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Ego Sum

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Ego Sum

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Abstract

The use of first-person narration in literature has traditionally been used to impart a sense of intimacy, immediacy, and relatability between the reader and the work's narrator. First-person narration has also traditionally acted as an initial step in crafting a signature voice or style for fiction writers in creative writing—one that is often abandoned as the writer's style matures. Additionally, the cultural climate of this and preceding years has engendered many debates and discussions centering on which voices are heard and received as credible witnesses to political, institutional, and social events. The MeToo Movement, Supreme Court Justice Kavanaugh's confirmation hearings, and mass killings committed by Elliot Rodgers and Alex Minassian provoked an alignment of the male voice with first-person narration as simultaneously credible by merit of the speaker's gender, and senseless by merit of the substance of the speaker's addresses. *Ego Sum* is a collection of stories, entirely narrated in the first-person by specific male characters, all of whom are dominated by a hamartia created and fueled by an element of toxic masculinity, with one exception. The final story breaks from the first-person narration intentionally to explore how unmooring gender and self-identification from origin stories can allow for a more constructive, generative exchange. Rather than an argument for or against gender dynamics, the thesis is an exploration of gender and cultural influences, expressions, and failures that sound the tensions between what we commonly believe to be masculine, and what we commonly believe to be human.

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Chapter 1: Sisyphus I

1.)

In my end is my beginning.

My life journey's unresigned to its end, its passions unsatisfied
though fulfilled.

This death perpetual.

This path endless.

Step

by

step

by

step

Footstep within footstep—the act and the memory one.

No rest for the wicked. No passive peace for the damned.

2.)

My shoulder

at the boulder

holds

the weight of the world

This weight.

So hot and hard and ready

will wait until I weaken

or I steady.

Such weight

resisted by my needs

rising tides against an even stronger levy

Will wait

—For I am not yet ready.

3.)

I will know no master.

Made more cunning, more keen.

I have slaughtered those who sat at my table,
violated every living law.

How should the laws of the dead then rule me?

I am King,
unusurpable.

I ate from the poisoned plate to prove my power.

Drank the wine of benediction, cursed the gods good will—their blind and trusting folly.

Once drunk, poured the dregs over the bodies that I lay riven over each stolen threshold.

None left for the righteous offering.

My pathway

my passions

unobstructed.

You may think you rightly call me, but I am no servant. What need have I for your
answer.

I will chain Death itself to my palace walls.

All the armies of man, great legions of the undying, will clamor in their broken armor,
their pierced pieces rattling.

Even the hosts of Olympic heights will heed their clamor, their pleas for my mercy.

Mine and no others.

Send your wing-shod demi-god, swiftly stupid.

How will I hear with the sound of my hot blood hungry and ringing in my ears?

4.)

King of Ephyra, witch-crowned,

bewitcher of the softness of women.

My queen, seventh sister,

sole immortal to earth-born mortal bound.

Would I leave her unobserved?

Instead, call her unobservant, refuser of my rites

(such absurdity, have denied myself nothing, least of which my just desserts)

Your queen

however

Spring-soft and believing

so tender to thought of betrayal

(Your marriage a compromise.

promises kept,

swallowed seeds

sacrificed needs

—such faithfulness

such ripe

fatuous

submission.)

Denied entry
absent coin under lying tongue
the flowery entreaty
of her full-blossomed throat
will pay my passage

To return,
to life
and a surprised, welcoming, unended world.

Her sweet, unstudied words
your death sentence,
(my well-earned punishment)
Olympus's careful justice, overturned.

Once returned, I remain unturned
Sprung out of dirt, the path of this new life
set still in the same well-cut stone.

Living as I died and lived and
likely will die again.
when such amusing repetition still amuses,
what need then for that repetition's end?

But if in that time you've not forgotten
Stayed seeking, then seek me
Still
Come find me as an old man,
one whose wife would never dare to question
to ask
to disobey.
No appetite for her sin when my cravings
have stayed
so sharpened
still

Returned, I remain
and will remain here still.

Perhaps a bit too hopeful or hollowed or harrowed,
perhaps unknowing the path that I once set has now since narrowed
Or the knowledge that my human needs
my human sins, my human greeds
roll so far before me, yawn so far below
that all this stolen human life will leave each unfilled.

Despite this,

to spite them:

Sisyphus undamned,

Sisyphus liberated.

Sisyphus unstilled.

5.)

No noose can hold

no chains restrain

My will a conqueror's

and thus, unconquerable.

No cage

man-made or god-built

Could restrain

such unstoppable force

Could contain

my passions, my hungers,

my bloodied, lustful rage.

These irresistible desires

my tongue, forked and divided,

an inferno of insatiable Corinthian fires

Forever pushing me forward,

forever

pulling me higher,

This ungovernable
will to climb
above the restrictions of tablet, bower, or pyre

all my pride,
my ambition
my will
To ascend
always

Higher.

6.)

Sweet Sisyphean dreamer,

your fibula and femur

will hold

the weight of the world.

Over

and

over.

Shoulder to boulder,

stone bowling you over.

Over

and

over.

Hot death blood felt no less colder

your life, your crimes, your pride grew bolder

now trip and trap you, all stones now tumbling you lower

and lower

But not for one moment slower

To heights you'll only climb over

over and over

over

and

over

Again.

7.)

And against the immovable movement of this rock
My interminable force now my eternal punishment.

My deathless passion,
the weapon I wielded against my enemies in the living world
Now, sworn enemy of Death, trapped here below it
propels me against
myself.

I, who could endure all battles
must endure their victor
without victory.

My will, which I
once boasted
could withstand
blow after blow of
the hardest, sharpest stones,
Still pushes me onwards
pulls me
perpetually
upwards

Such everlasting will,

in spite

or because of

Death

will never still.

While against it,

and this bloodied rock,

I, Sisyphus, am

still

never

permitted

to crumble.

8.)

Back bowed

at the shoulder

bent towards that same boulder

my rage matched in the end

by Hades' satisfied glower.

Force met,

in step,

Rock, and hill, and climb.

None else to forget.

Only Sisyphus left

So cunning how

foot follows foot, gears grinding greaseless

and this damned stone whirls ever ceaseless

the world has still left me behind.

9.)

A life with one rule

earned a death

with the same.

No purpose save for pleasure

Purposeless still

despite the rocky storms I must weather

Stones tumbling back

and before me

No rest will befall me

though I tumble over

and over

—Again.

Grave, this damnable grinding,

yet I and this rock must keep climbing

my hunger a hope ever blinding

While foot follows foot

silent echoes

reminding

Infinite will

(—Still!)

Unwinding

And I

push upwards

towards falling.

Always,

and again.

10.)

My wife, Merope

a lost passion once known to me.

Left my bodied unburied by my secret decree.

Now sits alone at empty table

and though this body yearns and strains

cursed blessedly strong, still remains,

now and forever able

but never close enough to her table

I stallion doomed to the track

made impotent having escaped the stable

These arms will never more hold her

Embracing only this boulder

Over and over.

Until reaching the top

where it will leave me,

for it is as I am,

unable to stop.

And though I'm gelded in the following

I will gaze at its retreat, stone heart hollowing.

knowing it leaves me here, as I left you there

Alone.

To descend.

11.)

To be dust, to be dust

but this labor permits no such rust.

I held Death as my slave

kept him far from battle field and plain

left him moored to my throne, withering

a brute inert against the force of my crown, my power, my chain.

Thanatos,

you would not beg

All my then vanity now regretted in vain.

Once freed

a promise made

(first kept)

to never again

darken your doorstep

So now on this hill climbs a living, breathing shade.

Though on earth I did perish

below, it continues in your absence

My liberty your reckless abandonment.

But were it not for this boulder,

without chains but

forever returning

to my shoulder

My freed hands would pray for

what I could not then cherish

This futile freedom

a cleverer punishment

than any earthly crime

I dared commit.

And Death,

though you once warned me

my strength, oh,

it scorns me

now.

12.)

The hot fear of my end

forged in it new beginnings

infernal furnace forged an unforgivable link.

Even I, clever Sisyphus, have no force left to think

When the mountaintop nears, promising surrender

To hear in such silence, invisible, unfelt chains clink.

Or, hands full of stone,

might wait

pondering its weight

and wonder.

I have made this,

and forgotten.

Of crimes committed

sins begotten,

But the final effort forward,

loosens stones under the boulder, towards

until all of it

will crush you

punish and disrupt you

truss and disgust you

Flailing, falling, following over

Over and over
again.

Chapter 2: All the Way Down

Preacha stops me on the corner most every day. Setting up shop while I'm heading back home. He knows me like he knows most of us Bed-Stuyers, the ones born and raised here before 'Brooklyn Brownstones' was a password opening our homes for gut renovation and \$300 strollers.

"What's good, young scholar?" A smile and a twist in one, always.

"Same as you, I imagine," I say, serving the same plate back. Sometimes we get into it. A lot more since I got back. We both have our versions of the good word, our mix tape gospels. Other times I just nod and walk home.

"Feeling the spirit today, young scholar," he tells me, rubbing ashed hands together while he setting up his table next to a banana crate. If I gave him a dime of my time in an hour he'll be howling up to his heaven denouncing every last word I say, or smoothing down his salted scruff, deep in unflowering thought. I'm not his disciple, but I give respect to our elders, even castaways like Preacha. It would be easy to look at him and see an oddity, on the corner six days a week in the same light blue polo, manic versing psalms at the top of his voice. But I've lived here all my life. I know who the knights of the neighborhood are—the ones allowed to survive, that watch over us in their own way.

"You feelin' your spirit, young scholar? You got them devils in check?"

I can't decide if today will be a day that we duke out with our doctrines or one that I nod and keep on keeping on.

"I heard from your momma that they still chasin' you down. From the higher ground upriver. Now they got you in the home. Your momma's home. You got to be careful of that technology, young scholar. Every time you're up in those screens they watching you too."

"They always watching us, Preacha. That ain't news." Neutral. A solid truth we both can stand on. He nods, goes to his beard. There are some realities that our pulpits will always share common ground on.

"Be careful with your movement, young scholar," he says to me, climbing onto his crate. It's from the same height he watched me from when I was running up and down these streets after school. No different now I'm grown. But different from the kind we agree on.

"They don't take kindly to men like us when too many people listen. Thinking it might get to changing things."

"No drive-bys on the internet, Preacha," I tell him and make my way. He waves me on, getting ready for his own sermon, summoning his personal spirit, his ancestral ghosts. "No martyrs either. – No matter what my momma worries."

There's more I could say to him, today or any day. But there is always more, in heaven and earth, than what we can say in our own philosophies.

I'm not a part of any movement, I could tell him, share my truth, but he's not my audience. Get down to it, we're speaking the same words in different languages. But I'm not here to proselytize. Indoctrinate. If anything, the opposite. Think what you want to

think, give witness to whatever facts you place your faith in, your reality. Me? I'm just asking questions.

...

I hit up Alicia again last night. Or I tried to. Blocked, maybe—hard to tell with texts. Last few times I called went straight to voicemail, which she never set up, so I couldn't say nothing. Would have been nice to hear her voice though. Or not. Might have been too much. Can't say. No opportunity.

Can't argue about ish if it never happened.

It's important to keep that in mind in life. What actually happens, versus what you think would happen, or what should happen. People can lose their whole life in a fantasy. Live their whole lives lost, serving up all of themselves on an altar of lies. It's important to seek the truth, no matter the cost. We've been slaves too long.

I know that bothers some people, but everything about me bothers some people. I'm just not going along with it anymore. Preacha is right that my mom worries too much, especially if she worrying him now. She worries herself sick. But I've tried to tell her that all that worrying changes nothing. Things are the way they are and it makes no difference how you feel about them. Doesn't change nothing.

I saw that for myself. The hard way. Wanting things different don't make them so no matter what you thought, or believed, or were promised. Otherwise she wouldn't pray so much. Her prayers would be done by now. That shit would have all come true.

Ever realize all the things you don't question? It's all the time. With every breath.

Every day—get on the train, go to work, punch in, punch out, cash that sad, small check. Die. The tiny tight lines you live inside to feel safe, to feel like you belong. That way, when we move through the world we get to feel intact. Accepted. —Harmonized.

Our protective bubbles, pushing the doubt out, the ignorant spheres of bullshit we cultivate. — All the invisible shackles that stop us from realizing the real truths they keep from us, been keeping from us. The flatness of reality slowly crushing us under its boot.

I do, more and more. Every damn day since I came back down. Every minute it sometimes feel like. How one lie unravels another one then another one until the whole damn ball of being gets too lose and there you are in the midst of it, unspooled.

More than enough to drive any kind of man crazy.

When I first met her Alicia said I was crazy. But she said it like the way you imagine a fine girl like that saying it to you when you growing up— lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, thinking about all the things you think can happen to you in this life before you get older and go out and live life and realize you can't. Like sweet and a little silly, but after you feel strong or brave or special. Shit like that. She always called me crazy but the way she said it got twisted. Changed. Like the word itself got a new meaning to it behind her back without telling. I don't know—incredulous. Maybe. Then it was angry for a while. Longer than I thought it would, looking back. Then it was sad. The last time was sad. Now she doesn't say anything to me. Neither does her voicemail.

That's why I got fired from my job. Trying to figure out her phone situation. If she was blocking me. Why her voicemail wasn't set up. But other times came up, telling me it was full.

“Violating protocol” and “misusing confidential company technology” – that was the final verdict. Me trying to see who was calling her so much that I couldn’t get one last chance in to make her see the truth. To get her to open her eyes. To ask.

I don’t regret the loss of my corporate overbears—fuck those hucksters—but I could feel how close she was. That sadness happens when the truth is so much in your face that you end up squeezing it out whichever way you can, closing those eyelids tight tight against the light breaking through all the shadows that they cast on you in this world. This flat, Alicia-less world.

Of course she was sad. The truth is sad. If I could live in that world with her, the one where we’re laughing and grabbing on to each other and spinning around and around this cold, empty place and feeling like the two of us being on it is enough to make it different, I would. I promised her I would. But you can’t go back. You can’t forget what you see when your eyes are opened and the light finally unblinds into them. Even if you close them again. Even if you close them tight as fuck.

You’ve seen. You’ve seen with your own two eyes.

The Greeks knew you can’t close that box once it’s opened. And that the last demon trapped inside was hope, which keeps us all locked up in there with it.

...

The world resists me and I resist the world. That’s nothing new.

Ever since we were brought across the dull ocean to these duplicitous shores, we’ve been suspect. As if it were our idea. As if we were the one shouting liberty out one side our mouths while shouting chattel out the other. Pretending the crucible from out which democracy was born wasn’t pouring out leg irons, chains, collars for their darker

brothers and sisters at the same damn time. Christian people stoking fires to brand godless African skin with their good Christian names.

Shit's evil. And no one can close their eyes enough to pretend it isn't anymore. Or most can't. None but the worst ones. But if it's in the past they don't think they have to look anymore. They don't have to be blind. They're free of it. But the past has the answers. The past is where the truth is hidden. You think they mad I found it? Or they mad cause they can't chain the woke mind? At the end of the day, they about as free as me.

My mom worries. She has cause. All mothers of black sons have cause. But I've never been reckless. Even with T-Mobile. I could have kept that job. Made some excuse, looked sympathetic. Said enough penitent, soothing words that sounded just intelligent enough that Marcy would have kept me. Kept me and gone home feeling better for it.

"I'm trying to help you here, Imari," and just like that, instead of staring back at her and letting the lie of it bounce back, I look down at my feet and fret. Tell her "I know" and "I will" and "I'll try". Say I'm sorry—and in saying sorry— show her my neck and let her think she was helping me out because I showed it. People want to feel good about themselves. Even if they haven't done real good to feel it. Keep that world turning.

But I know we overcharged for shit-ass service and kept customers locked in contracts that didn't keep their promises. So instead I stared back and we watched as her words fell flat on the floor where my eyes should have been. Let her fire me, and let her live with her lack of satisfaction. She knows as much as I do, even if she pretends she doesn't.

I put my nametag in her hand for her and bounced. Softly held the biting hand that feeds. Next week I walked two doors down and got a job at Cricket. Now I sell people what they expect to pay for. No illusions. In advance.

I didn't tell Mom about the job or Alicia. She still worries. Hasn't done much else since I came home. I walk to the bathroom in the middle of the night when I'm uploading sometime and I see her sitting at the table. Head bowed under the jaundiced yellow halo of the kitchen light, cradling her face in her hands. I pretend not to see how much she worries, as all black sons must, if they want to live the life their mothers try to protect.

I kiss the top of her head when I shuffle in for breakfast before work. Her face still in her hands, hours later, but now a plate for me across the table, warm. She sigh when I sit down—the weight of the world confirmed.

I went ital for a while. Then just vegan. Never stopped rolling her eyes while I criticized her processed, pharmaceuticalized meats, back then, but that was just high school shit. Teenage rebellion. Probably borrowed half that rage off of Preacha and his rants about our poisoned pre-packaged food. Drinking every form of Kool-Aid. Now she says she wishes I still did sometimes. That I still cared about that because it reminds her of when I cared at all. Too much.

How maybe then I wouldn't have left to only come back. That she wished she knew then how much worse it could get.

She stopped asking when I was going back up though. Enough mornings passed where she would mutter words under her breath that neither of us could bear to hear.

At least things like “Middlebury” and designated grant recipient” and “academic probation” aren’t our everyday neighborhood vernacular. Not until a few more of those monthly rent strollers roll through.

“I will cut off service,” she says, as I unearth a banana slice from bowels of the oatmeal. “I will call and have the service stopped and then what will you do?”

I sigh because I know enough about the weight of the world myself, and how love, even a mother’s for her son, is blind.

“Mama, they won’t stop the service,” I tell her. Hoping I am as patient with her these days as she was with me as a child, carefully scraping out the last lumps off the bowl. “Because I pay the bill.”

I wash my plate and dry it before I leave, put everything back in its place, try to give her some comforts. A hand on her shoulder, braced against disappointment or some other invisible force, unacknowledged. If there was a way to help her I would. What will not bend must break. She must have told me the same a dozen on a dozen times.

“What Devil can make you act such a fool!” she mutters to herself or my back on my way out the door.

I wish I could make her see it has nothing to do with the Devil. Or God. She couldn’t imagine someone looking at her promised son—her beautiful, gifted boy—and see a project from the projects. Sit through a seminar of six in African studies and be the only black one there. The education he came looking for on the path she practically built for him was a whole different one than the one he got.

“The earth is round, Imari!” she shouts from the window once she sees me out on the street. “The earth is round and you need Jesus to kick your behind off the internet to make you see!”

“I love you, Mama,” I yell back and start walking. “—but the earth? Bitch is motherfucking flat.”

...

I take the long way back from work this time, take Halsey to walk past Alicia’s. She won’t be there. I’ve done this too often. But her younger sister’s outside, talking to a young cat I don’t know. Only in middle school and already she’s trying it.

“Jasmine,” I say, slow but still walking.

She sucks her teeth at the sound of my voice and gazes up at the firmament like she can’t stand the sight of my face.

“She’s not home, you Hotepping, midnight-stalking Looney Toon.”

I get a lot of things like this online too. Prophets are never accepted in their own land. Even in the forums. You should see what some of the people who read me comment when they get to my Truthutorials on Youtube and find out I’m black.

“Just enjoying a leisurely sojourn on this lovely day,” I reply, level-voiced, unperturbed.

The kid talking to her looks at me and mumbles something at her under his breath. Jasmine rolls her whole head and falls in raptured love with the sidewalk the way she’s looking at it. I can feel her willing me to disappear. I know I can help myself, but I haven’t heard from Alicia in weeks and decide I don’t want to.

“How you livin’ my man?” I ask Jasmine’s admirer. Those of us familiar with the truth have learned its power to shield us from disbelief, from embarrassment, from shame. And the vacuum of power its denial brings.

“All good,” he replies. Eyes level. A challenge. “Around here it’s all good.”

“Nice,” I say, “that’s real nice. But do you believe that because someone told you? Or because you know?”

Jasmine kicked at the pavement debris by her feet.

“Take young Miss Jasmine here,” I say, and I can feel the force of my words bringing her back down to earth.

“You believe she was visiting with her Auntie this summer because she told you? No doubt?” We’re all on a disc rocketing upwards in space and Jasmine, for the first time in her life perhaps, will recognize the force of it acting on her and know it for what it is.

“Would you still believe it if I showed you the phone records I showed her pops when their data plan went over? Know how he found a bunch of selfies on her phone no sister her age should be sending to the young blood two floors up.”

I kept walking, ignoring the argument erupting behind me. Not my finest revelation, but real education can’t come early enough. The moment you turn your back on the real version of things, the lies can fall right the fuck down and flatten you.

And in the words of my fallen fellow truth-teller— if they don’t know, now they know.

...

I didn’t always know the truth of the world. But I knew it was wrong.

I don't understand how everyone else can pretend to not know that much. That much is obvious.

The struggle is real—that's nonnegotiable. That's facts. The struggle keeps us distracted. Can only spend so much time under the boot before you stop caring whose boot it is or why it's there and only want to find a way to stay alive under it.

I still walk my momma to and from church every Sunday even though I don't go in. Our people have been fed religion as a way to keep us quiet, keep us steady. But there's no shifting back the bedrock once you find out what you've been standing on, when the whole world stops spinning.

This place is straight up evil. Demonic. Enough that the devils Preacha go on about were dancing in the streets instead of his mind. Most folks look around and can leave it at that. Others go to church, go to goodness, try those respectability politics. Ever hear a group of old timers outside playing dominoes and find out that wearing a belt is what's going to save us? That it's our *pants* that keep things the way they are, keep us falling down? People call me crazy. They think that shit's just plain gravity.

You grow up young and black and intelligent in a country that wants you to be none of those things and you get this deep-down feeling that the world must be rotten at its center. To not see the grace in our young queens, or the power of our brilliant vitality of us emerging kings—potential threats. Hos and thugs fed to the engine of European jaws—waste or fuel or forms of amusement.

You live long enough you learn nothing that rotten inside can sustain itself on the surface. Insufficient tensile strength. You can go to Vermont and eat couscous in a dining hall because cafeterias are for the brown folk who work there, non-students, and say

words like ‘post-colonialism’ and quote Nietzsche’s Will to Power but that doesn’t mean you know shit about shit. You can even say it in a fair trade sweater made from an animal I haven’t seen at a zoo—one that costs as much as my mom’s rent and still bobo as fuck—and then talk about global labor practices like you’re exempt from it all. And you might think it might not matter that really you have no idea where your daddy’s money came from. Or really no desire to learn. At least if it doesn’t matter to you.

Or—if you’re smart enough to see things for what they really are, trust in your own two eyes and nothing else, you can uncover the truth. That it’s all surface. The world is a flat plane, rocketing upwards, crushing everything on it with the force of its momentum. We exist under a domed firmament that the motherfuckers in charge will never let us touch and the moms and the aunties like to call God it’s so far removed from us.

You walk out of that classroom forever and you build you own cathedral of learning. You liberate yourself.

—You think they’d have been more careful with the internet then. Probably didn’t think we’d be able to find each other, all the barriers put between us already. They’d been able to decimate our communities—the CIA with their state-sponsored, schedule II neuro-chemical controlled terrorism, the five-oh with their slaughter of unarmed children, the machinations of gang-violence to level thriving neighborhoods, our centers of culture—the systematic assassination of our poets, ministers, our anointed leaders. On and on. On and on and on until you’d think all of us would just spill over the sides of this infernal plane. Their hellacious supper plate of a fake-planet, serving us up on it, gummy and cold.

And no, I'm not pretending that I'm like all black folk on earth. I'm not like all the other flat-earthers neither. That's some prejudicial nonsense. All y'all squinty eyes squashing us till we're lumps of human mass without faces. That's how dissenters become hordes, how our bodies become piles of meat—living or dead, labor or refuse. I'm not stupid. Ain't never been. And I paid attention even when I didn't turn in my papers. Saw the realness between the lines of their books no matter how much the middle-aged white dudes who assigned them looked through me. Called me son. Like they thought I just didn't understand how they meant it kindly.

...

When I found the community, I found my purpose. My meaning. I could see where they were right, obviously, I can see the truth, what have I been saying this whole time, but I could also recognize the holes.

I been waiting. Too white-sounding for the block, too black-sounding for the institution. After a while, too busy battling the shadow self or astral projections of other folks' versions of you. The kind of you that makes *them* feel safe, makes *them* feel understood.

The internet doesn't judge. It can't. You get a handle, you get a voice.

Yeah the videos are different, but by then I knew what I wanted to say, knew my place in the debate, the value of my voice. I didn't have the full grip on it, of course not, not at first. You wouldn't believe the faux pas, the foibles.

First comment I made in the forums I made as 'GhettoBlasta'. The Christian Armaggeditoners in the community fucking loved that. Went to town on my ass like it was Tree Swing day. Then I went too far the other way and went under 'FlatWhite'—that

got took way too literal. Went right over all the entry level-heads. But one day I got off that drift and found my vibe and enough time and comments as ‘Grim Leaka’ made it so people started to listen. I found my voice and the community found it too. By the time I got my channel and the TruthTorials started burning through, my skin wasn’t a strong enough surface to contain that voice. Now, echoing through those blessed tubes, it’s been reconfigured, digitalized, immortalized. Finally strong enough to be heard.

...

I don’t know the earth is flat because the Bible told me so. I don’t believe what any institution, establishment, or person tells me. Not since my intellectual emancipation. The center of our flat earth is one understanding above all others—that everything you can’t see for yourself, understand for yourself, feel the truth ringing out from your inside of your living bones? If you haven’t seen that shit with your own two eyes? Well, cuz—that’s a lie.

I could go on, get in-depth, talk about flight patterns, gyroscopes, the Bedford level experiment. And I can because I *do* know about those things—the contradictions that keep some of my followers up at night, the repeated bars spit up we spit out there on our wireless connections they think should be our rallying, collective call.

But, and I’ll admit, it did take a minute for me to realize this—but that’s after all how it should be played, one man, interrogating each question for himself, one after the next—that’s just more noise—chatter, banter, hearsay.

I’m never going to fucking Australia, so I’ll never know how the plane gets there and I understand less why I should care. And you know what those limey wig-wearing pomp-positors were taking a break from to argue with Bedford? The taxonomy of the

African on the scale of beast to neanderthal. How much lesser were these dusk-skinned lesser men. How much could they fetch for us at market, and was it worth the insurance money to just down a ship of us in the middle of that flat-fucking Atlantic Ocean if enough of us couldn't survive the typhus, dysentery, starvation, or violence from the trip. As a soft interlude from the debate of whether a pole in a river was a different height than a pole six miles down if they both were cut the same length.

You know how the world got its experts, right? The same European coffee houses that underwrote the most lucrative genocide this disc has been witness to date. You know what the looks like in today's world, right? You ever been to a rich, white college campus?

...

The wisdom of the Pharaohs built the pyramids at least. Tried to elevate, to lift themselves higher. They believed the flat earth too. Jasmine can call me hotep, but my misdirected lil' sis don't know what any of that is, where it started from. Hotep is peace. Enlightened peace. She only know where it landed when they spun it. All Europeans built were stacks. Stacks of coin, stacks of bodies. Banks and vaults and graves. They were the deep builders. Buriers of hoards, homunculus squirrels lovingly pawing at their coin purses of dirt.

There's this line from history the haters use to mock us. How after some philosopher cat was spooning out his sermon—and I say 'some' cat not because I don't know, but because they don't, the 'scientific accuracy' they try to beat us down with damn near eyerolling terrifies—and an old woman came up at the end to correct him. Said the world wasn't a ball circling the sun, but a brittle crust resting on the back of a giant

turtle. When the dude—they still can't decide who though maybe it was Bertrand Russell, maybe William James—stooped to humor her by asking what was under the turtle, she tickled his funny bone right the hell down to a sliver by telling him the back of another turtle, on and on forever.

“Turtles all the way down.” That's the line.

Hilarious. Am I right?

—A tight little slam that gets remembered a hundred years later and repeated on now in our comments and message boards a hundred times a day by those spherical bastards, which means they bastards anyway you look at them.

You know what they leave out? What they 'forget'? That Russell was such a sick fuck that his own daughter burned herself alive because she couldn't believe how beloved he was, knowing the truth of him. That the people who saw her dying described how her screams were like nothing they could have believed if they hadn't seen it for themselves. That her pain they witnessed was one they never in all their lives could have imagined. Or that as James was dying he begged his colleagues not to let a narrow mindset prevent those honest appraisal of those beliefs. But just them. His homeboys. His professional brotherhood. Not people like me.

People want to be cute, talk smart. Of course the world isn't teetering on the back of a giant turtle. I know that. That much I can see. I'm not a primitive mumbo-jumboist. I live in the same two-bedroom apartment I've lived in all my life and I've never seen a turtle in or near or around it, about-above-across-after, let alone one big enough to carry it on its back—forget the whole world.

What I know is this. There is that which is in our control and that which is not.
That which we see and that which we can't. Or don't. Or won't.

...

Alicia couldn't see how much I loved her, and I couldn't stop her from leaving.
Not if it meant being blind. I couldn't control her blindness either—probably why she
bounced. She thought leaving school was the death of me, of our love. It was my
beginning. It could have been ours, together.

I see my mom sitting at the kitchen table with her swollen feet in an old house
dress. I can't control those ballooning ankles, her cracked soles. Just like I can't control
the decades of working on her feet at jobs no white stomach could tolerate that collapsed
her exhausted veins, the price of insulin in cities where juice only comes as a powder. In
this country blacks have died growing the sugar, and once they couldn't make us do that
no more, they turned around to beat us to death with the cane in the smallest comforts we
could find. Took our chains and threw back rotting black teeth, rotting black blood. They
beat us, then they diabet-us.

You know how much insulin costs? I can tell you despite market fluctuations or
which rich man's son decides to jack it that week for another lambo it's in exact opposite
number to how many supermarkets are in our neighborhood that sell fresh fruits and
vegetables, or ones not shipped out from nicer supermarkets in nicer zip codes, wilted
and discounted a day after expiry. They call that indirect proportion. I call it starvation
and bullshit.

I can't control that. None of us can. But maybe some of you coffee-housers could.
And what do you do about it?

I can't control where I was born, or what as. Not that or the schooling I got for both those reasons. Can't control how unprepared I was for their world even though my mom and I spent my whole life trying to prepare for it.

I can't control how people see me on the street, or on paper, or in an interview. I can't control the vision of me in other people's minds. Hell, give it the wrong time of night on the wrong side of a street and I can't control if I live or die. Or how if man has a badge or a few shades north of my skin tone he can be the one to do it and go live the rest his life safe and sound, secure in a world that finds its comforts knowing somehow that being there and being me must have been enough to deserve it. That the penalty for being me doesn't somehow always include having to die, to be put down.

And yet somehow, they feel like they're right in knowing that. Somehow have no problem knowing that, without ever knowing me. Never having met me. Never even knowing my name.

Fuck that noise. I've never been allowed those delusions. You know enough about anything you know this: this country was built on the backs of blacks, not turtles. Black backs breaking, generation after generation, all the way down.

Some internet bitches post up iPhone photos of the earth's curvature from their first class airline seats and my followers get all riled, get up in arms, link to videos that show different places all across America, all across the world, demonstrating how from where they're standing, where they see can see it for themselves, the horizon is always flat.

I've said it and I'll keep saying it. No matter the cost. No matter who leaves. We fought too hard for our freedom and we never got it, not really. Not truly. It's not me

that's bending my mommas back. It's only the sound of my voice reminding her of the weight that's on it that makes her think so. Alicia called me crazy then the next thing I hear she's doing a summer semester in Europe, hooked up with a dude named Ian. – Ian. Preacha tells me she's planning on bringing him here for his first thanksgiving in the hood. Who you think gonna be called crazy then?

The horizon is always flat, as far as I can see. But more important, it's always falling back. Right there in front of us, a mirage leading us on, making us crazy, giving us nothing, but promising a whole entire world.

...

You might be hearing me and thinking that if my world is flat that maybe that means Alicia and I still get to continue together somewhere on it, coexisting on the same plane, just out of arm's reach. That the distance isn't multi-dimensional, lost in physics I've been told are too complicated for me to fully comprehend. That instead of spinning around on opposite sides of each other, lost points on a globe that guarantees we'll never touch, instead I *want* to think of us as separate but together, hurled higher and higher in one single, same motion, even if it's into nothingness. That then It leaves the two of us, wherever we are, facing it. Forced to by the earth itself, a flat openness with nowhere left to leave— up and out, soaring in the same direction.

