MOLOCH! MOLOCH! ROBOT APARTMENTS!

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MOLOCH! MOLOCH! ROBOT APARTMENTS!

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Soothing, persistent chimes accompanied the sudden glow of tiny pictograms above each passenger’s seat. An angular brunette wafted down the central aisle, touching sleeping men and women gently on the shoulder. Bleary-eyed, they stared at her beaming face and followed her long fingers as they seamlessly wove the international gestures for *seatbelt, please!*

Nigel had buckled himself in within milliseconds of hearing the first chime, tightening the belt an extra half inch past comfort for good measure. He grinned up at the stewardess as she swept by, making the international face for *Rules, am I right? Gotta have ’em. Love me?* As always, his eagerness went willfully unnoticed.

He frowned down at the hemisphere of his gut, watching it rise and fall and hang over the taut gray safety strap. Flying always made him especially constipated, but it seemed that his mother might have been right: he was getting rather roly-poly. Ever more colorful in her old age, she’d made the point in slightly different terms, comparing him so passionately to a polygamous and pregnant stray animal that he’d blushed deeply for several seconds before summoning the composure to grimace horridly at his blind date as she inched towards the door of his mother’s flat. Mother all but bloodied him for it, but he never brought a first date\(^1\) to his mother’s home after that.

As the plane raced downward through cottony cloudscapes and a\(^2\) baffled flock of

\(^1\) or anyone else, save for a school-assigned hamster that was shortly electrocuted

\(^2\) very briefly
Canadian geese, he closed his eyes and quietly thanked God for his good fortune. As he’d explained loudly to his mother from behind his locked bedroom door, the promotion meant better pay, more respect from his colleagues at the synthetic sandwich corporation, and an opportunity for mother and son to spend some unprecedented time apart. He’d called out that it would be healthy for the both of them, waited for the hail of dishware to thin out, and opened the door a crack. He’d winced as a well-aimed teacup shattered against the doorframe, its shrapnel nicking his left ear in two places.

The night before he nervously took his first trans-Atlantic flight, he’d left a carefully worded note about things to avoid saying/doing/thinking on his pillow for the lodger, packed and re-packed his father’s old trunk, and spent three hours staring at the model-airplanes that hung from his ceiling before finally dozing off. Though his eyes had rested on the models’ awkward lines and dusty globs of glue, his mind was anxiously engaged in creating scenarios, very enjoyable ones, that had to do with the real reason he’d taken the job in Vancouver: he’d signed the two-year contract because everyone in England, his mother included, always said that North Americans were fat, young ladies included. Nigel reasoned that his only somewhat pudding-ish frame wouldn’t seem so repulsive to Canadian girls as it always had to European ones, grading on the curve, anyway, and that he might just get to… well… in any case, for the first time in his life, he had hope.

According to the shining-eyed North American regional managers who’d offered Nigel the promotion a few weeks earlier, hope was what North America was all about.
“You’ll find everything you’ve ever wanted in Vancouver, and more!” the white one had boomed.

“Certainly, yes, certainly, yes,” his black partner had agreed. The white one nodded in agreement to this, and continued.

“But you’ll be flying back and forth to England, about, oh, twice a month?”

“Goodness-gracious-at-LEAST!” the black one cried.

“So you’ll still be able to keep up with all of your lovely English ladies, I’m sure.” Nigel quivered a bit at this, feeling guilty.

“Surely yes, surely yes,” the black one stated, smiling. The white one beamed lovingly at his business partner while pinching his own nostrils closed with a circular rubbing motion.

“Since the planned submergence of the South and Central American continents, the North American West Coast has become, as you may, ahem, may know, the, as it were, sandwich capital of the world. And we at Synerwich aim to grow! To swell with the lifeblood of experienced personnel like yourself.” He sighed, satisfied.

“Naturally, the research we’re conducting in our West Coast laboratories is pretty, well, it’s pretty ground-breaking.” All three men nodded and grinned vigorously, although Nigel wasn’t entirely sure why, at the time. After five years of cheerfully answering phones, conscientiously taking down bizarre, seemingly nonsensical messages and little else, Nigel was professionally motivated to really get his hand in

3 “Sir, a Mr. White phoned to say he ‘has two health inspectors in the Bristol freezers.’ To please return.”
sandwiches, so to speak. And these men would help him do it, God help them.

“And naturally, the nature of our research is very sensitive, sensitive, yes.”

“Oh, yes, very.” The black one sniffed violently and rubbed his mustache hard.

“So naturally, you understand, you understand, I’m sure, that you’ll have to be…”

his eyes bulged as he held his breath, “de-BRIEFED before you travel each time!” The North Americans’ eyes rolled around manically before finally, mischievously, meeting. Immediately, the two men exploded with giggles, slapping one another on their toned thighs in useless attempts to quell their laughter. The black one calmed down first, and managed to speak again.

“It’s a simple process, really--you’ll just meet with our people on each end and they’ll just get you to sign a form over drinks or something, really very simple.”

At that point, both partners suddenly retired to the lavatory and hadn’t returned by the time Nigel finished signing a thick stack of forms, unread, so he simply dotted his i’s and crossed his t’s, gathered his coat and umbrella and strolled out into the rain, whistling.

Nigel thoughtfully stroked his ear bandages as the huge jet shuddered onto the gleaming runway. He thought about the “de-briefing” drink he’d had two nights before with two British men in dark trench coats. It had been quite simple, really. They bought him what must have been a very strong whiskey and sour at a rather dark pub and
watched him sip it down over about ten minutes, occasionally nodding in response to his polite questions. With a twinge of guilt, Nigel now realized that he didn’t even remember what they’d told him to forget, or if he’d even known it to begin with. He remembered peering into his glass at a rather misshapen maraschino cherry that tasted like aspirin when he sucked on it, and then the moustaches were frowning at him so he offered them a lick, and then… and then he woke up in his own twin bed under the lumpy quilt his mother’d gotten for him from a pile in the street, and he’d felt rather hung over and he didn’t feel like he could manage any breakfast.

Thinking about breakfast, Nigel rubbed at his bulging belly, realizing that he hadn’t had any sort of meal since teatime two days earlier. He wasn’t hungry, either. Maybe he was finally growing out of his “fat greedy piggy” phase, as Mother called it. He chuckled, thinking that, at this rate, he’d be trim enough even for French girls after two years abroad. Like his schoolmates had always said, if there’s anything that French girls would willingly tolerate more than a British boy, it’s an American man.

Enveloped in groin-stirring fantasies about a fat French girl and a thin one, Nigel gasped as the stunning stewardess’ voice filled the airplane. Hidden with a microphone somewhere near the cockpit, she was shrilly announcing their arrival with an audible sense of personal achievement, chirping on about the number of their baggage claim area,

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4 such as, “How’s the weather in Vancouver, usually?” or “What’s an alright neighborhood to find sushi dinner?”
5 the less discerning or more nearsighted ones, anyway
6 and a lustier, more a-young-Alec-Guiness-y version of himself
the local temperature, how much she’d enjoyed serving each and every passenger. She then began the whole speech over in French, and was just wrapping it up by the time Nigel had freed his crushed carry-on bag from an overhead bin, apologized to the steaming line of passengers behind him, scrambled up the aisle and earnestly thanked the handsome pilot, who ignored him thoroughly, for such a smooth flight.

Nigel’s heartbeat quickened with excitement as he stomped up the gangway and hustled through a series of long, well-ventilated hallways. He gasped and stopped, blocking an irritated stream of cowboy-booted Albertans, when he passed into an enormous, cavernous, sky-lit arrival hall. The foot traffic from several arriving flights streamed down a dozen escalators and stairways, framed by towering totem poles and two babbling waterfalls of smooth, glistening stones. As he clambered onto the nearest escalator and craned his neck towards the delicate sculptures above him, seemingly suspended from the sky itself, Nigel could smell the new life that awaited him.

The line of passengers snaked quickly through red-velvet ropes. Eyes rolling in their sockets, Nigel found himself almost wishing that the wait had been longer when a pretty, slightly chubby female border guard interrupted his ecstasy and ordered him to approach her cubicle.

“Passport.” She stared blankly into Nigel’s pale face as he slid the brand-new booklet towards her. An East-Indian, he thought to himself, slightly surprised. I suppose they have them here, too. The Commonwealth, and all. She unfolded the crisp work visa he’d clipped inside. She studied it vaguely. Her black hair was neatly combed and
plastered to her head. Nigel ogled it.

“Anybottom, Nigel Philip. British citizen.”

He nodded gaily. Several dozen yards away, people were hauling their luggage off of fast-moving conveyor belts and wheeling it through a sun-lit corridor stuffed with relatives. Squinting his eyes, he could just make out his new life, waving at him. It was a she, and she was standing on the other side of one last velvet rope—in Canada.

“How long will you be in Canada?”

Startled, he blushed deeply and reached towards the document through the hole in the glass partition until she glared hard at him, silently indicating that he’d better damn well not. He gulped, trying instead to point downward at the visa from his side of the glass.

“Er, well, it should say that I’m, that is… it’s two years, then? I mean, my contract expires in 2036. Unless I’m quite lucky and they extend it. Eh?”

She blinked very slowly and scribbled something on a pink customs form.

“Reason for visit?” Her dark eyes remained fixed on the form. Nigel smiled—this was an easy one.

“Sandwiches!” he crowed. Reluctantly, she looked up.

“Excuse me.” Clearly, her tone suggested that she was thinking something less civil.

“Ha, yes, of course, I’m sorry, what I meant to say was…”

Before Nigel could begin to explain the history of Britain’s illustrious
sandwich-synthesis industry, he felt what seemed to be a furry elbow bobbing against his anus. He slowly turned his head to see a large German shepherd burrowing passionately into his bum. Outwardly, he was stunned, his mouth gaping in exactly inverse proportion to his involuntary clenched rectum. Inwardly, he thought to himself,7 *I say!*

The animal’s pair of brawny, blandly-handsome handlers glowered down at Nigel as he tried to remain perfectly still, forcing his plump face into a well-meaning but hideous smirk. Nigel noted that the slightly taller, slightly less blond one was letting the busy dog’s leash hang slack. *Not exactly as friendly as I’d been told,* he thought sadly.

The slightly shorter one closed five sausage-like fingers around Nigel’s doughy arm and five more around the handle of Nigel’s carry-on luggage. The man cleared his throat and clicked one heel against the polished floor; the dog obediently fell back onto its haunches, a look of disgust on its noble face.

“You’d better come with us. Sir.”

The guards half led, half dragged Nigel across the gleaming hall. Japanese and South African tourists tittered nervously, pointing but not pointing, looking but not looking. His body was being manhandled excessively by the guards while the German shepherd looked on with envy, but Nigel’s spirit was floating up near the tip of the glass dome. Safe and weightless, he was watching himself with a feeling of *Glad it’s not me* that was shared by the Dutch nationals who sneered at Nigel from across the room.

Nigel snapped painfully back into reality as the guards kneaded him towards a

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7 characteristically oblivious to the irony of it
single imitation-oak door. The slightly taller one briefly seemed to rub his hips and genitals against a matte-blacker-than-doom digital reader, which apparently caused the door to swing open with a pendulous-ness unfit for faux wood, revealing matte-blackness behind it.

Nigel’s brand-new Oxfords bumped and scraped along the cement floor as his rag-doll corpus was being delivered to someone—well, someone, he rather hoped. As his eyes adjusted to the carefully engineered twilight, he began to realize that the walls rose twice as high as those in the heavenly entrance chamber where his fellow passengers were now merrily gathering their rolling suitcases. And yet the length and width of this other room dwarfed its height, giving Nigel the feeling that he was being slowly crushed, despite 100 meters of head room. His brain throbbed in tempo with his now-aching stomach and bum as he realized that this place should have been visible from the air, that the airport wasn’t possibly this big from the outside. Remembering the crystalline welcome of the sunnier chamber, Nigel further realized that it was all for show—that this was the room where all the meaningful work was being done.

The slightly shorter guard glanced down and stated, “You are correct.”