Love is complicated. I understand that. Of course I do. The human heart is a mystery. No argument there—though theories abound. Mom believes it's a gift God blessed us with, our exalted consolation. God's teaching and God's love the tools we must take up to comprehend it in the course of his greatest gift—life. And that if we are

good and true servants and follow the straight and narrow path under His Divine Light one day we might wonder and at best, begin to fathom all of its hidden beauty.

Preacha seems to think it's like a bone, soft when we're young, bouncing us around as dumb, happy babies, then with each time, with the right food, it hardens, and breaks, grows back even harder.

I used to believe I knew what Alicia thought about love. That her heart was a mystery because at first it was drawn to mine like a magnet—like one day I looked inside and there she was, a glimmer in the dark rooms locked so deep inside I had forgotten they were there. Like her laughter rang out, rose up out of my own hidden world and woke me up. From what?

From a dream, from myself maybe, the parts of me I didn't know I hated for being so alone. Woke me to something I didn't know I was. And then one day it was gone. And the hurt and betrayal I felt was the exact double of what I saw in her, that last moment, the last time I saw her, leaving. The last time she looked in my eyes, and I could see it, right there, for myself. Like my pain had become hers and now she was finally leaving. That was the real awakening right there.

I know there's no shaped world that can hold the two of us at its center. Not anymore. I don't believe anything about Alicia or her heart because it's gone across a distance I can't never reach. Belief is only as complicated as you make it. As you need to make it to disguise the cold, hard, truth.

The heart is complicated. Life? Couldn't be simpler. Much like the truth, two different sides of a flat coin. Truth is a kind of simple I cherish as much as I despise the kind that life is.

The truth is a white, hot key, fresh from the fire, and it can break shackles and lock doors that shouldn't have been opened and open eyes that shouldn't have been closed.

Life is a cold, dark shadow that lays heavier and heavier on you pretending to be a comfort until the weight of it crushes you, makes you so dizzy you can't even tell which way is up, let alone out.

...

I'm a young black man in America. Born and bred to its legacies, its lies. And its truths. Don't forget that. Don't think I've forgotten what my real education is. The one I got for myself, like the black brothers before me—the wisdom of those whipped for learning to read, or a hundred years later shot in cold blood for speaking on the true version of history, the one that was happening right in front of them when the people in power told them it wasn't.

All that I've learned for myself out there on that darkling plain—the invisible, inextricable, level-ass interconnected web. There I set the horn of hard-won knowledge to my thick brown lips and blew for everyone to see. I saw how the blue light of cyberspace was bright enough to wash out the dark skin from my philosophy, expose the facts they'd rather not see. I saw it with my own two eyes. The truth squashes everything out. Stamps it down. Makes it all flush. What else have I been telling you this whole time. You think I don't know my place here on this earth? That my whole life isn't the reminder?

The world is flat, my people. We can believe whatever we want to believe.

Chapter 3: Godhead

Let my words wash over you. Take the suggestions as you desire them.

You are in complete control of this time. You will only accept those suggestions which are for your benefit and that you are willing to accept.

If there's anybody in the world that's calculated to believe what he wants to believe and to reject what he doesn't want to believe, it is I.

I realized I was a God the first time I killed a man.

It was not murder.

However; I did enjoy every moment of it.

I return¹ to these moments again and again. Every second. All the specific and varied sensations.

NOTHING IS FORGOTTEN.

¹ Technolocratic Command Principle #5: **RETURN!**

The incident is captured in a crystalline clarity so brilliant that even the blinding force of my newfound divinity could therein be contained. The photons of my God particles reflecting and refracting within them; my postulates allowing an organizational structure. I bore witness to the creational hand that meets and meets and meets the divine spark. My own fingers touched its fire[€]. The technology holds[×].

PULL THE STRING.

The subatomic wave loops back on the time-track, loop meeting loop, in infinity, ad infinitum. Then. And now. Finally the discovery—the construction!—of a closed circuit shining a light so bright that even your astigmatic eyes[∅] can glimpse the path away from mortality, see it beaming far beyond the confines of this prison planet. A beacon promising freedom to all the galactic travelers of the far-flung confederacies sprinkled through all the reaches of Space and Time and so much of its residual dust.

ALSO: I can already imagine your arguments.

In fact, I can do more than imagine them. I know them. Before you did.

—Divine omniscience, you see.

[€] “But it depends upon the skill of the artist to keep people interested enough to walk this treadmill called the MEST universe.”

[×] **TECHNOLOCRACY ALWAYS WORKS**

^{*} “There must be an author to all these things.”

[∅] Astigmatism, a distortion of image, is only an anxiety to alter the image.

TECHNOLOCRACY:

(Greek *tekhnē*: art, ALSO craft, *logia*: knowledge, ALSO oracles, ALSO divinely inspired scriptures†, and *kratia*: power or rule) is the science, (ALSO *artful crafting of science* to), of mind.

Far simpler than physics or chemistry, it compares with them in the exactness of its axioms and is on a considerably higher echelon of usefulness. *The hidden source of all psychosomatic ills and human aberration has been discovered and skills have been developed for their invariable cure.*

See _ALSO/ADDITIONAL:

(Furthering reading):

TECHNOLOGY:

(Greek *tekhnologia*: systematic treatment) the discipline dealing with the art or science of applying scientific knowledge to practical problems^{§*}

Technocracy is at base a family of sciences embracing the various humanities and translating them into usefully precise definitions. With the technological techniques

†ALSO the Word of God.

§* ADDITIONAL: the practical application of science to commerce or industry

(See: TECH) derived within, the intelligent layman can successfully treat all psychosomatic ills and inorganic aberrations.

More importantly, the skills developed in the devotional study of its tech will produce the Technolocratical ClairBrilliant, (See: CB, ALSO Brilliant) an optimum individual with intelligence considerably greater than the current normal.

ALSO/ADDITIONAL is the Technolocratical TransComputationally-Relieved (See: TCR, ALSO Relieved), an individual who has been freed from his major anxieties or illnesses.

Technocracy is an exact science and its application is on the order of, but simpler than, engineering. Its axioms should not be confused with theories since they demonstrably exist as natural laws hitherto undiscovered.

Its various axioms are not assumptions or theories—the case of past ideas about the mind—but are laws which can be subjected to the most vigorous laboratory and clinical tests. Understood and applied, they embrace the field of human endeavor and thought and yield machine-measurably precise result.

In addition to things known if not computationally elevated (See: Comp-el'd) or evaluated, Technocracy includes a large number of new discoveries of its own about thought and the mind.

The Technolocratically Relieved is comparable to a current normal or above.

The Technolocratically Brilliant is to a current normal individual as the current normal is to the severely insane.

PRIMARY PRACTICAL AXIOM #1 – KEEP TECHNOCRACY
WORKING.

So what is it? God doesn't kill people? *Wouldn't* kill people?

The Judeo-Christian God that the average, normal Joe worships has killed every man and being He's believed to have created on this current version of Earth more times than he's supposedly deigned to appear on it.

'Water rush over us all and wash away the sin', and so on.

—They really goofed the floof on that score.

Limitless power and a spiritual source so awesome in scope and grandeur, we're told, that it surpasses all possible imagination or understanding, and 'He' uses *water* as His Great Clarifying Technology? How terribly *advanced*.

Basically, they forgot their PIIPP^b. Outdated, you know. Relying on belief. Belief alone. Technology always changes, always *improves*. And so Technocracy^ÿ has never been just a matter of belief. It's a step-by-step, scientific process that will help anyone overcome their limitations; to realize their full potential. It's alive; the same as you and me. It's so much better than immortal dictums in that way. So much more *billable*.

Of course, a God kills. Giving life and taking it away has been the Divine Prerogative for 73 trillion years. It's such a basic formula it barely counts as Tech.

I'm humble enough to admit that I wasn't the first.[?] Cronus, one of the initial innovators, hacked Uranus to bits with a scythe and threw the outdated remnants out to

^b or Programming Integrated Into Present Personhood.

^ÿ "New religions always overthrow the false gods of the old, they do something to better man. We can improve man. We can show the old gods false. And we can open up the universe as a happier place in which a spirit might dwell."

[?] Though I had no one to help me; what I had to know I had to find out. And it's quite a trick studying what you cannot see.

the sea. They floated, spewing. Spending the last of his unfunctional father's power in foaming inefficiency. Blood and guts without spirit; irretrievable fragmentation.

The trouble with that route is there's no coming back. Cut the ol' Paternal Progenitor, you cut the cord. Severed. No more track to travel through, backwards or forwards. Trapped in time. Pull that string all you want, most you can use it for is a fishing line⁷.

But that's Bronze-Age machinery. Which, I think we can all agree, is only a step above Baseline Primitive. At best.

The God popular in the last 2,000 years or so made an advancement in cruelty (if not complexity) with the cruci-fiction, when 'He' allegedly nailed *himself* up on to that deeply imaginative configuration, a formula which could basically be described as :

$$\underline{(\text{Half a Tree}) + (\text{Half a Tree}) + X \times (\text{Nails})^4}$$

$$\text{Death} = \text{GOD}$$

where the variable 'X' is defined as "have them meet somewhere in the middle"

Though I must give (Them? Him?) credit for its sleekness⁸. Personally, I prefer a more elaborate approach, but the ease of replication that results from such a simple equation may very well be the reason, that their system of Divine Tech proliferated and endured as long as it has. Arguably.

⁷ "We commit your sins and errors to the waves and trust you will arrive a better SAPIan."

⁸ Though for the average consumer-convert, I was happy to make the formula for their own evaluation readily available:

PV = ID^X

As for me, I wrapped my hands around the Old Bastard's throat and squeezed with enough force that his trachea collapsed and his lungs were so hungry for air they burned up like miniature hot-air balloons.

That covers the basics, anyway. In practice, if not full technical theory.

RECOVERED

ALSO/ADDITIONAL:

Despite the poetics of man-to-God transmutation by personal technological discovery allowing advancement on the Mortal→ Immortal axis of Present Beingness...

(freed from the once single direction of the now liberated axis of Observed Time)

...a few declarations were made that, on reflection, I believe might not have been supported with sufficient evidence to give objective credibility to their claims.

It wasn't murder because the act of killing lacked intention, or passion, or plan.

Not only did my slaughtering of the Old Bastard possess those qualities in such large amounts he couldn't lift the mass of them with the wheelbarrow he died no less than a few feet from, it had others¹. Furthermore, as I'm sure you'd attest as witness to my bi-andgramatic testimony, the act was endowed with catharsis and pure, awe-inspiring beauty.

It was also, I hope, educational. Possibly bordering on the revelatory.

...instructional, perhaps. At the very least.

In conclusion, no, it is by none of the accepted wisdom that would normally separate that transformative act from a crime I might be guilty of, or a punishment that would be its price.

It wasn't murder because I am God, and God is flawless.

Murder would imply an error in my programming, a bug in my technology.

It wasn't murder.

It was Divine Deletion. Got the idea?

¹ These include but are not limited, to: judgment, retribution, diversion, and enjoyment.

My Tech as I'm sure you've guessed was of course fathomlessly complex, but the execution can be understood easily enough:

Return to the pain inflicted upon you back to its originator until the lights fade in the eyes of his shocked, swollen face.

Note the transference of power as his strength becomes yours.

Do not sever the connection. Do not cut the binding tie. Rather, let it unravel, as his tongue does from his false, sneering mouth. Amplify the cellular code until it's long enough to wrap around his neck.

PULL THE STRING.

Behold the new world you've created in your image. It's finally dark enough to see the stars shining. This new darkness is your blessing. This is how the stars are able to shine bright enough to guide you on your way.

Reach your arms out to the heavens as the Cosmic Bridge unfolds towards you.

Stand and place your foot on that initial step.

Acknowledge this new position as your rightful place, the spoils of your victory, your inheritance. Your tech has worked. Keep it working. Continue building the Bridge, through the MESS[§] of the known universe and former lives to discover the unknowns that await.

NOTHING IS FORGOTTEN.

—Ascend.

And welcome home.

[§] MESS = Material Energy Space Solitude

ADDRESS YOUR TECH

When one deals with facts rather than theories and gazes for the first time upon the mechanisms of human action, several things confound him, much as the flutterings of the heart did Harvey or the actions of yeasts did Pasteur. The blood did not circulate because Harvey said it could nor yet because he said it did. It circulated and had been circulating for eons. Harvey was clever and observant enough to find it, and this was much the case with Pasteur and other explorers of the hitherto unknown or unconfirmed.

... It was then discovered that the cells, reproducing from one generation to the next, within the organism, apparently carried with them their own memory banks. The cells are the first echelon of structure, the basic building blocks.

See: Basic.[∞]

ALSO/ADDITIONAL: Basic-Basic[∞].

Technocratic study and therapeutic devotion is concerned with BI-ANDgrams, not memories, with recordings, not experience. And wherever there are human cells, bi-andgrams are demonstrably possible and when physical pain was present, BI-ANDgrams can be demonstrated to have been created.

[∞] Basic: the first bi-andgram on any chain of similar bi-andgrams.

^{∞∞} Basic-Basic: the first bi-andgram after conception, the basic of all chains by sole virtue of being the first moment of pain. ALSO See: basic personality*

* Basic Personality: the individual himself. The person, minus his pain, dramatizations and reactive (ALSO *viral*) mind and its contents.

The BI-ANDgram is a recording like the ripples in the groove of a phonograph record: it is a complete recording of everything which occurred during the period of pain.

The entire physical pain and painful emotion of a lifetime—whether the individual “knows” about it or not—is contained, recorded, in the BI-ANDgram Bank (See: BIB).

Nothing is forgotten. And all physical pain and painful emotion, no matter how the individual may think he has handled it, is capable of re-inflicting itself upon him from this hidden level unless that pain removed by Technolocratical Thru-Therapy-Till-Salvation (See: TTTS, ALSO TransSalv). This process is known as Deletion.

Through the courses of devotional study, the Technolocratic Initiate will now be able to, for the first time[∞] since the race of man appeared on this planet, locate BI-ANDgram anywhere on his time-track.

He will be able to locate and embark on this journey only because BI-ANDgram exist there.[∞]

The BI-ANDgram and only the BI-ANDgram causes aberration and psychosomatic illness.

[∞] Thanks to these newly developed technologies

[∞] ! Technolocratic Command Principle #5: **RETURN!**

I was born on a ranch just over a decade into the 20th century, the most momentous and historic century on record since history has been recorded, on lands that once consisted of the Great Western Frontier of the United States, but now is more commonly called Montana.

I was the only son born to my mother and father, and am still, in fact, their sole child.

My name is Regulus Graham Husherson, though most know me as R Graham Husherson, and most call me RGH. You've probably heard at least one of these names before. Not to boast but I've accomplished quite a few things. More than you might think. More than my fair share, even. In some areas I've accomplished more, I think, than any man who has ever lived.

In fact, I more than think it, because I know, and I can prove it.

R Graham Husherson, RGH, founder and Com-Pope of the Church of Technocracy.

I am the Source.

—Look it up.

See: ALSO/ADDITIONALLY:

U.S. Naval Lieutenant, WWII hero, rocket scientist, engineer, cowboy, blood-brother to Old Tom Madfeathers and honorary member of the Blackfoot Indian tribe, federal intelligence agent, Satanic Scribe, vaudevillian, engineer, billionaire, Explorer's Club Officer, amateur herpetologist, lady-killer, college graduate, film director, submarine-downer, screenwriter, government-toppler, inventor, bona fide celebrity acolyte, aristocrat, every single Everyman, a rags-to-riches success many times over, comedian,

black magician, hypnotist, composer, race car driver, pilot, drinker, smoker, beautiful singer, marriage counselor, philanderer, pedophile, Defender/Protector/Savior of this Sector of the Universe and All Its Attendant Planets, genius, polymath, Antichrist, and Messiah.

Occasional husband. Sporadic father.

...

I am basically a writer, though that is my basic-basic.

I have written and published more books than anyone who has ever lived.

I captained a ship that was downed in the Pacific and spent weeks on a raft. Was myself a raft of injuries. Back broken and stomach full of ulcers, eyes blinded by shrapnel and Sun.

I stood over one of my wives with a coat hanger after I bruised her purple for enraging me. I aborted five of her seven pregnancies in five years.

Once I forgot to shut the door while I did it, blindered by rage. She was screaming but I didn't hear it. She said my son watched.

I tried to abort him too. But we were too late or he was too early; out he came at six and a half months. I made him an incubator with a cardboard box and a blanket and a lightbulb. I watched him grow in the womb of my technology. I became his mother more than his mother was[Ⓔ]. He was gestated in the womb of my technology[%].

What did he do with the gift of life I gave him, not once, but twice[^]?

[Ⓔ] "I wrote a great book on marriages. You should read it."

[%] "Make them question themselves so deeply they go to you to understand what the definition of 'happy' is"

[^] "First draft, last draft, get it out the door."

He killed himself. The fucker.

“I’m not beating you,” I told him. “I’m making you a man.”

NOTHING IS FORGOTTEN.

I think my mother tried to abort me.

PULL THE STRING.

My father said he loved me and was proud of me but I never believed him. He joined the Navy and brought me along to see the world, and so when I became a man I joined the Navy and saw more.

Then I created my own navy. I was its Commodore. I commanded a fleet of ships. He didn’t command one.

I watched him die, eyes bulging, in a field on our ranch under the starlight. I saw him dying, face swelling, and I watched and did nothing. Hands limp at my side.¹ He dropped to the ground, dead, and I did nothing to stop it.

The Old Bastard deserved it.

Did you help?

What are **your** crimes?

I’ve been to prostitutes and enjoyed innumerable lovers and they didn’t mind my limpness. They swore they didn’t. They promised.

¹ “Exhaustive tests have demonstrated that hidden pain is not a necessity... it has *no* survival value.”

¹ “Even a criminal leaves clues to his crime, because he wishes for someone to stop his unethical behavior.”

¹ “Similarly, a person who has accidentally hurt himself or gotten ill is ‘putting ethics on himself’ in order to lessen the damage he does to others or to his environment.

I smacked another wife across the face with a .45 while she was sleeping. She was smiling in her sleep. I know the smile wasn't for me.

I kicked her in the stomach while she was pregnant so she would lose the baby. But the child lived; a true milestone of Tech^¾.

After the baby was born I was afraid she would leave so I kidnapped it and sailed to Cuba. I wrote the first butcher-paper scrolls of my epiphanies there while the little one slept[®]. I dreamed up fanciful eternities while she slept fitfully under a wire mesh cage[•].

I wrote that bright, young wife of mine a letter saying I had cut the baby into pieces and then thrown them in the river. That the river was littered with her. Her little fingers. Her little toes. She hushed and hushed and hushed up and down that disordered stream.

She had said I was a fine, beautiful thing. She said she would never leave me^ã.

— Funny thing about forever, mind you. It's limitless. There's always more and there's never enough.

Made them all sign^µ billion year-long contracts after that, didn't I.

^¾ Technocratic Command Principle #1

The one command of all existence—that all life and all people have: SURVIVE!

[®] “This hellbroth I cooked up works remarkably well on kids.”

[•] “It's perfectly alright to step outside the law because the law itself is aberrant.”

^ã “When you can make a person question their very being, their belief is the only thing in this world that you can ever have the ability to *know*. There's no limit to what you can make them doubt. Or what you can make them believe.

^µ “I do not want to be an American husband for I can buy my friends whenever I want them.”

DESTROY FOLLOWING FINAL EXTERIORIZATION

Only Technocracy can rescue humanity from its inevitable doom—a step-by-step scientific process that will help you overcome your limitations and realize your full potential.

The student has to testify to his own wins, his own advancements. He has to defend himself in order to advance.

Give people BIG RESPONSIBILITY to soothe their ego and they'll work like slaves.

*Point out a thing and give it weight. Then make the weight unbearable. **Then** offer to take it off their hands.*

-- They'll kiss your feet from the relief.

In addition to tax advantage, religion supplies a commodity that is always in demand: salvation.

Claim their fears. Build their egos.

*You give someone, instead of **an answer**, **THE ANSWER**. That is, the answer to everything. Capital E, E-V-E-R-Y-T-H-I-N-G.*

They never need to ask another question. They'll never ask another question. Because they have the answer to everything.

And they don't have to be confused or angry or scared or helpless or worry or wonder.

*But more importantly, they'll never question **you**.*

MISSING SECTION

BI-ANDgrams and Your Case

The entire physical pain and painful emotions of a lifetime—whether the individual ‘knows’ about it or not—is contained, recorded, in the BI-ANDgram.

The BI-ANDgram and only the BI-ANDgram causes aberration and psychosomatic illness.

See: Abberation.[∞]

ALSO/ADDITIONAL:. BIB^Σ

When any such recording, a BI-ANDgram becomes reactivated, it has command power.

The BI-ANDgram shuts down the conscious mind to a greater or lesser degree, takes over the motor controls of the body and causes behavior and action to which the conscious mind, the individual himself, would never consent.

Technocratic therapy may be briefly stated. Technocracy deletes all the pain from a lifetime.

You will be gratified to know that you held not opinions, but scientific facts in many of your concepts of existence.^Ω Only things which are poorly known become more complex the longer one works upon them.

[∞] Abberation: an optical phenomenon resulting in the failure of a lens or mirror to produce a good image.

^Σ Technocratic Command Principle #12: **CLEAN YOUR BIB!**

^Ω “You will find, too, many data that have long been known by all, and you will possibly consider them far from news and be proven to underevaluate them.

Be assured that underevaluation of these facts kept them from being valuable, no matter how long they were known, for a fact is never important without a proper evaluation of it and its precise relationship to other facts.

TAKE WHAT YOU WANT, LEAVE THE REST.

PRIMARY PRACTICAL AXIOM #2 – IT IS GENERALLY TRUE THAT AN
INDIVIDUAL IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENS TO
HIMSELF.

Just when they're on the very brink, you pull them back.

—You reward them.

*They will live for that reward. They will live **only** for that reward.*

*Tell them to give of themselves entirely with the assurance that it is effective, that there will be **no waste**, that just the act of sacrifice in and of itself **guarantees** meaning.*

Take the impossible and make it easy.

*Find someone who wants to help, who wants to save the world and **let them;**
without all the world that would rush in to foil them.*

To keep a person on the Technocracy path, feed him a mystery sandwich.

TO KEEP A PERSON ON THE TECHNOLOCRACY PATH:

FEED HIM A MYSTERY SANDWICH⁺

UNABLE TO BE PROCESSED

UNINTELLIGIBLE / ILLEGIBLE

Transcript unable to be translated by machine.

⁺ “You hadn’t though about this until I mentioned it, had you?
Everybody from Somerset Maugham to Euripedes said so.
And they said so—and this is what’s criminal with aesthetics;
It has never entered anybody’s mind to be a god.
That would not be permitted, anywhere in any literature except somebody being insane
and completely monomaniac and paranoid and all of the nasty words you could heap on it.
Because the gods are too far above us for us to ever contact.
And they fly around in the air. Except in the Arabian nights where we find the efreets, as
gods of a sort.
— but they’re ugly and they’re mean and they’re horrible and they’re vicious and
they do terrible things to man.
So we couldn’t touch the gods of the Greek hierarchy. They’re above touch. And one
would be insane if he thought of himself as one.
And we couldn’t possibly touch ghosts, could we?”

UNKNOWN ARCHIVAL SOURCE

And what are *your* crimes, huh? Ol' Reggie, Ol' Pal. You little Graham Cracker. You
thick-lipped loon.

Seems to me you're not as eager to talk about *those*.

WE COME BACK

I saw the Bridge to Immortality descend from the heavens down to a field where I stood, impotent¹. I was limp², then. And alone³. Then and now, somehow still alone⁴. Lingly⁵ staring at the corpse⁶ of my dead⁷ father⁸.

My father, who fell down dead, inexplicably. With no knowing that he would die. No sign given, to him or I⁹. He fell to the ground and I fell on top of him. I pounded at his static chest. Praying all the while to restart the track; to re-stimulate the circuit. I wept and prayed to the dead heart inside him; for the dead heart he left inside of me. I was abandoned on the turbulent currents of my own life's folly. I felt all the lost years of me, a spanner spinning back in time and ahead¹⁰.

¹ "You will never forget these incantations. They are holy and are now become an integral part of your nature."

² "You have no fear of what any woman may think of your bed conduct. You know you are a master. You know they will be thrilled. You can come many times without weariness."

³ "You like to have your intimate friends approve of and love you for what you are."

⁴ "This desire to be loved does not amount to a psychosis."

⁵ "Many women are not capable of pleasure in sex and anything adverse they say or do has no effect whatever upon your pleasure."

⁶ "You will live to be 200 years old."

⁷ "You have no doubts about God."

⁸ "Self pity and conceit are not wrong. Your mother was in error."

⁹ "You are psychic."

¹⁰ "You have no fear if they conceive. What if they do? You do not care. Pour it into them and let fate decide."

Then, with bleary eyes¹¹, sick¹² in body¹³ and burning with righteous fury¹⁴ at such outrageous, pernicious fortune¹⁵. I saw the line unfurl in the black wet grass¹⁶ at my feet¹⁷. The beginning of the ladder I knew it was my fate, my role, my burden to build. Observed it rising up, up, up, to the loading dock of an alien spaceship¹⁸.

You are beginning an adventure.¹⁹ Treat it as an adventure. And may you never be the same again.

I saw the Bridge, clear as day, for the very first time that dark, thieving night. That I had been placed there, through all the seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, centuries upon centuries, through countless millenias of time, to build it.

It came because I had the technology.

It didn't matter if I was a liar as long if I could make others believe.

— Got the idea?

¹¹ “Your eyes are getting progressively better. They became bad when you used them to escape the naval academy. You have no reason to keep them bad.”

¹² “Your stomach trouble you used as an excuse to keep the Navy from punishing you. You are free of the Navy.

¹³ “Your hip is a pose. You have a sound hip. It never hurts. Your shoulder never hurts.”

¹⁴ “You do not know anger. Your patience is infinite.”

¹⁵ “Money will flood in upon you.”

¹⁶ “Snakes are not dangerous to you. There are no snakes in the bottom of your bed.”

¹⁷ “Your foot was an alibi. The injury is no longer needed.”

¹⁸ “Masturbation does not injure or make insane. Your parents were in error. Everyone masturbates.”

¹⁹ “You are not a coward.

Chapter 4: E.G.B.D.F.

Sing, O Muse— you cum dumpster femoid— of the rage that burns brighter than all others, of the destructive fire shining RedBlack from the fringes! The one real light, purest and true, the obsidian force so warm, so damning! Recall us to it—the heat of that awakening touch (both so longed for and so feared), when its forked tongue reached out from the black heart of the fire, bringing dark illumination to our shadowed, huddled corners, to caress (at last!) the grossest of faces. That moment our bleak baptism. Sing, you snickering, sneering Slut! Sing of the flaming forums that blaze in the corners of our collective telecommunicative consciousness, the murky madness of darkest webs! Give praise to the wondrous deeds done by our hERo who foretold and fulfilled our promised glory long ago, to the trials of our Minnasiah (Second Coming, driven to greatness), but (most importantly), to our future glories! Harmonize with our horrors and the revenge that awaits!

Sing of our noble plight! The endless pain suffered—by really, Such Nice Guys—unfairly hurled in their multitude for their sub 8 frame/wrists/teeth/hair/chests/glands/income (but most of all, faces)— to the house of Hades, (TL;DR : banned from Reddit, besieged throughout 4Chan, no subculture/race/religion/creed so persecuted through time immemorial).

Sing in memoriam to those unfairly banished there by Staceys who'll never realize how good they could have had it, (stupid whores). Forget not the slights suffered

from Beckys as well— (the fake numbers given, the loud, intentional sighs).

—Sing and shame them for not even sending nudes!

Begin, Muse! Not with Chad—sleek, sexy, strong (though quite frankly obvious, even for a ferroid like you)—but with the ending. Which is near.

For soon the old DOM will collapse under the weight of its degeneracy, and the new dawn of justice will arrive—beta, blemish, and blue-pill free.

Just like the qt underage 10 my suffering has earned me.

How will you ignore me then, you roastie cunt? How will you sing, fa-la-la-lating the normie cucks, newly necrotic, who bought into your bullshit chorus once our long painful night is over?

How will you keep time once the clocks and the scales and the negative canthal tilts return to zero?

Do you think you'll be able to breathe past the fistfuls of black pills I'll shove down your throat?

You will belong to me then, when I emerge from the darkness, unshackled and unmasked. But I won't want your loose, worn-out melodies then.

How many ears have you pressed your lips against, whispering secrets to everyone else, leaving me poison? You think I'll still want your sloppy, sonorous seconds?

When the sun rises on that new day, so will I. Beyond the Chads, beyond you, beyond any version of male perfection your inferior FHO mind could ever dream of. Fully Ascended.

Uninhibited.

Uncontrollable.

—Undenied.

...

ForumThread86Pv34/i-on-

you/FinalCountdown_BahdiBAHbah!BahdiBAH!BAH!BAH!/_

//Corrupt.File.Recovered

Admin: Aristotle

Class: OneTrueCel

Thread_Override

Mass-Comm//Open.File-Malware.me

i-on-you/frontpage_rollscript.repeatrepeatrepeat

[“ Salutations newcels and oldcels, fatcels and thincels, mentalcels, breathcels, but always first and foremost, truecels—welcome. Welcome brothers, comrades, friends. Welcome to The (w)Reckoning, the Retribution, The Real Fucking Deal. The wait is almost over. The end to our endless torment nears.

To the rest of you, the remnants, how does it feel to be where we used to be? Enjoying the opportunity to look up for a change?

Oh wait—you thought I might give a shit? How delightful. How delicious. How delusional.

You’re probably a little confused, or too low IQ to understand, which even during the worst times I could never be, so I’ll try to shrug off the vast mantle of my superior-inferiority for a little bit at least, since you’re still adjusting.

Sit down. Shut up. – Let me educate you.

Before the PC pogroms ransacked our sites, our forums, the dark squishy undersides we carved out of your handsome chiseled rocks, I promised one thing. I'll remind you of it now:

Posted by: Aristotle [Gatekeeper, Poon-Slayer] — 11 months ago

“I didn't start this war but I will finish it. XD ”

I'll say this once and I don't expect you to ever have me fucking repeat this again.

Aristotle isn't just a member, he's a lifestyle' – PumpNDumper5000

See, unlike subhuman animals like you, I keep my promises. When I said I would let you make me your boyfriend, I meant it. When I said I would wipe civilization off the surface of the earth to reset all SMV, I meant it. When I said that I was the ultimate gentleman and wanted to prove it to you, I meant it.

Then.

The first pill I swallowed was red. The second pill I swallowed was black. It's not that bad, the swallowing. You'll learn to love it. —I promise. ;)

Posted by: Aristotle [Gatekeeper, Poon-Slayer] — 2 years 7 months ago

“With the red pill we obtain the awareness of the dark truths surrounding human sexuality; hypergamy, the female cycle of alphafucks and betabucks, women's strats and traps, society's Feminine Imperative, and the recognition of feminism as a doctrine of class hatred and violence.

Feminism's end goal is killing all men and we're simply defending mankind.”

I'll say this once and I don't expect you to ever have me fucking repeat this again.

Aristotle isn't just a member, he's a lifestyle' – PumpNDumper5000

See, the black pill helps you realize your worth. How much greater it is than any other. The bitter seed that slithers inside to grow dark, bruising fruit.

Posted by: Aristotle [Gatekeeper, Poon-Slayer] — 2 years 3 months ago

“We need to focus more on our hatred. Hatred is power.”

I'll say this once and I don't expect you to ever have me fucking repeat this again.

Aristotle isn't just a member, he's a lifestyle' – PumpNDumper5000

I'm only letting you see this to know one thing. One final question for your final moments. You can call it morbid curiosity. I'll let you. Get it? No? Not what you were expecting? Well what about what *I* expected every time I asked for a date? Refuse a drink to a parched man in the desert? Revile an open hand, sweaty and shaking, begging you to hold it?

How the hell can you sleep at night knowing that the whole world ended just because you wouldn't fuck me? XD

“]

Transmission_Terminated/terminal-condit//exterminate.Open-repeatrepeatrepeat

...

Recovered:

Frontpage/i-on-you/TheBeginning/Interrupt-threads-all/Lesson#1.corrupt-script

Admin: Aristotle

Class: OneTrueCell

Thread_Override

Mass-Comm—unFuckedfromtheStart/knowledge.swallow

InitialBroadcast:01:49_Sep102018

In the cells of my body dwells my ultimate betrayal. Twisted ladder of coded proteins that doomed me from the moment of creation. Cruel and crooked fate. Sentence of lifetime pain before life could even begin. Mother's putrid insides only ones I'll ever know. Being born, can only forget.

Those of us smart enough (not you, if you're reading this) realized long ago that when God kicked A&E out of the garden, it was not their pale pink skin that shamed them, stinging newborn though it were. Not their quivering, shivering, bareness, no. Cruelty in rippling muscles? Persecution of sweet soft slopes? No. No. No. No. Who would mourn such an unrevealing revelation?

No real fear can be clothed in such simple solution. No real sin so easily hidden.

—E's eyes, forced open, wept from the truth. A's ripped from his denial cope by a hatefully absent Alpha God—though give pause to consider: alpha and omega *together*? Only the Truly Unselected are aware of our species' founding joke—saw the rejection in her eyes and raged. The punishing 74discovery not his nakedness—so lenient a sentence, so surmountable, so ridiculous, NO!—but his *ugliness*. Turning back towards the beauty of the lost garden, back turned to the loser doomed to give chase.

(Swathe, conceal, hide in shadows—)

(—You'll still never be allowed

back inside.)

Broadcast_Term:00:59_Sep202018

...

Forum: Ascend/Descend

Subject: OnlyUs

Thread: Archived

Posted by: WrektWrist08 [Level 8—72 posts]

Any one else see that roastie buffet exploding all over the response sub to the old forum? It's almost like the SJWs miss having us to screech and insult and belittle. I'm glad that they shut us down. A van plows into a bunch of femoids demanding more govt \$\$ so they can get unlimited pills to ride the cock carousel, and suddenly we're all they can think about. Too late.

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,452 posts]

The old forum was infiltrated. Aristotle saw how rotted it was getting and cut us out like we should have been cut out of our mother's rotted insides. It isn't enough that we're persecuted IRL, isolated, ridiculed—those SJW Feminazis and their suckling soyboys thought they could come to witness our pain *and laugh?*

Whoever drove that van, I hope it was one of us. Even if it wasn't, still deserved.

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: 5everAl0ne [Level 1—0 posts]

HiCell-- just got admitted to the new site.

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,453 posts]

Cope/rope/hope

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: 5EverAl0ne [Level 1—1 posts]

No hope, no cope. Refugee from MGTOW—tired of looking the other way.
THHFV, girl friendzoned for TWO FUCKING EYARS posted new Chad to FB. Saw the
broadcast last night. Looking for answers. Or will rope.

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,454 posts]

Red pill give you heartburn?

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: 5EverAl0ne [Level 1—2posts]

Thought I was done trying. So many attempts, so many rejections. I tried
looksmaxxing. Went to gym every day for a week. Looksmatched. Walked with her
from bus after school. Not a Stacy, but I was willing to sacrifice. Thought she could be
different. We talked about manga, thought she could be my waifu. Now she's throatfull
of Chad.

Any strats? Maybe once Chad is done with her.

Posted by: WrektWrist08 [Level 8—74 posts]

Fakecell wannabe. How'd that blue-pill taste, you soy-sauced cuckcuckcuck-
apuss.

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,456 posts]

Aristotle will block your IP and add it to his list if you don't go full black 5Ever.

Hope? JFLollllll. – Upload pic.

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: WrektWrist08 [Level 8—75 posts]

– Upload pic.

[deleted image]

Posted by: WrektWrist08 [Level 8—76 posts]

This chinless sad sack thought he could MOG a CHAD with THIS?! X D

JFL JFL JFLoo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

NO ASCENSION POSSIBLE— DARE TO DESPAIR—Descend into the
BlackLight

-- Look at that brow ridge!!

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,457 posts]

You see a brow ridge?

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: CountCuckula [Level 28—789 posts]

No maxxx possible. Complete lack of mandibular determinism. Swallow the
black pill if you still can with that flaccid floppy jaw.

Posted by: BetaSuck666 [Level 50—4,302 posts]

Cantal lift set to negative 1 billion. XD

LDAR, kid. Only answer.

'Pain is the only truth. Hate is the only answer to Pain – Aristotle'

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,458 posts]

Or should he rope?

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: WrektWrist08 [Level 8—77posts]

-- Rope. Def. Only truecell black pills can be saved. The rest of the Manosphere
is fucked by cucks and blue-pillers.

Posted by: CountCuckula [Level 28—790 posts]

How can he rope tho?

There's nothing to separate his neck from his face?

Posted by: BetaSuck666 [Level 50—4,303 posts]

Who else saw the broadcast last night? Did you hear those normies on the news?

All that outrage, what fucking bullshit. Like they could ever know for even a second the depth of our pain. Our lives are hell and they're acting like revenge is our fault and not theirs.

'Pain is the only truth. Hate is the only answer to Pain – Aristotle'

Posted by: CanCell4Lyfe [Level 5—26 posts]

[image deleted]

-- Rate me

...

Posted by: Aristotle [Gatekeeper, Poon-Slayer] [One True Cell]

“It's Over.”

I'll say this once and I don't expect you to ever have me fucking repeat this again.

Aristotle isn't just a member, he's a lifestyle' – PumpNDumper5000

Posted by: PumpNDumper500 [Level 83—10,459 posts]

“It Never Began.”

'Future DOMSlayer of Chadistaniswreckia'

Posted by: BetaSuck666 [Level 50—4,304posts]

“It Never Began.”

'Pain is the only truth. Hate is the only answer to Pain – Aristotle'

Posted by: CountCuckula [Level 28—791 posts]

“It Never Began.”

Posted by: CanCell4Lyfe [Level 5—27 posts]

“It Never Began”

A spoonful of black pills makes the incelocalypse go down

...

Class: OneTrueCell

Limit_Terminal/001

Single-Comm/LOOP/repeatrepeatrepeat

ForbiddenDomain_SecretCell

Admin only

Admin: Aristotle

InitialBroadcast:11:39_Sep302018

Hyoid, maxilla, mandible. Medial canthus's pathetic sad-sack slope to lateral. Coward's drooping white flag limply waving its sclera show.

What death sentence/field/march/camp could compare to this genetic holocaust?

I mean, are you fucking kidding me? Everythingeverythingeverything is against me, from the wispy hair clutching the top of my head to the overlong hallux dangling off my flat, fetid feet.

It's all science and biology, really.

Untouchable science.

Untouchable me.

No one can blame me for what I'll do.

...

Class: OneTrueCell

Thread_Override

Mass-Comm—FucktheCucksBurntheBeckys/Gospel.swallow

InitialBroadcast:01:49_Oct_252018

To TPTB:

Your first mistake was not wanting me.

Your second mistake was not listening.

Your third mistake was turning your back to us and our pain and pushing us further into our darkness, this doomed, diseased existence.

Just because our Sexual Market Value is a rotten goose egg, you think that the blame lies with us? Who lays those eggs? Us? Your muscle-throbbled Chads?

The internet gave birth to us, raised us, roped and wreck'd us. Who do you think knows it better? Who more able to slip inside, unnoticed?

You think that your silence can silence me? Is there a man on earth, who will continue forwards, when so willfully woefully ignored?

To ascend, we will descend. The only way forward is down. Join us. Or say no. You can always try.

But perhaps we have been told no too often to hear it. Just as you could not hear us and our howls of clumsy, catastrophic pain.

If you will not listen, I will speak louder. I will speak with the weapons at my disposal, infiltrate the fiber optics veins that run through the diseased body of the society that forgot us.

You think I won't get angry just because I'm not Chad?

If I can't have your body, then I'll take your body, and I'll break your body. –
Because it wasn't good enough for me to begin with. Every foid so proud of her fetid
folds, the beautiful, decomposing crack in the universe. The dank, festering void from
which all this deluded, disgusting life pours forth.

Fuck Chad. Again. And again. Like you haven't done it a million times already.
Like I haven't watched and wept. Get one more turn on the carousel before the whole
ride comes screaming to a halt.

I would have been good to you. I would have married you at 18 and only asked
for what I deserved.

Or perhaps you think that I'll deny myself my male-given right to rage.

You think that I'll spare you.

Did you spare me?

Take me into your arms and accept me as I am, pustuled and pernicious?

The greasy, febrile strands of that hang in tatters over these ogre ears will chain
you to the bottom just like they've done to me.

Pain is truth. Hate is power. I finally have more of something than I ever asked
for. And unlike me, life's truth cannot be denied.

You told me to put myself out there then spurned me. Laughed while I scurried
under the bright hot faces of the handsomest heated gods.

Hope or rope?

I've found hope, like all the warriors before me, at the end.

Now that I'm out there and only the black light shines, it's finally time for you to come to me.

—Crawl.

On your knees, bitch.

I don't know what you don't see in me, but I will punish you all for it. I didn't start this war, but I will finish it.

Lie Down and Rot? After you, my thotful roasted cunts. – See?

See?

See?

I am a Supreme Gentleman, after all.

You're finally over.

Because we never began.

Chapter 5: Mertensian Mimicry

“If we do one more collage installation, I’m going to murder/suicide us both with a confetti canon,” I tell Marilyn while she asks me to move a newspaper headline monstrosity from the north wall to the south for the fifth time in an hour.

“Of course, my darling,” she replies. “As long as you prep the walls so all of it sticks.”

I laugh, because I know Marilyn expects me to. But while I laugh I imagine a puddle of her brains oozing down the wall, exquisitely composed. A spray of cranial glitter bashed against negative space.

“Oh Marilyn,” I titter in my cunt-iest *Yaass, Queen* tone, “People who say you’re too much don’t know their ass from their elbows—you’re *just* enough.”

...

I value beauty over almost everything. You’d be surprised how many people don’t. Either don’t understand it or can’t recognize it when they see it. Hetero males, obviously. Some women. A lot, actually. Nearly everyone you can think of. Most people are stupid. Or blind. Or both.

But I can. It’s a gift. One of many really. I don’t know if it’s possible to really be able to *know* beauty if you’re not. Beautiful. Maybe ugly people can *appreciate* things that are beautiful but in the end they’re always going to bend it back towards themselves

and ruin it, like a shitty Ikea mirror. Warped through jealousy of what they don't have it in them to see because they don't have it in them to *be*.

That's what I think anyway. I'm pretty sure I'm right.

...

Marilyn can't get enough of these faux-hipster, disowned-except-for-their-bank-accounts semi-tragic street kids and their found fucking art. I used to joke around with her assistant, threatening to inspire Marilyn to get a 'space-specific' bird installed in the gallery, just to have it shit all over that day's copy of the *New York Post* and submit it to Marilyn for a solo show.

Les Enfants Terribles she calls them.

Usually to herself, after we're done hanging and she's standing alone in the gallery pretending to synthesize some extra-ordinary cohesive meaning out of the arrangement so that *she* can make believe that she's an artist too, somehow. She pretends to own something separate in her mixed media nursery and I pretend I'm not watching and judging her while she does it.

What is that, symbiosis? With the big fish and the little fish sucked on and phoning it in. There are times I can't tell if she actually *wants* me to notice—seriously, the fucking drama of it sometimes—*Aaaaahhhhn-phAHNT, ter-EEE-blah*.

All guttural and stuck in her throat. Like I wouldn't be able to differentiate her from a mother tiger growling out to her wounded cubs instead of the raisin-crotched, cougar-chested Hungarian cast-off she'll always be.

Like the Balenciaga tunics and vintage Westwood capes and fug-ass Japanese platform sneakers could obscure all *that*. Like I'm not calling her fucking Marilyn instead

of Maritza or Marcushka or whatever garbage disposal cycle of consonants she came off the boat and landed at Studio 54 with half a century ago. She thinks that keeping her hooked Jewish nose intact is keeping her authentic. She loves that schnoz—kept it preserved through the rhinoplastic pogroms of the late 80s and early 90s, curating it like her accent—as if the fat-transfers to her labial folds and her daily intake of green juice and her secret devotion to celebrity cleanses from Us Weekly haven't been the real foundations of her life for the past twenty years. Haven't remade her entirely. As if someone *not* raised in a Brutalist hellscape and reeking of Bolshevik blockade *désespoir-chic* would rechristen themselves Marilyn.

As tragically sincere as the \$600 Russian nesting doll burgundy dye job she shares with half the housewives of northern New Jersey along with her name. You know, where it looks like you pop open seven layers of Fekkai to expose the Feria within, seeping and seething at its center—Marilyn's kitschy, yearning heart that can't help what it loves, like attracting like, discharging the sentimental, aspirational gunk of her pre-coke youth into veins riddled with insecurities that have stuck there calcifying, emotional plaque since puberty, constipating any talent she might have once had with inflamed human vulnerability and the shame of feeling it throbbing away, lodged there. Like a hemorrhoid. Except hemorrhoids usually only torment your asshole, and the kind she has actually makes you one.

I would feel pity if I didn't know how much more I could do with it. That's how you can tell the world's not fair. Marilyn gets to forget about the tinges of drugstore fuchsia staining her imaginary but impeccably serviced aura, staining the meticulous

designer ensemble of mismatched band-aids she thinks camouflages her, and I can't because I'm the one who has to look at her.

Like blending into her graffiti-lite, excised cinderblock exhibitions is showing how much a part of their vision she is, instead of unmasking the strip mall mentalities they share between them.

So yeah, there have been days when I wish I wasn't so smart, because being smart makes everything too easy and when everything's too easy I get bored and I end up cutting corners and forgetting things like scheduled deliveries that I end up having to blame on Marilyn's assistant so that she gets fired instead of me.

There are even sporadic, flickering moments when Marilyn's dispensing her Slavic throat-clearing adoration where I've wondered what it would be like, being her—or how if I could switch, could downgrade, be as bland and blind and mind-numbingly, palate-shreddingly poor-tasted, but happy—obliviously, obnoxiously, inferiorly *happy*, that you know, maybe in weaker moments I actually *would*. Make it easier on myself, play one part so long that I could forget I'm playing it. Whether it fools anyone else or not.

Then what happens is Marilyn pulls away from the piece that she's been communing with and then they're both ridiculous, her *and* the art. I could be Marilyn—I could even be the Marilyn she *thinks* she is. The only difference is I would have to look at the same stain as its forming, day after day after day. But on me this time. Where it's not as funny. As if it's not bad enough having to fluff and fleece my way through six-hour days, watching helplessly while she's contaminating all that hard work from the inside out.

I smile and pack my bag, keep my eyelashes lowered to look coy, if not naïve. Naïve is harder to pull off with the *cognoscente*. Half the work in piquing adoration is detecting what qualities are most likely to be adored. Well-seasoned game don't buy into innocence unless it's real. I stumbled a few times with that in my less-experienced days. Old, dumb, and *rich*—so many more of them than you, or they, would like to think—they're the meal tickets that little boys like me pick our teeth clean for.

Bernard holds the gallery door open for me and winks over my shoulder. I double blink, veiling mild, calibrated shock and smile wider—just a touch—when I walk past. While he's walking to his car I look over my shoulder at Marilyn, expression copy/pasted from a Brassai gamine. She hasn't realized she's angry yet. I'll be eating oysters when she does. I hitch my shoulder half a notch and press my lips half into its cashmere knit because honestly sometimes I just can't help myself. Her face begins a fracture of a puckering that I picture in the full grown lemon-suck it'll grow to in an hour. Even then she won't be able to explain why though.

She's so much more darling than she thinks, when no one's watching. I could never hate Marilyn. She has too many uses.

...

Lunch is more taxing than I want it to be. Boring, boring, boring—nod attentively—blah, blah, blah. Ol' Bernie's not as much of the eurotrash bon vivant his velvet elbow patches advertised.

“Care for a drink?” he interrupts while I'm scanning the menu for price points.

“Vodka soda. With lime.”

Would I like steak tar-tar? There's a wagyu making my tongue salivate, red-blood lust itching my mouth with phantom traces of iron and chew. —Too bulky. I don't know what Bernard will be into. First times you've got to be ready for anything.

Enough of a lapse in the droning and I glance from the menu to the waiter to Bernard. Fuck. Too curt.

“Sparkling for the table, Edward. If you don't mind. And a bottle of Margaux, eighty-nine, ninety-five—whatever's on hand. You know what I like.”

Too late. Sweet, cloying Bernie is clenching his fist in tiny pulses on the menu that's still closed and flat against the table. He took me to one of 'his' places. I should have expected this. Of course he wanted to show me off.

“Thank you, Bernard. That would be lovely,” big eyes, aim for slight embarrassment with a finish of shame. Then turn to the waiter—an opportunity to recover.

“And thank *you*, Eddie.” I save the big smile for him. “And *seriously*—please, take your time. I can see you're busy.” I hand back the menu, wave it jusa little too fruitily so I can use it as cover to steal a quick scan of Bernard's face. Almost there. “I'm here for the company anyway.”

Bernie smiles at Edward. Edward smiles back, pulling the menu out of my hand with a little too much zest.

God damn waiters—secret pockets of kryptonite. Maybe it's some karmic debt but they're always the quickest to clock me.

Oh Eddie— make sure to crinkle the outer corners of the eyes so the face lifts up and shows off my cheekbones—you must *know your place well enough not to fuck this up, right?*

Sneak a quick inquiry at Bernard's face. Start a smile, small, just on the side facing him, an echo of amusement. Make it a little joke, a secret shared between us. Then allow it to soften the whole mouth, the lower half of the face. Turn it into contemplation.

That's it. Nibble nibble at the bait. Keep thinking you're swimming along at your own speed and never fathom at the invisible line leading you. You're perfectly safe while I'm holding it taught.

“So Edward,” I lean in, putting my sweet little face on cupped, soft palm. “we need your guidance, so *dish*—” register the voice midway between a supple purr and a conspiratorial whisper, “--how's the steak tar tar? *Divine?*”

Me and Bernie are back in business.

...

The only thing worse than a closet case is a dusty closet case that literally, actually, obnoxiously *reeks* of mothballs. Try to cover it up with that discontinued-to-the-public *YSL por homme* all you want—and I mean seriously, *do* that, it's only fucking manners trying to cover it up—but the essence of it lingers. All those crevices and folds. Barf-o-rama.

I swear sometimes I'm brushing legit cobwebs off these old man dicks instead of parting their unkempt, snowcapped genital shrubbery. *Majesty*, my waxed butthole, fellas.

...

Bernie's soft-serve is tightening behind my uvula when his fucking *landline* rings and he slithers away—without apology, btdubs, clearing his throat to answer. It's one of those white and gold things where the mouthpiece looks like a half-chewed banana—you know—special ordered from the cold-dead fingers of Barbara Eden when *I Dream of Jeannie* was at its prime. Sick outfit though. And eyelashes.

“Yes, my love. – My darling. I see. I will. Isn't Faith supposed to drop by for tea? Oh. No. Yes, yes. Of course. It will be lovely, I promise—”

God bless dead Steve Jobs for inventing the iPhone. Slip it under the nearest pillow while you're on the side of the bed sliding your pants off and no one can detect that all that laser-focused attention might for a second be divided.

You've never really *appreciated* how beautifully designed these little soul-catchers are, have you? No one does. Even the middle-class *bourgeois* rhetoric lamenting the brain-softening zombification of *the youth*—jealous hags—has leached into the small-talk of the normally-less tedious cultural elite. *Screen time*. Be more banal. I dare you.

You can't appreciate the slick, seamless glide of a scroll—undetectable if you're inventive enough to pre-set the lowest light setting on night mode—unless you've been a thirteen year-old boy jamming seven hundred fucking buttons on a rubber-buttoned fossilized brick of a Nokia trying to get predictive text to say that you're staying late at *soccer practice* and not *robber squat-ing* or whatever when you're trying to give your first hojo to the hot JV captain. Like the step-by-step planning it took to miss your bus through perfectly planned orchestration wasn't challenging to begin with, not to mention getting the timing so precise that he not only offers you a ride but drawing it out so he'll allow himself the curiosity, awkwardly fill the silence with questions about what girls

your into and what you've done—then, on top of all that, indulging him with *just enough* time for him to roll his head back when you unzip his fly and get him hard *before* he passes out from the rank Southern Comfort you stole from his parents' liquor cabinet you both drank on a dare when you got to his house.

Jesus, middle school was a mess. And Jesus *Fuck*—how is Bernie still jabbering. *Wives*. I don't know what's more tragic—the irony or the predictability.

Delicious sheets, though. Like, completely fucking scrumptious. If I could trade my bank account in exchange for a buck per thread of this bedding I would, no numbers needed, no questions asked. That's how good.

I don't pull up any hookup apps or messages because I'm not fucking stupid—typing is distracting, easily detected, and insulting to the dynamics of the exchange. I'm not some unperceptive moron who thinks appraisal is isolated to direct observation. Beauty exists to be regarded. Always. It's an obligation as well as a gift.

Therefore—the scroll. Instagram. Cascading images curated for consumption. I have a modest twenty or thirty thousand followers, personally—I could have more but that kind of proliferation lowers value and I hold aesthetics in too high a regard to compromise my own. I've been sensitive to these things since I was a child. My mother's favorite story from me as a toddler was how one time while she was holding me in one arm and talking to the electric company on the phone about a late payment with the other, she turned her head to give me a kiss and I put my hand on the worry lines scrunching up her forehead and said 'no', then tried to rub them out.

She tells everyone that I used to be her little worrywart—preternatural fussing over her well-being. I remember doing it. I think I was three or four. I wanted her to stop because it made her look ugly.

Most people follow celebrities because their socials allow normals the delusion that they're the same. Tools. Used with their consent minus their awareness. I follow Taylor Swift for her cats, which are perfect. Especially Meredith. Such a heinous cunt. When Taylor Swift ends up murdered inside her own home one day, police are going to find Meredith lying on her chest staring down into her sightless eyeballs, I'm telling you.

An exaggerated exhalation followed by a sigh in the bed behind me. Slide the phone back under the pillow.

“Apologies for the interruption. My wife’s condition makes, well, her memory is not—”

I roll over to Bernie with the goofy affability of a golden retriever and gaze up at him with an expression of the same blank loyalty.

“Shh—don’t ever apologize to me. That’s not what I’m here for.”

Bernie looks down at me with eyes so dark I can see my face reflected back to me in his and reaches out to brush my hair back in soft, sooth strokes.

“And what are you here for, sweet boy?”

...

Sunlight, luxuriant breeze, Park Avenue. The whole afternoon delight detour takes less time than I planned for. But I’m not going back to the gallery with this good an alibi. Happy hour it is.

You know the most annoying thing about being *so* much slicker than the average? Everyone's at work when you want to play. Seven texted invites to play hooky and no bites. How depressingly *dull* this day is turning out to be.

I flirt with the bartender out of boredom—he's straight, at least for now, but that doesn't mean I'm not allowed to amuse myself by making him uncomfortable—when I see myself in the mirror behind the bar. What *crime* against *humanity* did Bernard fucking perpetrate against my hair?? I look *crazy*. No wonder I'm not getting any interest.

“Hey— are there any salons close to here?”

...

“Sorry if I made a scene at the front desk, but this is an emergency.”

“Clearly,” the stylist replies while laying out his roll. A hint of sauce there. I can play this.

“Yeah well the girl should learn to recognize a life and death situation when she sees one.”

“Who? Madison? Oh don't mind her, she's on her period or something. Here, let's take you over to the bowl.”

Getting your hair washed is one step down from good sex—or a few steps up, depending on who the sex is with. The stylist isn't dumb enough to be taking his annoyance for the sudden disruption to his day on my scalp, and as the steam of the warm water mixes in with whatever eponymous Italian fag brand of shampoo he's using I feel myself solidify into being once again. Restored.

“This is *exactly* what I needed,” I sigh. “What a day I'm having.”

“Really? Tell me. What kind of day could it already be at 2pm on a Tuesday?” I think about opening my eyes to see his face and counterpoint from there but there’s shampoo everywhere and honestly I’m feeling too lazy.

“Do you talk to all your new clients like this or only the ones who leave terrible reviews?”

A laugh. “Honey, I charge three hundred a cut—they don’t have a yelp for that.”

Laugh back, only half-forced. *Very* saucy. Adjust approach, and—“Seriously though, I *am* sorry if fitting me in messed with your schedule. I work with a lot of rich assholes too. I know what it’s like.”

“Oh yeah? Is that where you picked it up? Here, sit up—”

His hands are gentle enough as they cup the back of my head and cradle it up and out of the sink. No need for drastic measures yet.

“You work as a personal assistant long enough you learn sometimes a temper tantrum is the difference between you getting fired or someone else. Might as well be the person who doesn’t know how to do their fucking job.”

A chuckle escapes from behind me as a towel wraps around my shoulders from the same direction. “So you’re an assistant?”

“Not anymore.” I open my eyes and he’s in front of me now, not leading me to his chair for the moment, maybe annoyed, maybe amused enough to want to listen. “Eat or be eaten, right?” I leave my face readable in either direction.

“Sad, but true. The way of the world. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

We’re back at his station and he’s combing my hair when an assistant comes by to ask about beverages. “Two coffees, Luz. Thanks. How do you take yours?”

“Black,” I answer, slightly bothered at his presumption but not enough to let it show.

He grabs his scissors and peeks at me in the mirror. Is he flirting? “And don’t worry about the tantrum. I had a cancelation.”

“Lucky me,” I smile, teeth set to dazzling.

“Lucky *us*, you mean. It’s my last spot of the day and we’re getting drinks after.”

...

What fresh and bracing hell is this. Of all the places I could be, *should* be, for some inexplicable reason I’m on a subway with the sun setting at my back like I’m entering the underworld, getting jostled to death on the way to *East Williamsburg*.

The haircut is good—three hundred dollars good, sure like fine, whatever—but since every strand of it hasn’t been balayaged in literal fucking gold leaf I have no confidence that it was worth getting dragged to Brooklyn for.

“Doing okay over there?” Fuck this Blink-Fitness quarter-otter overgrown twink. He’s enjoying this. Too much. Should have paid more attention to the beard. They’re always tethered to some outer-borough idiocy.

“Who me?” Fine, you want to play, I can play. Lean back in the seat and maintain eye contact, smooth back the hair he spent an hour fine-tuning, let the hand linger on the back of the neck and let it rest on the collar bone as I lift the shoulder, squeezing the side of my body facing him shell-tight to appear both dramatic and demure at once. Glimpse up at him through bashful eyelashes. Hold it for a moment longer than I would normally. Then glare.

He explodes, thoroughly amused, braying in donkeyish satisfaction. Called it. Budding leather daddy loves a prissy stunt queen. You want to stay engaged without losing control, huh?

But it could be worse—probably the reason why he offered me the open seat and stayed standing.

“Come on, it’s not that bad, is it?” he smiles down at me. If this is flirting I wonder what he thought was happening when his crotch was swaying into eye level through every turn of the tunnels.

“What are you talking about? I *love* Brooklyn.”

More bestial snorting. “You bitch. Two martinis ago you said you’d never set foot in Brooklyn. That B&Ters should have to register every time they cross the river so you wouldn’t confuse us with your... what did you call it? Cultural elect?”

“Well yeah, I haven’t been here *sober*. Or you know... during the *day*... When I had to *see* it.”

“Rude!”

“Girl, you don’t know the half of it.” I reply to my nails. “I have the entire floor of a Brownstone in the West Village. Can’t remember the last time I was even on a subway.” This is getting boring. I don’t want to burn a bridge this early—unless it’s the one taking us to Williamsburg— but sometimes I have less control over myself than other people.

“Next stop is ours,” he tells me after the doors close forever on Manhattan and we hurtle jankily onward like the train is as grossed out by where we’re going as I am. “But since you’ve been a good boy so far, I don’t see why we need to be sober.”

“A good boy? Honey, you better have enough shit to take down an elephant if you’re going to talk like that.”

“Well,” he says, unzipping his bag. – Yeah, I know. But I can tell it’s vintage distressed leather and though it’s unlabeled probably cost at least a grand. “I’m not sure how many K’s an elephant would need but if you can divide by the customary horse I think I can swing it.”

“Wait, really??” Overeager, yes, but I’ve been a drug-slut since I learned how to swallow. “Can I have?”

He purses his lips and reaches out to stroke my face—like Jesus, seriously?—but when his thumb passes over my lips there’s a hard tablet pushing against them. “We’ll start small, and then maybe…” he nudges his thumb into my mouth, chasing the pill. I open the back of my throat, feeling it drop down, make sure to look up before I suck. “And then we’ll see how much you can take.”

The train squeals and stops and then we’re out in the crowd waterfalling down the platform stairs.

Sweetheart, a voice whispers from the dark center of my brain, *there’s no limit to what I’m going to fucking take.*

...

The bar is dim and predictably Brooklyn-y—all reclaimed wood probably sourced from a defunct bowling alley in *Des Moines* and covered like a Christmas tree with hanging Edison bulbs which I normally despise but the K is making the filaments velvety blurred and succulent. There are actual succulents too, growing sideways out of the wall.

I stare at them for what feels like hours, watching them grow, until Special Agent Manscape laughs and pulls my hand away when I reach out to touch.

“These are some good drugs, you,” I sigh before draping myself over his chest.

“Can I have some more?”

His laugh sounds like whiskey, “You’ve got to pace yourself, you little fiend. My friend isn’t even here yet and you’re halfway to It’s-A-Small-World.”

“Your friend?” I ask, confused. I offer him the garage sale-couture crystal tumbler in front of me. “My drink is empty.”

“We’ll get another round when it’s all three of us. Which should be soon. And yes, the friend I told you about in the salon. You know, the reason we came out to Brooklyn in the first place?”

“Fucking *Brooklyn*,” I moan. I can’t tell if my dick is getting hard or I’m just wishing it would. It’s been hours since Bernard and I didn’t even finish before it was all over.

“Yeah, yeah—the borough of your dreams.”

The booths are covered in velvet that I want to rub my face against so I do.

“Hey! Sit up! She’s walking over—Cari! Over here!”

Ugh—Scissor Sister over here didn’t disclose the fact that this was going to be a fruit fly shit-stir. Fag-haggery. I just—I can’t. It’s low hanging fruit, and I’m supposed to be off the clock. Technically, at least.

Overgrown Otter Daddy gets up to hug someone and I topple back into the banquette. Fuzzy velvet blur. I keep forgetting about the K. Pulpy velvet tongue tied to a plush velvet anchor dropping me down.

I hear voices but I can't get up. Which feels like a perk—not like I was in a rush to meet this person anyway. I swivel my head over enough to glimpse them from under the table. The lights are pulsing, little industrial suns radiating affected light. Saffron glow. I lick my lips and taste a paella I remember eating when I was five. – Huh. That's weird.

All I can see from this angle is K Daddy's back and a swirling mass of white blonde burning behind him. A corona of thrumming energy, a Bauhaus-meets-Botticelli halo streaming up and down and over his shoulders—tendrilled filaments spiraling out in strands, or wires, or snakes. Snaaaaaakkkeeeesss. It's a snaaaaaakke. Fuck I'm high. I rub my face against the seat cushion, remember being sick and imagine someone caring for me, the gentle application of phantom-cool washcloths applied to incandescent brow. Oh my. Memories crash in waves of light—bedside, tableside, classroom:

I am looped in the loops of—

“What are you doing under there, Crazy?? Sit up and say hello to my friend.”

“Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh” I muster from the sedentary depths. Seden-tary. Sed-i-ment-ary. Meant to me. Meant to be.

“Sorry—hold on, I think we've got a lightweight on our hands.”

“Guy! What did you give him!” Her voice is... not what I was expecting. Low, raspy—rich. Vintage velvet. Rub, rub, rub.

Hands scoop under my shoulders and settle me upright. The bar rotates on its axis. Reorientation. Where is north? Is it up?

“Hey there Party Monster, how ya doin'?”

I bet my pupils look like river stones. I hope they do. Focus on a face. Mr Beardy McCliperston.

“Cocktail?” I ask, the word a gummy stuck between molars.

The donkey laughs. He-haw. “One track mind, I see. Okay—how about you say hello to Cari and then I’ll get us some drinks.”

I look at the haloed figure behind him. Fruit fly, fruit fly, how do you do?