Nigel’s jaw dropped. His eyes rolled around freely, searching desperately for some kind of information to offer his brain. They found none. Minutes passed with only the scraping of Nigel’s shoes and the guards’ rhythmic footsteps for company. Suddenly, the guards tossed Nigel like so much terrorist meat into a sharp-cornered wooden chair

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8 Nigel later reasoned that the guard had had an electronic key in his pocket. He hadn’t.
which immediately fell apart, dropping him on his increasingly sore rear end.

The slightly taller guard sighed and produced an identical chair out of thin air. He stuffed Nigel into it and drew suspended curtains around them on four sides. The curtains looked more or less like the ones you’d find in a shared hospital room, Nigel thought, except that these were dark grey and rough-looking and spattered with something dark and internal-looking, while hospital curtains, Nigel further thought to himself, were occasionally washed, as far as he knew. As Nigel was evaluating his surroundings, his limp, numb body was being hooked up to a matte-black, man-sized computer through a series of rather invasive wires. Nigel tried to remain perfectly still, tried to be cooperative. The slightly taller guard pulled on a hanging chain, and the cloth cubicle filled with light. The single tear-shaped bulb swung to and fro, causing the machine’s edges to flicker menacingly.

“Ah, so this must b--…” Nigel gagged and swallowed his ridiculous guess as to the machine’s purpose when the slightly shorter guard switched it on, paralyzing Nigel. The slightly shorter guard strolled around to the rear of the contraption, his face barely lit by, Nigel presumed, some unseen computer monitor. The slightly taller guard rummaged through his pockets, occasionally tossing out scraps and gum wrappers before eventually unearthing a crumpled sheet of paper, which he unfolded and smoothed out on Nigel’s face. The dog watched.

“Question 1: Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist party?”
“Have I what? The what?” Nigel sputtered. The slightly taller one looked at the slightly shorter one, who nodded.

“That was a control question. You passed. Question 2: Are you now in possession of or attempting to transport substances or items known to be illegal in the nation of Canada?”

Nigel thought slowly about this. His mind’s eye scanned the contents of his luggage as they had been laid out on his bedspread the night before, ran down the corresponding list. He blushed slightly, picturing the girlie magazine he’d purchased a year earlier as well as a single expired condom he’d received in a sexual education course and saved, mostly for good luck. Surely Commonwealth nations had similar rules concerning, gulp, such things.

“Er. No. Possibly. That is, I certainly hadn’t intended…”

“Shut up.” The slightly taller guard glanced at the other one, who shrugged. Both guards sighed. The dog, having already decided he’d better get comfortable on the floor, put one paw on his forehead and snorted. The slightly taller guard cleared his throat.

“Are you attempting to bring illegal drugs, firearms or other weaponry into Canada at this time?” Nigel thought hard, his eyes crossing. The slightly taller guard waited for several seconds before putting his hands on his hips, tapping his foot four times, and taking a deep, deep breath.

“Well???” he bellowed. Nigel started, his irrelevant thought train derailed.

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9 which had, if anything, caused rare dinner companions to storm out upon observing its shape in his trouser pocket.
“I’ll have to say…. no. Definitely not, no.” He relaxed slightly, for the look of it.

The guards made eye contact. The slightly shorter one nodded.

“Very well. This concludes phase one of Canadian customs Secondary Screening Measures Section C. If you’ll please stick out your tongue…”

Nigel stuck his tongue out and, as a reflex, went “aaaaah”.

“Don’t do that.”

“Wight. Thowwy,thur. Ith juth tha I--….” The slightly shorter guard, having crept silently around the computer and up behind the chair, suddenly stabbed Nigel in the arm with a syringe, plunger plunging as he did so. Profoundly startled, Nigel bit down hard on his tongue, immediately tasting blood. The dog snickered, while the guards had enough composure to merely cough, awkwardly.

The slightly taller guard stalked off into the darkness while the slightly shorter one took over the job of looming over Nigel’s cowering form.

“Officer Fraser’ll just fetch our supervisor while the serum takes effect, then we’ll get right down to business. We’ve got a moment or two before you’ll start to feel it, then. So what bring you to Canada? Pleasure, eh?” He winked. Nigel gulped.

“Well, I--..”

“Shut up.” A normal-sized man strode into the cubicle. He flew right past Nigel into the far corner, turned on his heel, and rounded the computer terminal in as much time as it took Nigel to stop talking. He wore a black trench coat, a black bowler and an enormous black mustache that made the dog feel rather insecure.
“Let’s get started, then,” he growled. “Is he ready?”

The slightly taller guard eyed Nigel’s sweating face and flipped a switch. Nigel’s pupils shrunk to pinpoints.

“Do you ever masturbate?”

Nigel opened his mouth to answer but found that he couldn’t speak. He drooled and looked anxiously at the trio of men. A mechanical hum filled the tiny space.

“Yes. Frequently. Please review images 1 through 2,435,” a monotonous, digital tone rang out.

The three Canadians clambered around the computer monitor. Someone clicked a button. All three immediately turned away, squinting and groaning.

“Oh, for the love of… he uses a… oh, good Lord,” the mustached man hissed.

Nigel drooled embarrassedly. The guards shook their heads.

“Have you ever masturbated... in public?” the mustached man sneered.

Certainly not, thought Nigel, though it hurt his head to do so.

“Yes. On September 29th, 2013, at 10:53 a.m. On my eleventh day of kindergarten.” Nigel gaped almost to the point of dislocating his jaw. Did I? How could they...? I don’t even remember what my kindergarten teacher looked like.

Unless... unless she was blonde and rather... rather leggy...

The few remaining drops of blood drained from his face as Nigel realized the scope of their...scope.

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10 “No”
“Right, then. He’s ready. Office Nelson, begin the interrogation series, eh?”

“Right. Are you a mule for prohibited items?” Nelson barked.

_Well, I can’t imagine why they-...

“YES.”

“Are they concealed on your person?”

“NO.” Nelson scratched his head.

“Are they concealed _in_ your person?”

“YES.” Nigel clenched.

“Are they hidden in your-...”

“Now, now, Nelson, let’s not spoil the surprise, shall we?” The moustachioed man leered at Nigel and raised his right hand into the dirty light, revealing, Nigel noted, that it was gloved, and that the glove was…textured. His mind raced, tripping over the occasional hurdling realization that he really needed to poop.

“Boys?”

The guards fell upon Nigel like fat children on a piñata’s innards. Within seconds, he was straddling the chair’s seat while having the wind knocked out of him by its back, his pants effectively cuffing his knees to the wooden frame. He heard a snap, then a squish, and gasped, too late. Moments later, the mustached man reeled back, and Nigel had the distinct and painful sensation that he had instantaneously trimmed down.

“My God, boys, this little British fucker is absolutely _stuffed_ with coke!” They murmured in agreement.
“Sure is, sir.”

Nigel stared at the floor. For the second time that evening, his mind wandered into scenes of his tenth-grade sexual education class, specifically the lecture on lubricant. From their shadows, Nigel made out that the mustached man had tucked the sticky package under one arm and was vigorously shaking hands with the guards, who both hesitated slightly first.

“We’ll just print out the transcripts from my office and maybe have a mug of something to celebrate, eh?”

Laughing merrily and talking excitedly about how “he almost had them,” the three men strolled off towards the direction from which they’d first come. As the mustached man threw back the distant door to the customs hall, a piercing beam of sparkling daylight raced through the darkness and fell upon Nigel’s bare, pink asshole. As his eyes quickly adjusted to sudden illumination, Nigel made out several other curtained areas in the cavernous room. He might have imagined it, but he thought he heard groaning from several of them, and the angry buzz of flies from others. Silhouetted in the doorway, the mustached man chortled and then yelled, proudly:

“Thank God for those FreuDetection systems! Without them, we wouldn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of nailing all those unsuspecting memory-washed drug-packing motherfuckers!”

As the door clicked shut, echoing throughout the lonely chamber, Nigel thought

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11 which he’d heard about days later, having missed it, sadly, for a dental appointment
of his mother. And he even thought, in some shadowy corner of his soul, that he missed her. That his life with her in Britain had been far better than… this.

“NAH.”
A Short-Term Collaboration

I was walking home from the pharmacy along the underside of the train tracks, battling my crappy umbrella in the semi-storm while also smoking, when a man stopped me. As I took out one earphone, I heard him saying, “please, miss, I have five dollars, I’m only forty cents shorts for a pack of cigarettes.

I stood still and looked at him.

“You know a place that has a pack of cigarettes for $5.40?”

“A half pack,” he said, his hood sliding back a bit.

“Where can you get a half pack?”

“Of loosies. 50 cents each, so.”

I had a thoughtful glance at the middle distance while feeling in my pockets for change with my free hand. “Yeah, that’s not bad. I don’t like menthols, though.” As my pockets came up empty, I halfway un-shouldered my backpack and grabbed at the bottom of the change/tampons/unpleasant-scraps-of-things zone.

“Me either, but I can’t afford the 12 dollars. I wish they’d split up a pack of Marlboro’s,” he said, looking encouraged.

I pulled out a small but healthy-feeling handful of coins, looked down to confirm a couple of quarters among the pennies, and started trying to fish a bit of soft, soiled paper out of the mix with my thumb.

“But you know the bodega over there has packs for $7.50? Camels, everything.”
“Yeah?” We looked at each other — a quiet, purpose-filled fraternity between us — while he quickly thought over my proposition of a longer-term investment. He dipped his hand into his own pocket, opening his fingers to reveal several nickels and dimes, maybe a quarter or two.

“I have… close to six.” Our eyes turned to my handful.

“I have… this much.” I slid the contents neatly into his other hand, which still had a crumpled five pinned to it by his thumb. I knew my contribution was definitely closer to a dollar than not.

Our eyes moved back to his hands for a moment, then met.

He paused, our stares causing a humble speck of combined ambition, faith, and determination to crystalize in the wet air between us. The reflections of street lamps trembling in pools of rainwater, the aggressively hissing cars, the careening buses stopped, for a quick moment, and waited while he calculated.

He licked his lips.

“I can make that.”

“Yeah?” I said, the supportive, sympathetic hopefulness in my voice almost — but not quite — necessitating an exclamation point.

“Yeah.” He nodded, finding the middle distance with his eyes (a lower m.d. than mine), and stood a bit taller, readied. “I can make that.”

We waited quietly for one last second.

“Cool. Good luck, man.”
He nodded. “Thank you, babe.”

Off we went in our own directions again.
On My Side

Sometimes, when I’m stoned, everything looks bigger. Like when I’m walking away from my car where I’ve just parked it, already across the street and uphill a few yards, and I realize that my car looks bigger than I expected it to, and the buildings look bigger – not taller, but just bigger, which doesn’t make a lot of sense, because for something to be bigger or smaller than it was, there has to be something to compare it to, something that stayed the same.

I think that what is probably happening is that I feel bigger and taller, that less-depressing realization of “I’m not so tiny and ineffective after all,” so that my car, which is more of an extension of me than anything else I own, also gets bigger. This happens in my room, too: we both get bigger, grow more spacious together, and it feels pretty good. Even if everything actually stays the same, the important thing is that I’m there to see it, to bear witness to something, or maybe just nothing, but something, anyway. I was there.

In 2017, I will become the first woman to ever naturally inseminate another woman, and I’m never going to tell anyone how I did it. In 2035, some Finnish guy, born last week, is going to harness time well enough that he can travel through it, backwards and forwards, losing only a small amount of body hair during each trip. Despite pleas and threats from other leading nations, he will refuse to share his discovery outside of a small group of European academics, who will reassure China and the United States and
everybody else, time and time again, that if anybody tries to steal the device, specially trained interns will launch missions into several key time periods and really fuck everything up. This genius Fin will, however, allow numerous historians to travel back in time to investigate various scientific mysteries, of which I am one. A team of such historians has been hovering outside my window for the past month, gathering information and trying to quiet down the raucous lesbian protest groups who have been camped out on my lawn since they heard the news. The researches want to figure out how I might have done it without interfering in my day-to-day life which will lead up to this “miracle,” as someone called it. They think it has something to do with makeup, because people wear a lot of makeup in the future. So I stay inside a lot, watching the minutes drip by and getting as fucked up as I usually would, which is to say, as fucked up as I can.