I go to speak and the words I stock in my arsenal are shadows dissolving in her solar flare. She’s older than me. And him. Older than I thought. Crone. Maybe thirty-five? Hard to tell with this nimbus surrounding her face. Smile. White teeth. *Nice kitty.*

“Alright then, I’ll introduce you. Since this is the whole reason why we came here. This is my friend Cari, Cari this is Danny Boy.”

“No,” I whisper, oracular—no, oral—umbra leaking out. *Shadow, shadow, where have you gone? High noon at the OK Corral. Nowhere to hide. Bang, bang.*

“No?” the friend asks, amused. Sparks flicker in her eyes that match her hair. *Gay points for matching.*

“Daniel. Not Danny. Or Dan.” My tongue is finally ungluing from the mind-mashed words I’ve been chewing. Mouth full of mastication. Keep smiling. Pull the glue from your teeth. Show off those smile-bones.

“Nice to meet you, Daniel. Guy said you’d be my type. “

Guy? Is this guy’s name actually... Guy?

“—and any friend of Guy’s is a friend of mine.”

“Friends?” I murmur, stoned pupils skipping from her face to his. Braying punctures the tranquilized melasma.

He-haw, he-haw. Careful you don't grow ears to match that laugh, Pinocchio. All the better to listen. Don't you want to be a real boy?

—Why, what have you heard?

“As much a friend as an afternoon of your company and a free haircut in exchange for introducing you to my friend over here. A baby friendship?”

Baby. Was I ever a baby? Or did I always know?

—Get it together, cupcake. You're slipping.

I shake my head, loosening it from the k-hole mist clouding it. My face is stretched tight around the smile like rigor mortis. I must look like the fucking Joker.

Pass it off. Lift a leaden hand and run it over my scalp. Hair soft as spiderwebs. Muss it up. Rude? Good.

“Do you like?”

Guy guffaws—*Guy guffaw, Guy guffaws—say that ten times fast.* Who even says ‘guffaw’ anymore? *Who names a kid ‘Guy’ after 1912?* Get it together, Daniel. Still slipping.

“I love. Lucky duck. Guy refuses to cut my hair anymore—”

“—Because *you* keep bleaching it. I'm not cutting hay. What do you think I am, a farmer?”

“It looks like electricity.” – Fuck. Did I say that out loud?

“*Thank you, Daniel. That's what I've been going for. Probably work bleeding into my perception. But that's the artistic struggle, right?*

Oh right. She's an artist. Leather Daddy Otter Boy mentioned that when I was ignoring him. Dangers of deep scalp massage.

“Cari, why don’t you have a seat while I get us drinks. I think *Daniel* over here might be a little parched.”

The banquette cushion sinks as the fruit fly settles next to me. Her hair is still on fire. It better not fuck up this jacket—it cost Bernie thirty-eight hundred dollars. Kidskin. *Baaaaaa*.

A tinkle of windchimes echoes from Fruity’s mouth and dash against my cheek in sonic waves. What is that? Laughing? Is she laughing at me?

“Did you just go ‘baaa’ at me?”

Fuck—did I say that out loud? Again? “I’m high.” And I really need a drink. *Tinkle, tinkle—little star*. More laughter. Jesus, I’m never doing K again.

“Oh no—did Guy give you one of his atrocious little pills?” I turn to look at her and need to squint against the light. My retinas are sizzling. Scratch that. I’m never going to *Brooklyn*, again.

I nod my head and squeeze my eyes shut. The inside of my skull is a cool, dim cave. Better.

“Here, let me help.”

I open my mouth to protest, eyes still closed, then suddenly—relief. I lay my head down on the table and feel a clear, spring-water river flowing down my spine, long gushes of snow-melt tempering the hot methane bubbles that have been building under my skin. Cold comfort soothing. Release.

I open my eyes, blinking. The lights are still swirling like a dorm-room Van Gogh but the periphery is clearing. Ice bath. Shock to the system.

“How did you do that?” I swivel to look at her and hear a normal laugh, human noise. My face loosens and the smile melts away, astonished. I can feel the mask floating an inch above it, slow descent into re-settling.

“An old trick my abuela taught me when I was young.”

“Fifty years ago?” Snap, crackle, *pop*.

Throttle it back, Sweet Pea. The system’s recalibrating trying to get back online.

Laughter: more human noise. At least she’s not a bell anymore. Or a donkey, like my baby friend. Does that make her Titania?

“It certainly feels that long, sometimes. But at least my life blesses me with mementos. Even if it tends to leave them on my face.”

Thud of glass on wood. Baby’s back, bearing libations. Gay-nemede overgrown.

“Solace for the sapless. Cheers to thirstiness—in all its forms—and to our ongoing struggle in keeping that bitch in her kennel.”

I kiss him, sloppily. Suddenly. He’s surprised. A second of hesitation then his mouth softens, my dry tongue invading his perimeter. Oasis for a parched exile. His beard scratches the itch the velvet started.

I open my eyes just before it’s over. An invisible line pulls from my stomach searching for soft matter to sink into. A target to cling to—to restrain. To reel in.

His eyelids rise slowly as I pull away, pupils wide and affirming. Soft, deep—unaware. Good.

Hope that cardboard-faced cunt caught it. Do you ever notice how sometimes you don’t want something until you know someone else does?

“That was... unexpected.” Guy murmurs. Then smiles.

Even better, I reply in my head. Now don't laugh and fucking ruin it. "Expect the unexpected when you're with me, baby boy."

Smile back—rein it in—not too crazy. No one wants to fuck a comic book villain unless he starts as the hero first.

Lean back and slow exhale. The room is staring to swirl. Turn to the phosphorescent Medusa and let the smile simmer to a coquettish smirk.

"Daniel... are you okay? You're covered in sweat." A black tunnel grows around her face as I try to focus on it. The bubbles are back, beginning to boil.

I force a numb arm to reach out and grab the drink. The ice clinks against the glass as I raise it to my lips, palm now clammy, wrist shaking.

A hand reaches out from the darkness that is shrinking everything else to a pinpoint. I go to shrug it off and spill my drink instead. Fuck. Force it to my lips and throw my head back, draining it. Acid burn descending.

Come on, wake the fuck up.

"I'm absolutely..." I start to say, or try to, but even to my ears it sounds like mangled slush.

The hand cups my face and I'm back in my childhood bedroom, shivering with fever pain.

"... perfect."

I open my mouth to laugh, playing it off, and vomit shoots out of me like a rogue canon.

...

Light hammers my skull and breaks it open. Metallic clanking echoes in the newly formed cracks, removed then near, irregular clatter, thrusts in even though I'm squeezing my eyes shut against it, breaking the soft yolk apart.

Something fucking *reeks*. I try to calm the racket, lifting cement arms to press my hands against my ears. Exposed armpits. Correction: *I* fucking reek.

First open one eye. Then the other. An exposed brick wall full of windows, bare and pitiless. Blink. Open. Blink again. Daylight. Lots of it. I squirm to turn away from it and fall off the couch where I've been deposited. – Rude.

I have no idea where I am.

The banging continues, nowhere in sight.

Pat the pockets of my jacket, which was draped over me like a blanket, ascertain the whereabouts of phone and wallet. Check, check. Well, at least I haven't been robbed. Pull the phone out to confirm the time. Dead.

Of fucking *course* it is. Never any help when I *actually* need it.

Grab the side of the couch and haul myself up, flop against the cushions like a dying fish. Struggle to sit up, to locate some kind of equilibrium. To locate *myself*. My face puckers up like a lemon, squinting against the obscene, rotted gash-monster sun. Lean back, assess, breathe. Now devise a plan to eviscerate and murder whoever's making all that fucking *noise*. I try to stand up and almost black out, breath choked in a series of dry-heaves. Okay. Maybe that can wait.

The clanging stops and I pry an eye open to see the dim outline of someone silhouetted against the light. Short enough. Probably not dangerous.

“Here, I brought you some water.”

Grab at the empty air until a glass is placed in my hand, soft fingers cupping mine until they're sure I won't drop it. The noise-maker guides my arm back to my face, releasing only when the rim is against my lips. I drink in gulps until the glass is empty.

I keep my eyes closed. Not the best manners but that's what you get for not splurging on blinds.

"Thank you. Whoever you are."

"How much of last night do you remember?" The voice is inquisitive, balanced—unjudgmental. Which, like, finally. I don't have enough in the reserves to play the usual charm card right now.

"Too much. Not enough." I start coughing hard enough to unearth some digestive muck and spit it out into the glass, then stay slumped over after setting it on the floor.

"Sounds about right. Here— try to sit up."

I let the figure arrange me more comfortably on the couch. The blood drains from my head, leaving stabbing cranial pain as it squeegees down. I moan— a dejected, crippled wretch.

There's abrupt pressure on the back of my neck, cool fingers digging in. A sensation of cold, calming currents traveling down as they descend down my spine. — Last night.

"You're—"

"Cari. Yes, we met last night. Guy's friend. He wanted to take you back to his place but mine is closer. And he wasn't in much better condition himself. You're heavy."

And you're old. Even Stevens?

“Are you okay on your own for a few minutes? I have something for you that might help.”

“Whatever floats your boat, fruit f—I’m sorry. – Cari. Yes. I’m good. That helped. Thanks.”

“Sit tight.”

“Tight like a tiger.” The cushions lift when she gets up, and I picture myself as a toy boat bobbing in a bathtub against child-size swells. I’m suddenly grateful there isn’t anything left in me to puke.

Cari, apparently, has other ideas. She nudges a bowl into my limp hands and I’m able to squint an eye open long enough to see the steam rising up from what looks like a tomato-based reduction of what I sprayed her with at the bar.

“No. Absolutely not—”

“Come on! Seriously—trust me!”

I open my mouth to shout whatever banal insults are within easy reach of my poor, drug-addled brain and it’s just enough time for her to shovel whatever the fuck she made inside it. *Goddam, cock-sucking, syphilitic—*

Swallow. Jesus Fucking Christ that’s delicious. The tight convulsion my insides had warped around unclenched itself. Then evaporated.

Holy shit.

Open to see her crouched in front of me, grinning. *What in the Salem Witch Trial fuckery?*

“It’s menudo. My abuela’s recipe. Looks like dog mess and doesn’t smell much better, but it’s the best hangover cure I’ve ever encountered. Guy swears by it.”

Guy. I've got to see that queen again if only to strangle him for whatever that dark-net, Chinese pharmaceutical nightmare he gave me.

"Where is Guy?"

"Work. It's a Wednesday. I tried to wake you up earlier but I think you actually tried to strangle me in your sleep."

"Fuck my life. Do you have a phone charger?"

...

I'm able to neutralize Marilyn with some bullshit about working on Bernard for a buy-out for the upcoming gallery exhibition, which is lucky since he hasn't been reachable since yesterday. I finish the bowl of indeterminate animal part soup and observe the supernatural fruit fly wash her dishes from a safe distance.

"So you're an artist?" I ask when I'm finally curious enough to break the silence. Honestly though, there's something so soothing about watching someone else do housework. It could be its own spectator sport.

"More or less. If only for myself. At the moment." She shuts off the faucet and turns to face me, leaning against the kitchen doorway.

"Sorry that my insides wanted to introduce themselves before we could talk" *Not really. Bet you're a hack. Or worse, a boring hack.* "What did Guy tell you when he asked you to come meet us?"

"That you run a gallery in SoHo and were scouting for new talent."

Likely. Sounds like me when I want something.

"—And that he gave you a free haircut if you promised to meet me."

Well. I'm *truly* fucked now. An active hostage-audience with nowhere to run off to since you just heard me spend twenty minutes coming up with a grab-bag of excuses for why I couldn't come into work today.

"It looks good, by the way."

"What does?"

"Your hair."

"Still?" I run my hands through it and look around for a mirror. Fucking warehouse lofts. I can't even figure out where the bathroom is.

"*Excellente*. I cleaned you up while he combed it before leaving. You kept moaning for him to fix it. Most of the vomit ended up on me, anyways."

At least there's that silver lining.

"You were definitely the sharpest person at the bar last night, sick or no sick. Here, take these and finish the water."

I dry-swallow the pills she hands me and look around her place, letting a minute pass before drinking so she can get the unspoken message that I'm returning to myself enough to not blindly follow order. It's sparse, even spartan. Cardboard boxes are stacked against the wall next to the windows.

"Did you just move here?"

"A little under a year ago. I'm a bit of a gypsy. Can't stay anywhere too long. How are you feeling, better?"

"Much." I continue to snoop under lowered eyelashes, sipping water demurely as I buy time. Craft a strategy for how to approach the developing situation. Is there a way I can get out of this *without* taking a big verbal dump in a paper bag for her to huff?

“I can’t believe you run an art gallery and you’ve never been to Brooklyn.”

“Well, it’s not *my* gallery. It’s Marilyn’s—you know the woman I was talking to on the phone?” She nods. “I haven’t worked there that long but she’s been giving me enough space to experiment with it. Attempt reinvigoration. Which it needs because that woman’s taste is totally fucking *tragic*.”

“Oh really? Like what? I love industry gossip.”

Jackpot. Found my angle.

“Like mixed media newspaper collage and decorative blood-spatter canvas installation from used heroin needles and political statement graffiti. You know, glorified found art from unimaginative ghetto-aspiring bourgeois posers.”

She grimaces and pulls a sympathetically disgusted face before sitting down on the floor cross-legged across from me.

“Ugh. I’m so tired of that bullshit. It’s all the galleries want right now, and it’s just so—”

“Boring?”

A gust of wind-chime laughter knocks an impression loose from last night. I pause, and the moment stretches out, uprooting the hiss of ghost-rattle from an electric snake in its expansion. A sense-memory I know I’m only imagining feeling – of constriction. Smooth-scaled muscles buzzing as it tightens around my throat. How long is a k-hole supposed to last? *Collect yourself, kid—she’s talking.*

“I was going to say predictable, but yes, boring too. The ultimate sin art can commit.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

I've perked up enough that I realize that I'm thirsty again, but not for water.

"Do you have anything to drink? You know, hair of the dog?"

...

Cari buys two rounds of bloodies after I pretend to have left my card at one of the places Guy and I went to pre-death march to Brooklyn before telling me I don't have to bother coming with her to her studio, effectively letting me off the hook. Which is tempting. And what I wanted. But I'm feeling generous and contrarian enough that I assure her I *want* to see her work, *for my own benefit, not to mention the gallery's*, and the thrill of power the promise brings is enough to sustain my decision.

Besides, I'm too lazy to take three different trains home and if I stay late enough I can probably divert us to a happy hour and text Guy to join after work. Then we can finish what we started. And I'll massage him to take a cab into work in the morning and act like I'm along for the ride well enough to get dropped off in front of the gallery doors. Maybe breakfast if we pass a bakery on the way.

It's important to plan ahead. At least three steps, if you want to be as good as I am.

...

The fashion in this dumpster-borough is a crime against humanity. We've passed at least four pairs of overalls—one of them *pas-tel pink*, like a pedophile's epitome of an ideal *vagina*—and enough septum rings to furnish all the water buffalo in south east Asia for years of eco-tourist voyeurs to come.

Don't even get me started on the tattoos. Which are *permanent*. Someone better than me should clue these girls into that fact. The only true thing my mother ever told me was only idiots put bumper stickers on cars and think that they can still pass as expensive.

Women gross me out. Frequently. And not because I'm gay. They have it so fucking easy—I don't care how butt-ass hideous you are, there will *always* be a straight man horny or drunk enough to try to stick it in—and they don't even use what they have. Definitely not well enough to deserve it. You don't think I feel, *viscerally*, the irony that my most liked insta-videos are the ones where I throw on a wig and dance around to Arianna Grande? That that doesn't *hurt*?

I have to work twice as hard for half the attention. And all the glorified holes need to do is skip a meal or two. Wear a pair of heels instead of those silver Birkenstocks or whatever garish monstrosity that girl was just wearing. And she could *actually* be pretty! I mean, here I am, following in Cari's wake, floating along in the blissful hum of a happy hour haze and I almost stop to puke *again* because she's holding the door to her studio building open for a white girl with fucking *dreads*.

—*Ginger* dreads. Like reading between the lines and gagging at the thought of her firecrotch wasn't sufficient trespass on my visual sensitivities.

“I'm serious, we don't have to do this now. If you're worried about Guy getting mad at you for not coming we can make something up and do it later.” Her laugh echoes up the old metal stairs of the factory-turned-studio space, rounder and more resonant, like a church bell. “Or you know—never.”

Now she tells me. After we've left the bar.

“Hush!” I cut her off, and it sounds more annoyed than I intended. Gotta be careful—the emotions are closer to the surface in the afterglow of the drugs. Parry it into a different direction. Make it work for me, not against. “I *want* to see your work”—but keep it believable—“otherwise what the hell did I come all the way to Brooklyn for.”

“Oh stop! It’s lovely here. Give it a week and you’ll probably be trying to move in.”

“Doubtful. Practically have an entire floor to myself in Manhattan”

“You know what they say about stranger things, *mi querido*.”

Um, what?

She’s fumbling with her keys outside of the studio door. Nerves. – Worthless. To her anyway. Insightful for me. I could come clean and tell her that even if I loved her shit the odds of me actually being able to *help* her are as negligible as anything inside being worth the effort. But that wouldn’t be in my interest. And probably not hers in the long run either. Hope is a tricky little bitch for the creatively inclined.

“Okay. So I told you, as of late I’ve been working with a lot of mixed media...”

“—if this is some Dash Snow fuckery, I’m going to start ripping things off the walls until it looks like a piñata massacre, I don’t care how much puke I sprayed on you last night—”

“—Oh please. *Por favor*. I could never.”

She fits the key in the lock and is about to turn it when she turns around and smiles. It could be residual blowback from the K, or from the Adderall I snuck in the bathroom or even that spicy-ass menudo that’s been knocking at the backdoor of my asshole since we climbed those stairs—seriously, I hope this place has a bathroom with a

mother-fucking *lock*—but when her eyes meet mine it looks like a live current is running through her. No joke, she could be buzzing, like she’s transforming into a Tesla coil shooting sparks— *zap, zap, zap*.

“Close your eyes.”

“Fuck off, I’m not doing that.”

“Daniel. *Close your eyes.*”

I normally wouldn’t listen but I guess the whole Bride of Frankenstein thing exerts a mysterious influence so I do—or mostly. Cari waves a hand in front of my face then flips me off before opening the door to her studio. Was that a nervous sigh? All I can see are dim shapes in the sliver of one eye only just fractured. She grabs my hands and leads me through—I stumble performatively, giggling, and she swats at my chin. Jesus she’s short. How have I just noticed this now?

“Okay, keep them closed, alright?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” I respond. She’s backing away from me, cagey and wary at once.

“Oh my *God*—don’t be boring. I’m not looking at you.”

“Then how did you know I was watching?”

Well. Shit.

She goes to close the door behind me and in the brief moment I open my eyes all I can see is a fucking *mess*. There’s pipes and PVC and metal scraps all over the floor. What in the Silence of the Lambs grotesquerie have I been lured into?

“So you don’t cheat,” Cari purrs behind me and then the world goes dark. Yo. Did this bitch just put a fucking *bag* on my head?? I reach to rip it off but she grabs both my

hands and escorts me clumsily through the wreckage. People *should* need a passport to come here—clearly I’ll be testing the limits of my last tetanus vaccination.

“Don’t move.” She lets go and I reach for the bag but apparently that was too predictable a move because I hear her again somewhere off to the right. “Daniel. Please. I’m asking a favor. Remember the vomit.”

Nice try Sweet Cheeks—guilt is the least effective form of manipulation. On me at least. But she sounded wounded enough and she did buy me a few drinks and will likely buy me more after if I comply. So I sigh heavily and stand still. This seems to satisfy her, initiating some clanging in the corner.

“If you keep that up you’re going to have to do that hoo-doo santeria magic finger fuck you did this morning to deal with my migraine.” I shout over the clamor. “And deal with whatever extra vomit might follow.”

“Bitch, you could have gotten a job at the Fire Department with how much *vomitoma* you sprayed at me last night. If you hadn’t passed out face first in it right after I would have thought it was on purpose.”

Well—two things can be true, I guess. There’s an unexpected whir of what sounds like a saw or a drill to the left that startles me. You might be shocked at the revelation, but surprises are *not* my favorite. I start tapping my boot against the unfinished floor to convert the unease to annoyance.

“Any time now, Ms. Koons.”

“Oof—you wound me.”

“You’re starting to deserve it.”

“Almost done.” Her words are close and immediate at my ear. The fuck? Does voodoo come with a side skill of ninja stealth? “I just need to get the lights.”

The dark interior of the bag plummets to pitch-black claustrophobia. Sweat skitters out of my armpits and gums up my palms and suddenly I’m one hundred percent fucking d-o-n-e, *done* with all this David Blaine sideshow foolery. I rip the bag off, throwing it on the ground, spinning around to face her, finally and truly furious, but the whole room is concealed in impenetrable opaque nothingness.

“Cari! WHAT in the ACTUAL FUCK?!” I shout, blindly, hoping she snuck back close enough that’s right in her stupid craggy lettuce cup face. I hold a handout in front of me—nothing. Shit, shit, *shit*.

I turn to where I think the door is and step forward, determined to either beat this bitch to death or get the *hell* out of Brooklyn and never ever return and then of course, trip on some detestable hipster garbage pile and go sprawling, eating shit on the floor.

“THIS is not FUCKING OKAY, OKAY?! YOU CUNT!” The roar I was hoping for emerges more as a howl. I’m getting pulled back into memories of being locked in the supply closet after PE, jocks who I’ll later blow and blackmail with nudes sent anonymously to their girlfriends giggling and high-fiving outside.

Then—true sightlessness. It’s instantly, unbearably bright and my eyes this morning wish they could squeeze shut this tight. I feel Cari’s hand on my shoulder, then her crouching down next to me, helping me to my feet. I’m unsteady enough that I let her. Cock-gargling fag hag. I wish I could see well enough to wrap my hands around her withered throat and strangle her.

She reaches down to hold my hand and I swat it away. Cunt. This stopped being cute the second we stepped over the threshold of this broke-ass Saw set hipster hellscape. She better start praying to whatever ESL gods her grandma sacrifices chickens to if she thinks I'm letting her get out of this alive.

“Oh, Daniel. Please. Everything is okay. I'm right here.”

Bang the gong, Johnny. As if this freckle-chested rabbit turd doesn't know that's exactly what's wrong with this scenario.

I feel soft, dry fingers cover my closed eyelids, and the glare softens to a warm, amber flush. Fine. At least the flop sweat's tapered off. And I didn't cry. Which would have been as unforgiveable as it is disgusting.

Have you ever noticed how much crying fucking *hurts*? Like I can pinch out a dramatic, glistening tear when the need arises—even a picturesque run of them if I'm really feeling the moment—but actually *crying* crying, like because you're literally sad or scared or distraught? That shit can leave your face looking like a punching bag covered in burn blisters. Give me a hangover and supplementally repressed emotion any day of the mother fucking *week*.

My breathing calms and Cari removes her hands, reaching for both of mine now. The glare isn't as aggressive as it was before so I let her. This has been embarrassing enough that I want to recover from it, at least as far as she's concerned. Later I can come up with as many creative ways for destroying her art career from a protected, Manhattan-based radius, as I like.

“Alright? Okay... when I tell you to open, you open. Yes?”

Get fucked you Central American Raisin.

She lets go and backs away, audible steps removing herself from arm's reach. I immediately open my eyes because I've been done listening to her directions. And what I see...

What I see...

There are no words for.

— None.

“Cari. These are...”

“What? Predictable? Boring?”

“... Beautiful. They're really fucking beautiful.”

Only morons and sycophantic try-hard critics attempt to describe real art with words. But if you have a *truly* artistic eye, and mind, and heart—like I do—you recognize the few limits that shouldn't be broken—or bent.

Whatever hidden ability the K hole unlocked in my subconscious last night instantly makes perfect and perfectly resounding sense. It's like the third eye of my mind could see the secret magic inside of her, revealing the electricity of her true form. And for the first time in my life in the art world—in the whole world—I know that I am experiencing, no *discovering*, something uniquely, indisputably great.

The room is an unfinished installation of different light forms—all of its known media iterations—forming a complete vision of an indescribable, universal truth. There's neon and LED and screens and static and flashing bulbs, all channeling the same incendiary light, manifesting into singular imagistic depictions that soften and render and fuse into others. Into new visions that seem to morph and evaporate the moment they're recognized.

Honestly, I damn near shit my pants. And not because of the morning's menu.

"Really? Daniel—I'm serious here—don't pull my dick. I know it's not finished yet and honestly I didn't think it's ready to be seen yet—"

"I'm not lying."

The statement is flat and intrusive. It feels meager and mean— unmasked, pallid, insufficient truth—tinged with hostility, writhing like an exposed worm in the presence of all these glowing lights.

I could do this, I tell myself. And for the first time looking at a living artist's work I know it's a lie. This, all of this, is something I can't touch. And I feel a seed of hate sprouting in my stomach knowing I can't touch it. Knowing that that makes it even more beautiful.

Jesus fucking Christ, Daniel. Cowboy the eff up. This isn't the Uffizi—you're not gazing on the goddam face of God.

I step forward, hesitate, turn so my back is to Cari. I've got to examine this closely, scrutinize every detail. She can't know how good it is. I can't let her have that. Not yet. And not all of it.

Everything can be made better. That's the flaw and insanity of art. Mozart is so mathematically perfect it makes freaking fetuses more intelligent while they're still in the mother-fucking womb? Sure Jan—but it's also boring as shit once you've heard even a second-rate DJ drop a beat in the club. There's *always* a soft spot to exploit, something human to press into, a fleshy seam you can poke and prod enough that eventually will encourage it to bleed.

“It’s definitely... different.” I say, and let the sentence hang in the air. Let her take what she wants from it. Better yet, what she fears.

The crazy thing is that this should be an epileptic clusterfuck—optically disorienting at the very least. But—and I don’t know how this aging rotten vagina-drooling Nobody could have achieved it—but the whole installation is transforming the visual effect of light into something tangible, concrete—like water. Like if I reached a hand out I could scoop some up and drink it.

Focus. Look at the individual parts. Smell out the weakness.

*That’s your gift, I remind myself. What makes **you** unique. There are things inside you that no one else has too.*

And that’s when I find it. Good—an opening. At least one. My forehead becomes newly dewed in relief.

“Well...” Again, let the word linger, dangle. A dim lure slinking in the dark, oily reaches of the deep. Fancy a bite, Cari dear?

“Oh no. Well, what?”

I cross my arms and cock my head to the side, keep my back to her. I rearrange my expression to a set semi-pout of considered contemplation. I can feel her apprehension coalescing behind me, a shadow of refuge in this spectacular, balefully brilliant room.

Raise the right arm up to cup the chin. Peer in neutral concentration. Her boots scuff the cement floor as she approaches. The angler opens its jaws in the deep.

“I’m trying to phrase this as carefully as I can” – *yeah, no shit Sherlock, but not in the way you hope she’ll perceive it* – “because really, this is actually pretty decent for an amateur.”

I swivel my head sharply, half-vamp half-vampire, to peer down at her when I feel her draw alongside. I sense more than see her settle into herself, planting herself in the space next to me, bracing herself for the criticism to follow. I’m glad I noticed how short she was when this started.

“Sorry, gallery snobbery dies hard. Not amateur, per se—” I turn from her back to the work, returning my face to a soft, unfurled hand. Not a fist. Never threaten with a fist. It’s vanilla. And trite. And stupid—once you’ve successfully mastered the long game.

“More novice, I guess. Or maybe... hovering in the murky space between outsider art and the less classically-trained.”

Did I mention that I minored in art history? Or I almost did. Few credits shy. But it’s come in useful for putting the over-confident in their respective places when the need arises.

“Here, do you see?”

“See what? Which part?”

Ooo she’s nervous now. I can practically taste her body odor, the anxiety is so stringent. Good. Time for you to sweat now, Hunty. Payback’s a bitch. And so am I.

“Here, the part where the snake swallows the butterfly and then turns into a cocoon? Then grows back into the snake?”

“Ugh. I know. I’ve been struggling with that for months.”

“It’s a little...”

“Derivative?”

I laugh. Honestly, artists are *too* fucking easy. You kick one leg out from under them and the whole towering genius thing topples right down.

—*Still*. Still. Take a moment, Daniel. *Think*.

Would it be absolutely *thrilling* to hold this tender-budded prodigy and crush it to satin-petalled mush in my hand? Yes. Of course it would. She would deserve it too. But that would be one opportunity seized upon and then squandered forever after. And *that's* been a lesson I've learned the hard way. Hearts don't bleed once they turn to stone. And rocks don't sustain shit, not in the lean times, in the cold loneliness that follows after you've had your fill. What other uses might present themselves if I loosen my hold on the jugular *now*, what future avenues could I explore if I keep this little beating heart close enough to me so that I can sink my teeth into it when I need to, monitoring its sweet, blindly loyal ticking.

How much more can I siphon from it until the very last twitches, when I can drain it fully dry?

“No, not derivate, it's more... I don't know. Neat? I mean, the whole thing is iconic, but this feels more iconographic. You know? Like the parts of this that are good are good because they speak their own language, but this is too legible. Like anyone can read it. So it's less special.”

Hold. Breathe. Don't even think about looking at her until she responds.

The neon and LCD display burns into my retinas until I see a snake rearing up open-mouthed every time I blink.

“I... Ay. Fuck. You're right. Fuck, fuck, fuck. *Mierda*. You're so right.”

I stifle the fizz of evanescent triumph carbonating my entire being. I feel like a New Year's Eve champagne bottle uncaged, desperately close, fated to pop.

Easy, easy—almost there.

“Oh Cari. Please don't be too harsh on yourself. I'm sure almost no one else would see that.”

I reach out and wrap an arm around her, refreshed in baptism and the newly created role of her confidant. And savior.

“Let's go get a drink and talk more about this while we wait for Guy to get off work, okay?”

She nods, once, barely perceptible. She can't even feel my teeth at her throat.

“But, I'm glad you're open to my insight. You're smart. Because I'm never *not* right.”

...

Two bottles of some Provencal rosé that Cari claims to know the vintner of brings us out into the street to a taco truck two blocks down. I house an enchilada that scalds the roof of my mouth when Cari mentions something about her shock at how much I eat for how *flaca* I am, and I smile through the mouthful of magma hot cheese-goo.

Women are unlucky in some ways, really. I can't tell you how many old friendships have soured over bowls of emptied guacamole and cheese fries when even the model-thin to the porkish have lamented over the force of my young, masculine metabolism.

“It's genetic,” I tell her, because I don't need to explain that some things really are easier when you have a dick.

Imagine getting fat because you're making a baby?? Could there be anything more invasive? More vulgar?

We're both pretty drunk but Guy hasn't shown yet, so I persuade her to go back to the bar and order another bottle so we'll have something open when he arrives. I've been in Brooklyn for over twenty-four hours at this point and even I am partially gagged at the thought.

...

"I've got it!" Cari yells over the din of the bar. The third bottle's almost done and Guy only texted he was on his way ten minutes ago. "Your face! I've been trying to think who your expressions remind me of, and I just realized!"

"What?" I reply, though I'm pretty sure I heard her right—there's just the slosh of pink sour wine inside me glutting my ears.

"Your face! Not your real face, the bones and skin and all that, but the way you make it look. Different all the time, but still you know, always a bit detached?"

My asshole puckers up to a pinhead that a battalion of fallen angels could cha-cha slide up through my colon on.

Seriously? Now? I've been so confident all day. Could it all have been a ruse?

"Who?" I shout in her ear, a little too loud—if I accidentally rupture her eardrum maybe it can buy some extra time.

"Cindy Sherman! Do you know her?"

A flood of endorphins joins the rosé, soothing the ripple of anxiety that Cari created when she dropped her little nugget of insight into our previously casual drunken conversation. Safe, still. Safe and secret.

“Are you kidding me? I fucking *love* Cindy Sherman!” I yell back, smiling in varied reflex.

“You do? Truly? Or are you pulling my big fat *cock*, hmm?”

Cari sure loves some toilet humor when she’s wasted. Her accent, usually undetectable in all but a few words, is getting thicker too.

Thick like my big, fat cock.

– Evidently I’m getting plastered enough to love some toilet jokes too.