If life is a water slide, getting fucked up is the friction of your bathing-suited ass dragging along the damp plastic tubing: it slows you down, lets you acknowledge every passing molecule before the ride is over, lets you pause to look down and up at the annoyed faces of generations past and generations lined up for a turn.

The only problem with being stoned all the time is that I’m unnerved by the lack of a “control” object in my reality, like that cozy space between the little lines on a carpenter’s level, both a physical state and a spot to which every bubble longs to return after its daredevil adventures with gravity; something that captures and offers up all those details affecting a state of normalcy, like the Christian Reading Room on Polk St. with all
its pale stacks of gathered information, that dull, people-sized glass cabinet silently and anonymously locked and unlocked day after day, patiently referential. You’d think the historians could have brought something with them, some future invention, to give me that anchored feeling, but they didn’t. They say they don’t want to interfere.

Watching a lot of TV is pretty good way of linking arms with time as it jogs along. The alarm clock always seems to tell the time that I wanted it to, or that I guiltily knew it should be, but TV progresses at a consistent rate and doesn’t jump around. If they’re having conversations with witnesses that last more than thirty seconds, you’re about fifteen minutes in. If they just got back the groundbreaking results on a piece of thread dipped in semen, you have seven more minutes to pack your coat pockets and start walking to your car in order to be exactly five minutes late to work. By the time I’ve finished watching every episode of every crime show ever made, I’ll be thirty and I’ll have just impregnated someone, supposedly with twins.

As we paddle faithfully through seasons of CSI: New York in reverse order, my boyfriend will observe the exceptionally dated costume styles of its criminally-investigative crew and pseudo-urbanite guest stars. He’ll say, “Mac (Taylor) is so nineties.” I might surface from my waking slumber for a moment to argue, “Different ways of acting and dressing come into style and go out again, but meanwhile, as the cycle keeps going, there’s still someone, or, like, ten percent of people that have always been wearing it and still wear it.”
The point is that eyeglass frames and newspaper headlines are surprisingly useless as tools for determining your place in time. He’s right about Mac, though. As the bruised, brilliant and likeable male lead, he is carefully designed to be unaffected by time. Based on the gorgeous women he dates and how fit he is, he should be in his forties, but he looks and acts like he’s in his fifties, and Gary Sinise, the actor who plays him, is pushing sixty. I think they use a lot of makeup on that show.
Aloha

[Aloha in the Hawaiian language means affection, peace, compassion and mercy. Since the middle of the 19th century, it also has come to be used as an English greeting to say goodbye and hello.]

Bob and Marge, doctor and nurse, met at Tripler, a military hospital on the sun-bleached hill east of Honolulu, during the war. She was four years older than him, but he was a good foot and a half taller. They were white--Norwegian and Irish and British and so on--and while she was trim and pretty, he was handsome, too. Because she was a small woman in her mid-to-late thirties (and with a few of God’s tricks thrown in there, too), two of her four pregnancies would produce stillborns, the survivors being a white boy and a white girl, Robert, Jr. and Lucy, pregnancies #2 and #4, four years apart. Between birth and puberty, their milky hair darkened to brown. Much later, they’d tell their own children the wartime family lore of Grandpa Bob and Nana Marge, told within the decade after Bob managed to hang himself after several attempts, told it when their kids were soft and clumsy and then again when they’d stretched out a bit, but Robert, Jr. and Lucy either didn’t know or wouldn’t share the details of the meeting.

So we’ll imagine doctor and nurse in their surgery whites, picture them locking eyes over a pale young sailor, cracked open like a soggy, flowing nut; she bats her eyes demurely over her cotton mask, face sheathed like a woman from a middle-Eastern
country which would cause sailors to spit and roar and fire a million and two rounds, but much, much later. As she bats her eyes and hands him the scalpel he requested, pointed in, he clumsily grabs at her wrist, not looking away from her shining blues, and he cuts himself, gasps comically, and then his mask stretches lengthwise as his jaw drops and the fumbled scalpel spins slowly upward then downward, end over end, gleaming, until it lands handle down in the guy’s guts, erect as a flagpole and having--thank God--missed all of the vital bits. His eyes grow wide and his knees buckle, but she laughs softly, musically, and then he does, too, grateful for two miracles in one day.

And maybe, while we’re at it, the guy on the table was a paraplegic from a football accident early in life, unrelated to his now being split open on a steel altar under bright lights (and yes, the Navy still wanted him, for whatever reason), and the butt of the knife whacks some critical spinal tube back into alignment so when he wakes up, he’s cured! Twice! But that’s really more his story, not Marge and Bob’s.

There are only so many ways two medical professionals can meet on the job, and the most interesting ones, presumably, involve life, death, blood, bile, carnage, miracles, or, at the very least, starched white uniforms and a war going on out there, by God. In the mess hall, maybe, or cafeteria, or whatever the places in military hospitals in Hawaii in 1943 during a world war where you could buy food and sit and eat it were called. Maybe they met there, maybe they bumped steel trays in line, or plastic ones--that early, brittle kind of plastic--because non-precious metals were very precious then. Maybe he spilled
coffee on her starched, starched, starched, white winged-steeple hat, because he was so tall and she was so short.

In a way, it doesn’t matter. In a way, it matters terribly.

They met, God knows how.

For the record, it wasn’t Marge’s fault, or Robert, Jr.’s, or Lucy’s, or anybody’s but God, that Bob hanged himself. He even signed His work that day: not long after Robert, Jr. and Lucy started having babies (still mostly white), Marge drove home from an afternoon of volunteering at the Red Cross and found him in the garage, hanging from a cross beam.

A few years after she moved her own family to Honolulu, after Marge died, Lucy told her daughters, “suicide.” “Struggled for a long time.” That Bob was an excellent water-skier, taught his children how to skip fast along the surface of a lake like stones. He loved skiing. She had some photos.

Either Robert, Jr. and Lucy didn’t ask for the blow-by-blow details of that afternoon or Marge didn’t want to share them or none of them wanted to talk about it, but Bob and Marge’s grandchildren never received the practical account of Bob’s death, and never asked to.

We can imagine that when she pushed a button to open the garage door electronically nothing happened, so she pounded at the button several times, irritated, and the button was part of a small box clipped to the ceiling of the car, maybe, so she was poking and poking upwards with her pointer fingers as if to object, angrily, to a bad
argument someone made. Maybe. But finally and definitely the garage door started creaking and shuddering into motion and drawing back jointly into the garage like a cranky old snake into its pit.

We can imagine that—since we gave the garage one of those fractured, retractable doors instead of the solid kind that just swing open—that as the door slowly slid out of sight Bob’s feet began to appear and then his shins until his whole lower body would be visible from the street. See, this is a high-ceilinged garage, we’ve decided, so only his legs, from the waist of his slacks where the belt (now otherwise occupied) should have been and on down to the feet (stockinged? bare?), are visible from the driveway without pulling the car in.

Marge might have seen this—the legs sliding into view—or maybe she had unclipped the garage door opener and was flipping it over in her right palm (left one on the wheel sound right?), cursing softly and frustrated at the new batteries she’d just put in last week using words that carried real weight in the ‘50s but would have made her grandchildren smile in the ‘nowadays’ of that day, the day Bob checked out. The car was idling as she fiddled and then looked up, kept idling as she ran into the garage, or walked, and screamed and lost her head and forgot her nurse’s training and tried to pull him down by one foot and shake him awake and call 911 with a cordless phone all at once.

Or she was calm, sorrowful but not surprised, and sensibly closed the garage door before she went into the house through the door off the garage (always kept unlocked) and sat down on their bed and took several breaths before calling the proper authorities,
and then Robert, Jr., and then Lucy, who was most likely cradling or changing or cooing to her six-week-old daughter, who would pretty soon become the oldest of two girls, then three, but on this day had been held and changed and cooed to by Grandpa Bob while Nana Marge was at work. Maybe she still smelled like him. But, then again, babies smell like a lot of things, and those things change a lot.

It’s possible that when Marge sat down on the edge of her bed she put her right hand or her left hand on the receiver (with a curly cord this time), but didn’t pick it up right away. Maybe she just...sighed. And all the way across the country we live in, the country’s president, who was from Texas (where Marge and Bob had started out), looked at a report about the old, old trees being cut down by his order and at the picture of his predecessor on the wall of his office, and their predecessors, and just...sighed, right when Marge did. It’s possible.

Beyond speculation is the fact that, when she and Bob were back home in the States and married and trying to fill out their family tree in the very southern part of Texas in a town on the bay (Baytown, actually), Marge was being treated by encouraging, almost pressuring doctors with an under-tested fertility drug that would lead to Lucy’s hysterectomy much later, but which just maybe led to little Lucy being born pink and wailing, too, but probably not. But, as a matter of fact, right around the time Lucy was surrounded by her three daughters in a hospital, tired from the operation and blinking from anesthesia but smiling at her daughters, who were frightened to see Lucy in a hospital bed with a hospital gown and tubes going this way and that and taped to Lucy’s
arm, making her skin wrinkle—maybe a few months after that at most—Robert, Jr. called Lucy in Honolulu one morning to tell her straightforwardly that he and Marge had had breakfast plans but that, when she didn’t answer the door, he let himself in and found her flopped back on the bed from a sitting position, her small calves and feet still dangling off the side, that she was in a nightgown, that the TV was still on and turned to the news channel, that a lukewarm glass of milk was on the bedside table, next to the phone that we know she used for lots of things but not any one thing in particular. We can assume the milk had botchelized, that her skin was cool.

Robert, Jr., Lucy and an old doctor friend agreed that she was probably all ready for bed, sitting on its edge, when she had a stroke, probably, that killed her almost instantly, reasonably believed that she wasn’t in any pain. They didn’t examine Marge’s body in order to form this consensus, didn’t compare notes. No autopsy.

They didn’t need one.

They didn’t need to know.
Sufficient unto the Day Is the Evil Thereof

aka, Drugs and Shit

Part I

She audibly tapped premature particles of ash from her cigarette and thought about her mother. She’d felt horror when, years ago, she’d first noticed all the mannerisms and traits she’d picked up from her mother, many of them shaping the way she smoked--ways of holding a cigarette, of dragging on it, of shaving off flakes of ash to reveal the ember; they preferred the same brands, and came to share the need to chain-smoke while grading essays.

Now, whenever she’d eye her long legs or feel her obsidian melancholy deepening, she’d suffer pangs of nostalgia that summoned no era in particular, but just an aching inter-cranial echoing of, Mom. And then her chest would constrict painfully when her mind eventually drifted to the idea of her mom’s eventual death. Hopefully, dear God, decades away when she might be able to handle it better than her mom had when her own mother had died--and, please, not from smoking.

Today’s ashtray was a heavy glass cup that had contained a candle worth more, she realized, than her new winter boots. The candle was one of her boyfriend’s few but cherished birthday presents, thoughtfully given by the designer florist down the street from the high-end men’s shop where he worked. She knew that he adored the candle, in both its life and its death.
Feverishly mussing his wet hair, he paused and turned away from the mirror, eying the bedroom. Perched on the bed, rolling the tip of her cigarette against the inside of the cup, she tried to be as small as possible to avoid blocking his view of some necessary item.

“Babe,” he called across the narrow hall. “Can you make me a care package?” He turned back to the mirror.

Lisa thought about her own stash for several seconds. It was always her own stash, split two ways, more or less.

“Sure.” The cigarette was left to burn on, or out, as she grabbed the shoe box of “toiletries” and sat down lightly.

She opened an old prescription bottle and set it on the black, near-vintage chest that served as a storage bin and table. She pulled out various containers and eyed their contents. John was going away for five days, five nights. The peeled xanax bottle held six xanax, four klonopin, and a handful of obnoxiously pink benadryl (in case of cats or sleeplessness). The vicodan bottle had half a valium, some adderalls, no vicodan. She checked the inconspicuous “travel” bottle in her purse, in which she tried to have a couple of everything, for any occasion. Nothing useful.