We giggle like suburban housewives drowning in boxed Target-brand wine while our husbands play golf on a Sunday morning, both forbidden and routine at the same time. I burp loudly and laugh even harder. Cari looks scandalized, clutching fake pearls in shock at my gaucheness. Then she forces a burp too, even louder, and we both disintegrate into fits of hysteria. I literally start peeing my pants sufficiently that I have to jump up and bolt to the men’s room.

Here’s another great thing about having a penis. Every time you take a piss you have to hold it in your hands, and if you have a nice one like I do, it allows an almost compulsory need to admire it. Behold its sheer weight—its presence, its power. Also, you can use it to spray your name against the urinal wall in script if you remember second-grade cursive classes well enough.

I totter out of the bathroom in time to see Cari reeling haphazardly through the front door of the bar.

“Hey! Cari! Don’t leave me here! I’m not paying this bill!” I shout. The table closest to me turns to look with stuck-up yeast-infected pussies. I stick my tongue out at them, moaning orgasmically and roll my eyes back to the whites to top it off. Which is

effective but is awkward enough after that I decide to join Cari outside rather than return to the table by myself. A good actor knows when to exit the scene.

My girl is leaning dangerously close to a bearded man-bun provocateur, with enough studded spikes on his jacket to look like a gay Nazi or one very gay Doberman Pinscher.

“Woof!” I holler at them, tickled pinker than the wine, and descend into giggles again. When I come up for air I see that she’s bumming a cigarette off him, which he lights uneasily, seemingly less eager to engage with his fading sexual prospect now that an escort has appeared, rabid and territorial.

“I didn’t know you smoked.” The words tumble out in the brisk night air. I find myself both curious and uninvested—which is curious in and of itself.

“I quit but permit a few lapses in judgement if the mood strikes,” she replies. She inhales deep and holds it, blows the smoke out through her nose in two long dragon streams when she exhales.

“Can I have a drag?”

“*Por supuesto, mi amor*” She offers it to me with her arm outstretched, still holding it between her fingers. I take a shallow pull and let the ashen death taste of it fill my mouth. She slides her other arm into my jacket, snuggling her face into my chest.

“This is nice,” I say and as I say it surprise myself, realizing that it’s true.

“Now this is such a sweet picture I feel bad interrupting it.” Cari looks up, peeling herself off to jump up and down on the sidewalk.

“Guy! We were worried! I was starting to think you’d never come!”

Guy's standing on the corner—and I don't know how to put it any lighter but he's looking like absolute shit. Dark circles, grody beard, the whole nine. My initial plans for a cheeky suck-and-fuck sleepover evaporate like a phantom boner. Honestly, it's hard not to think of my dick shriveling up inside of me just looking at him.

Cari jumps up to hug him and he picks her up, twirling her around. Jesus, what the fuck is this? West Side Story for haggard drunks and leftovers?

When he puts her down she reaches up to stroke his face, a tenderness in the gesture that puts my teeth on edge. What is—could this be—I can't possibly be... *jealous*, could I?

“*Bueno, nenito*. Let's go back inside. The night is young and you're buying the next bottle for your tardiness. There's no time to waste—you're far behind.”

...

I wake up to the smell of coffee and a searing tightness at the base of my neck. Guy is standing over me, showered and toweled, mug in hand. The morning from the wall of windows is overcast and discolored, like a bruise. Cari's place. Again. Wonder how that happened.

“I'm leaving for work in about twenty—want a ride into the city?”

“Ugh.” I grumble, smacking furry tongue against acrid mouthroof. “I think I stink. Could you wait for me to shower?”

“Sure, but we gotta hustle. I've got a client coming in at 9.”

I labor to sit up before I notice that Cari is tangled on top of me, head to foot.

“Yeah, we all ended up passing out on the couch. Not going to lie, it's happened before, but it's more, uh... precarious with a third person.”

“That explains my neck,” I reply, rubbing the knot that hardened against the old wood arm. “Is that coffee for me?”

“It could be.”

Fuck me, Guy. Not now. I’m not into the dirty dick pig fetish thing. And you’re not rich enough for me to pretend.

I lift Cari’s legs off me and stand, let the full weight drop on the cushion behind me in solid thuds. She snores loudly in response.

“Um, *rude?*” he protests and arches an eyebrow. He lifts the mug to take a sip.

“So is serving yourself coffee before offering it to guests,” I reply and take it.

I can cock an eyebrow too, you hairy fairy. So I do and take a deep, exaggerated gulp. *Except mine’s higher.*

I slap his ass on the way to the bathroom and his *hee-haws* follow in volleys echoing down the hall.

...

The water is lukewarm from Guy getting to it before me, but the pressure is strong enough that I outlast the promised ten minutes. When I get out the towel on the hook is already damp. Fucking *gross*. No thank you.

Sounds of washing up from the kitchen. Captain Cuntnugget’s likely fuming at the extra time I took in the bathroom and is considering leaving without me. Which, let’s be honest, I’m not going to let happen.

I walk in naked and he’s nonverbal already, furiously sponging out a new mug that is definitely clean by now. I open the fridge, find leftovers of Cari’s hangover concoction, and open the top before tossing the used lid into the sink in front of him. If

that didn't get his attention enough of the red oily mess spattered the countertop next to him to do it. I keep the door open, standing in front of the light inside, but sideways enough that the cold air doesn't do much damage to my bare dick.

“I mean, *really* Daniel? Are you fucking *serious* right now?”

He hasn't turned around yet so I take a theatrical swallow straight from the container, making sure to audibly swallow.

The look on his face when he spins around is delightful enough to counter the rubbery animal guts I've just ingested. It's definitely not as good cold.

“Sorry I took so long, but I'm in a bit of a—what's the word—pickle?”

“What, uh, what's wrong.”

How thirsty you are would be my first guess. But I wouldn't be surprised to discover enough for a list.

His eyes are so focused on my dick it could be made of flypaper.

A long one.

“I don't have a change of clothes and can't go in to work wearing the same thing. You know, since I didn't go in yesterday. I was going to ask if you wouldn't mind stopping at my place—it's on the way—but I know you're already worried about being late.” I swallow another mouthful for kicks and smile reflexively to stop myself from bringing it all back up. Fucking *rank*.

“Right... um... okay, sorry. Yeah, I should have thought of that. Sorry. Uh—”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah—just uh, I don't like to keep clients waiting. You know how annoying those rich bitches can be.”

“Oh my God—don’t even get me *started*,” I reply, stroking my thigh with my other hand, letting it drift close enough to where I’m hanging to seed the suggestion in his mind.

“So... clothes?” Cock the eyebrow again. *Tit for tat, mother fucker.*

“What? Oh. Right. Clothes. Um—I have some here, actually. They might fit. I stay over enough that Caridad gave me a drawer.”

“Caridad?” I ask, shutting the refrigerator door to signal the desired change of scenery.

“Yeah—that’s Cari’s full name. Let’s get you something—her bedroom’s in the loft space upstairs.” He wrenches his eyes from their newfound center of gravity and extends his hand to indicate the general direction. A ladder-staircase I’ve never noticed—not that weird since I’ve spent less than an hour sober in this place—is bolted at a steep incline against the wall adjoining the kitchen.

Oh no you don’t. First tastes free, but if you want to get your face that close to my ass you’re going to have to pay for it, Beardy Boy. Literally.

I bat my eyelashes, a hair hyperbolically. “Do you mind showing me? I don’t know the way.”

“Sure, yeah—of course.” He leaves his mug on the dish rack to dry, coughs a few time—*of course, that will totally deflate your semi*—and goes to lead me, eyeline comically level.

“Aren’t you cold?” he asks over his shoulder as he begins to climb. Oh, that’s too sweet—is he trying to make me feel awkward? Embarrassed? *Shamed?*

“Do I look cold, Guy?” I ask in response, though I keep my tone light and flirty.

“Not in the slightest.”

When we reach her room he starts pulling out some loose, cotton crap. Clearly PJ’s. Oh dear. I peek over his shoulder and see right away that Cari’s closet has much more promising finds.

I grab his shoulder from behind. He’s wound tighter than a stripped screw.

“Thanks for the help. Do you mind waiting downstairs so I can get dressed? – Privacy.” I smile. Even with his back turned I feel him sense it.

“Sure—I was going to take the train but since we’re running behind I’ll call an uber.”

“You’re a prince,” I tell him, poking the discards he left for me on the bed. *Trash, trash, fucking Target brand trash.*

As soon as his head disappears from sight I redirect to Cari’s closet. My, my—what buried treasure will I find here?

...

I walk into work fifteen minutes late—even with Guy dropping me off first—but Marilyn isn’t waiting so it’s the same as if I got in early. Actually, I did come in early. To make up for yesterday. Which was spent working doing off-site client relations anyway. Seamless.

I head to the desk and check voicemail for messages, deleting two complaints from the same buyer that I forgot to call back the morning when Bernard came in. Then I handwrite shorthand versions of the others before deleting them too, and finish with a note for Marilyn explaining that some idiot Chinese tourist bumped into me outside the gallery and spilled her morning Americano everywhere, and that I’m leaving the desk to

run out and get her a replacement. Guy was damn near twitching with anxiety over how late he was for his first appointment so I didn't want to push him too far too soon with the whole breakfast thing. At least now I'll be able to pick up a breakfast burrito and come back with Marilyn's daily injection of caffeine, a hero.

Isn't it *funny* how genius can strike under legitimately *desperate* conditions? I don't know if it was anxiety over the time or shell-shock post-penis confrontation, but he didn't notice that when I left Cari's building and got into the uber where he was waiting that I was wearing half her shit. Which you know, is a *little* weird since the stoned fishnet top and vintage fur coat were obviously *not* included in the pile of dogshit he left for me on her bed. I did end up having to wear his pants though. They're this black nylon BDSM cross between cargo pants with all these bizarre straps sprouting randomly—normally fucking hideous—but curated with the rest of the ensemblé I think I kind of like them. Maybe I'll keep them. If I get enough compliments. – Baggy as fuck, though. Could mean a donuts-after-burrito kind of day, you know, make hay while the sun shines and whatever else.

It's not perfect—Cari had this pair of *sick* Roberto Cavalli snakeskin-print cigarette pants that I was able to squeeze into—but typical luck for me, she's so short that even I couldn't pull off that much exposed calf. They were practically capris. I heard a few seams pop while I was ripping them off, seriously Guy needs to *chill* with his anal-retentive punctuality thing, having the freaking uber driver honk his horn like they were crossing lanes to make the on-ramp for the Jersey Turnpike or something. I got them back on the hanger before grabbing his bondage eyesore and made sure the full look passed

muster in the bathroom mirror before he blew a gasket and tried to leave without me. Again. She'll never notice.

...

When I return to the gallery an hour later, Marilyn is at my desk. Livid. She's vaping inside, in plain sight. Not a good sign.

"Daniel! Darling! While I'm thrilled that you appear to be physically intact and not suffering from some fleeting amnesia that caused you to forget where the business that employs you is located, I find myself still—what the fuck is the word in English?—*fascinated* by what possible reason you could have for leaving the desk unmanned until *noon* after not even showing up the day before?"

I walk over to the desk, keeping my low, eyes fixed a foot off the floor. Shame can be a useful tool. That's true. Or more accurately, the *perception* of shame. But you know what's better? Pity. And guilt. And if by this point you're thinking it's going to be mine then you're more of a chump than Marilyn.

I place her Americano gingerly in front of her—on the desk— of course. Not directly to her. That would permit her the excuse to snatch it.

"I left a note." Never offer more than the minimum. Over-explaining is a rookie mistake. And easy to spot.

"I saw. And you called yesterday, too. An *hour* after you were supposed to be here. In person."

I take off the oversized Fendi sunglasses I grabbed off of Cari's dresser as I was dashing out to meet Guy. No eye contact yet though. That's key.

“And I apologized for that. When I spoke to you. Yesterday.” I can’t see her reaction but I can tell that she’s wavering enough to have stopped vaping.

“It isn’t a crime to want to take a more active role in the gallery, Marilyn. You said yourself when you hired me that you wanted this to be an environment to *grow* in, to *learn* from.”

The silence swells and strains but resisting the temptation to fill the void is crucial. Right now Marilyn’s engaging in an internal struggle—deciding whether she should be disappointed with herself, or with me. Guess which direction I’m nudging her towards.

She sighs, throws her hands up, and reaches for the Americano. “Oh, Daniel—what am I going to do with you?”

Now this is vital—and in my younger, less-experienced days I would have jumped on a premature victory like this, eager as an excited puppy coming across an unguarded chicken carcass, carelessly left in easy reach. Time is a teacher, however. And with sufficient episodes—with sufficient *practice*—you can hone your instincts enough to sniff out the larger triumph just out of sight. A puppy with a stolen chicken leg in its mouth will be scolded but forgiven. Because puppies are young and cute. And dumb. Dumb is different than stupid and easily forgivable. But you know what’s better than leaning on cute and dumb for absolution? Playing it cute and cunning so that the meat is *offered*, free and clear, before there’s even the chance to steal it.

“Are you interested in hearing what I *was* doing yesterday, or would you rather I return to the desk and continue answering calls that any brain-dead NYU-intern named Jessica could handle?”

See, most people would think that coming back with an accusation, a demeaning one at that, would be a mistake when clearly—I mean, let's be honest here—I'm the one who's wrong. Like if I were in Marilyn's position I would be torturing me slowly while waiting for a client to walk in so I could fire her in front of an audience before sending a mass-email out to every gallery on earth, blackballing me from the industry from now until the end of time. But this is what you have to know about people—and it's the same with every person, any person, irregardless of race, or gender, or education, or background. The quickest way to get at them is through an open wound.

How do you think someone like Marilyn could open a gallery in Soho that barely clears a few million in sales a year? Family money? Yeah, my ass—her name would still be Martinka then. Would you guess a tidy little divorce settlement? After one look at her crusted dye-job I did. Fuschia is practically the official Pantone color of desperate mid-life reinvention. Though even I'll admit I resorted to Google to confirm it. And boy was it *ugly*.

But what I bet you didn't know was that contested, drawn-out divorces generally require the kind of litigation that leaves helpful little crumbs like testimonies and filed accusations of mental cruelty and—gasp!—DOMESTIC ABUSE—clinging to the public record even if they're withdrawn in anticipation of a lucrative enough settlement. And Marilyn? She must have been Tina Turner-ed to make out as good as she did.

Listen, am I proud of leaning on a broken bone to get what I want? A little, sure. Really, she was asking for it trying to manipulate me through guilt first. I'm just better at it than she is. It's not entirely her fault.

Marilyn hems and haws an annoyingly long time, but ultimately the contrition I know is coming is volunteered. “I know it’s dreary work. I see so much *potential* in you, Daniel. I hate to see you waste it.”

Finally, the time for eye contact. Direct, determined—a notch under predatory. Her ex-husband at his best, just before his worse. I’m assuming. Albeit, correctly.

“And I’m not wasting it. I told you I was convincing Bernie to commit to a full collection. But you know as well as I do that he’s not going to be interested in the gallery’s typical showings.”

That one landed. The filler-stuffed crepe stretched over her cheekbones flushes in a way that divulges the awareness of her mortifying taste even if she’d probably actually, literally die rather than acknowledge it. Another enduring gift of Mr. Ex-Marilyn in all likelihood. *Poor dear.*

“And you’ve devised a solution to that in all of one day’s time?” she asks. It’s an honest question, the fear embedded in it is a dead giveaway, even though it’s paired with an acidic finish of venom.

I pause, hesitating for effect—for her benefit, really, I’m not pitiless—and pull out my phone.

“I do, actually. Or I think I do. It was a silly impulse—and I honestly am sorry that I didn’t handle it better yesterday. I should have called earlier. But I had an instinct. And, well. – I followed it.” I lay the phone on the desk. Screen-side up. But locked.

I can tell she’s intrigued. Marilyn’s only found work through her contacts. Friends of friends with disappointing creatively-inclined children and all that. The lure of the phone—she knows I would never be pedestrian enough to offer a discovery made over

social media—hints at something fresh. Unexplored territory. Nothing makes an aging art collector cream her underdoos more than the prospect of the novel—brilliance is mandatory, but rarer is the prospect of straddling both the brilliant and—that elusive initial high—the *new*.

She stands, hovering over the blank screen like a black mirror. I can practically see her breath clouding it she's so close. And where did this instinct lead you to?"

"I made the trip to East Williamsburg yesterday—I know, I had doubts too, serious ones—but I think I found something."

I unlock the phone and play the video of Cari's work, which I took while she was peeing in the bathroom I destroyed with the aftershocks of her menudo. I didn't plan on doing enough damage to force her to give it enough time to air out, but it came in useful nonetheless.

"Daniel—this is, I can't—there are no words."

"I know that's *literally* what I thought."

I don't have to arrange the ecstatic smile on my face to match Marilyn's when she finally looks up. For once I'm overwhelmed enough by feeling that the external reflects the interior.

"And the artist? Unknown? Unsigned?"

I let the few seconds pass for the finished video on the phone to revert back to its locked, neutral screen. Always set your default time to the shortest option by the way. That's a habit anyone who browses Grindr in the bathroom while their paycheck is snoring in bed ten feet away will tell you.

“Yes. And yes. The work... it is startling. However—it’s also not ready. Yet. There’s some cohesion issues, and of *course* the usual gamut of marketing and persona-construction.”

“Of course.” Marilyn replies. Too quickly. She would be salivating if she hadn’t had the glands surgically removed.

“*But*. I know the artist. She trusts me. And I think she’s still unformed enough to be molded. She doesn’t want to exhibit, let alone sell to the public.”

Marilyn balks, slightly. But even she can feel the tension of the line guiding the hook in her mouth up towards the surface. To the light.

“And as a friend is she aware of your powers of persuasion?”

“She will be. Especially if I’m allowed to act as lead curator for a possible installation. And for handling the back-end dirty work of brokering sales. You know, hypothetically.”

Marilyn sits back down. There’s a glint in her eye that I’m sharp enough to discern isn’t attributable to post-coital gallerist afterglow.

“I’m correct in the assumption that you won’t be providing a name without permitting this, no?”

It takes everything in me not to give in to a gloating eyelash flutter.

“Marilyn, my dear, nurturing, *practical* mentor Marilyn. – Weren’t you the one who told me on my first day that I would need more than a pretty face to make it in this business?”

She stares down at her folded hands then swivels in the reception chair to the mini-fridge behind it, returning with a bottle of champagne.

“Dom Perignon. 1985. I bought it the day I signed on this gallery.”

I know a cue when I see one. I walk over to the galley kitchen tucked in the back and grab two flutes—but not before depositing my phone back in Guy’s pants pocket for safekeeping.

I bring them back to reception where Marilyn is cradling the bottle like a baby. Already a proud mother, just anticipating the imminent birth.

“I knew I was saving this for good reason.”

She pops the cork and I take the bottle from her, pouring both glasses near to the brim and hand her hers first. I’ve won a significant victory—playing the deferential ingenu will allow her the illusion of a larger role in it. Gratify her need for ownership without actually giving her any of the real estate.

She offers her glass up in salute for a toast. I clink mine against it and drink, defying the impulse to drain it.

The champagne tastes rich, like hoarded money gaining interest over centuries.

“I retain first rights and my name still appears before yours, Daniel.”

“*Por supuesto*, Marilyn” I say, borrowing Cari’s line. “I wouldn’t dream of having it any other way.” I top my almost empty flute up with bubbly before it can occur to Marilyn to stop me

Too many women reach out for a rock and are shocked when they discover a hammer.

...

I’m feeling magnanimous—floating on the effervescent tingles generated by the spoils of the day—so when Guy thirst-texts me to meet for after-work drinks, I agree. On

the condition that they're enjoyed locally. I'm not getting trapped in Brooklyn again—especially not wearing Cari's clothes, which she'll recognize despite Guy's anxiety-blindness this morning.

Today's not the day for tedious accusations anyway. There'll be time enough for that boring back-and-forth *after* the opening.

I start packing up my bag ten minutes to four, like I usually do, when Marilyn calls my name through her open office door.

“Yes?” I ask, poking my head in. She better not be getting ready to deliver a lecture, complaining that I should make up the lost time from this morning by staying late.

“I just tried Bernard again, and his secretary said he didn't come into the office today.”

“Huh.” I reply. *And... why should I give a shit exactly?*

“He wasn't there yesterday either. I assumed he was with you.”

“Nope.” – Fuck. I *did* tell her that I was meeting with him when I called, didn't I. Why is it so easy to get careless once you get what you want? “Well, yeah—we made plans during our lunch to meet yesterday. I thought he might want to see some of the potential work. But the artist got gun-shy and was going to cancel unless I flew solo, so I left a message at home to reschedule. I think I spoke to his housekeeper though. I'm not sure how much got lost in translation.”

“It's not like him to be unreachable. He's usually so voracious for new art. When the urge occurs.”

“Yeah, it does seem weird. But you definitely know him better than I do so I don’t think I can say.”

“His secretary said he’d be away from the office for the foreseeable future. He didn’t mention anything?” She’s fondling the tip of her oversized acrylic reading glasses with her tongue, mouth pursed, not yet puckered. More bewilderment than suspicion.

“Not to me, but that makes sense. Above my paygrade.” I keep my body outside the office, hopefully signaling both nonchalance and mild impatience to get gone. Which is harder than you’d think—I’m craning my neck and it’s reactivating the crick I woke up with on Cari’s couch eight hours ago.

“Yes, you’re right. I’ll call his secretary back and tell her to connect with his housekeeper. Likely a miscommunication.”

“Likely.” I reply. My neck’s going to start quivering from the strain. Fuck that stupid couch.

“Thank you, Daniel. Have a safe ride home. See you tomorrow morning. Nine AM. Sharp.”

I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth and make my exit, tastebuds still flirting with the memory of Marilyn’s celebratory magnum. I take out my phone when I’m out on the street and type a message replying to Guy’s last text.

“Want to get crazy and split a bottle of champagne somewhere fancy?”

Send.

...

For someone who drinks as much as he does, Guy gets sloppy annoyingly early. Which is boring but necessary since he started bitching about his day the moment we sat

down. Clearly he makes enough money to balance the abuse, but I sip and nod sympathetically since he agreed to the suggestion and texted the location to a speakeasy that would have decent sparkling options in addition to the harder stuff that inevitably follows. It's mid-tier but passable. He's not old enough to have acquired the kind of coin I typically earn for these kind of occasions—or the establishments that inspire them—but I bet his taint doesn't taste like saddle leather either, so I tolerate the lack of exclusivity.

It's a weakness, but there's only so much shriveled dick you can suck before you start choking on mummy dust and need a refresher in your own age group. He *is* buying, after all.

He's also getting handsy. And dropping hints, flexing on his ability to vers, how he's equally happy to both give *and* receive. Jesus—whatever happened to the thrill of the chase? I'm fighting the reflex to disengage after we switch to cocktails, hoping we start making out before he hot-breath whiskey-whispers something about getting his pants back and reciprocal sharing when we leave the bar—seriously, if you're someone who pulls that kind of shit, *don't*. It's rotten as week-old tilapia—when Cari starts texting him non-stop, sending mock-accusations of abandonment and whining about her acute case of FOMO.

I hadn't realized the level of their codependence. It isn't great news for tonight's eventual hard-on, or whatever'll be left of it, but there's too much riding on staying in her orbit to pout about something that's clearly deeply ingrained.

We stay for another round before Guy makes puppy eyes at me.

Nice try buddy, like that could actually work.

“I know you said you wanted to stay local, but would you mind coming back to Brooklyn with me? We’ll get a cab. My treat.”

You better believe it’ll be your treat. This whole fucking night is turning into one.

Returning to Cari’s would give me easier, more casual access to her however. And maybe another day off if I can sneak more photos to Marilyn. A later start, most certainly.

I’ve already decided to go with Guy—that doesn’t necessitate me letting him know that, yet. Men only value what they have to work for. Guy has no idea how hard he’s going to work for me.

“Maybeeee,” I whine. *Here you go, Puppy Boy, you want to play?* “But I’m so tired.” I pout, prettily. He leans in and kisses my protruding lower lip, leaving it damp with spit.

Seriously? Not a promising start, you Sloppy Otter.

“Do you have coke or something,” I ask, distracting him. “You know, something for a pick me up?”

“No, all I have on me is the Special K I gave you the other night—which you’ve lost privileges for by the way. I have some pot back my place though,” he pauses, reconsiders, “and so will Cari.”

“That’s okay—I have some at my place.” I smile, because we both know I’ve nailed him. “You don’t mind stopping on the way, do you? I need a change of clothes for tomorrow anyway.”

...

I keep Guy waiting in a car for the second time that day and jam all the apartment buzzers until someone lets me when I can't get my key to work. It's a brownstone—Greenwich village—that I sublet from a girl I used to hang with at FIT when I matriculated there for a hot minute. The salad days. Honestly, outside of the poppers and pretension I can barely remember it. Turns out owning and wearing clothes is much more exciting than making them. And the fucking faggots there—the flamboyance of those femme boss bottoms was so unpalatable I almost went straight. Good contacts though, resource-wise. I only pay \$700 a month while the owner—technically a “roommate”, I guess—spends most of her time in Europe and on yachts. The address is surprisingly helpful too. She has a whole floor, on loan from grandparents while she flicks her clit and dabbles in unimaginative jewelry making—but I've found the real Big Fish sugar sources only *really* give up the goods when they think you don't need it. Some capitalistic social-warfare keep-it-in-the-family bullshit. Probably.

I flounder up the stairs and faceplant on the first landing. *Ha ha*—I can't feel my face. Like, *at all*. Guess Guy isn't the only sloppy queer sashaying through the city tonight. I peel myself up and hold onto the handrail of the staircase so I don't careen into the walls. Fuck this pre-war fuckery. When I land my first millionaire, I'm not even going to touch his saggy scrotum until I have a glass-walled house with an elevator. On the beach. In Malibu.

I climb one flight of stairs, and then another. Some musty-dusty, turban-wearing, DAR-chairwoman widow is shouting at me from the first floor to keep it down. *Cunt!* This is *New York*. Go back to Kennebunkport if you want peace and quiet.

When I make it to the next landing, I stand for a minute, wobbling. Breathe.
Balance.

I look around and realize I must be more fucked up than I thought—either I missed my floor or went right past it because whoever’s on this one is having some sort of Marie Kondo moment, or updated and left the discards out for their housekeeper to pick through tomorrow morning. Literally giant black garbage bags *everywhere*—I nearly trip on one. I should come back tomorrow and see if they’re still out there. If I stage a public injury I can sue. What the hell is this? A Vitamix?

Huh. That’s a \$500 blender. If I hadn’t already taken one from the fashion house I interned in I would grab it. I didn’t even steal it—it was a request from Arianna Grande herself. She was in the middle of a cleanse when she came in for a fitting. That skinny brown bitch left it behind, had a brand new one delivered, gratis, just for the afternoon.

– I’ll get there. One day.

...

I remember Guy is still waiting and that Cari is expecting us. Prioritize, Daniel. Focus. I squint at the number on the door—need to figure out whether I have to go down, or up. Wait—what? This *is* my floor. What the fuck? Did DeeDee get back and randomly decide to remodel?

I stumble to the door and jam my key in the lock, shushing myself when I break into giggles. The Billionaire Crypt Keeper a few floors down is still making a racket. I go to turn the key and sneak in—DeeDee is notorious for over-medicating on long flights—whenever she comes back I’ll inevitably find her passed out on the sofa with her coat and sunglasses still on, covered in mohair. – Seriously, some rich people have no freaking

taste. – If you want something that expensive to shed all over the place, get a Pomeranian, not furniture.

The lock, however, isn't working. I pull out the keychain and hold it up to eyeline. I'm so drunk I probably tried the one for the gallery. I'm scrutinizing them through one eye, an inch from my face when I notice something. There's a note on the door. What the fuck, DeeDee—you have a three-bedroom apartment. If you want to bring some rando back to screw take him in the bedroom and do it.

I reach out and peel the note from the door to read it. Maybe her parents are coming over for brunch or something tomorrow. They don't exactly know I live here. Still—what the fuck. Rude. She could have just texted me like a normal person. Why would she think it's cool to tape a goddam note to the door like a divorced single mother, like she didn't know I would get it after coming all the way over here.

Daniel—

Here's all your shit. I put them in garbage bags so you know who they belong to. After everything we've been through, after everything I've *done* for you, I cannot believe that this is how you repay me. I blocked your number and changed the locks. If I ever so much as *see* you again I will rip your smug little face off and call the police.

Everyone said you were trash and I always defended you. I was the only one who defended you. I knew you were shady—seriously, you think I *didn't* notice how much has gone missing since you moved in?? But my dead brother's Rolex?! What kind of piece of shit psychopath *are* you??

I knew you were fucked up but I thought I was an exception. That we were friends. You don't have friends. You never will. I hope you die alone, and poor. And soon.

Don't contact me and don't ever come back. I'm letting you off easy. If you try literally *anything* I *will* press charges. Don't think I won't. The only reason I'm not now is I want you gone as quickly as possible.

Eat shit and choke you cokehead Rent Boy.

—D

(And if your shit isn't gone by tomorrow afternoon, it's going straight to the dumpster where you can find it since that's where you're from. And where you'll be living from now on.)

Before I get to the end I hear someone screaming. I know it's my voice but I can't feel the air leave my throat in the swirling suck of fury possessing every cell of my body. I crumple the note in my fist, hands shaking with a rage I haven't experienced since I was young. Back home. There's yelling downstairs but I don't give a shit—that fucking *cunt*. That trust-fund, teat-choking, festering spoiled little *whore*. I start kicking at the door—hoping I fucking splinter it. I will burn this entire place down if it means I can take her down with it.

Someone grabs me from behind, and I flail my arms trying to connect. Break a jaw if they won't let me break the door.

Fuck *everyone*.

Fuck this entire stupid shithole world.

I will end it. I swear. Let me go so I can watch it burn.

...

By the time we get to Cari's I'm sobbing so hard that she has to hoist me up to her place, shuffling under the weight of my arm she threw over her shoulders. I don't even remember the taxicab full of my stuff until I'm sitting on the couch drinking some hot jungle leaf tea she made me when Guy comes in through the door carrying the garbage bags. It must have taken at least three trips.

"I'm so sorry, Daniel. This is crazy! Completely insane! How can someone *do* that? To a stranger! Let alone one of their friends?"

Cari is rubbing my back in little circles while Guy goes into the kitchen to get vodka from her freezer. She could be doing a fucking spell back there and it wouldn't make a difference. I can't stop the deep, choking spasms that are taking hold of me. My body isn't mine. I have no control. My chest and throat are boiling, furiously dredging something deep inside to the surface. I can't see. I can't breathe. An abyss that was buried, gnarled and rooted at the core of me is stirring. The chasm inside yawns and is reaching up to drag me down into it, to claim the mask that's concealed it for so long.

A warm weight announces itself on my other side.

"Drink," Guy says, and puts an ice-cold glass in my hand.

"It just makes no sense!" I say. I howl. I feel the soft pressure of Guy's hand take the drink and then his other cradling the back of my head, tipping it back.

The vodka is both sharp and soothing as it courses over my tongue, sluices down my throat. The tremors racking my muscles dissipate. The tightness gripping me uncurls and calms.

I breathe. I breathe again. The emptiness clutching me loosens its hold. I can still feel its grip—not yet released—but its appeased for now. The claws press without digging in. Shackle slack but secure.

“I don’t understand! We’ve been friends for *years*. I don’t deserve to be treated like this—I did *nothing* wrong. Nothing!”

“Even if you did it’s a shitty way to handle it” Cari tells me, leans her head on my shoulder.

“You know as well as I do how batshit crazy and unpredictable the over-privileged are.” Guy begins rubbing my back too. He’s not as good at it as Cari.

“Fucking French-court fucks,” Cari spits. “It’s things like this that make me wish we still had the guillotine.”

I pry open swollen, blood-red eyes enough to stare dejectedly down at the floor in front of me.

“I have nowhere to go. I don’t have any family here, no support—”

“You have us, Danny Boy,” Guy says and pats me on the back.

Seriously, where did he learn his soothing techniques? From a pedophile Boy Scout leader who raped him?

“You’ll stay here tonight and we’ll figure it out,” Cari assures me. I can sense her looking at Guy over my head. “Someone has treated you terribly but that doesn’t mean you’re alone. That you don’t have friends.”

“I can’t ask that of you,” I reply. It’s what you’re supposed to say. I’m knocked on my ass but I can still follow a script. “You barely know me.”

“Well,” she says, “I know Guy and he’s good people. I’m good people. Us strays have to stick together. The world is too enamored with its bullshit to act different.”

I lift my head, a wounded predator rallying at the scent of more wounded prey. I turn and look at her—for once not needing to create the necessary expression—my blotched, bloated face is enough.

“It would only be for a short while. I’ll get my own place—I can pay rent.”

“Hush, hush. *Calmate*. It’s been a long, awful-fucking day. We can talk tomorrow. For now, sleep.”

“You’re right,” I tell her, then pivot to Guy, “Can I have another drink? It’s helping.”

...

Life is funny. You can’t predict it. Even when you’re as smart as me. You think you know about yourself inside and out—the hard realities, the imperfect truths. And then something happens that makes you question everything. Who you are, where you fit in. It’s like opening the back door of your mind, one you’ve walked through a thousand times before, to paths so routine, so they’re hard-packed that nothing can grow on them, and then, one day—without warning—you open it and find a whole new room you’ve never seen before. You’ve grown, developed—matured. And if you’re brave enough and adaptable enough you discover you’re this expanding, dynamic force that can build a mansion of yourself where a house used to seem enough. You realize the boundaries that have fenced you in, kept you captive, are tricks in your mind. That you only have to bend your mind to break through them.

I take to Brooklyn like a duck to water, like a scorpion to a frog's back. I'm so close and near to Cari—so recently, conveniently maimed—that all she can think of is to take care of me. Which I allow in spurts. I'm sure it would get old and then obvious, but unlike with DeeDee I now have a larger purpose, a greater goal than immediate gratification. I push her into her work, which she quite naturally views as me pushing her needs back on to herself. She has no suspicion that her potential success means even greater success for me. Of course she doesn't. She has no reason to. I make sure of that—in as many ways as I can.

Do you have any idea how much you can get away with as long as you make people laugh? You can get someone to wake up and make you coffee, make you breakfast—fuck, make all your meals *and* your nightly cocktails—and as long as you make puppy faces and *act* like a spoiled child instead of pretending that you're not one—you can literally get away with murder.

Even Guy has found a role in my new life. With the upcoming show, managing Marilyn, managing Cari—I don't have time to make be going into Manhattan for the typical carnal appointments. And I'm sure as hell not going to meet anyone in East Williamsburg. I tried once and I nearly gave a ho-jo to this Drakkar-Noir stinking Persian car dealership owner. When I unzipped his fly and smelled the cologne wafting off his enormous, untended bush I had to leave and when I got back home I showered for like an hour. Full Silkwood.

Guy is bland and boring but also two blocks down. And, given the right encouragement, fairly trainable. Even if I wasn't lazy and localized as a housecat, I know he and Cari's dynamic well enough that my "relationship" with him is too useful a lever

not to leverage. And Cari is the future. I'm pretty enough that I'll never starve, but the revenue is sporadic, and the work is harder than it looks. If DeeDee showed me anything—that syphilis riddled slut—it's that having independent funds is crucial. The transition of switching survival strategies from living on my back to off of hers isn't entirely unplanned—granted, it's had some twists and turns. I'm not deluded, or grandiose. I know there are risks. But I'm her friend. I believe in her. And her talent. And mine.

Plus, at this point, she barely needs prodding. She's even sleeping at the studio now, which is doubly appreciated since it leaves her bed free for me.

– I'm going to set fire to that vindictive couch the minute her show sells though. Believe that if nothing else.

The only real fly in the ointment is that Marilyn keeps pestering about Bernie—where he is, why isn't he responding.

Umm, I want to reply, how is that my problem, exactly?

— But she also hasn't signed the papers I had drawn up, outlining the role I've had in Cari's discovery, my hand in her development, where it ensures my crediting in the show and 50% split commission off her sales with the gallery. – She's trying to hold out until I let her meet Cari in person. Like *that's* fucking happening. She'll sign, soon enough. She doesn't have a choice.

How well I'm adapting to my new professional role, to a fake but consistent enough romantic relationship—to fucking *Brooklyn* of all places—still shocks me sometimes. When, you know, it really shouldn't. Things happen—people can be vicious,

hurtful, cruel—but there’s never been anything bad enough to cause me to doubt myself. I can survive anything. On anything.

My instincts are flawless. As long as I’m awake behind the wheel, I’ll never steer myself wrong.

...

I leave Guy’s just before noon. Marilyn’s left me off-leash this week so there’s nowhere particular I need to go, but I’ve gone through pretty much everything in Guy’s place already so it’s ceased to be of any real interest. Both he and Cari have way too many books. It was fun paging through them and pretending the first few days—no juicy notes or photos or hidden storage or anything—but other than the big art glossies they all ended up being turkey breast dry. There was one about Greek mythology that I was into at first but then it got all blah, blah, *blah* heteronormative god rape and like be a swan or don’t be a swan, but do a better job of *describing* how it all happens. Not like ‘oh the nymph’s a river now’ and then go on for like ten pages about cattle stealing. I wish someone had mentioned how much Ancient Greece and Oklahoma had in common. *Don’t be a-theivin’ ma’ here livestock and a-rapin’ ma’ sons.* —There you go, Socrates. Summed it up for you. Shit like that makes me glad I never finished college.

Cari’s books were way worse though. Like I don’t give a fuck about Susan Sontag—that whole other people’s boo boo’s thing was *such* false advertising. Cari *also* doesn’t have a TV—fucking Brooklyn, I swear to *God* sometimes—but Guy does. It gives me enough of an excuse to stay the night once in a while—keep up considerate appearances. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not all sweat and tears by any means. I’m educating him through his new Hulu subscription about the full Housewives’ *oeuvre*.

Now *that's* a real, contemporary artform. The mess. The menopausal hysteria. The *fashion*.

Honestly, for a top-tier stylist Guy doesn't have the critical appreciation for optics and visual performativity I anticipated.

Out on the sidewalk, I decide I'm craving something decadent—maybe something crispy too. There's a half-vegan/half-coffee/half-bakery that makes these *killer* egg sandwiches that the Polish lady who owns it refuses to do after noon. That was a fun first screaming match. But she's gotten the picture enough that if I walk in either before or on the dot I'm leaving with one no matter how long the line is. Could pick up a couple chocolate croissants too. If I were a woman I would totally have to be bulimic.

I get there with a few minutes to spare and I see the sweaty bitch over the counter scowling at me through her little kitchen window cut-out. I order two sandwiches. Just to revel in the reaction. She doesn't disappoint. She thinks she's slick with that window so she can shout at her less-favored customers directly, but joke's on her cause the stupid commie can't spit in any of the food. I loved doing that when I waited tables—my own two-week campaign of biological warfare.

When the sandwiches are ready and packed up I add on half a dozen pastries—a little much I know, but it's a dull ass morning so far and I'm in the mood for some Soviet-Bloc pyrotechnics. The reaction is just—sweaty red-faced chef's kiss—I honestly think Stalin himself would blush at the string of unintelligible insults flame-throwing out of that woman's mouth. I grab the food and smile before leaving a dollar in the tip jar.

I'm halfway to Cari's when I realize the hours of boredom waiting for me there. I've exhausted Guy's and a trip back into the City feels as enticing as a burst hemorrhoid.

Especially with food. I've done a lot of gross shit in my life but egg sandwiches on the subway is *not* something I care to revisit. Especially on the G-train. It's too early for bars. And it might be surprising but I *hate* getting fucked up by myself—even with something chill like weed. My brain is too highly-calibrated, too fine-tuned to go without stimulation for long. What to do? The afternoon stretches like a blank canvas in front of me. Great. Now I'm getting depressed. This is why all the Real Housewives film as ensembles.

I think about going through Cari's closet and filming a video for my Insta—but my wigs are in some unlabeled garbage bag and I'm off work for today, so pass. There's always my phone. But an entire afternoon of porn is going to leave me completely indifferent to Guy and we're close enough to the show that I need to keep that going. Plus, I want this egg sandwich in me asap and the only thing worse than forcing a hard-on for the silver pubed is trying to get off when I'm all bloated and gas-y. No telling which orifice is going to unleash first, if you know what I mean.

Then—a flash of genius—I remember the second sandwich. Cari's studio. I can poke around, see her progress, all while accumulating brownie points. Maybe send some covert clips to Marilyn to pressure her into signing by the end of the day.

Sometimes I'm so brilliant I even take myself by surprise. Rarely. But it does happen.

...

The studio door is cracked, the only light from the hallway and the part of the installation Cari's working on. It's the section I pointed out during my first visit. A hit of smug satisfaction floods me when I recognize it—good. My little protegee adheres well

to direction. I'm glad I didn't text ahead—I can feel the rush of power's effect radiating through my exterior surface. But the room is dark and Cari's back is to me, unaware. Even with practice, it's a signal that's difficult to mask. Instinctual I guess. The stiff alertness of a tiger chemically connecting to its next meal.

“Hey stranger,” I coo, voice low as I carefully inch open the door. “I brought you the morning special from our favorite surly Polack. Figured you were hungry.”

She's cross-legged on the floor, gazing up the snake-butterfly metamorphosis. It takes her a moment to respond, like she's descending from the astral plane to re-inhabit her earthly husk. —*Artists*.

“Daniel. Hi. How are you?” She twists to look at me in the doorway. Hag didn't hear a word of it.

“I thought you might be hungry so I brought you some food. Haven't seen you in a couple of days. I was starting to worry.” I walk over and sit down next to her. She's back to staring at the snake. Her hair is a previously unreached level of crazy. Like, on the planet, not just for her. *Fucking woof*.

I reach into the bag and take out my sandwich. I'm halfway through before I realize she hasn't moved. Jesus. I can't afford to have Little Miss Lite Brite have a total fucking mental collapse when we're this close to an opening. Whoever said parenting is the toughest job obviously hasn't tried making it as an art dealer.

I reach for her hand and deposit the oozy tin-foiled mass on to it. I've got pastries for dessert but if she goes full-hunger strike in her creative ascension and wastes that I'm going to be *pissed*. I wake up before noon like twice a week lately.

The weight in her palm appears to jolt her back into her body. She blinks and looks at it, then at me. “Daniel—thank you! I was thinking about this last night—how did you know?”

“You have your gifts and I have mine,” I say. Then I roll my eyes and start unwrapping it for her when she keeps staring at it. “Jesus, Cari—I know I said you should work like your life depends on it but you don’t need to be so *extra* about it.”

She laughs and lays down on the floor, leaving the half-opened grease bundle in my lap.

“*Ay Mi Dios*—I feel like I’ve been staring at this thing for so long I’m going to go blind.”

I sigh. The fragility of people. It’s something I’ve never been able to relate to. Cari’s going to make me work for it today.

I lay down next to and stare up at the ceiling. The shadowed room feels oddly comforting, the flickering images out of sightline our only illumination.

“This isn’t so bad,” I say, filling the space.

I watch dust swirl in bursts, passing in and out of existence in time to the mutating light-creatures. “It’s nice to change shapes once in a while. Move the body, get a new perspective,” Cari finally responds.

I think of babies in utero and wonder if this is what their world is like before being born. I imagine myself floating, unpinned from gravity and the concrete floor. I turn my head to Cari.

“Want to get fucked up? We could try to open your third eye or something—create conditions for a breakthrough.”

She laughs, swivels her neck so the bones pop. Her eyes are closed, imposing a different blindness to confront the one blocking her from her work, perhaps.

“Daniel. I swear. Sometimes you’re too fucking much.”

I return to staring up at the ceiling. *Well. Okay. – Cuntasaurus Rex.*

But the intermediary atmosphere of the room subdues me. I feel composed, focalized in blank neutrality in the half-light.

“What do you mean?” I ask, curious as a vacuum. I don’t know—this can’t possibly go anywhere complimentary, but for the moment I feel a strange unfurling within me. Unbiased and bare.

“I was wondering when you were going to ask for something—either about the opening or for some kind of entertainment.”

“I brought you a sandwich,” I reply, because I can’t think of anything else.

“I know. Thank you. How badly did you want to cause a scene to think of doing that?”

The fuck is this bitch saying to me?? Does she know I practically own her?

“Ever since the night you’ve moved in—even before, really— our only interactions involve you trying to press buttons on me like I’m a vending machine,” she responds. I lift my head to check her expression. Eyes still closed, hands folded on her chest.

“That’s not true,” I counter, the accusation escalated ever so slightly in my tone. She’s laughing before I’ve even finished speaking.

“Yes. It is,” she affirms, then laughs again.

This is weird.

I keep still, concentrating on the ceiling since I don't know what else to do. Think. I can't scream or yell—she's too calm. I'll come off unhinged. I can't cry on cue—seriously if I could pick a goddam superpower—and the whole, I'm-so-wounded-how-could-you vibe clearly isn't gaining any traction.

“There's something I want to ask you,” Cari interrupts. “I won't be upset, whatever you answer, as long as your honest.”

Honest? Who in the actual fuck does this no-name fruit-fly think she is? Who she's dealing with?

I'm watching her chest rise and fall, subconsciously monitoring her breath. Regular, steady. Relaxed, even. My eyes drift up to her face when I realize she's been looking straight at me, watching me, watching her.

“Do you think you're a sociopath?” she asks, her face a mask as neutral as my own.

I blink. I feel stunned, immobilized—a cat whose face just got sprayed for clawing the furniture. Frozen in the act, claws still caught in the upholstery.

“What?” I finally respond, after what feels like forever but is probably a minute tops.

“I think I saw it the night we met, actually,” Cari replies, turning away to return her gaze to the sheltering dark. “You looked at me and your eyes were—blank. I don't know. Maybe that's not the right word. Not ‘nothing’ so much, but a presence of absence.” She laughs, breaking herself from the memory. “Sorry, I can't really describe it. My English is good, but not *that* good.”

“You're sorry?” I ask, all I can muster in response.

“*Cálmate,*” she sighs. “I’m not scolding you. I said I wouldn’t be upset, and I’m not. I just want to cut the bullshit. To be plain. Open.”

I lay there, silent.

What the fuck is happening right now? Is everything crashing down on me?

“I recognized that look. The one you had. Have. When you think no one’s looking. Or just can’t see.” She turns towards me, raises an eyebrow in the gloom.

“From where? Fucking *Silence of the Lambs*? What are you even talking about, Cari?”

“*Ay, por favor.* For the last time, I just want to talk. Don’t act all crazy. – It won’t help you,” she adds, sighing, closing her eyes again. I’ve felt the same expression on my own face a million times.

“Okay,” I answer. When she doesn’t respond, I lay back down, attempt to settle into this fucked, new alternate reality.

“This is where most people tend to ask, ‘how did you know?’, by the way,” she jokes.

“Oh yeah? Are you sure? They teach those convo skills in whatever cinder-block ‘Save the Children’ schoolhouse you attended? Where you had to use a machete to hack a path to the hole in the ground you called a toilet?”

Now, I’m pissed. You want fucking honesty, Hag Bag? You want the real Daniel? Well now you’re going to *fuckin*g – *get*— *him*.

“Good,” she replies, “now we’re getting somewhere.” I’m glad she’s not looking at me because whatever face I’m making I know I haven’t made it before. “And no. Not in school—where there was an actual toilet. – From my father.”

I sit up. I don't know what's about to happen. I've never felt this out of control. Not in my life. Not even when I was a kid with my family. My stomach lurches. An acidic slurry of egg sandwich is rising incrementally up my throat and locks in a peristaltic canal. I swallow, hoping to push it down. It goes even higher. I'm about to spray vomit all over for Cari again, and this time no one—not even her—can accuse me of doing it on purpose.

“So, what *are* you saying? What are you going to do? Are you kicking me out of the apartment? Are you going to cancel the *show*?”

I curl up, holding my knees to my chest. I thought my heart would be racing but I can't feel anything. Like I don't even have one. Like the emptiness is back and this time it's going to swallow me whole.

Then— a light pressure on my shoulder. Cari's hand. I look back at her and see her eyes in the sputtering light, eyes fathomless and whole. Her face glows pink and fades to shadow, then lilac, then acid green.

“No, I'm not saying that.” I look back at her, wonder for the first time what she sees looking at me. I have nothing to offer. And I'm too exposed—too vulnerable to take.

Do animals feel like they have a choice when they hit a wall in the evolutionary cycle? Do they adapt because they know they have to and magically know how to do it? Or do they die, and something new slips out?

“So—this is a surprise then? You didn't realize? Never thought?” she asks, eventually. I search for somewhere to look that's not her shifting, naked face. I land on the snake, shapeshifting to cocoon, shapeshifting to a butterfly.

“You were right, by the way,” she says, resuming the cross-legged position I found her in. “That’s what I’ve been thinking about the last few days. On and off. I mean—I knew what you were doing—I’ve seen it a thousand times before. The insecurity. Lashing out. *Vindicación por dolor*. But then—you were also truthful. And careful. And... I don’t know... seeing. You were really seeing. You were going to wound but you found the decay first. Waited. Then stuck the knife in there.”

“Is that what your father did?” I ask the ever-changing light show, watching reptile swallow insect until both are swallowed up by darkness. Anything, anything, to distract me from her face full of horrific understanding.

She laughs. The vibration of it thrums up my vertebrae like a skeleton xylophone from some bizarre Halloween cartoon resurfacing from my youth.

“Yeah. Pretty much. It was his specialty.”

I keep waiting to feel my heart beating. I suddenly wish light made a sound.

“I still loved him though. I couldn’t help it. He was all I had. Other than my abuela, who I’m still not sure is human,” she laughs, quieter this time. Soft enough to feel the edge underneath. Knives then, not windchimes. “He was cartel. My mother killed herself not long after having me. Rape. *Obviamente*.”

“So you’re some kingpin’s kid that collects people instead of I don’t know, tigers or alligators or something?” I ask, lashing out, trying to throw her off balance. No need to hide anymore, if she’s so fucking perceptive.

“No—Jesus. Please. Too much trouble. I can barely collect myself half the time.”

I’m waiting for the accusations, the threats—at the very least, some revulsion. So far, nothing.

Ok, Daniel. Look at what you can get out of this—you're not bored. That's for shit's sure. What else is there to get—she wants honesty, fine. Find out what you get in exchange.

“I know I’m... not like other people. Not like most people. I—I haven’t thought about it that much, other than that. Everyone else—they’re messy. Broken. They’re so soft sometimes I feel like I don’t want to touch them or I’ll sink in. It’s pretty fucking disgusting, actually, now that I’m thinking about it like this, saying it out loud—”

Cari starts laughing so hard at whatever face I’m making that I begin laughing too. “I’m not kidding,” I say through wheezes, struggling to breathe, “—it’s gross. You’re all squishy. Leaky too.”

“*Leaky?*” she asks, gasping for air, “Fucking *leaky*—what the fuck? So people are what? Obese snails? Shell-less lobsters with the *flu*?”

“More like, you know, old pillows stuffed with diarrhea. I guess. Kind of” I say, wiping tears from the corner of my eyes.

“That’s beautiful, Daniel. I think you’ve given me inspiration for what to replace this *basura* section with” Cari replies, leaning back on her hands as the laughter finally subsides. “You know, for thousands of years, Western civilization had no word for zero—”

“—Okay, listen, now that you’ve ripped the shell off my back do I still have to sit around and pretend to listen to your bullshit?”

“Shut up, *pendejo*. I’m trying to tell you something.” She kicks at my back with her booted foot until I turn to look at her. “Pay attention.”

“Fine—but you’re picking up happy hour after this.”

“Daniel, you fucking idiot, you’ve never bought a drink for yourself since I met you. Did you think no one noticed?”

“I’m not an idiot,” I say, surprised at how quick the anger blistered to the surface.

“No. You’re not.” And just like that the blister burst. This feels... new. And a little painful. Like there’s newer, fresher skin underneath but there’s still a little rawness. A little sting. “But listen,” she interjects, “and I’ll buy you drinks if you’re a good boy.”

“Deal.”

“—Good. Now *cállate*. So, forever and ever, there’s no word for zero. No concept of it even, really. Life *exists*, we exist, from the moment we’re born and as a soul after death. The idea of nothingness was too abstract—too offensive. The Catholic church even forbade it,” she stops, chuckling to herself, amused at a joke I’m on the outside of. Though as far as religion goes, in my experience it’s rarely entertaining, “—and that because God was everything, imagining *nothing*, nothing at all, was thought to be alien—even *satanic*.”

She pauses to shoot me a sly, knowing smirk.

“—But. Even though my father raped, lied—likely killed, many times—he also... I don’t know. *Saw* things. As they really were. The truth of them. What they were, alone, without altering them. Or coloring them with his own perception.”

I look at her and feel her boring into me, her pupils dilated so widely that I can see my reflection blinking in and out of them in sequence with the lights.

“Everything has its opposite. There has always been nothing, this *cero*, in the world. Whether the pope or the police or the shrinks agree or not. Nothing is what gives meaning to the *something*. It’s the blank slate. Where every moment starts fresh. New.”

She leans her head against her knees, contemplating me. She looks both like a small child and a hundred years old. I can't tell whether she's blinking or not in the sequence of sporadic, flashing light.

"My father was like that. I think you might be too. What you are makes you different, yes, but it is also what makes you *different*. Clear. Unclouded. It can be ruthless, sure. But then so can the truth. You can't have one without the other. So—"

Suddenly Cari unfolds herself, knees cracking as she struggles to her feet.

"Fuck—my foot's asleep. Ay. What was I saying?" She stands over me, where I'm still cross-legged on the floor. Her insane hair is haloed by shifting, prismatic colors.

"Something about the truth," I reply. "How it's ruthless."

I realize I'm holding my breath. I inhale deeply, then again.

"Ah, yes—well. I can understand this. I understand *you*, is what I'm trying to say. And as long as we can continue this way—with honesty—with brutality, if necessary, not just for the fucking sake of it," she gestures towards the only part of her entire installation I critiqued, that she's been examining for fuck knows how long, "then we continue. You don't have to hide. So then I don't have to hide either. I'm too old for the stupid games" she finishes, offering me a hand up.

"How old are you, actually?" I ask, noticeably quicker to my feet.

"Mind your business, Daniel. Or you'll stay as thirsty as my hair."

...

I don't know how to describe it—this now. The way things are once you're fully *seen*. What life becomes. What the *world* becomes.

My universe has contracted. Cari and I are planets revolving around the Sun of her work—our work—of truth, and beauty, and the uncovering of both. I always thought of myself as the most important thing, but the past few weeks have taught me that you on your own can't be as good as you *with* others. Absorbing them. Making them a part of you. Expanding and spreading with the consummation.

That's what people mean when they talk about 'something greater than yourself'. Something greater than just you, because there are yous that you can only be with someone else—potentials hidden inside the core of you that takes someone else to teach you how to unlock them.

So, no—I never thought of myself that way. Never used that word. Sociopath. Honestly, I'm not a huge fan of labels, generally. Brooklyn rubbing off, I guess. I mean, sure, I like men. I like fucking them. I like using them. And yeah, okay, I'm a big ol' cock hog. It's not like I'm lying when I say things like that, *do* things like that.

But then I also like to wear panties and accept donations for dancing around Cari's apartment with a wig on. Maybe I just like attention. I mean, what does 'gay' really mean anyway? There are times I look at Cari lately, especially when she's working, or even when she's like staring out the window and doesn't know I'm watching her—and honestly, I think I could fuck. Sometimes I'm pretty sure I want to.

Maybe this is what love is. Caring about someone so much that you want to swallow them whole. Wanting them to live like a fish in your belly. And if you're lucky enough to be someone like me, that can find someone like her, then you can have that. You really can. And every time they move around inside of you it's a reminder that

you'll never feel the kind of empty you felt before. The kind of lonely. Not once. Ever again.

...

Guy is such a pain in my ass right now.

He just got back from work—didn't want to meet me at Cari's place, even though she's in her studio. Nope, have to go to *his*, because he's *tired*, and now he doesn't even want to get fucked up and hang out at home. He's going to shower because we haven't gone out, 'just the two of us', in a month apparently. Which like, honestly, what does he expect? A relationship? A *boyfriend*? You don't have to be a fucking psychic to see that I'm not that dude. And if I were that I wouldn't be for *Guy*.

He's definitely jealous of what's happening with me and Cari. The time we're spending together. How close we are. Which apparently, he thinks is *weird*—too much, too fast, too *attached*. He texted if I wanted to grab dinner in Manhattan yesterday and of *course* I asked if Cari would be going—as if she's not like my fucking job right now. And then he's like 'blah, blah, blah—who are you even dating, her or me?'. So I responded saying he was rude and inconsiderate of his friend who we would be leaving out—that shit always works, by the way—and he relented so I thought we were cool.

But now, there's this shit. So I'm lying on his bed, texting people for any hookups for some molly, because I will *not* be able to handle him without some pharmaceutical intervention tonight. Even his face is getting on my nerves.

“Oh my God—I needed that,” he says toweling off in front of the bathroom mirror. To *me*, I guess. Cause I care. “So what do you want to do tonight? There's a

great, authentic Italian place I know—they do out of this *world* carbonara. Guanciale, homemade pasta, the real deal. Sound interesting?”

“Pasta? Really?” I reply, voice flat, scrolling through contacts. No leads yet for the Molly. “I don’t know. You’re kind of getting a gut.”

“A *gut*?!” he laughs, looking at himself in the mirror. “Jesus, you’re cunt today. Besides, have you seen the garbage you eat? And I work out more than you. I don’t think I’m getting a *gut*.”

“I run,” I point out, which I do, when I feel like it. “And I’m younger. But if you want to be all *Lady and the Tramp* and suck on some meatballs and have a carb-fest, I mean, we can do it. If that’s what you want. You’ll probably be too tired to do anything after, but you wanted me to be more supportive, so...”

He snorts, picks up his trimmer and starts clipping his beard. Intimacy is disgusting, don’t let anyone tell you differently.

“Alright then, Ms. Jillian Michaels—what brilliant ideas do you have to offer?”

“I don’t know,” I say, letting my full disinterest show.

“What does your phone say? You haven’t stopped looking at it since you got here,” he retorts, in full snark mode, then sucks his top lip to get to his mustache.

“I know. Because I’m *looking*.”

– Fucking faggot. Don’t try me.

Then, success. *Finally*. I get a text from a friend of a friend I used to party and hook-up with—*way* too femme for me, normally, but he has the best party drugs. He’s Ecuadorian or something but has this cousin in like fucking Mississippi who is like autistic but with Rainman capabilities when it comes to chemicals. I text back, asking

where he's going to be tonight, if there's a scene where I can drop in with a friend to have a good time. He'll be into that. He loved some kinky group shit.

Guy's humming something to himself, fussing with his hair. I guess it's not his fault. Or not all. Cari says that I remind her of Guy because more than anything we want to be loved for who we are. He hasn't mentioned any of it to me but she's let it drop here and there that he had a rough childhood, isn't close with his family, the usual homo rigamarole.

"A friend just tweeted about a warehouse party in Bushwick—how does that sound? Dancing? Maybe some poppers? – You said you wanted to be social."

Guy sniggers to himself, grabs a pair of scissors. "I don't know, Danny-Boy. That maybe sounds a little *too* social. He pulls a face in the mirror and laughs again, cracking himself up.

Hee-haw, hee-haw.

I roll my eyes and sigh, visibly exasperated. "Well then, I don't know what you want from me. Sounds like you want to stuff your face with fucking ravioli no matter what, so—" I wave my hand in the air dramatically, one queen dismissing another. Then I roll over on my side, facing the bathroom. I lower my eyelids, stare at him cat-eyed, pouting. Enough attitude that I give off the impression that I'm ready to pounce.

He looks over, moans then turns back to the mirror.

"Warehouse party, huh? Sure you don't mean rave?"

"What, now you're too old for a rave?" I ask, innocent as can be.

"Uh, yes—I absolutely am."

“Whatever,” I say, then flop back on my back. My displeasure is thick enough to choke even a donkey like him.

“Dancing could be fun,” he replies, after a while. I look over and see him trimming his nose hairs with the scissors.

“Great,” I reply, “I’ll get ready. – Would you mind closing the bathroom door?”

...

It’s definitely a rave. Guy brings it up as soon as we get here but I ignore him. I let him wear his retarded leather harness thing so he’s out of passes for the night.

Now that I’m here, I recognize the place. I’ve easily spent a handful of coked-out nights here before. There’re cages hanging from the ceiling with non-binary go-go dancers and tonight’s theme for the dance party appears to be just eyeballs. They’re everywhere. There are lights that are eyeballs, an archway of helium balloon eyeballs, nipple pasties that are eyeballs, giant inflatable eyeballs that people are tossing around like some zombie volleyball tournament. Guy’s whole BDSM black-strap kink vibe is sticking out, borderline embarrassing. I contemplate ditching him and using the whole ‘lost-in-the-crowd’ excuse but I haven’t met my hook-up yet and I’m not ready to handle this sober. Sober-ish.

“This is wild! It’s all Dr. T.J. Eckleburg up in here,” Guy shouts in my ear. The music’s so loud I can feel the bass thumping in my chest.

“What??” I reply, and he shakes his head in response, laughing.

Okay, bitch.

Luckily, I shoved my phone in my jockstrap so I feel it buzzing when it goes off. *Bingo*—a rush of relief pours over me as soon as I realize I won't be alone with just my thoughts and fucking *Guy* all night.

“Stay here!” I shout in his ear, probably closer than I need to. He winces, making a face, then snorts and gives me a thumbs-up sign. Good. Don't move. Maybe I'll come back.

I text the hook-up to meet me by the downstairs bathroom—it takes me like ten minutes to find it with the strobe going full blast. The place is packed. And then there's this eyeball festooned disco ball in the stairway, reflecting a million silver severed orbs along the walls and floor and ceiling, messing with my depth perception. I took an Adderall in the cab over, made *Guy* do the same—if he was going to keep talking I need to at least interrupt and keep up with him. I was seriously shutting down he was so goddam annoying—but now I'm beginning to regret it. Stimulation overload.

I find the bathroom but other than two twinks wrestling around in what looks like an amateur tug-of-war with their dicks there's no one else there. I look at my phone and realize I have no idea what the hook-up's actual name is. *Raul? Eduardo?* I have his contact saved as 'Skinny Dick Good Drugz', so that's no help. Fuck.

“Hey Stranger,” I hear at my back. Time for all the charm I have left in the tank. Dig deep, Daniel.

“Hey *you!*” I reply, twirling like a nine-year old fairy in his first real ballet class. I jump on him, squeezing him in a hug that's too long to be comfortable.

“Woah—” he replies, taken aback. Good.

“I’m so happy to see you!” I shout, over-loud, not giving him time to recover. “It’s been too long! My boyfriend’s upstairs! He can’t wait to meet you!”

I see the dude’s eyes glaze over a little bit at the word ‘boyfriend’—which of course, was what I was hoping for. Threesomes are great, but homos with hierarchies of feelings are another.

“Maybe later!” He replies, then quickly changes the subject, “Cool theme tonight, right? The whole ‘Evil Eye’ thing??”

“Oh!” I yell. “Is that what it is?” I laugh, uppers finally kicking in. “I just thought it was eyeballs or something!”

“Same old Daniel,” he says, then giggles. Oh fuck— now I remember. The fucking *giggling*. He sounds like a deranged clown who gets high off his own helium tanks. It’s demented. Like straight-up Woody Woodpecker drag. I pull on my jock—my dick’s already shriveling at the flashbacks.

“So— you want to meet him?” I ask, getting to the point. This is going to decide the rest of the night. Whether I’ll have a good time or not. Putting my strategy to the test. Which will work. Should work. I’m hoping.

“Maybe later!” he yells. He looks me up and down, assessing my outfit. “What are you wearing? I’m trying to find pockets and you’re not even wearing pants!”

“I just went with glitter!” I reply. I had been wearing Cari’s fur in the car ride over but dumped it in a room that was probably coat-check when we got there. So basically it’s jock strap and a crop top.

— Hey, *I’m* not the one who’s going all *Molto Mario* with the pasta lately.

“Nice—I like it!” the dude leans in to whisper in my ear. Or come as close to whispering as he can with the deafening thud overhead and the mutual masturbation moaning from five feet away. Just as he’s about to pull away I feel him slip a fistful of pills in my open palm.