Glancing at his tailored form, she fished out two xanax, the half valium, one klonopin, and a generous few benedryls, and dropped them in the empty vial. She twisted on the cap and presented it to him, standing, naming off its contents.

“You can have the last valium”, she said warmly.
“You sure?” He rushed back into the room and continued scanning its surfaces. “I already had more of it.”

“Of course,” she said, humble and benevolent. It was important to keep track of these things, especially the ones that ended up powdered, the stronger stuff. He had a way of disguising the bigger line with a more compact shape, and then asking quickly, “Which one’s yours? Pick one.”

The other drugs were paid for more or less fifty-fifty, but John always seemed to chew or snort about 10 or 20 percent more of everything. She was always good at estimating fractions and percentages and noticed the discrepancy, but by keeping her nagging greed to herself, she came off as the better partner, for what it was worth. This was born of a sincere desire to seem good. He was significantly bigger than her, she’d admit. Anything bought legitimately, doled out from the pharmacy in her name, she would pay for.

They bickered for a while about the kind of bottle he should carry the pills in, and whether they’d be better off in carry-on or checked luggage. Having been on many more plane rides, she’d started to help him pack the night before, within a bowl, two bumps and about twenty minutes of arriving home from work. Four years older, Lisa generally loved helping him sort out practical issues like what to pack and how to appease the student loan people. He took her advice on which sweater’s bulkiness outweighed the worth of its style potential, how early to arrive at the airport. With the packing of the pills, their task was almost through.
She begrudgingly lent him the small green Excedrine bottle from her purse, pouring its contents into the sad shell that had once brimmed over with vicodan. They finally agreed that he wouldn’t need the pills (all legal) on the one-hour flight, and that his checked duffel bag (a recent large purchase which she discouraged and then learned to accept) really, really wasn’t going to get searched. Shoudering his bulging, tasteful luggage, they turned off lights, patted one another reassuringly, and marched from their shared shitbox apartment to her beloved shitbox car, two and a half big hills away.

He smoked pot on the way to the airport, which he would have done anyway, to “bring out” the oxycodone in his system. She usually would have shared it, but she had to go straight to work at the elementary school after dropping him off and didn’t want to smell like it or be too fucked up. It was the first day back after Winter Break, so there’d be no excuse for looking harried. They told each other, over and over, that they’d miss one another so much, too much.

She pulled over at the Alaska Airlines curb sign. As usual, the other cars were being assholes, not using the curbside space efficiently, leaving the wrong blinker blinking.

“Alaska’s my favorite,” she said, angling the car inward.

“Why’s that?” he asked, slightly anxious.

“They’re one of the only ones that fly between Canada and here, so I used to fly on them a lot. They were really good, I think. Free beer and stuff.”
When he’d dropped her off for her own Christmas flight ten days before, she was surprised when he made out with her on the curb. Open-mouthed tongue, which always embarrassed her a little bit. This time, he jumped out quickly and surveyed the terrain as she carefully placed his duffel on a dry, clean-ish patch of pavement.

“Okaaay,” he said conclusively. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. I miss you.”

“I miss you more.”

They kissed three times, lips closed but full. He walked into the terminal like a virgin soldier, unusually straight-backed, a modest settler with big ideas and his eyes on the horizon, ready to face his parents. She tried to watch him gradually disappear, as she always did at airports, but the two sets of sliding glass doors hid him within seconds.

Driving back towards San Francisco, she smiled proudly about her willingness to smile. She normally cried at the Departure end of everybody’s flights. The sun beamed and sparkled on the bay, as if swearing on the Bible that it was going to be a gorgeous day, as it always was when someone went away. If he’d been with her, Lisa thought, her father would have mused, like clockwork, that travelers brought bad weather with them. The two of them didn’t call each other as much as they should have, but he would have been right about this.

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The alarm clock buzzed and spun on its tough wheels at 9:15, but it wasn’t until 10:34 that they stirred.
He moaned, “Baby, we have to go. I’m late.”

She half-screeched, half-moaned, “Oh, GOD!” and suggested he take a taxi to work. John sighed a “yeah” and started pulling on clothing from the floor and closet. She sat in bed mourning over another high-anxiety dream for one minute before clambering out from the bale of twisted wool sheets. After methodically pulling six pieces of crust from her eyes, she put on jeans and a shirt he’d given her. It had James Dean on it, but it was for a metal band neither of them had ever heard of. Like expensive brands (but without the benefit of any on-ass documentation), certain vintage shops leant credibility to the items pawned to them, marked up and resold. People would ask where somebody got that thing that was black, faded and interesting, and he’d answer. In the tiny, lush fashion district where John worked, there were right and wrong answers in complexly varying degrees.

“Are you sure you don’t want to drive me to work?”

“Swhat I’m geddinready for!” she spat.

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“I hadn’t told you yet.”

She had fallen asleep with the cigarette pack next to her, so he yanked the bed around looking for it while she wiped her face with cold water. They were both angry, not especially at each other.

Five or ten minutes later, they were shooting through the tunnel that connected North Beach to everything else. Knowing she was hung over, she was still shocked to see
a mountain peak neatly framed by the other end of the tunnel. She blinked at it through her sunglasses, which had suddenly become her most prized possession.

“Was there always a mountain there?” she asked incredulously.


“Never mind.” She let it drop. Whenever the sun came out, the city changed completely. It wasn’t just the cotton candy between her ears, it was life. And today, in the ongoing, armed struggle between Lisa and life, life was winning.

In the last leg of their brief commute, she brought up ‘the whole money thing’ and they quickly constructed bitter arguments against one another. Lisa endured chalky nausea as she felt the personal shame in her heart stirring thickly with anger and betrayal-anger because, once again, he was completely missing that point that he was, right now, broke-assed as he was, creating all of the physical and emotion problems in her world, which was clouding over darkly with each metabolizing minute… and betrayal, because it was him. He convinced her to love him, and then promptly started carving out chunks all over her. He owed thousands already. At least, at least he would buy today’s batch. But on the scale of things, it was nothing.

Wheezing, trying not to weep, Lisa clawed her way through the morning routine. She dropped him off at the store. She found parking nearby and powdered her face, sweating. She put off a chat with her pregnant sister. She delivered coffee and a pastry to her now falsely perky, really busy boyfriend. She drove a few blocks away before pulling off, exhausted, to park in the shade on a main throughway.
She thought and determinedly sipped her ice tea, treasuring its medicinal value as she would aloe on an amputation. Should she call Vernon? Should she wait until this tripped-out, horrible, 3-D feeling passed? Would it pass if she didn’t go see Vernon? She felt the bottom line clanging in her mind’s ear: that they’d sucked clean the world into ashes, and probably couldn’t face a single promise or task without It.

With John’s sacrificed $100-bill in her purse, she closed her eyes and did the math, taking into account his pocket money for the rest of the week, his rent. There were three more granola bars scattered across the pantry’s dusty shelves, enough for the day. She decided: four pills. Make them last, then take a break. Their libidos would return, as would their shared love of walking around the city with just a joint or two. She’d finally clean out her car, drink coffee, save up, jog. A prospering nation of two. In time, they’d forget those few months of other-worldly glory, the pinkest and whitest sex, they’d rediscover food. Quitting might sting for a few weeks, two months tops, but they’d gradually remember life’s other pleasures. They’d have their love to sustain them.

Part II

Her cracked nostrils run, stinging dry lips. Natural saline chaps the skin beneath her eyes as she rubs it in. Sweat runs in rivers. She believes she has a premature understanding of hot flashes, knows the waxing and waning fever that soaks and chills.
Real physical agony but also profound heartbreak. The low-tide before a tsunami that won’t come, exposing the reef to perpetual baking sunlight.

Resting fitfully in day-before-yesterday’s soiled panties, she glares at slivers of sunset slipping past the crooked blackout curtain. It might as well be ten a.m., it might as well be never; she’s staying in bed.

Three weeks ago Vernon’s Section 8 application clears and he relocates his business to Roseville, three hours north. He doesn’t pick up their phone calls any more, probably doesn’t see the point, doesn’t realize they would dedicate their lives to driving 300 miles a day, every day. Score from a guy for a year and a half, give him a bottle of wine when he moves into his new piece-of-shit residence hotel, accept invitations to joints and Thai dinner in his silk-sheeted studio, and then suddenly he moves away and you might as well be dead.

The last time they ever pick up from him, those few weeks earlier, right before she runs out of money and John blushes and departs, Lisa exchanges her last $400 for a small handful of worn blue pills, stocking up for the imminent long season between dealers, like a dry spell in April when the expectant land aches for moisture, cracking deeply. She opens the broken passenger door from the inside, notes the surge of his wilting cologne as he heaves himself into the car, pulls the neatly folded bundle of twenties from beneath her thigh and the driver’s seat, where she always hides the money while she waits for him to fucking come downstairs already. His thick brown fist relaxes over her cupped hand, allowing almost two-dozen pills to spill and bounce gently against
her pale palm. She asks about the details of moving from one city to another, nodding at his relatable answers as she screws open her travel bottle, mimicking his earlier gesture so that the pills cascade into the empty green vial, luscious tablets, gathered and hoarded and eyed hungrily like so many displaced lobsters in a murky restaurant tank.

Moments later, those weeks ago, John is grinding one up, setting the pace so that every crumb will have flown brainwards within six days, and suddenly everything is lost, and the void is total. A space shuttle orbiting the earth expels them and they plunge breathlessly for days on end, his hand gripping hers as she tries bitterly to tear herself away, eyes streaming, he’s begging and accusing her of everything from fucking his band-mate to hiding his chambray shirts, and while in her heart she pretends to see the ground approaching she can’t quite remember what she ever saw in him.

Squinting away from re-routed online Chinese bootleg TV, Lisa lies in the shadow room plucking hairs in the laptop’s glow. Called in sick. Menstrual stuff, her boss understands without really knowing. She fishes out butts and smokes them down, making her hands and her hair and the walls stink further. She clamps the tweezers too desperately between sweaty fingers, scraping at her skin to expose infant follicles, before the tool dives to the floor and bounces under the bed. Reaching past hairballs towards the fucking thing, she spots a long-lost half-vicodan that still bears the tooth marks from being bitten in two. She swallows it dry, gouging out dried cuticles as she reclines and waits for absorption. As a crumb of hope and relief slowly materializes, she begins pulling on clothing, wipes her face with cold water, and wanders towards the door and
through the front gate with just enough energy to go in search of smokes.

Sunlight passes through her eyeballs and converts into pain. Gliding nimbi tauntingly offer speckled shade that vanishes as she crawls desperately towards them. The freezing heat has lessened, leaving her flushed and chilled but mobile. In her breast pocket are four crumpled bills he had symbolically scattered on the filthy bedside trunk before showing up for her combo VCR/DVD player and then disappearing entirely, plus three or five quarters that bear traces of wax. Not enough even for USA Gold’s in South Beach corner markets, prices driven up for fat eager tourists whose walkabout sweat mimics her own.

The park by the church is packed with bad art and bad artists, thumbing their prints-of-prints and suggesting only the most heinous rainbow-colored cityscapes to big browsing bastards from Pittsburg. Driven by anger and nothing, she crosses the main avenue towards this sunny Sunday circus, standing silently in the gutter, caught invisibly between the competing traffics of sidewalk and street. One walrus bends way over to appraise a cardboard boxful of redundant hand-knit scarves, causing his fatted wallet to squeeze and bloom from his back pocket like pus and fall onto the treated and trampled green field. He doesn’t seem to fucking notice.

She doesn’t have to think as she moves quickly over and snatches it up and stuffs it in her threadbare purse and enters the crosswalk too soon. As a cab strives to thunder through the yellow light and the purple-haired vendor begins screeching and pointing her yellowed claws, Lisa’s worn plastic heel slips on the curb, allowing her determinedly
driven body to fly forward, the sudden force pushing her face and nose, once broken
during a well-meaning ballet rehearsal, into the cab’s rumbling right turn, shattering and
flattening her kind-of-Jewish, kind-of-British, kind-of-Mom’s, kind-of-Dad’s nose in less
than a second of stopped time.

She falls, blinking, spinning, spun.

Everyone she has ever known and several dozen park-goers are dragging her onto
the grass by her armpits, her ears, her tits. Vernon’s salt-and-pepper mustache frowns
down at her, haloed painfully by red and yellow lights, as he wraps one arm regally
around John’s waist. Her nose is flowing freely, the blood mixing with a creeping floe of
blue and white snot, minute glaciers of pill fragments – too hastily ground up and snorted
– filling her chin, catching on Vernon’s sleeve as he guides her shoulders and the ground
beneath them softens and turns to arctic-colored mud. As Lisa lies drowning under the
sun and John looks away, Vernon kneels gently in the growing puddle and bares his
glistening, gapped grin, looks her over one last time with yellowed eyes, lowers his free
hand to slide it into her back pocket, eases out four dollar bills and change, and nods,
businesslike, friendly as can be.
The Fungus Amongus

The federally-instituted alarm trilled and Fritz Hamburger immediately jackknifed into a sitting position and bashed his head into the cracking plasticine supports of the bunk bed above him, as he did every day. Although only seventeen years old, Fritz was almost two meters tall, with an unusually hard skull. He winced, mostly out of habit and expectation, and swung his gangling feet and toes onto the warm floor. He wandered over to the wall unit, yawned, and pressed his flat hand against the identification pad.

“¡Buenos Días!” it chirped. “Fritz Hamburger, male. Confirmed awake.” The alarm continued to screech. His twin brother, Nein, had applied non-toxic quick-dry ChinkFill to his ears the night before, and was still in deep sleep. Fritz reached out with long pasty fingers, which an old, old man had once called “eggshell white”, to pluck out the stiff globule from his brother’s left ear. Immediately, the boy raised himself into the ideal push-up position, leaned into his arms to lift up his round and perfectly balanced calves, swung his perfectly-controlled body around to thump his brother in the side of the head, and dismounted the bunk to land noiselessly next to his twin, the air still stirring with his effortless acrobatics.

bleeding.” He touched a few clammy fingers to his left ear, then his right, and held the lukewarm wetness in front of his weak eyes to peer it at. “Oh, yeah. Um. Thanks.”

Fritz stood in the doorway and listened to the beeps and clicks coming down the hall. Nein had already sealed himself in the bathroom and activated the twenty-minute hygiene cycle for himself, so Fritz tripped downstairs and into the small bathroom, which had an old-fashioned sink, bruising several toes rather badly along the way.

He rolled up some synthetissue and stuffed it in his ear. Its tip melted almost immediately, but managed to block the flow. His blood was thin, closer in both consistency and color to water than to the bright, gummy ooze that occasionally came out of his brother’s futsal wounds.

The boys had been born two months after the Animal Equality Act of 2015 had passed in parliament. The act took effect immediately, but contained a short-lived and unpopular clause allowing anemic infants to breastfeed until their first birthday. Unlike his brother, Fritz had the benefit of his mother’s pale soup for almost six months, up until her death. Teachers often mused, after reviewing his academic and medical records on the first day of school, that he had sucked the life out of his mother by breastfeeding, and that her death was a fair penalty for perpetuating the struggle of Living Food. This wasn’t true. He had, however, inherited her profound allergy to soy.

After their mother’s death, their father took the boys to Neue Haven, Connecticut, where he had been able to secure employment as a mid-level chemical engineer. The company provided fresh houses, fully-equipped with all state and federally mandated
in-home appliance and security systems, to all its employees. As soon as the boys were old enough to be enrolled in the community’s pre-school preparatory academy, Dr. Alte Hamburger entered a contractual agreement to work very, very long hours for the remainder of his professional life. While he greatly preferred the whirring cleanliness of his laboratory desk in the Materials and Discovery division of Mund-Eco Corp. to the less clinical environment at home, Alte often wondered if he shouldn’t have supplemented his sons’ school-raising with some of his own guidance and wisdom. Left to their own and the home’s devices, the boys grew up separately. Nein became co-captain of the secondary school’s futsal and cricket clubs, and won several regional Achievement Awards for ecology, nutrition and grammar. Fritz spent much of his time drawing portraits in the waiting rooms of medical clinics after accidentally ingesting soy proteins. The frequent shocks of adrenaline caused him to be both jittery and tired, while the periodic vomiting (which was his body’s own, first-generation reaction to fungal-based foodstuffs) kept him thin and friendless.

Waiting for his brother’s cycle to complete, Fritz lounged in front of the open refrigerator, dangling from the door with one arm and steadying himself with another, placed on the freezer’s handle. Kugel. Wheat-derivative streudel. Papples. Brocoleeks. Calcium liquid. None of which his body considered to be edible. He finally eyed a potato which was settling in the back corner. He washed it off, set the nanowave oven to “rejuvenate”, picked at his ear briefly, set the oven to “French fries”, rubbed his nose with unexpected energy for several seconds, pulled out the steaming, unscented pile of
cooked, starchy sticks, and sat down on the one stool that accompanied the kitchen’s eating counter. He picked up a French fry and burned his fingers, then his mouth, before setting it down again. Sullen, he called out, “Omnivision. On. Um. News. I guess.”

The light-green room exploded with sound as one wall instantly filled with the beaming faces of two black news-anchors. Fritz bellowed to be heard over their amplified voices. “Volume down. Volume DOWN!” The audio instruments slowly complied. He yelped, knowing that his voice would not penetrate the tilunium ceiling, “NEIN! Stop turning off the hammed Auto-Adjustor!” He gathered up the scattered fries. “Jesus.” Fritz examined the soggy handful, realizing that his brother had managed to spill (and then ignore) a glassful of soy-based Chocotein the night before, and sighed. The voices crooned, “Tragic news from the Philadelphia International Zoo this morning, where two puppies, out of a litter of twelve, were found to be stillborn. The baby Huskies, pre-named Matilda and Jeff…”

He dragged the whole mess into the in-table garbage chute with a squeegee, left the squeegee in the sink, washed his hands with liquid Benadryl, climbed the stairs, pulled on a Tuesday jumpsuit, shouldered his backpack, and jogged slowly to the street to catch the early Special-Needs bus. Unlike the later Special-Needs bus, which left forty-five minutes before the “normal” school bus (to allow for “unforeseen circumstances” with its passengers), the early bus carried only the most mentally and physically retarded students. It crept along as if on a track, taking almost two hours to reach the high school, which was five miles away. It cradled and sedated its cargo until
the last possible moment, expelling them directly into the school’s side entrance at 8:55 a.m. through an enormous hatch in the bus’ rear. Each seat resembled a cupped hand wrapped in cellophane, protecting against bodily projections and, unintentionally, treacherous allergens. Fritz gratefully climbed aboard, took two anti-anxiety tablets and one anti-nausea capsule from the wall-mounted dispenser, drifted to a seat in the back row, and fell asleep. The driver waited patiently until he heard Fritz’ reedy snores before pulling away from the curb.

Fritz was walking across a sunny parking lot. He stepped up onto the grass, which needed cutting. Bees were patrolling the ground seriously while birds dipped down lazily to scatter them. He was walking towards a cluster of wooden tables with red and white-checkered surfaces. They appeared to be on fire. Fritz started running towards them, slowly, yelling with the little air he could muster. He realized that the fire was contained in some sort of stone altar, and that a smiling man in a strange apron was tending it. He stopped to catch his breath, putting his hands on his knees, keeping his eyes on the laughing group of children surrounding the man, praising him. Fritz breathed deeply through his nose and almost fainted. His mouth filled with saliva, and his stomach growled so loudly that the people stopped chattering and looked over, noticing him for the first time. They smiled.

He noticed two dogs, one small and one large, tethered to a nearby tree. They looked at him impassively for a moment. A beautiful woman arose from one of the tables and floated over to the pink-faced man. She spoke briefly in his ear. He smiled, nodding,
and raised up an enormous two-pronged fork for Fritz to see. Dangling from it, dripping, steaming, was an enormous piece of flesh. He chuckled as Fritz’ eyes widened in horror. “Hungry, son?” His voice was rich, his accent strange. “Come join us.” The woman nodded encouragingly. She open her pink mouth to speak. “Dear boys, dear girls, we have now arrived at your place of school-raising. We have loved being with you today, but we are comforted to know that a wonderful day of learning awaits you.”

Fritz awoke to the soothing, gradually loudening voice of the bus’ Farewell Message. He found that, like several other students on the bus, he had curled up inside his seat, and that his open mouth had sealed itself to the plastic sheeting with spittle. Wiping his lips on the sleeve of his coveralls, Fritz glanced outside to make sure Nein wasn’t around, and hurried off the bus.

First block was Economy and Law. Fritz scuttled into the classroom, only half full, and took his assigned seat near the window. He spread his books in front of him, laid out the required notebook and two pens, and slumped into his chair. It was hard and symmetrical, resistant to any stain or damage. It would not permit even the laziest student to go to sleep, though many had tried. Wincing, Fritz stared at the recreation yard, at its rows of seats and bright green DuraTurf. From beyond Fritz’ view, a tall man suddenly appeared. He strode across the yard, stopping at a pair of dark grey meal benches. He pulled out a shining tool, looking for all the world like the dream priest. Fritz gasped, choking.

“Hey, F”. Maize Linklater sank down into the seat next to him, dropping her
books loudly. Fritz murmured at her breasts. “Hey.”

“What’s new, pal?” Maize jangled her crossed legs, gnawing on gum. The old shopping teacher had once asked her if she was chewing something called cud, right before he retired. She and Fritz were the most mismatched lab partners in the class. While Fritz seldom moved beyond taking careful but finally useless notes, Maize was a living, breathing flurry of activity. She radiated health and energy, but did nothing to earn it. She only ate junk in the cafeteria, and little of it. Fritz liked the way she smelled.

“Um-m. Nothing,” he stuttered. He looked back at the tall man outside. The man was on his hands and knees now, stabbing the turf over and over with a gleaming two-pronged instrument. Maize followed his gaze. “Aerating it, probably.” She frowned. “Strange they haven’t found a better way to do that, yet.” She shrugged. Smitten, Fritz shrugged back. “Your brother win any more trophies over the weekend?” Fritz wilted.

Doctor Lillian Moreau breezed into the room, singing, “Very well, very well, let’s begin, shall we?” Fritz gulped. Dr. Moreau was tall, tanned, buxom, and glamorous. If she hadn’t been such an exceptionally cruel teacher, Fritz might have been in love with her, as would have every other male student at Dennis Kucinich Secondary School. As it was, however, Dr. Moreau had scores of teenaged enemies (not counting jealous young girls), each one of them perpetually aroused in her presence.

She began, “As all of you know, today you will be taking your regional mid-term examination.” Fritz suddenly noticed the blue plastic booklets on the far corner of every pair of linked desks. “You will have three hours. You should have used the bathroom
before coming to this class. There will be no breaks. There is no eating or drinking.” She paused to smooth her trench coat over her round hips. “I am assuming that every single student has his or her federally-equipped combination honesty-monitor-and-calculator and two pens with black ink?” Several students murmured and nodded, slowly. A handful stared in wide-eyed horror at the instructional screens, which had begun flashing the “minutes until exam” countdown.

Maize sighed and rolled her big, outlined eyes at Fritz. “No can do”, she whispered, and settled her pale face comfortably onto her crossed arms. Fritz eyed his two pens, took a breath, and began rummaging furiously in his backpack for the large paneled wristband. He found it inside a sock, brushed off the bigger pieces of lint, and strapped it on. Unlike Nein’s monitor, which all but cut off the circulation to his powerful hand, Fritz’ dangled listlessly, sliding around heavily on the pale twig of his arm and making his handwriting yet worse.

“Very well. Those of you who did not remember your equipment have failed the examination. You may sit quietly at your desks for the next three hours. Those of you who did manage to prepare yourself for school today: there is no erasing, no crossing out. Each question should receive only one answer. Anyone speaking unnecessarily will automatically fail. You may begin.”