“Don’t go too crazy—I want to catch up before you go,” he says, then winks. I pop a tablet in front of him, wink.

“Catch me if you can, cookie” I reply, palming his crotch with my other hand as I head back up the stairs.

...

Back upstairs, the thrum of the house music is starting to mellow. An aerialist starts spinning over the center of the dance floor, nearly naked, body-painted with big blue and white circles, dotted with black. They spiral into a cloudscape blur as she begins to revolve faster and faster. I feel the warm hug of the molly kick in and find myself staring at a tan-skinned androgynous Latin of indeterminate origin as they vogue in the middle of an admiring crowd, headdress of peacock feathers and floating peacock fans that make big gusts of air that make me shiver when they reach my heated body.

“There you are!” Guy emerges from the crowd next to me, the glitter I petulantly slathered through his beard before we left sparkling like gutter diamonds. “I thought I lost you!”

“No!” I shout back. Then smile. He’s tolerable in the rolling cascade of good feeling. “Let’s get drinks!”

He shakes his head, hee-hawing at my expression, which is probably dazed or vacant, but is pleased enough to see me recovered from my bitch fits to lead me through

the crowd to the bar. I ask for a bottle of water to start and he raises both eyebrows in disbelief.

“Water? Seriously? You’ve never turned down a drink once in the whole time I’ve known you.”

“I’m thirsty!” I yell, maybe a little too loudly. Whatever. We’re here to have fun, to relax. “It’s hot in here!”

He looks somewhat suspicious, but orders two bottles of water and a vodka soda. I jump on his back while he’s ordering, then ask the bartender for another vodka soda anyway. With a lime. Pretty please.

This seems to put him more at ease, and I can sense his tension fade as he’s running his hand up and down my back and I lean into it. *Fuck my ass*, I feel good. Really good. He grabs my ass while we’re waiting for the drinks and I stick my tongue in his ear.

“*Ew!*—what the *fuck*, Dan?!” Guy recoils, pushing me away. Uh oh. Not happy. “You’ve been a bitch for *weeks* and now all of a sudden you’re all over me? I’m getting whiplash.”

“I’m just *happy*. Which is not a fucking *crime* by the way, Guy. It’s kind of the whole point of going out tonight—*isn’t it?*” I answer. – He better not ruin this night for me. I’ve put in too much leg work, and this is all his idea in the first place.

“You’re definitely on something,” he mutters and grabs the drinks. “Is it that hard to just fucking *be* with me? Do you need to be on another planet just to stay in the same room with me now??”

Kind of.

—But even I know I can't say that. Okay. Different tactic.

“So? It's a party! You can be here with me too!” I wrap my arms around him, hanging off his neck. The whole room is swimming in lights and bodies and these really *yummy* vibrations. I think I see a pregnant woman in a bikini top with her belly painted like a blood-shot eyeball. Upside down it looks like the floating eyeball stomach is crying out half a person.

Guy tenses up and puts down the drinks before breaking the grip I have on his neck. I almost fall down but he grabs and settles me against a table before I do.

“No, I can't. I have work tomorrow. Remember? You should too—but you're using Cari as a way to get out of it for the past month.”

See—this is not fun. This is not what I came here for. It's not even what *Guy* said he wanted when he started his whole *fatwa* against staying in for another *Housewives* marathon. He's trying to change the rules on me. And I don't fucking appreciate it.

“Fine. Fine—what *do* you want to do? We're here, we *were* having fun, I'm not messing with other guys—*what?*” I demand when he rolls his eyes, snorting. Fucking donkey. Fucking *asshole*.

“I don't know, Danny. Do you even like me? I'm starting to wonder” his jaw is set under his freshly-trimmed beard, mouth a straight, grim line. I am not losing my high over this. No Ma'am.

“It's *Daniel*,” I reply, finally. “Not Dan. Not Danny. Not Danny-Boy. *Dan. Iel.*”

“Okay, *Dan-ielle*,” he responds. Through the drugs I feel a look flare across my face that makes him take a step back, spooked.

The bass drops and the whole room shakes as the music ratchets even louder. There's a boom in the corner and then confetti glitter and tissue paper Evil Eye cut-outs spray everywhere, covering the entire crowd.

I start laughing until eventually Guy does too. I smile, eyes crinkled at the corner, and grab his hand.

"I don't want to fight. I want to have fun. Do you want to have fun with me?" I ask, as much innocence as I can summon.

"Yeah—I mean, yes. I do." He replies, before smiling back.

"Do you want to dance? Please?" I ask, swinging his arm. I twirl, swinging myself under it, crafting the figurative cherry on top.

"Ugh—*okay*." He answers, rolling his eyes, play-acting like he's doing me a favor. Like me even being here with him isn't the biggest favor of all.

"You clear a path, Daddy Bear," I whisper-yell in his ear, kissing his neck on the way down. "I'll bring the drinks."

He grabs my face and shoves his tongue in my mouth—thankfully the molly is still in effect enough for me not to retch at the first contact.

He smacks my ass and I fake gasp, clutching imaginary pearls before he starts off for the middle of the dance floor that's a solid mass from where we are. It looks like what I imagine unicorn jizz would underneath a microscope, undulating, magical, gorgeous.

I take a moment to crack open my water, taking big long gulps so that when he turns he can see me. Which he does, of *course*. Fucker still doesn't trust me for a second.

I wink at him and he turns back around, heading deeper into the crowd. As soon as enough bodies accumulate between us I take the four tablets I have left, dropping one in each drink and quickly crush the other two in his water.

You want to *dance*, you punk bitch faggot?? Oh—we'll fucking *dance*. Bet your life on it.

...

It takes less than half an hour for the E to hit Guy, and I keep him distracted enough while it kicks in that he can chalk it up to the Addy and having a good time. Because he's with me, of course.

Sure, I didn't *have* to dose him. But I was already rolling and he was going to be a fucking bad time if I didn't. No one wants to drag around a soggy banana when they're trying to have fun, so why should I? Now we're *both* having fun, he's enjoying my company, and I'm—*finally*—enjoying his.

God *damn* the facial hair is a fucking delight while we're making out.

– I should have done this weeks ago.

I feel clean, euphoric—like I'm the best version of myself I'll ever be, and the abyss that seemed to open up inside me weeks ago is actually a crystal-lined cavern sending pulses out to the universe, of love, of healing, of joy and prosperity. All I've ever needed is myself—just me. All the world needs is me to fully realize my wholeness and then it can learn to heal itself from *my* healing.

I sip on my drink, keeping the good vibes flowing. I even go and buy two more for both me and Guy once he finishes his. The lights are melding with the music to form

this textured landscape that I want to reach out and touch. All these eyes are on me and my skin hums with electricity—with *life*—from their looking.

Guy reaches out to touch my face, laughing in a way that I now find hilarious, endearing even. I start laughing too and his fingers drag across the lips of my open mouth, so I grab his hand and start sucking them. His eyes roll to the back of his head in a way that looks to enjoyable to miss out on—so I shove my hand in his mouth for him to return the favor, and *holy shit*—oh Jesus—I can't wait to stick my dick in there.

We're still dancing, Chinese Finger-Trapped in a bizarre double oral fixation scenario, when I notice how sweaty he is. Like *really* sweaty. Bottom-of-the-pool sweaty. Britney Spears in 'Slave 4 U' sweaty. The image of Guy in a magenta scarf top, doing body rolls with his fuzzy bear-cave pre-gut pops into my head. I find this hilarious, by the way. So does he apparently, because he starts laughing too. Then *I* start laughing so hard that I have to pull Guy's hand out of my mouth, just so I don't choke.

He makes such a sad puppy dog face in response that, laughing, I shove my fist into the back of his mouth and throat as far as it'll go.

So yeah—vomit everywhere.

For *some* god damn reason, vomit seems to be my legacy. My inheritance.

Guy rips my hand out of his mouth—which like, seriously, I was going to do that anyway, since it's now covered in his fucking *vomit*. The music and lights are still thumping in sync, but the crowd is thinning around us. The spray hit a pretty wide radius.

“Oh my God! Is he okay?” the bikini top chick pregnant with an eyeball asks, running up to us.

“Yeah! He’s fine! Don’t worry!” I shout to everyone in general. Her eye-stomach is staring weirdly at me. Hopefully we can just move away from the spot and keep on dancing. “You’re okay, Guy, right?”

His hands are on his knees, back hunched over, the view of the sweat running down his back is Over. The. *Fucking. TOP.* He looks like a lobster that’s been fished out of a pot of boiling water by its BDSM harness.

“Dude—I don’t think he’s okay,” someone else wearing plastic eyeballs on each of their fingertips says, slipping when they try to grab Guy’s shoulder and ask him how he’s doing.

“It’s okay! I’m going to take him to the bathroom! Do you want to go to the bathroom, Guy?” I shout at him, a little pissed to leave the dancefloor, but at least this way I can get him cleaned up. Maybe even get a quick suck-n-fuck in one of the stalls. I wonder how it feels to wash your hands high on E.

Guy nods, still crouched and staring at the floor—drama queen—so I grab his hand and lead him through the crowd, swaying my hips in time to the music. When we get to the stairs I have to reach down and haul him half on top of me, but honestly the heat of his body feels so good against my bare skin I don’t even mind that much.

By the time we hit the bottom of the stairs he’s shaking so hard that everyone waiting in line clears a way. Which cool—*werk*, honey bear. Put *on* that show. Someone in the crowd shouts my name as I’m backing Guy into the bathroom, and I realize it’s the hookup from earlier.

“Hey! How’s it going?! Looks like you caught me after all,” Guy is hanging around my neck like a fucking albatross at this point—complete dead weight, absolutely no fucks left for me. Apparently.

“Yo—is he okay?” the hook-up asks, then leans in closer, “How many hits did he *take*?” The whisper against my ear is close to orgasmic.

“Um, I don’t know—two? Maybe three?” I reply, shuffling past the door while everyone feels comfortable enough to just watch me, I guess. “Could you give me a hand with him?”

The hookup follows me inside. “Fucking *THREE*?!” he explodes, as soon as the door swings shut behind him. “He took three whole pills?! Are you *serious*?”

Uh, oh. Okay, Daniel. Downplay. It doesn’t have to be that serious. “No! Are you kidding? No. Who would take three pills. No, he took like, three sips of the drink I put it in. One pill. For each of the drinks.”

“Oh my god—I thought I was going to have to call 911. That I was about to be *arrested*,” the hookup moans, rubbing his face and shaved head before exhaling through closed fingers.

“Um, the stall door? Can you get it?” I ask, distracting both of us from what’s happening to Guy’s face. The hookup holds open the door and I pivot Guy into it, then reach up to close the door behind me.

“A little privacy, please” I say, and wink at him. Or at least I think I’m winking. My whole face feels like its lighting up like a Christmas Tree.

“Okay—yeah. Okay. I’ll uh, meet you outside then?” he asks as he releases the door, which I shut immediately.

“Sounds good!” I reply, before locking it and turning to plop Guy ass-down on the toilet in front of me.

“Come on, Guy. Wake up!” I shout, clapping my hands in front of him. His eyes are all white now. Every last strand of hair on his body is soaked with sweat. “Wake up. Wake *up!*” No dice. His head lolls back on his shoulders. “WAKE! THE FUCK! UP!” I bellow. I slap at his face trying to get a reaction. It looks like I’m finally getting somewhere when he lurches forward and starts to puke again. I brace myself for impact, closing my eyes. When nothing happens I look down at him, trying to assess the damage.

—Nope. Not puke. Foam. Saliva foam. Guy’s fucking foaming at the *mouth*.

Fuck my life. – Why does this shit always happen to *me*?

Then Guy starts convulsing, shaking so bad he falls off the toilet to the floor. He bangs the back of his head enough times against that stall that I grab him by the knees and pull forward so he can lie flat. His head hits the floor with a sound that is *not* – *very*— *cool*.

Fucking. Yikes.

He shudders around, eyes white, mouth foaming white, bone pale and blotchy red at once. He rolls his head to the side and coughs, firing off a sticky trail of spit. Then he’s still. Very still.

— Too still.

I unbolt the stall door and close it behind me. From the outside the bathroom’s dimly lit enough that you would only be able to tell someone’s lying there if you were looking. I think, then rethink. I reopen the door and pat his pants for his wallet and phone. His eyes are closed. He could be sleeping. He probably is sleeping. He’s fine.

I close the stall door again, taking the phone and wallet, and throw them in the trash. Then I wash my hands. By the time I open the bathroom door I know my face is collected, composed—miraculous.

“Hey, is your boyfriend going to be okay?” the hookup’s lingering outside the door. Why would he give me five pills to begin with? Did I *say* I came with five other people? Or just *one*?

“Yeah—he’s fine. Well, he got sick. Obviously. He got upset because he didn’t want me to watch him puke and shit his pants and stuff, so I texted our friend upstairs and she’s going to come and take him home.”

I smile. I fucking *dazzle*.

“You sure? He didn’t look so good,” the hookup asks, getting nosy. He’s craning his neck to look around me, as if he’s thinking about going into the bathroom to check for himself.

“Yes.” I say, coldly now, so he gets the picture. “Besides, I thought it was *me* you were planning on seeing tonight, wasn’t it? Well—now I’m free.” I run my fingers across his shoulder, down his arm. The high has faded a little from the scene in the bathroom, but I’m not going to lie—I still feel pretty goddam *fantastic*.

“Free, huh?” the hookup’s eyes meet mine, a smirk beginning to form at the corner of his mouth. The disco-ball of reflective eyeballs whirs several flights above us.

“Free as a bird,” I reply. “So—what were you thinking? Your place, or mine?”

I’m already leaving the stairwell when I hear shouts for help and a general ruckus starting up downstairs near the bathroom. Or I think I do. Hard to tell with the drugs. I might just be imagining it.

...

I leave hookup's place in the morning—I still can't remember his name, plus it got to the point that it would just be awkward, not to mention *rude*, to ask—and I'm trying to figure out where the hell I am by walking to nearest elevated track of the subway.

Which—get ready for hilarity—turns out to be *Queens*. Fucking *Queens*. As if Brooklyn wasn't bad enough. My phone is dead—of fucking *course*—so I have nothing to look at except other people's faces on the train. And *woof*. I don't know if there's a secret metric where the fatter and more repulsive you are the further you have to live from 14th Street, but the she-beast next to me is more than three of me put together. Like seriously, she's big enough to just unhinge her jaw and swallow me. Definitely has the jowls for it.

Jesus, my asshole's on *fire*. I flip both sides of the coin, if you know what I mean. Depending on the situation. But it's been a while and dude last night was *rough*. Which—yeah, sure I can normally get into. I was into it at the time, last night. But now that I'm on a bumpy ass train getting jostled next to SNAP's finest it doesn't feel like my best decision making.

By some weird twist of fate—luck *finally* making its appearance this morning—I only need to take this one train to get back to Cari's. It's like whoever designed this amusement park shitshow horrorhouse of a city decided to string all the ganked parts together like a cheap necklace, keeping it all contained. Maybe it's more like a colon, actually. Or a human centipede.

Anyway, here I am, probably with a full rosebud flapping around inside hookup's basketball shorts—which yes, I did technically take without permissions, but it's not like even *he* would expect me to get home in a fucking *jock strap*. That's when I realize I left Cari's fur at the warehouse. Fuck. Fuck fuck *fuck*. I wonder what time it is—if it's late she might already be at the studio. Or she could have slept there.

Jesus, I hope she slept there. I don't want to have to deal with any unpleasantness between us when we're this close to the opening.

I look around the train for the time, but it's one of the ancient rumbly ones from like, Ed Koch times. Any gays around that I can ask for the time? That's a joke, by the way. No one who's gay that I would talk to lives in Queens. Or at least, not *this* far into Queens.

The next time Serta NotSoPerfect PillowTopPlus slams into me, I go to shoot my most withering cunt glare, I notice there, on her swollen little wrist, nearly cutting off the circulation—I imagine—is a goddam Apple Watch. A *new* one. Jesus fucking *Christ*. What the fuck is the world coming to? *I* have to steal twenty bucks from a one-night stand's wallet to get subway fare and a double latte and *this chick*—this chick!—has a four *hundred* dollar watch! In. *Rose. Gold.* – Limited edition. I know my mood is gutter-crashing from the molly, but this shit is every damn day ridiculous.

“—What.”

Um, I'm sorry—did this Build-A-Beast come to life just fucking *snarl* at me?

I allow my head to jerk back in offense. I blink, full eyelashes. Twice in a row. Punctuated.

“Excuse me?” I ask, then blink again for full measure. Cunt.

“What the fuck are you staring at?” she asks, somewhat aggressively I might add, then ignores the fact that she immediately pins my hips against the guard rail with the next turn. With her oh, two *hundred* superfluous pounds of muffin top? Yeah. That. That happened. And I noticed it.

“I wasn’t. Staring.” I reply, over-enunciating for full faggotry. Homos love us some T’s—you haven’t noticed that yet?

“Yeah. You *were*,” she says, staring down her neck rolls at me. Which I guess is easy to do when you’re carting around two fucking couch cushions as a booster seat and pretending it’s an ass.

“Oh—was I?” I ask, prettily, mildly. She sucks her teeth and turns the other way.

“I’m sorry, I was just wondering what time it is,” she rotates her fat baby head like I asked her a question. Let the record show, I fucking did *not*.

“WHAT” – she hollers this, loud enough for the entire train to hear. Jesus *Christ*.

“Your watch—I was wondering what time it is.”

See, something about me is, I can either let something go, or I really fucking *can’t*. And it’s hard to tell where the line is going to fall until it does. Right now—nothing on earth matters more than forcing this bitch to tell me what time it is. –
Literally, nothing.

She makes a disapproving gurgle somewhere deep in the fatty crevices of her throat—honestly, I’m sure her throat is actually *lined* with fat. Like bacon grease—and stares straight ahead, ignoring me.

The other people on the train return to their phones and mobile game systems—always without headphones outside of Manhattan proper, have you ever noticed that—and assume the confrontation’s over. Well, cupcakes—think again.

Tap, tap.

My finger actually *sinks* into her shoulder flesh—like I’m checking on a roast. It’s *gross*—honestly, goose-bumps and hair-on-the-back-of-your-neck disgusting—but when she spins around to face me and I see her face it’s worth it.

“The *FUCK* you want, you fucking *fairy*?” she screams, spit flying, full-on Jabba in his death throes.

“I want to know what *time* it is!” I shout back. Everyone’s staring. Good. *And* she used a hate slur. Sit back and let social pressure do its work.

She rolls her eyes, sucks her teeth again. Tries to jangle her foot which only sloshes her whole semi-solid body against me in rippling tides. But I don’t back down. Keep staring. Which, of *course*, works, because now everyone else is too.

“It’s 8:25.” She turns to stare straight ahead again, back to ignoring me, thinking we’re done. But I feel like twice-baked garbage and for the first time today I’m having the barest whisper of fun.

I lean in, which isn’t hard to do since basically her body is engulfing the entire right side of mine, like an amoeba.

“I like your watch by the way. Apple. Is it new?” I ask, *sotto voce*.

She snorts. Deep enough that I feel my arm and shoulder echo the vibrations.

“*Why*—you want to steal it or something?! she asks, then turns away as the doors open. My stop’s two stations away.

Not if you keep your eyes open. —Bitch.

...

When I walk through the door, I can tell Cari's still home. The smell. I've looked for the perfume she wears in her room but I can't tell what it is. Like ozone maybe. With a hint of lemon peel. Or caramel that's about to burn.

I kick off my shoes so she hears me and walk into the main room, curated nonchalance..

"Daniel, that you?" I hear from the kitchen. Then clattering. Then a crash. "Fuck! ¡Chingate madre, pinche plato!"

"Everything all right in there?" I call while looking for a free phone charger. Cari keeps them in every other outlet. I've only taken and left one at work, another at Guy's, so there should still be plenty

"I broke a dish and fucking burned myself," she shouts, then appears in the kitchen doorway, flapping a *hideous* housedress with a giant black-brown stain on it. Jesus—glad I never saw *that*, hanging in her closet. I probably wouldn't have been friends with her.

"Shit, Cari—you look..." I say, then stop. "Happy to see me?"

"*Basta*—enough," she mutters, holding her shit-smeared Mumu in front of her with one hand while climbing the stair-ladder to her bedroom with the other. "I was working all night. Your boss sent me a half dozen emails in the last twelve hours, and I *still* have no idea what to do with that fucking snake section."

“Wait—*Marilyn* emailed you? My boss, Marilyn?” I say, whipping my head around from the baseboard, mid-search for a charger on my hands and knees. “How the fuck is Marilyn emailing you? I didn’t give her any of your contact info.”

“From my website!” Cari calls from the loft. “She said because you’re out of the office so much lately that she thought it was important for us to talk. About the show.”

Holy fucking flaming shitballs. This isn’t good.

“—you know, the one that’s happening in two days? That show?” Cari reminds me, reappearing in paint-splatter overalls and what suspiciously looks like one of Guy’s castoff t-shirts. As if I need reminding.

“Yeah, Cari. I’m aware. – It’s my ass on the line too, by the way.” I reply, petulant, then return to searching for a charger. Ostensibly. But really, I’m buying time.

“Where did you end up last night? I tried calling. Guy said you were dancing in Bushwick?”

“—Guy?” I ask. “... have you heard from him?”

“Not since around nine or ten last night,” she replies. I ‘find’ a charger that’s been a foot away from me for the past five minutes, plug in my phone and stand up. Maybe a little slower than usual.

“Oh.” I say, and leave it at that. I sit down on the couch. “You haven’t made coffee yet, have you?”

“The *cafeteria*’s on the stove,” she responds. I finally take a good solid look at her. Her hair’s wet from the shower, combed back and close to her head. She seems smaller somehow. Diminished.

“Could you make me a cup?” I ask. “I’ve had a horrible fucking night. And morning. God—wait till I tell you about the fucking bitch on the train—”

“So wait, Guy’s not with you? Or you left him back at his place?” she asks from the kitchen. Again, clattering. But at least she doesn’t break anything this time.

“No, Guy is not with me. Jesus, Cari—you two are such butt buddies sometimes. Am I not your friend too?”

I’m surprised at the amount of anger in my voice. Or how much of it there is. I was only planning for a little.

I look up when I feel her standing next to me, mug in hand. She looks drab, her hair damp with water, weighted.

“Yes. You’re my friend. I didn’t say you weren’t,” she replies, and hands me the coffee.

I grab it—a touch more brusquely than I mean too—*Jesus*, what is *with* me today?—and sip, focusing on the floor. My tongue feels scalded. I put it down by my feet.

“I can’t drink this,” I tell her. “It’s too hot.”

She crouches in front of me to reach my eyeline. “What’s going on with you, Daniel? Sure, I’ve known Guy for longer. Decades, practically. We’re important to each other. But that doesn’t mean you’re not important to me too.” At this she reaches out to place a hand on my knee, which I move out of reach.

“Yeah? You sure about that? Sure it’s not just convenient that I’m dating him and helping you with your work, getting you your *first* gallery show—with *my* art contacts,

by the way. Sure that's not why I'm important to you, Cari? That you're not using me?" I stand up, walking over to the nearest picture window.

"Yes. I'm fairly certain. Especially since you've been living in my apartment rent-free for over a month and paying for nearly everything besides that," she replies to my back, tone cool and even.

*Fuck. Fuck. Why isn't this working. Whatever—it **isn't** working. That's what matters. Find another tactic, Daniel. Another way in.*

—Come clean.

"I'm sorry, Cari. It's just..." I trail off, staring through the window. Hoping a miracle materializes on one of the street corners below to bless me with a way out of this. Fuck—why does shit like this always happen to *me*?

Then—lightning strikes.

"Guy and I—we broke up last night. It was bad. And now I'm acting like an asshole because I'm scared that you won't want to be my friend anymore," I turn to look at her, the sharp sunlight from outside causing my eyes water. "I'm sorry, Cari. Saying that out loud makes me realize how stupid that sounds. You know I love you"

"Oh, Daniel," she sighs, and walks over to give me a hug. Up close she smells more like ditch water now, like dirty potatoes soaking in the sink about to be peeled.

"What happened? This is crazy! You two are so close! And happy!"

I sniff, burying my face into her shoulder. That smells better than her hair, at least.

“He’s really angry. I think. I slept over at a friend’s place last night because he made *such* a scene.”

“Oh no,” Cari replies. She starts to stroke my back, which, truth be told, feels *lovely*. I could do this all day. “I’ve been afraid of this. You’re so social and Guy is so…”

Dead? I think, thankfully before my stupid mouth says it.

“—I don’t know. He can be jealous. It’s happened before. And I know he’s said he feels insecure sometimes. With you. That he felt more than you did.”

Wait—what? Seriously? Wow. I guess I didn’t give him enough credit. Turns out he’s more perceptive than I thought. Or was.

Meh. Too late now.

“Which is *not* true!” I shout, pushing her away from me, but gently enough. “You should have seen him, Cari! He was *such* a dick! We ran into my friend at the bar, and then he went to the bathroom and took fucking *forever* so I ended up dancing with my friend—and honestly, we were *just* catching up! It wasn’t like I was sucking his dick or anything!”

I peer across at her from under my lashes and see her face, radiating sympathy and understanding. A wet-look Madonna.

“The next thing I know we’re having a fucking *shouting match* out on the street—where he also fucking *pushed* me by the way, and I fell down. We were both just drunk and fucked-up and I thought it would blow over, but then he was all, ‘you can find another place to sleep tonight’ and ran off and I was just wandering around in the streets, calling his name, and, and—” I turn away, heaving some great, realistic gasps, incidentally “—and then some fucking punk ran up to me and *stole your coat!*”

At this I throw myself on the couch—facedown, of course—and rub my face in the cushions. I can't cry on command but whatever horrible fabric this thing is upholstered in has made my ass itch enough for weeks so I know that I'm in for at least some slight facial redness and irritation. I squeeze my eyes shut rub my face into it again, hoping for swelling.

"This is horrible, Daniel," Cari murmurs, sitting on the edge of the couch to run her fingers through my hair. Man, she is just hitting *all* my physical buttons today. "At least I know why I didn't hear back from him. Or you."

"My phone died," I say, though it's hard to tell what she hears since I'm muffled by the couch cushion. "Right after your coat got stolen."

Surprise of the century—she starts laughing. I'm shocked enough that I roll over to look up at her incredulously. "You're *laughing* at me, seriously?"

"Well, you have to admit—you're being a little ridiculous." I huff and scramble to sit up. This cunt—this is Oscar-worthy shit over here.

"I don't care about the stupid coat," she replies, soothingly, and puts her arm around my shoulders. "I care about you. And Guy. Both of you," she leans her head against me when I stiffen at the last part. "*—and* each of you. Separately. Did he say where he was going? Back home, or...?" she trails off.

I sniff, rub the miniscule snot the couch scored me on the back of my hand. "I don't know—my phone died!" When I can tell that's not enough to completely satisfy her, I huff again. "In the middle of everything he kept shouting that he needed distance from me—that I'm too close—that he needed *space*."

“Oh. He didn’t mention anything about his brother? In Boston? I know he was planning to visit, you know—” I turn to face her and see she’s struggling, “before uh, before... he met you.”

“Maybe.” I say. Then pout. – Seriously, no one can beat my pouting game. Not even babies. “We were both drunk. It’s hard to remember.”

She starts rubbing my back again, and though it’s brisker this time, I honestly don’t want her to stop. Like ever. When she hits a knot that’s probably a gift from my subway slammer I groan in pleasure. Which, thankfully, she finds amusing enough to laugh at. A little.

“Why don’t we both give Guy his space, and then if neither of us hears from him, I’ll reach out and try to smooth this all over. Okay?” She’s looking at me like I’m a cranky toddler. Which I don’t mind all that much, really. I love getting taken care of.

“Okay,” I say. With the show in two days that should give me enough time. If I keep her busy. And I work the angles right.

“Do you want me to come by the studio today? Help you out with the section? I’m the one who saw it in the first place,” I offer. Then realizing, soften it, “you know, I’m the one who put in this mess to begin with.”

“No, no. It’s close. I can feel it. I was just frustrated before, I guess. Or nervous, maybe. I usually get four of five texts from Guy by this time of the day, if he doesn’t come by himself before work.”

Seriously?—The fuck kind of codependent Siamese brother-sister dynamic is that?

“You’re not going to stop being my friend because of this, right? Like you’re not going to just stop talking to me if Guy runs off to his brother or wherever or tells you not to be friends with me anymore,” I blurt out, or seem to. Okay, *yes*—it’s a little heavy handed. I’m aware of this. But you wouldn’t believe the kind of leverage promises like this have in future arguments. The things guilt does to average people is absolutely mind-boggling.

“Oh Daniel,” Cari squeezes my shoulder and sighs like a sad dollar-store balloon leaking the last hiss of air it needs to stay afloat. She pushes herself off the couch and kneels at my feet. Honestly, my dick twitches a little when I see it, but like I’ve said, the way I feel about Cari is confusing sometimes. And I love oral. – Sue me.

She grabs both my hands and kisses the back of them—not helpful. I resist the urge to cross my leg over my growing semi and gritting my teeth, meet her eyes.

“I will never betray you. I will never discard you. I already told you when we were talking, that time, in my studio,” she grips my hands closer when I pull away at the mention. – Weird reflex. I force myself to relax.

“I don’t want you to hide. I don’t want to hide either. Life is cruel, sometimes. And is a mess *always*. But as long as we have honesty between us, there’s nothing to fear. Do you understand what I’m telling you, Daniel?”

That you’re saying we’ll still be friends as long as you don’t find out that I’m lying about your best friend OD-ing in a men’s bathroom last night. Sure. – Got it.

I nod, but she squeezes my hands harder.

“We’re honest with each other, yes? If you’re telling me the truth you have nothing to hide.”

Her eyes are tunneling into mine, looking for something I hope I don't have to actually answer with. That she'll be satisfied with whatever she sees. For once I hope the hollow void inside me is all that she can see.

"I know. – I'm telling you the truth, Cari."

"Well, then," she says before patting my hands and fighting to get herself to her feet. "We have an understanding. And I have work to get to— Fuck, why did that hurt so much? I don't want to be this old."

Too late, I think, for the second time that day.

...

Cari's safely out of the apartment for nearly five minutes before I remember my phone—still attached to its charger on the other side of the room. It should have enough battery by now that I can get to any updates about Guy before she does.

No texts from him. Well—that's not a good sign. What do people do in these situations? Google 'drug deaths' + 'bushwick' + 'eyeball rave'? No—that seems like it would look incriminating in my browser history. Call hospitals? Morgues? How many morgues are there in New York City? Just one, right? Like one big one?

And then—and its little things like this that remind me that I'm on the right track, that the universe is behind me and there's no setback I can't overcome—an email notification pops up. From Marilyn. – I almost forgot with the whole Guy's-probably-dead cover up scenario.

The returned contracts I sent her two weeks ago. Signed *and* notarized. That must have been fun without me there. Maybe she got a new assistant. And she's made me an appointment for a phone interview tomorrow with some art blogger, who's doing a

listicle of 30 gallerists under 30 on spec for some magazine. It's oddly thoughtful of Marilyn, really. Humble, even. I'm glad she's not trying to push me out—hogging the spotlight. I mean, I *am* the main reason this show is happening in the first place. Like I'm basically saving her gallery. So it's smart of her really—even if it is middling press. It's not *Interview*, but it's something.

And you know what I can make out of something? Fucking *everything*, sweet cheeks.

...

Cari's gone by the time I get up the next day. She left enough coffee for me though, so I forgive her for leaving without breakfast. I debate about going to the studio to see whether she's *actually* got the last section handled before I realize that it's almost noon and I have the interview in under an hour.

Most people wouldn't prepare for a phone interview—at least not physically—but appearance is important. Appearance is *crucial*. If you haven't learned anything else from me by this point, learn that now. You make the person you want to be, that other people see. And if other people see it—pick up what you're putting down, so to speak—then that's what you actually *are*. What you become.

Or you can, if you know what you're doing.

I'm longer in the shower than I anticipated—so I email the blogger to see if he's okay with pushing back an hour or so—big rush to the finish, working in collaboration with the artist, etc, etc.

Aaannd—apparently the interviewer is a she. – Huh. Go figure. Well I can fag a hag with the best of them. Shouldn't be a problem.