Silence enveloped the room. The students stared at the closed booklets in front of them. No one moved. Moments passed. Dr. Moreau looked up from a thick, humorless volume and glared venomously at the young people. “Begin.”
Fritz grabbed the top book from his small pile. Hamburger, F. Maths. He slit open the plastic seal with his right thumbnail and cautiously opened the booklet to the first page. Post-Calculus. He sunk gratefully into a haze of symbols and algorithms. The most difficult questions were skipped. Many of them were more or less answerable. He scribbled on, chewing on each fingernail slowly, in turn, before moving on to picking at his dry face.

He closed the booklet just as Maize stirred in her half-sleep. Her purple-painted lips parted slowly. She mumbled warmly, “Sure. I’ll try anything once.” Fritz swallowed, crossed his legs under his desk, and wished he’d worn his school tunic over his form-fitting jumpsuit. He reached for the next booklet. Hamburger, F. Religious Cults. Trying to peel off the security sticker, he loudly ripped the plastic cover. Dr. Moreau glanced up severely, scowled at the class as a whole, and went back to reading. Fritz crossed his legs in the other direction and quietly opened the booklet to the first page. He began to read.

“With the rise of the Animal Equality movement in the ’00s, numerous flesh-centered religious cults gained popularity, protected by the former U.S. Constitutional separation of church and state. Which was the most dangerous of these cults, and why?”

Fritz stiffened. He looked up at Dr. Moreau, then at his classmates. Everyone was silently brooding over his or her own book. He looked up at the surveillance camera above the professor’s desk. At the moment, it was idly scanning a row of sleeping
“slacker” students in the back row. Future janitors. Mouth-breathers, Moreau had called them.

Looking back down at his booklet, Fritz felt slightly calmer. The questions were assigned randomly. Late twentieth-century and early twenty first-century meat cults had made up a significant part of the history/culture/law curriculum that year. There was nothing wrong with being able to answer the question. Nothing legally wrong, anyway.

Fritz stared out the window for the seventeenth time that morning. He pictured Opa Fritz, with his oak walking stick and drooping, twinkling eyes. His namesake, with a real leather belt hidden under his elder’s tunic. His father had disowned the boys’ grandfather when he found the matching leather coin purses under their mattresses. Nein had shrugged, saying he didn’t want the disgusting thing, anyway. Fritz had cried for a long time after his father and grandfather had stormed downstairs, fighting. He’d liked the way the gifts had smelled.

One week before he reported Opa Fritz to the police and five days before he found the purses, Alte Hamburger had allowed his father to take young Fritz out for an entire day. Nein was busy with friends. Fritz was thirteen, just finishing up primary school, when his grandfather suddenly showed up and then went away again.

They’d spent the afternoon walking slowly around the town center, past all the houses, down the cleaned streets. At his grandfather’s request, Fritz told all about his life, about his sickness and his loneliness and how he felt different from all the other youths. Opa Fritz just nodded and frowned, trembling slightly when he heard about the boy’s
many trips to the hospital.

“It’s a damned shame, them starving you. Starving you right to damned death.”

Young Fritz blushed. “No, Opa, it’s all right. Things are better now.”

“Hm. That’s what they want you to think, no?”

They ordered a light evening meal at a well-lit diner. Opa Fritz flirted with the waitress and bullied the cooks, insisting that his grandson’s fare be absolutely soy-free.

“Eat what you like, leave what you don’t. The real food is yet to come,” the old man grinned. Fritz picked at this potatoes and vegetables. The old man only drank coffee.

When Opa Fritz had paid the bill, he walked slowly outside and turned to young Fritz.

“I’d like to take you someplace, now. Someplace special, where you’re not the only one who’s feeling like he could stand a little more to eat.”

Fritz blinked at his grandfather, mouth hanging open.

“Okay. Um. Okay,” he’d said.

They called a car and piled in. The two Fritzes rode past the school, the plant where Alte worked, the shopping centers, the old railroad tracks, the warehouses. The taxi stopped in front of an abandoned factory. Opa Fritz tipped the driver, who asked,

“What the veal you boys doing around here?” The old man frowned, then smiled, tipped the man again, and crowed, “Old family tradition. Examining the ruins from which we came, and so on.” He grinned. The driver sped off.

They walked for several minutes, young Fritz holding back pieces of torn fencing in three places to allow his grandfather to creep onward. The sun had set, and only the
gravel munching under their feet told Fritz that they were still on a road of some sort.

“Opa Fri-..?” The old man shushed him.

He grinned, baring his strong, white teeth. “Listen.”

Fritz listened. Walking more quietly, straining his ears, he realized that soft music was coming from the building ahead. It had chipped cement walls and a rotten tin roof. The doors were bruised and heavy. The voices of men, women and even children tickled Fritz’ ears and neck as he and his grandfather slowly closed the distance between themselves and the strange structure.

A large, hairy Jew was guarding the entrance. Fritz could tell he was a Jew because of pictures he’d seen on the news. The hat, the curls, the many different pieces of clothing.

“Guten Abend”, the man growled. “Kann ich Ihnen helfen?” *(Can I help you?)*

Young Fritz stared.

Opa Fritz responded cheerfully, “Fragt nicht, was euer Land für euch tun kann, sondern was du für dein Land tun kannst.” *(Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.)*


The chorus rang out the last notes of the hymn. “… has a way with B-O-L-O-G-N-Aaaaaaaaay.” Beaming, they sat as one.

A tall, thin man rose from a stool to the side of the choir. His robes were black,
with a dark red collar. His shock of manic gray hair reminded Fritz of pictures of Albert Einstein.

His grandfather tugged at his sleeve, pulling him down onto an empty bench as the man cleared his throat.

“That’s the Reverend Joseph McCallister. He’s Albert Einstein’s great-nephew,” Opa Fritz whispered.

Young Fritz stared. “Oh.”

From within his robes, the reverend revealed a thick, ancient text. He placed it on an old-fashioned music stand, opening it with a loud ‘thump’. There were pages, corners and pieces of tape sticking out. The book seemed to have seen more conventional days. Fritz could almost make out the words, “The Joy… ooking.” The man raised his chin, admiring the bedraggled crowd of two dozen or so.

“WELCOME, friends, to the First Church of Kennedy, Omnivore. I see that our flock has grown this night. Willkommen, alle.” The parishioners turned and smiled at the two Fritz’. The reverend continued.

“Let us open with the call and response. ICH BIN EIN BERLINER.”


The preacher continued. “Ich bin ein Berliner. When the late President John F. Kennedy visited war-torn Germany in the mid-twentieth century, he proclaimed, ‘Ich bin
ein Berliner. Which, of course, means, ‘I am a sausage.’”

The congregation murmured with familiar approval.

“If he had said, ‘Ich bin Berliner’, meaning, ‘I am a Berliner’, his message would have been lost. By significantly saying ‘Ich bin ein Berliner’, or, ‘I am a sausage’, he was speaking to the very members of future generations that sit assembled before me today!”

“President Kennedy foresaw our struggle! He foresaw our oppression, our starvation, our decades of stewing and sweating in unnaturally processed vegetable oil! ICH BIN EIN BERLINER!”

“ICH AU!” came they echo.

“Yea, He envisioned our deprivation, our lack of protein. The most famous, most handsome, most ribaldrous, most powerful man in the world, he saw us, and he wept for us! But did he weep of the eyes?”

“NO!”

“Did he weep of the nose?”

“NO!”

“That’s right, brothers and sisters, he wept of the flesh! Which is, of course, invisible!”

“Amen,” they cooed.

“He wept of the flesh by not being GREEdy. He wept of the flesh by leaving us his words, his wisdom, to find and understand only decades later! Amen!”

“AMEN! Hallelujah.”
Fritz whispered to his grandfather, “What does ‘hallelujah’ mean?” His grandfather winked. “No one knows.”

The preacher continued, “We will now read from the online Encyclopedia entry on Kennedy’s eating habits.” There was a rustling as he pulled out a greasy page.

“Yea, We can not verify that this was President John F. Kennedy's favorite breakfast, but he did prefer orange juice, poached eggs on toast, crisp broiled bacon, marmalade, milk and coffee.”

Some burly men in the front row began sniffing in approval.

“For LUNCH, President Kennedy was particularly fond of soup--New England Fish Chowder was a favorite. He has been described as a "soup, sandwich and fruit" man for lunch--always soup though. For dinner there were no particular favorites, although he did like lamb chops, steak, baked chicken and turkey, white meat only, and don't forget mashed potatoes with butter.”

Children began stirring with excitement. Their mothers, stirring too, tried unsuccessfully to quiet them.

“HE WAS ALSO FOND… of seafood and baked beans. According to chefs who worked in the White House, President Kennedy liked corn muffins too---so did Calvin Coolidge. For dessert, if he had it, it would likely be chocolate.” The reverend lowered his voice dramatically, almost whispering the last lines.

“President Kennedy was a small eater; he often had to be reminded that it was dinner time... politics always took preference over food.”
Fritz looked around the room. The reverend was panting with excitement, his face matching his crimson collar. Grown men were weeping. Bony women were muttering to one another, “Chocolate.” The few young children had completely abandoned all social conventions and were rolling around in the aisles, screeching. Their mothers ignored them. “Chocolate!”

The reverend yelled hoarsely above the din, “Let us follow His example, friends. Let us put politics before food. Let us manage our hunger, our malnutrition, our HUMILIATION as caged omnivores, to fight our oppressors. Let us…”

But it was too late. The congregation had already followed the scent to a cabinet in the rear of the church, uncovering a steaming aluminum dish of black-market hotdogs and whole-wheat buns. The choir passed out disposable plates and napkins.

“Isn’t it something, Fritz? Isn’t it SOMETHING?” The old man’s face twitched, his browned hands clasping his grandson’s flimsy wrists. Someone knocked Fritz’ chair from behind and he fell onto his hands and knees, bumping his head on the upturned chair in front of him. He was at the bottom of a canyon walled by a family of six, standing together, trading buns and hot links. He peered up into the working mouths of the congregation, saw particles of food dancing under the bare lights like fireworks. He became aware of a wet mashing sound behind him, and slowly turned on all fours, greased plates sticking to both hands. Through a forest of trembling pant legs, Fritz stared up into the face of a young boy, even paler than himself, who was perched on the
minister’s lap, sucking mustard from the man’s fingers with his eyes closed; Fritz blinked twice, and passed out.

“Fritz? Oh, for vegans’ sake, FRITZ!” Maize was shaking him.

“Um. Huh?”

The classroom was empty. The exam was over. Dr. Moreau was standing before him, breasts rising and falling quickly.

“Mr. Hamburger. You fell asleep. Another soy coma, no doubt.”

“No, I was just… thinking.”

“Fine. Get a doctor’s note and you will retake the exam. Don’t, and you won’t. Good day to the both of you.” She sidled out.

Maize stared at him hard for three seconds. Then she shrugged, gathered her things, and left.

Fritz looked down at the sweat-stained booklet, then out the window. The big gardener was still stabbing the recreation yard, brutally, arhythmically. Fritz shouldered his backpack and wandered out to the school’s bus stop. The special bus floated up instantly, fragrantly. He climbed on board, took a small handful of pills, washed them down with protein liquid, curled up in a crinkling plastic dish, and prayed to no one in particular that he would never wake.
All Aboard

or, Working My Way Up

These days, I don’t even hear the 2 a.m. whistle anymore. I’ve worked on the late
night Chicago – New Orleans run for almost three years now, and the whistle hasn’t
woken me up for half of it. Instead, I have to set my father’s old brass alarm clock for
1:15 a.m. It could raise the dead- one of those old-fashioned monsters with a hammer that
has to be wound up, and two big bells the size and shape of ashtrays. As I’m getting
older, I need a little more time to get ready before work. It seems like every day I need a
few more seconds, even, if I’m going to make it for my shift before the train pulls away
again. I’ve never missed a shift, though.

I almost missed a shift last week, and it threw me off completely. I was running
up when the final whistle started to blow, the one that says “this train is leaving”, and I
had to wipe the sweat off of my temples when I got to the staff’s closet of the kitchen car
on board. In the movies I’ve seen that have a train in them, there’s always a conductor
standing at the top of the stairs when that last whistle sounds, and he’s yelling, “All
aboard!” When this train is ready to go, nobody comes out to yell “all aboard” or
anything like that. At this hour of the night, in the middle of nowhere, in the kind of
darkness you only get on the prairie, with the train being the only source of light for a
mile, if you’re one of the ones who’s supposed to be on it, you know about it.
The way I see it, my job requires me to be both calm and cordial all of the time. Nowadays, folks with plenty of money can choose to travel by airplane to most of the places they’d want to go. If I don’t provide good service, the really wealthy customers might decide to stop riding trains altogether. Having lots of money allows you to make all kinds of choices in life that poorer people don’t often get to make. With all that opportunity, it says something to the rest of us when wealthy people make their choice and end up on a train. They seem really satisfied to see the countryside rolling by, which is something you don’t get on an airplane, but I know that their experience on board counts a lot, and affects the way that they get where they’re going. I always find myself thinking that it’s a certain kind of person that chooses rail, the kind of person that is more interested in the journey than the destination, as they say. When they’re traveling all the way from Chicago to New Orleans, I know that people on this train are on it for a reason.

When I almost showed up too late last week, I was afraid I’d catch hell from somebody. Luckily, there didn’t seem to be anybody to catch hell from. As I pulled my apron over my head and tied it tight around my waist (you wash your own clothes, but the company washes the aprons), I realized that I’d never known who was in charge of telling people off, which is a pretty funny thing to realize. I learned my job from the cooks and the porters and the other waiters, and I picked up my paycheck from the pile in the staff closet every week, but nobody had ever stepped forward and identified himself as the person I’d have to answer to. In any case, I’d made the train, so I just told myself that that was alright, but not to make a habit of it, and I got to work.
It was almost raining that morning, but that was the case a lot of the time. Wind would blow down from Canada, the drivers told me, and it would stir up water on the Great Lakes, mix up with the steam from the engines, and then it would follow the trains all night, all the way from the train yards in Peoria through Illinois, and some other states I wasn’t sure about (since I always got off and changed trains to go back home right before the state line), all the way down to the Big Easy, at which point the new day’s sunlight would evaporate the mists and everyone would climb off the train. Like I said, I never saw where the train began or where it ended up, but I believed what the drivers said. They seemed honest enough, and no one ever contradicted them.

That morning, I wiped the sweat off my face and neck, burned my tongue on a cup of coffee but still managed to drink it down in about a minute, wiped the new sweat off with my apron, patted my belt to make sure my flask was tucked in tight, and unhooked my cart from the wall in the kitchen. The white cook gave me a sideways look because the dinner orders had already been sitting on the counter by the time I rolled my cart up, but there was still steam coming off of them so I shrugged at him and starting loading them up onto the different trays. The kitchen car is always at the front of the train, so I stack the orders for the finer passengers down on the bottom tray, since I’ll be passing through their cabin right away. I realized that since steam rises, the plates on top are getting warmed by the lower trays. So even though by the time I get to the last car the only food there’ll be is the leftovers that the other passengers didn’t want, it’ll still be hot.

I pushed my way into the first car. As usual, it was almost packed with passengers
wearing their finest clothes. The first car always makes me the most nervous, partly because it’s the first customers of the day, and partly because all of the men and women are so starchy and even-looking, but mostly because no one ever talks. As I call out the customers’ names, one by one, to give them what they asked for, they always look at me real quickly, like I was interrupting them, look me up and down just once, and then snatch the food out of my hands and look straight forward again. As usual, I could tell that all of the passengers were annoyed by my being there, and by all of the rattling and din that my cart made in all of that silence. As usual, their names were Doctor This, and Judge That, and So-and-So the Fifth, and they had the cleanest fingernails on the whole train. It felt like an hour went by while I was serving them, even with all of them being so quick, and never looking me in the eye once. I heard quiet clinking noises as the first car started in working on their meals, took one last look to make sure everyone was taken care of, and pulled the rope to open up the door to the second car.

The second car is always even tenser than the first one. That day, there were only two men sitting in it, one in the front on the right side and one towards the back left, but there was something in the air that made me think that they knew each other, and that the blood was bad. To prove me right, they started fiercely eyeing one another as soon as I did my bow and started reaching into my cart. I greeted the first customer and presented him with his meal. His eyes and big pink nostrils were so busy, but his hand held up the unread newspaper perfectly still, which is something you would need to practice a lot to be able do on a big train. He already had his table pulled down from the wall, and he
looked right at me as he took his tray, not breaking eye contact even to put it down in front of him. “Thanks…” he looked at my name tag, “Dan T.” He took his stiff parcel of utensils and a cloth napkin from me and clutched it tight in the air where I’d handed it to him. “Dan T. That’s a good name. I like that. Simple. Better than Jeremiah Bedrosian, anyway.” His fingers relaxed for a moment as he examined his silverware with one eyebrow up.

I looked down at the piece of paper with the seating chart and the orders on it, and realized I had gotten them mixed. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ve made a mistake.” I reached down into the cart. “The tray I gave you is for Mr. Jeremy over there. This here’s your tray.” His nervous smile sank away and was filled in with the meanest scowl. He glanced at his meal, and then back up at me. “This… this refuse? Clearly not. Hand me back the other one.” He reached for it but I pulled back, staring at him very wide-eyed, and said again, “I’m sorry, sir. This tray’s for Mr. Jeremy.” And then he made a face at me, and as I was caught for several seconds by his bright green eyes, I thought of the words TOOTH and NAIL. I explained, “It’s the same dish, sir. The only difference is his choice of vegetable.” He looked like he was going to scream at me or slap my face or both, so I pushed my cart down to the other end of the car before he finished puffing himself up.

The other man was just staring out the window with a little smile on his face, so I placed his food in front of him, cleared my throat, and said, “Mr. Benson Jeremy, here’s your dinner, sir. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir.” He turned slightly to peer down at his food, and I swear he could have been the other man’s brother. Aside from the similarities
in their faces, both were covered by grey overcoats, with little peeks of glittering finery underneath, tucked well away. And neither one blinked. “This looks awful. That other man’s dinner smells just fine from here. What’d he get?” I started sweating just a little bit. “Same thing, sir. I’m very sorry, sir. I hope you enjoy your meal, sir.” I bowed again and scooted up to the door and pulled the cord as fast as I could, before they could say anything else. I figured they’d work something out.

As the door to the third car slid open, a big cloud of smoke rolled out and surrounded me, washing me inside. Somehow the biggest herd of smokers always ended up in the third car, each passenger looking like his own private bonfire from the front of the aisle where I stood. It smelled like every person was smoking something different: thick, woody cigars, mintish mentholated cigarettes, exotic cloves that tickled my throat and burned my eyes. It was hard for me to find the right customer for each meal, because they were all walking around, forming little groups here and there every half-minute or so, steadily talking in low voices. I heard women whispering names, dates, weapons. Faces jerked forth from the cloud one by one as I gave my hoarse roll call. Hands would appear a few feet below, dragging their trays into the darkness of one little group or another.

Burly arms pumped as they started spearing roasted potatoes in silence, while long, unseen fingernails were clicking against their highball glasses, sounding like silverware on bone china. I guess they were happy to see me coming in and then also happy to see me go; all the time I was serving, their lips were sealed open, but their eyes
squinted only at the haze and at each other. What with all the smoke pressing up against me, my collar had just about melted entirely onto my neck by the time I found the right cord to pull.

I must have popped one of the wheels out of alignment when I pushed my cart over the metal lip of the doorway and into the fourth car, because all of a sudden it was heavy. I braced it with both arms to keep it moving straight, and I leaned into it with my whole body for every inch I went along. As I crept down the aisle, I caught sight of maybe a dozen passengers, all slumped down in their seats so that their heads sat between the headrest and the window. Two of the overhead bulbs had burned out, and I thought maybe the fumes from the third car had made them sleepy, but as I passed each passenger in his or her own row, all laid out with their feet and arms propped up, I saw that every eye was open.

I remember looking down at my passenger list and realizing that no one in that car had bothered to pre-order their meals. I called out, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. If you’d like to order dinner off the dinner cart, there’s a menu clipped to the wall next to you, so just have a look at tonight’s choices, unhook your tray table, and let me know when you’re ready.” Each body stayed tombstone still. Out of the corner of my eye, I thought I saw a man smiling in recognition of my announcement, but when I turned his way, I saw that he was buried deep in his coat and hat, that he hadn’t moved a muscle. I waited for about two minutes, slumped into my cart like a bored adolescent. I cleared my
throat for no real purpose other than to get my blood going a little bit, and forced my cart onward.

When the passengers in the fifth car saw the door sliding open, they slipped their hands into their pockets in unison. They saw me in my uniform and smelled the cooked meals and relaxed some, choosing instead to fiddle with their gleaming watches and rich furs. Every seat was taken, but I discovered once more that no meals had been pre-ordered by this group. The people were thin and regal and anxious, clutching their wool coats to their bodies and burying their purses and briefcases out of anyone else’s sight or reach. Working properly now, my cart rolled merrily down the aisle as I repeated my Purchasing Dinner speech.

I was about two-thirds of the way through the cabin when a very old man with a well-trimmed white moustache swung out his hand, relying on gravity more than muscle to direct his gesture. He withdrew, coughed into his papery fist, and stared hard at me, begging for something. “Say,” he said. “Are you providing anything… complimentary?” There was a slight rustle as every single passenger rotated on his velvet seat, craning economically to hear my response, reaching with their eyes. I apologized that no, I wasn’t. “Not in this car, sir.” A louder rustle, followed by a sort of unanimous, wordless muttering, told me that everyone had snapped back into forward-facing position, unhappy with my response. The bodies were so rigid in their seats that when I opened my mouth to explain their meal choices once more, I thought better of it and rattled on.
I realized that, at that moment, I was only approaching the halfway mark for that night’s shift, but my body already felt like it had been working for a week, and my head was frayed and filled by what seemed like a lifetime’s worth of moments, meetings and meal charts. With a solid wooden door covering my front and a roomful of solemn, forward-facing strangers covering my rear, I decided to take a moment to revive myself. I reached between my shirt buttons, peeled my flask off of my hip, wiped off a smear of sweat and skin with my apron, and took a deep swallow of warm whisky.

As soon as I entered the sixth car, I begged myself not to have taken that drink. The smell of booze pushed into me like a careless drunk, it was so strong. Thinnest cigarette smoke pooled on top of the shimmering fumes like oil on water. The whisky rushed up into my throat as I rummaged around in my cart. I would have vomited right then if I hadn’t accidentally stuck my hand in scalding soup. Choking back a yell of pain, I dried my hand on my shirt and apron, not really aiming for either one. Every inch of the second-to-last steel shelf was crammed with bowls and platters of rich food, much more than I remembered packing. In the interrupted lamplight, the shelf looked like a miniature version of the stuffed car, each fat little pot of chowder a blurred passenger, pork chops scattered like gleaming luggage.

Stunned by pain and noise and the flammable breath of the crowd, I hadn’t dried my hand properly, so I ruined my meal map the moment I grabbed it up. I looked up quickly and watched the crowd laugh with wet lips, watch me with grazing eyes. I swallowed back my sickness and reached for the first two, big plates. I whispered, “Good
evening.” The swampy air didn’t carry my greeting very far, so I drew in deeper and declared, “Someone wanted the chops and mash and gravy?” Two groups of men in the front row cheered and reached out with warm grins on their faces. The group on my right beat the group on my left to the punch. Mumbling warm thanks and grabbing several sets of silverware, they immediately tucked into the double-large helping of meat and potatoes. Weaving their forked arms around one another’s, they shared the dishes gladly and quickly, eyes rolling in drunken reverence for their feast.

I stared. Then I suddenly remembered the second group, who were watching me patiently but meaningfully. The booze stirred in my stomach as I reached into my cart and heaved out two more plates. “Someone ordered the meat lasagna?” In a heartbeat, they were inside of it. “Someone ordered the…? Someone ord-…? Some?” Exactly as fast as I could produce saucers of the Devil knows what, the crowd carried them away again, foods lifting and flowing and sinking and vanishing, reminding me of leaves on a deep steady river but also Jews on a wedding party. In under a minute, these celebrating, anonymous passengers had emptied everything but the dessert box (which I managed not to mention), and for just a moment I was bowing with hunger. I slammed the door of my cart shut, locked it, and worked my way through the distracted crowd to the door of the seventh car.

The door slid back two inches and stuck. I called through the crack, “Evening, ladies and gentlemen. Meal cart. Just be a moment. I’ll try to lubricate it with something.” Titters and chuckles breezed through the opening, followed by a cloud of
what could only have been, registered in my body as, the smell of women. I poured the last few drops from a bottle of olive oil into the runners in the floor. A man’s hand appeared on the door’s edge, and a low voice said, “Together, now. One, two, …” I pushed with most of the strength I had left, and the door shuddered to a glide.

All of the bulbs but one had burnt out, or been removed. This last compartment was the hottest. The few dry patches on my shirt immediately surrendered and soaked through. Several passengers had opened the small window above their seats, but the air that moved through the cabin was thick and terribly sweet, like July’s orchard. For some reason, my gesture to the man that had helped me came out more as a curtsy than a bow. He nodded and smiled. His voice rang out, “And what delicacies have you for us this evening, kind sir?” The two or three men and ten or twelve women turned to face me, also smiling brightly. I noticed that very few passengers were wearing coats or gloves, and that only the one woman was wearing a hat, and that it was a man’s. A limp tie swung from each gentleman’s shirt pocket, while the women held up bunches of loose hair in their pale fists, pulling it away from sticky necks and busts.

Silently, slowly, I raised the box of tarts and éclairs. I lifted its lid, facing the passengers with its rich array. Carefully and courteously, the women stood, in turn, to approach the box, coo with excitement, slowly lift a chosen treat, and return to her perch. The box grew heavier as each pungent beauty slowly reached inside me and withdrew, eyes shining. The men confidently selected their desserts, mostly dipped fruits, and
positioned themselves on armrests throughout the cabin. There was silence and then a warm wind as the passengers smelled their fare deeply, all eyes closed, and sighed as one.

Lips parted and mustaches bristled softly as the men and women began to eat. I saw them slowly, but I heard the rhythm of their licking and sucking rise up and outstrip my own heartbeat. The sloshing tempo was twice as fast, then three times as fast as the heavy swaying of the train. The single light seemed to grow brighter and brighter, and I was dying on my feet, suffocating, until I drew in breath as hard as I possibly could and everything ended.

When I came to, old Virgil, one of the porters, was kneeling next to me. I was lying up against a wall in the luggage car, which was empty. “Welcome back, amigo”, said Virgil, “to the land of the living.” He chuckled as I looked around me, kind of frantic, and tried to stand up. I coughed, “Where are we?” He smiled at me, and nodded up to the light and warm air seeping through the slats near the ceiling. “New Orleans, partner. We weren’t sure how to get you on the train home again, so we just let you sleep. Already told the main office about your being here.”

Morning had broken and been swept up. It was daytime down south. I’d never been so far away. Our steam-shitting caterpillar had delivered all of its passengers. The doors between the cars were open, so I stared all the way up through them, through the narrow peephole of all the aisles, to the kitchen car where I’d started. They were empty and identical again, the red velvet seats and stained wood made darker by the draining sneaking in. Virgil steadied me by my elbow as I staggered off the train into the sticky
station. He gave me a thump on the back, nodded to the northbound train across the
platform, and crowed, “Time to go home.” And twelve hours later, I did it all over again,
for as long as I can remember.
Charles Manson visited me in a dream last night. This was particularly unusual because I don’t dream very often—not this vividly, anyway, and not after smoking the equivalent of six or seven joints.

I knew it was a dream and not a Christmas Carol-type visitation because I was wearing a completely different set of clothes than the ones I had passed out in, and because he approached me casually on some sort of decrepit boardwalk next to a crimson sea, rather than simply appearing next to the couch that I was definitely sleeping on.

He introduced himself as Jesus Christ, as he was known to do, according to the Wikipedia article I’d been reviewing the day before. That caught me off-guard for just a second, but I could tell that it was Charles Manson and not Jesus because I’d seen Charlie’s picture before, so I recognized the swastika on his forehead, and because Jesus was black. I’m a half-white, half-Filipino ex-altar boy, and even I’m willing to admit it.

He told me that I was a beautiful person, and that I had a lot of love inside of me that he wanted to gauge out. My face went hot, and I thanked him.

“Ditto”, I said. I wasn’t lying, either. I’ll admit that he was very attractive. I’m into that whole hippy, free-love, “creative” look, and Charlie’s dream version had the added benefit of actually being from San Francisco in the ‘60s. That is, rather than the popular, 30th-Anniversary reissue of the same style that my usual suitors tend to sport. I’m a sucker for authenticity.
He continued to grin wildly at me as I blushed and shuffled my left foot. I took tap lessons for almost two years during elementary school (I adored the shiny shoes and even the pink leotards, which Miss Gruvin said weren’t required for boys), so when I say shuffled, I really mean shuffle. I even did a few flap-ball-change-kick buffalo steps that sounded pretty good on the wooden walkway, and Charlie seemed to enjoy it, though he mostly stared super wide-eyed at my stomach, which is pretty toned but not really where the action was right then.

I tried to calmly comb through my mind for something interesting to say. I scanned through a series of pretty funny Facebook photos I remembered, though I couldn’t quite recall any back story- just if they made me look thin or not. Suddenly, I recalled, from a recent conversation about fucked-up folk music with a cute, kind of greasy, straight hipster boy, that Charlie is actually still alive and well (I guess) in prison. Aloud, I said, “But aren’t you, like… still living? And, you know, in ja-…” I didn’t want to be rude. “in…carcerated?” He blinked slowly in confirmation.

“I’m everywhere, baby.”

By way of Wikipedia research, I have also confirmed this point: that he was reportedly able to project his energy and intentions to his followers from great distances. His smile entered my mouth, burrowed down through my organs, and rested between my hips with a twang.

He cooed, “Take a walk with me.” I looked around, and, in the absence of my semi-boyfriend (and any other apparent options), I shrugged in agreement and aligned my
body with his, keeping one eye on his sort of scrawny but definitely hairless and toned arms, which hung out from a sort of blue tunic that really brought out his eyes.

We had strolled in an electrically charged silence for about two minutes before Charlie finally spoke. I was glad that he did, as I was about to launch into a story about playing Annie Oakley in my Catholic boys’ school production of “Annie Get Your Gun” and someone putting Icy Hot in my bloomers on opening night when he basically whispered,

“I’d very much like to make love to you, Lucas.”

He knew my name. No one ever remembered my name (except as “Puke-us” for all of middle-school), and Charlie had just, I dunno, divined it. Even for a dream relationship (and I’ve had plenty- from royal weddings with Prince Charmings to a sort of Lukie Does Dallas free-for-all), this one seemed meant to be. He also had straight teeth, a glossy, shaggy ‘do, and I’m a sucker for guys with tattoos.

“Um. Okay. But where should we go?” I asked, pretending to be shy.


Fair enough, I thought. I hopped down off the boardwalk, looked up and down the beach at the over several hundred inner-city day camp kids scampering and cart-wheeling around, shrugged, happened to find a pretty clean-looking beige towel (with “Bobby F.” written on the tag) just hanging from a hook, laid it out on the sand in the shade of the boardwalk, and dropped my sweatpants and thong to my ankles with one movement.
Charlie smiled warmly at me and shook his head.

“Not that way, darlin’.”

From under a fold in his tunic, he drew out a four-foot-long machete encrusted with blood and, I guess, guts. Stuck near the handle (and I don’t know how I knew this) was a dried up umbilical cord.

“I love you, Luke. And I want you to love me, and to share our love with everyone on this beach. So before we mingle our flesh, let’s mix out spirits and let the love just pour out all over this beach! I want you to-...”

“Shhh.” I put one finger to his baby-soft lips and reached my other hand so slowly, feeling a tubular wave of heat roll from his groin, to slide the machete from his strong, fever-hot grip.

I tossed the machete’s handle gently in my right hand to feel out its weight as I walked towards a group of little black children that was busily building a crude but enormous sandcastle. I walked carefully and slowly across the sand to churn the muscles in my ass so Charlie could enjoy the view. As my shadow fell on the castle and the children starting turning to look up at me, I whipped my head around, raised the blade ’til it glinted high above me, beamed at Charlie and gave him my absolute sexiest wink.

I figured, what the hell. The things we do for men, am I right? Besides, there must have been over three- or four-hundred underprivileged kids on that beach, and only one of me. And I’m a sucker for ambition.
My Living Room is Dead to Me

The cat’s name is Chan Chan, and she belongs to my roommate, Jen, who may or may not think (that is to say, know) that I am a fool.

Chan Chan is approximately eight or ten or twelve years old (I have eaten her birth certificate). Chan Chan is a “rescue kitty” (Whatever happened to the phrase, “I got her at an animal shelter”?). From what I understand: she was a street urchin, and once had a litter of bastard kittens that are forever lost to her; she was treated very badly; specifically, she was de-clawed, and otherwise brutalized and/or ignored; a former roommate adopted her.

Chan Chan is quite deaf. I have tested this claim on numerous occasions, and it appears to be true at least 95% of the time. Either because she is deaf or because she is self-righteous, Chan Chan wanders the apartment, at literally all hours, howling as loud as she possibly can. Her cries tell of pain, loneliness, confusion, and terror. Visitors who hear this song, but have not yet “met” Chan Chan, will ask me accusingly, “Is that a baby?”

For reasons given and reasons unknown to me, Chan Chan suffers from acute anxiety. As a result, she frequently vomits, leaving a trail of semi-solid and pure-liquid puddles from the sanctuary of Jen’s room into the hostile emptiness of the living room and back again. I tend to step in these. I either clean them up, or I don’t.
Chan Chan is clownish and fluffy, completely white, near-meatless, with blue eyes; a corpse wearing a ruff. I once described her as the exact opposite of “my Delilah”. Delilah was attractively plump, black, and incredibly sleek. She was a dwarf panther that accepted early retirement. She glowered knowingly, all eyes and darkness. She really only spoke up when she was curious, or to welcome us home. “Me?” she’d ask, and “Meep”, she’d ultimately conclude. Delilah was my love child with my “college boyfriend”, with whom I shared three years, a rather low-brow apartment, and complete adoration for the cat. When we broke up and I left Canada, Delilah went to live on his parents’ Vancouver Island farm, the lone witness of a thing gone dead. She bullied the dumber cats out of the house and into the barn, lost three pounds, and never mentioned me again.

As I mind my business, Chan Chan wails outside my door. She knows I’m home. As a former Animal Rights Activist, and a relatively average 24-year-old human female, I feel sorry for her. She wants company. She wants, as a former roommate once said, to be released from her pitiful body. Occasionally, all she wants is a new glassful of water that is free of long, white cat hairs (to which I am empathetic).

I am more than willing to provide fresh water, or temporarily loan her some wet food (which she will undoubtedly return without the benefit of its original packaging). However, I am typically unwilling to provide any companionship. For this, I feel shame. For this, I feel guilt. However, there are both practical and emotional reasons for my abstinence.
Admittedly, I do not like Chan Chan. She is devoid of all qualities that I find attractive in cats. Also, I am allergic to cats, and especially Chan Chan. Her presence creates, in me, the most sensational asthma. When we got Delilah, I spent whole nights sitting up, forcing my lungs open, when my inhalers had run out; from the hot darkness of the Underbed, no encouraging mew would issue, yet I persisted. When I explained my situation to a doctor, I received, along with a begrudging prescription refill, the annoyed medical opinion that I would not ever achieve my goal of “building up a tolerance” to her. Medical science be damned: I did build up a tolerance. I can swear, from my experience, that it is physically possible (more or less).

I do not intend to do this for Chan Chan. I do not intend to start leaving my bedroom door open so that she can peek in, relieved by the knowledge that she is not alone in this place. I insist that the responsibility is not mine, nor are her deafness and rancor. I choose guilt over charity, apathy over constricted bronchial tubes. She will plead indiscriminately for my attention until death, never understanding that there are some things you don’t do twice.