I'm primped and coiffed and ready to go—it's almost interview time—wow, the Sun's setting early these days—when I realize I let the whole 'Marilyn finding Cari through her website' thing go without interrogating further. Maybe I *should* go into work tomorrow. Poke around. Clean up any loose ends.

It's a good thing I went through the whole visual preparation process—because when the new time arrives the blogger actually *FaceTime*'s me. With no advance notice. I mean, honestly, when people talk about the professionalization of journalism going to hell, I didn't think it would be *this* bad.

When she comes onscreen, the face that pops up ends up meeting the lowered expectation. Typical oversize glasses, brown hair in a top knot. Jesus—is that a *Peter Pan collar*? But I smile at full volume, go through the motions. Breeze through the personal background, lean heavily on references, future ambitions, the difficulties navigating the art world as an underestimated newcomer, the importance of discovering fresh talent and perspectives to insiders, to art generally, and the role that a budding curator—and future gallerist/agent—like me can have on the work. Basically, my greatest hits. Which I'm hitting pitch-for-pitch, by the way. Pretty perfectly.

“So what you're saying is, that more than the act of scouting, “mere discovery” as you put it, your work with Cari is closer to collaboration, yes?”

“Well, yes, sure. That is what I said. Already.”

“But, forgive me and feel free to correct this assumption, the work exists *before* you encounter it, no?”

“Well—yeah. Of course it does. I’m sorry, was that not obvious? I mean, about art as a whole. Throughout time.”

“Sure, but other than the abstract notion of the viewer affecting the work in the act of viewing it—a glorified version of the observer’s paradox, if you will—then how is what you’re describing, what you term as... ‘your unique form of collaborative curation’, how is that any different than say, *creative* curation, or intimate curation.”

Um—she can’t be serious with this, can she? First with the dishwater brown ballerina bun and now she’s actually trying to bust my balls? For a listicle?

“I mean—”

“Because if you’re familiar with system of patronage and how it functioned in previous centuries, some of the Masters best-known, most celebrated works were not only curated by their patrons, but commissioned by them, inspired by them—in everything from subject matter to medium, material, style—”

“Look, did Leonardo Da Vinci paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or did the Pope? Obviously it was Da Vinci, but *without* that guiding hand—”

“Did you—I’m sorry, the connection is probably poor. You did say Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel, not Da Vinci. I’m sorry. I want to make sure I have everything I’m taking down accurately.”

“Of *course* I said Michelangelo—what do I look like? Some neophyte? Some *idiot?*”

She pauses and jots down a quick note on a piece of paper I can’t see. “No, certainly not. Like I said, I think the connection’s a bit faulty.”

“*Very* faulty. Are you in your office by the way? Or at home?”

“Excuse me?”

“Or a coffee shop? I don’t know, I’m picking up a ton of background noise. Wanted to check. For the connection.”

“I’m in my office,” she replies, a little curtly.

“Right. So. Like I was saying—yes, in the past there was a hierarchy of values assigned by patrons to the work. Sure. That’s why we needed the moderns to come and democratize the artform, breathe new life into it, make it accessible to the common man. But now we’re in danger of that happening all over again. And it’s critical now, more than ever, as artists become so enamored with the capitalist designation of what is ‘good’ or what is ‘bad’ to intervene with emerging creative voices, preserving them from that kind of harm, absolutely, but *also* staying their hands if their work becomes too insulated from the universal audience, too precious. Or even worse—too understood.”

There. Suck on that sound-byte, darling. I’m sure the connection was just dandy for that one.

“So you’re saying that you’re occupying that role now? Preventing this insulation, or... over-easy accessibility?”

I smile, since now there’s charm to spare. “‘Over-easy accessibility’. I like that. I might use it. For the opening tomorrow night.”

She smiles back, but tighter, smaller. “Please feel free.”

“I will.” The smile cinches tighter. Our mouths are both borderline pursed.

“Right, so—with this current installation, you feel you’ve intervened in this way?”

“I would rephrase it to *persevered* in this way, but yes. I do.”

“Would you mind citing a specific example?”

“Not at all. I’d be happy to. When I first saw Cari’s work, I immediately recognized its potential, but I similarly recognized flaws as well. In fact, we’ve been in dialogue about the final piece of it and the amount of work I’m doing amounts to corrective restoration. But for her original intention. You see, with artists, they can become so focused on the forest that they don’t see the trees—”

“—Daniel, are you home? Who are you talking to? Is *Guy* here?”

Fuck fuck fuckity fuck.

“I’m so sorry, Melody—”

“It’s Melanie, act—”

“I had no idea how late it’s gotten and I’m needed at the studio. Big day tomorrow, and all that. I’m sure you understand—”

I cut little Mel off mid-sentence, just beating Cari as she walks into the room. She’s covered in soot or something. Maybe grease. All the way up to her elbows. And a spot on her face. She looks even more grizzled than she did this morning.

“Oh. There’s no one here. Who were you talking to?” She walks to kitchen, grabs a wine glass then opens the fridge. “I could have sworn I still had half a bottle of Sancerre in here.”

You mean the one I drank this afternoon after showering?

“I didn’t see anything,” I answer, then flop on the couch. “I was talking to Marilyn. Ironing out logistics for transporting everything.”

“Oh.” Cari replies, then scrunches up her face and rubs her hands all over it. Oh *sweet Jesus*—now there’s streaks instead of a spot. Like four of them.

“You look like you’ve had a day. Are you feeling okay?”

“—Yeah,” she sighs, then flops down on the couch next to me. “Just tired.”

“Have you heard from Guy at all?” I ask, making sure I don’t clench my hands or tighten up in any way while I ask it.

“Ugh—no. I haven’t. I left another voicemail after we spoke, but I’ve been so wrapped up in the work. I forgot,” she leans forward, runs her hands through her hair.

Oh my gosh—stop fucking doing that. Are you retarded? Do you not see the goddam grease all over your hands?

“I’m a bad friend,” she mutters, head still in your hands.

“No—*no*. You are fucking *not*. You’re a *great* friend, Cari. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

She nods but doesn’t move. Oh fuck me. She’s going to make me do the whole morning over again, but this time reversed, isn’t she? No one’s vacuumed this floor the entire time I’ve been here.

But—I want to do this. For the show. For myself. Of course. But also for Cari too. She wouldn’t be where she is without me, but I wouldn’t be here without here either. I mean, probably.

So I kneel. – Nope, too gross. I squat down in front of her, and I grab her hands like she did mine this morning, fucked up grease stains and all.

“Look at me—*hey. Look at me*. I mean it okay? You’re a good person. You’re a *wonderful* friend. I’m thankful for every day I get to spend with you since I met you.”

She raises her head enough to look me in the eye. I can see the start of a fire, building back up.

“Honest?” she asks.

“Honest.” I reply. And to my surprise I realize I mean it.

...

I wake up late. Mouth sour-dry and muscle-twisted. Back to the couch. Back to being hungover on the couch. I had left to get two bottles of cheap bodega wine for Cari to help her relax—that *I* bought, incidentally, with my own money—hoping to get her mind off Guy and back on herself and her work. I think I ended up drinking most of it though, but I got at least a few glasses in her, tucking *her* into bed for once.

It feels... *good* to be supportive, to be a good friend. To show up for a person and be present—bear witness, if you will, when you know they need it. That you’re helping in a way that no one else could. Not at that moment. It creates a bond, an understanding—a bundle of feeling, in time, that becomes its own little world in memory. No one else can touch that. No one else could *do* that. Not what I did for her—what I’m *doing* for her. Not even Guy. No one. Just me.

It takes me longer to get going than usual—I’m going to charge that couch with first degree murder of my back. The first thing I’m going to get Cari to buy after this show is over is a nice, suede gray sectional. The kind that has a long cushy end that’s basically a bed already so you don’t even need to use the pull out. And a flat screen. Obviously.

I nuke a cup of her cold, leftover coffee from the morning and find a note from her on the fridge door when I go for the half-and-half.

—She’s in the studio all day. Well, *yeah*—I should hope so. Does this mean she wants me to come by? I check the clock on the oven, see that it’s already two in the afternoon. Hmm.

On one hand, I need to cover my ass with this whole Guy situation. He turned into an even bigger disaster than I thought. I know I should get ahead of it, prevent any scenario where I’m caught with my pants down, especially publicly, but also—I’m really not in the mood for it. Not today. I’m still getting tingles from my exchange with Cari last night, and even thinking about Guy is pissing me off. Fuck, my head hurts. Before I decide on anything I need to find some painkillers.

And then there’s the show. Which is *tomorrow*. Which is more important to both Cari and I than Guy will ever be. And sure, I mostly trust Cari when she says the last section will be ready, it’ll be ready, but—

How do I put this? Artists are *tricky* when it comes to their own work? They have blind spots. I mean, I’m not singling out Cari here, obviously, she’s one of my favorite people in the world right now, but—okay, fine. Artists are liars. They get so preoccupied with the *vision* or whatever the fuck in their own self-obsessed heads that they forget *the work*. Which is what *matters*.

And they forget the audience. The viewer. The ones who are the *buying* it. The grease stains last night are arguably a good sign, but do I trust her enough to finish on her own? Enough to be sure that she’s not having some *enfant terrible* breakdown in her studio right this second, when I could be there, guiding her hand, forcing her to finish, her cell phone within easy reach for her to send out the Bat signal?

I grab my phone.

Hey love, checking in? How ru today? Work coming along?

Let the line dangle. See if she picks up. I shower, check behind the bathroom mirror for the selection of pills. Fucking *Advil*? Seriously? I rifle through, hoping for something stronger, but nope. Bupkis.

There is an unmarked amber bottle half-full of some viscous oil concoction. I open it, sniff—Cari. Well. At least I've uncovered her secret perfume.

I close the mirror, wipe the shower-fog of the glass, and take a moment to admire myself. Lookin' good. Lookin' *sharp*. Also, wow—Guy's haircut is still holding up pretty well. Too bad—probably not going to get another one anytime soon.

Wait—*Guy*. Guy has—had, whatever—*great* drugs. I bet that twitchy little basket case has half a pharmacy in his bathroom. I mean, I *did* leave some clothes there. It couldn't be *that* suspicious if I stop by the building, ask the door guy to let me in. And that way I can kill two birds with one stone—I mean, for all I know he made it back to his place and has been sleeping for the past two days. *I've* definitely been there.

I leave the bathroom to check my phone. Missed call from Marilyn. Nothing from Cari.

I look outside, see the saffron rays of late afternoon. Approaching golden hour. Two visits then. You know what they say, devil's work and all that jazz.

...

I slip into Guy's no problem. The doorman didn't even listen to the whole 'clothing retrieval, ex-boyfriend' spiel. Brooklyn, I guess. Get what you pay for.

So—yeah. Guy's *not* here. Doesn't look like he has been either—he's a neat freak and the clothes I was wearing before the party are still haphazard on the floor. I grab my

pants, a cute baseball cap of his, but going through his closet doesn't yield any great finds so I stop to check my phone. No response from Cari. No messages at all. Huh. At least I'm reminded of the time, so I shift to the bathroom and peruse the collection. I swipe his Ativan—*Jesus* is that a half-full script of *Percocet*, what the fuck Guy, were you molested as a kid or something?—then, remembering the headache, take a swig of codeine from a near-empty bottle and depart for Cari's studio.

She still hasn't answered my texts and all the calls I'm making to her to let me into the building are going straight to voicemail. Either her phone is dead or off. Eventually some overall aficionado leaves and I slip in after her, skipping steps as I head up the stairs to the studio. Seriously—if Cari hasn't had a breakthrough we'll both be genuinely *fucked*, but I don't know. I'm more excited than nervous. I don't really get nervous. It's smarter to have a plan.

The door is shut this time. I pull the big industrial handle and it doesn't budge. Locked. *Okay*. Well, no way to avoid me banging on a door when it's eight feet high and made of metal. I only bang five or six times before she opens it. She resembles a bleached dandelion, outlined by the darkness of the room behind her. Her pupils are huge and she's wearing a welder's mask with the visor pulled up. She squints at me, floundering to see in the light.

“Daniel? What time is it? Is everything okay?”

“You didn't answer your phone. I've been worried,” I say. I try to surreptitiously glimpse over her shoulder at whatever she's working on, but it's pitch black in there. Nothing's turned on.

“Oh—yeah. Everything’s fine. Almost done—Marilyn said she tried to call you but got your voicemail. Her guys are going to be here by seven to pick everything up, then I’m installing everything in the studio tomorrow. Probably early.”

“Right. Of course. Yeah I told Marilyn she should push the move-in up, give you time in the gallery. Normally we do it earlier but I know how crazy this week has been and that you needed more time for that section.”

She nods, more to herself than me. Honestly the girl looks like she’s in another dimension.

“What time is it? Did you already say?”

I hold back the bitchy retort. Client *relationships*. I check my phone.

“Almost five,” I reply. “What are you working on? That section? Can I see?”

“Have you heard anything from Guy?” – We both ask our questions at the same time.

“No.” I answer. Sure, it’s curt. But I’m still touchy from the other night. She should know that.

“Oh,” she says. *Again*. “It’s weird to not hear from him for this long. Maybe I should call his brother, check to see if he’s there.”

“I think your phone is dead,” I say, “I tried calling a bunch of times before coming here. You didn’t bring a charger, did you?” I ask. I *would* look around the room but I can’t see a fucking foot into it.

“Ugh, *no*. I didn’t. I think I’m losing them,” she answers.

“Listen—I’m sure Guy is fine,” I tell her. *The hell I do.* “And you have two hours before the gallery movers come. Can I get you anything? Food? Coffee? I can bring some of my Adderall from home if you want”

“—No, no, no” Cari interrupts. “No, I don’t need anything. I’m fine. I just need to get back, focus.” She smiles tightly. Mouth closed. It’s short-lived. And more grim than I’d like. “And finish. Obviously.”

“Okay.” I answer. To what I’m not sure. I know asking to see anything will be pushing it. There’s not much of anything I can do. Other than pretend.

“Alright, well. I’ll go home then and if you need something you can text?”

No, wait. Shit—her phone doesn’t have any battery. And I don’t want it to.

“Or maybe I’ll go to the gallery, help set up, make sure everything’s on track? Are you going to come with the movers?”

She shakes her head. “No, I haven’t slept in... I don’t know how long. Actually, if you want to go there, make sure everything’s accounted for and undamaged—Marilyn’s new assistant should have the manifest—that would help. Then I can go home when this is done and not worry about anything over there since you’re handling it. That way I can sleep tonight—”

“—and be fresh for finishing the installation tomorrow morning.” I finish the thought for her. “Got it. Okay. Well, I’ll go do that then.” I reach for her hand. It feels grimy and wooden at the same time, like a grotesque, homespun machine. The studio is cold and dark but reeks of something—maybe gasoline. It’s an odd disconnect. “Don’t go too crazy, Cari. You’re too important.”

She scrunches my hand in a way that's probably meant to be reassuring but feels like a stranded alien attempting its first handshake. When she lets go, I turn to leave, and I hear the door close behind me before I've left the threshold.

...

Marilyn's gone when I get to the gallery around six, but her new assistant is there. And it looks like she might be learning from experience because she finally ditches the recent-Vassar-graduate-prototype and got herself a tight little twink. He's blond and beautiful and dumber than a post, so our dynamic should work out nicely. Thankfully he's been prepped to know who I am and how to defer accordingly, so he takes my dinner order and has it brought and cleaned up by the time the trucks arrive.

You know, people get huffy and want to write off new talent, especially if they're young and objectively good-looking like I am, if they're not all ass-kissy and type-A. But those kinds of people have zero imagination. Both of them—the hire-ers *and* the hire-ees. What kind of idiot would jizz themselves over post-its and label-makers have fucking panic attacks at being on time when five minutes hasn't made a difference in anyone's entire life, ever. The number of times I've been actually, literally *screamed* at for “not doing my job” is *bananas*—and yet, look at me fucking now. Put me in charge and give *me* the opportunity to be the one yelling at the *real* grunts, and I'm at the top of my game. *The game.*

Once the clipboard's in *my* hands, suddenly two entire trucks get offloaded with every piece accounted for in an hour. Or thereabouts. And because *I'm* the one who understands Cari's work, who found it, who saw that it could be raised to this level. I mean, when I take a step back and think about it, I probably understand this show as a

whole better than even Cari does. I know the space. I know the market. I *feel* what the public will feel and I *see* what Cari sees—but I have none of their fears. I'm both close and distant enough to have the perfect twenty/twenty to make this work. Not to mention none of the misplaced maternal affection that always blows Marilyn off course into some bullshit buffoonery-typhoon.

I let the movers go close to midnight, and I'm not gonna lie—even I'm impressed with myself. After weeks of barely being physically in the gallery, I know the space so innately that I can still integrate all the disparate pieces and segments into a clear, cohesive vision. I know Cari's going to love it. I know her. From the moment I first saw her stuff, I know that she *recognized* it, like she saw *my* recognition. That it's *ours*, now, together. Not just hers. Overseeing the installation, watching the whole take shape, reform—it's a new birth. This show has remade that recognition into a shared dream.

And I can tell, can feel in my bones—tomorrow night we'll witness a goddam *spectacle*. An ascension.

The final section is here and it looks done, but I'm leaving the connections and hook-ups for her. So—I can't really see the changes she made. Just that she's made them. Some of the original neon tubing is here. The snake looks intact. The larger mouth part too. But the screens are dark, obviously. And there's some crazy piping coming out of the back—no fucking *clue* what that does. The stupid butterfly is gone, at least. – Thank fuck.

I'm not retarded. You can't learn how to mold, or manage—manipulate, whatever you want to call it—without understanding which boundaries are pliable and which ones

are *not*. And for an artist, the final fucking brushstroke is a *hard limit*. Even for rat fuck swindlers like Damien Hirst.

Assistant Twink came pre-packaged with a Bluetooth earpiece attachment, so he's been answering calls from Marilyn throughout, keeping her updated. I shoot her an email anyway, confirming the accepted delivery and finished layout with necessary attachments. Paper trails are important. *Crucial*, in fact. Don't underestimate the value of having one. It's easy to get too comfortable operating off-script. Peripheral work sets the stage, but that shit's erasable for good *and* for bad. Seriously, think about how many mafia bosses could have walked if they just booked a manicure or something at key moments and knew how to operate Instagram Live.

I'm tying up a few loose ends and entertaining the idea of breaking the new assistant in when I realize that Cari's out of the loop in all of this. I'm confident she won't show up and have a bitch fit or anything in the morning—not her style. Still—new artists. She might want to fiddle.

I call from the gallery landline. Voicemail. Straight off. I'm sure her phone's still dead. Or she turned it off to sleep. Either way, good news for me since that means she's not wrapped up in the Guy saga, at least for now. It'll re-emerge tomorrow, for sure. There's no way he would miss her opening. I'm going to have to think of some brilliant way of managing *that* future fiasco. Leave it to creepy, clingy *Guy* to fuck up the *one* thing in Cari's life that he's not sunk balls-deep in. Another thing to fix.

But really—*fuck* Guy. Fuck their whole Dr. Phil incest-lite, ooey-goey, over-enmeshed gross-ass relationship dynamic. I mean, in all honesty, I'm *really* fucking proud of Cari. And me—obviously. But also, like *us*. None of this would have happened

without us working together. I made more happen for her in a month than he did for however long they've known each other. Knew each other. Whatever.

I'm the best thing that ever happened to Cari. I know that. And tomorrow night, she will too. Guy or no Guy.

New Assistant is making a show of sweeping up, making sure his ass is in my line of sight whenever he bends down to pick his little dustbin off the floor. It's kind of cute. He's so stupid. And so *blonde*. You'd think someone of my taste-level would be turned off by that kind of cliché, but some things are just hard-wired. I know that better than anyone.

I tell him to get out of the way so I can take video of the layout and if it wasn't already blatantly obvious, the whole 'who me?' thing and wrist-flapping little scurry behind the desk seals the deal—*definitely* a bottom.

Cari's likely already asleep in Brooklyn. And I should probably sleep locally anyway. I don't want to risk a late start, and like I said before—hard limits. Punctuality's never been my forte. And I need my beauty rest as much as she does.

I text her the video with the usual round of fluffing and congratulations. She'll see it when she gets up. She'll appreciate the space as much as the reassurance. We get it each other. And she'll see me tomorrow night, at the opening. And now I'll have the whole day to put myself together and guarantee that I'll be looked at.

It's my day too. Can't risk fading into the background. You get to a certain level, you learn how to mitigate even the least likely possibilities.

...

The day of the opening is pandemonium. I sleep in. I don't know—maybe my unconscious knows how on I have to be tonight, that I need my beauty rest, that there's not much I can do at this point that I haven't done already.

New Assistant is dumb but knows enough to leave his keys behind when he heads to the gallery so I can shower and groom without having to rush out with him. Which is good considering last night was pretty blah, if I'm being perfectly honest. He's pretty, sure. But everyone looks the same from behind for the most part. He hasn't figured out how much more you need to bring to the bedroom to make yourself memorable. And a face alone isn't going to cut it.

I check in with Marilyn on my way to Bergdorf's. She's thrilled with everything, of *course*. As she should be. The video I sent to Cari is left on read with no response, but I told New Assistant to text me as soon as she gets in, so I'm not too worried. Probably just nerves. Poor thing. She's lucky to have me for this. I'm strong in every way she isn't.

Marilyn's former assistant works as a personal shopper now. And I normally *wouldn't* splurge with my own money, but tonight's a big fucking deal. Plus, there's her employee discount. And sure, Tom Ford at thirty percent off is still triple what I would pay in rent, but I haven't had to do that either, so really it's an investment.

I bet I can persuade her to let me 'borrow' something out of my price range if I really love it. I mean, *she* has no idea how she got fired. Hell, if I invite her tonight she'll *give* me whatever I want, she's so thirsty to be rescued from retail. Who could blame her? That shit's *awful*. Honestly, I could never.

...

I'm in the changing room when I hear my phone actually ringing. Like, with a call. Fucking scam marketers. I'm about to decline and switch it to silent when I notice the number. It's Cari.

— Finally.

“Hey Whorebag Superhero Lightgoddess Extraordinaire—how's it going? Installation okay?” I say, slipping out of the velvet blazer I'd been trying on.

“Daniel, Hi. Yes, everything's fine. Or functional. Whatever.”

“No, *not* whatever, Caridad. Tonight is going to be the best night of our lives. The *first* night of our lives,” I pop my head out to Old Assistant, handing her the blazer and shoot her a chef's kiss.

“Daniel—I'm freaking out. I don't know if I can do this.”

Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. I thought you were better than this, Cari. For fuck's sake.

“You can. And you will. Listen—”

“I haven't heard from Guy. At all. Nothing. I'm really starting to worry.”

What did I fucking tell you? That fag can't *stop* dragging her down. He's got an iron grip on and he's using it to yank at their creepy codependent chain from all the way down in hell.

“Have you called his brother yet?”

Okay, remember: cool and collected. Appropriately concerned. No matter what happens, you can find a way to play it. There's always an angle.

“No,” she exhales audibly, a hitch in her breath. “Nothing. *Nada*. The only number I have is a landline and there’s not even a fucking answering machine.”

Old Assistant knocks on the door, holding a pad with the new price of the blazer. I stop myself from rolling my eyes. Fine, bitch. See who I introduce you to at the party tonight *now*. I mime that I’m on the phone and do the imaginary pen signing thing that every waiter in the world absolutely *loathes* and smile with just my eyes to indicate that she’s dismissed. A warning that there’s still further to fall. She’s about as bright as a potato, though. Doubt she’ll get it.

“Cari—listen. I mean it, listen to me. We can’t control whether Guy will come tonight or not. What we *can* control is ourselves, each other. I will not let your biggest artistic achievement get pissed all over by anxiety, or a breakup temper tantrum, or any other bullshit. I am your best friend tonight, okay? I will be there, holding your hand, holding your hair back when you puke from the champagne. Right after you hold mine, deal?”

She laughs. It sounds snotty. Obviously crying.

“Where are you? Where are you right now—I’m coming to meet you.”

I stuff one of the shirts from the try-on rack into my bag. There’s a steamer at the gallery. I swipe the gallery business card to expense the fucking blazer—I can’t believe Marilyn was dumb enough to give New Assistant one already. Though I *can* believe he was dumb enough to leave his wallet on the dresser all night. Pretending I’m still on the phone, I take Old Assistant’s retarded little pad from her desk, cross out the price and write the time for the opening, and NO PLUS ONE underneath it, underlining it twice.

I can't wait for the day that I can just have a house account here. No more bartering, no more dealing. Just demands and fulfillment.

She takes it and looks confused, pointing at the six pm start time. *This early? Really?* she mouths.

No, bitch—not really. But you're still going to come and wait for two hours, aren't you?

...

Cari's standing outside the gallery when I get there, smoking a cigarette with her eyes closed, head tilted up to the Sun. It's later in the day than I thought—her hands are filthy from setting up but I don't know, I can't fully describe it—she's herself again. Glorious and golden and mine. Have you ever been so *thrilled* to see someone you just want to pick them up and throw them into the street??

I go to jump on her, excited as a little kid, to surprise her in the middle of her little moment—and suddenly *Marilyn* pops her fucking head out the door, freshly fuchsia-dipped and deranged and screams so loud I nearly shit myself mid-air.

“Cari! There you are hiding. Come inside now-- you need to get ready. – And where the *hell* is Daniel?”

“I'm on the other side of the goddam door, Marilyn. You almost broke my nose.”

“What? Merde!” she squawks, craning her Fraggles head around to follow the sound of my voice. Cari steps out on the other side of Marilyn to squeeze my shoulder.

“The second I come out of the bathroom, hand me a drink, okay?” she asks.

“Poison or champagne?” I joke, following her inside.

“Surprise me!” she shouts, before Marilyn shoots daggers at me and hurries her into the private bathroom in her office.

“You have half an hour, Daniel! Make sure to show the bartenders and caterers the delivery entrance, not the front door. Barbarians,” Marilyn yells, disembodied, like I haven’t done this entire routine a million times before.

“I’ve got everything under control!” I yell back, before heading into the bathroom to get myself ready. *In ways you couldn’t begin to imagine.*

New Assistant is already in there, cutting lines next to the sink.

“Oh thank *fuck*,” he gasps, clutching his chest. “I thought you were Marilyn.”

“Worse,” I smile and take the roll he just crushed in his fear-fist. I take a bump and look in the mirror, inspecting for any residue. “You know how to work the steamer, right?”

...

Here’s the thing about me—I am *really* fucking good at making people love me. Like, all of them. Any of them. It doesn’t matter. Sure Marilyn needs artists to make the actual art, but she needs me *more*, because I’m the only one who can sell their shit half the time.

And now that I’m not trying to pass off dookie pipe-bombs or having to wax poetic about some recycle-bin spin-art, I can finally feel the *joy* in my work, the pure, unadulterated pleasure. And it’s contagious—I can tell. The show hasn’t even started and I can already smell the bank transfers.

Marilyn calls for attention—I’m running through my speech after hers, where I introduce Cari, in my head. It was a fight, but I ended it by telling her Cari insisted. I left

New Assistant standing outside the bathroom with a glass of Champagne and one of Guy's Percocets for Cari. He's allowed to have whatever she doesn't want.

Drone, drone, drone. I don't know whether it's the CuisinArt blending of European accents or that I know everything Marilyn's ever said because she never changes it, but every word out of her mouth sounds like a grown-up straight out of the Peanuts character tonight. I'm waiting for her to stop long enough to recognize my cue to take over and then I feel Cari beside me, grabbing my hand.

There's a smattering of clapping and I step up to the mic, giving a final squeeze before I address the assemblage, waiting to be dazzled.

—Everything I say is perfect. That's all you need to know. I touch on everything—the transcendence that art allows us—the revolution in sight and feeling that we're all about to embark on. The importance of this show, for both me *and* Cari. I even remember to thank Marilyn and begin a round of applause that she tries to swat away before wiping tears from under her kooky glasses. I have the entire room in the palm of my hand. And sure, am I doing it for myself? Of course. But I'm doing it for everyone gathered here too. For the buyers, the critics, Marilyn—even Cari. I'm making this night an *experience*—not just a showing. What I'm doing now, in the moment? This is *my* art. And I am mother fucking Van Gogh right now.

I finish with a toast, seamlessly handing my empty glass to a nearby cater waiter while I initiate the applause, and signal Cari's introduction. I blow her a kiss before heading back to the crowd, though the overhead is so bright I have to guess at her general direction. Whatever—no one standing here can tell.

By the time I turn to face her, she's already begun.

“—and thanks for the kind words, Daniel. There were so many.”

The crowd laughs so I do too, though honestly I don't really get it. Maybe it's a second language thing. Not every joke's going to land, I guess.

“I don't have much to say, other than through what you're about to see. So rather, I thank Marilyn and Daniel for believing in me, for Dean, Marilyn's assistant for organizing this evening, and you all for coming. I hope you enjoy it.”

Fuck—the curtain.

I run over to the other side of the room where New Assistant is too dumb to understand how to pull a goddam rope and push him out of the way to drop the heavy blackout fabric blocking the light from Cari's installation from reaching the rest of the gallery.

There's a moment of complete and perfect silence after the unveiling. The whole room *lit-er-ally* is holding its breath.

And honestly, I get it. I understand. Because I felt it too. It's like seeing kids freeze in the middle of the gates at their first summer fair, watching the colored lights from the installation reflect on their faces.

I hang back, observing as each member of the audience seems pulled forward, entranced. Cows trapped in a spaceship tractor beam. Carol Anne reaching a hand to the TV static glow. The gallery is quieter than it's ever been the night of an opening. Cari is right—there's no need for more words. They're communing in collective silence, raptured up in her light.

“Hello, Stranger. It’s been too long—” a gay sibilant voice whispers against my ear. There’s a stream of hot, humid breath at the back of my neck, close enough for goosebumps to bristle under my new Tom Ford sleeves.

Seriously? Now? Is this happening?

“Bernard! So good to see you!” Marilyn calls from a few feet away.

My heart thuds violently to life. Jesus—for a second I thought... No. Fucking *Bernie*.

“Thank you *so* much for coming,” Marilyn says, raising her arms like Evita Peron as she walks over, then traps him in an overly-enthusiastic, pretend double-cheek kiss. She’s absolutely *hammered*.

“I’m so sorry to hear about Elizabeth’s illness” she slurs, though to her credit, only slightly. “And for you to come tonight, to support us, to support Caridad—to support *art*—when you’re already dedicating yourself *so* selflessly to others,” she places her hand on her freckled, seersucker-textured chest—which thankfully is shielded by some black sheer top for *once*. I don’t know who finally convinced her to commit to a higher neckline but they deserve a medal. “—it truly touches me, Bernard. Thank you.”

“Please, Marilyn. You’re making me blush,” Bernie replies. And ew—*gross*—as I look at him I realize he actually *is* blushing. I didn’t know skin that old *could* change color. “But if you’re in the mood for being magnanimous, I would love to have an introduction to this captivating new artist of yours.”

“Oh, Cari?” I interject. “I’d be happy to—she’s a close friend.” I make sure to get eye contact with Marilyn during that last part. “My first discovery for the gallery, in fact.”

“Why, *Daniel*— I’m impressed. What a coup,” he smiles, lipless, a prehistoric lizard.

“Yes—of course, Bernard,” Marilyn says, placing a possessive hand on his shoulder. “And our young Daniel here is full of surprises, lately.”

Do I detect a touch of resentment? Just wait till you get this month’s credit card statement, Markushka.

“Where is Caridad?” Marilyn asks, scanning the room. “I haven’t seen her since she spoke, now that I think about it.”

“Powdering her nose, probably,” I reply. I run a hand down the sleeve of Bernie’s other arm. “I’ll go fetch her, shall I? If you’ll excuse me.”

Marilyn’s office is usually off-bounds during shows, so I take a moment to enjoy perusing her desk and personal affects before knocking on the bathroom door.

“Cari?” I ask. “You in there?”

She unlocks it without replying and I slip in, shutting the door behind me. She’s sitting on the toilet, smoking a joint. The acrid skunk of pot is so thick I’m surprised I didn’t smell it from the office.

“I’m taking a moment,” she says after taking a long drag. “A little assistance for dealing with the carnival of assholes ass-licking each other out there. You want?”

“Is that a serious question?” I answer. I take a hit, check my hair in the mirror. “You know there’s nothing to worry about, right?” I ask, pivoting from my reflection to her. “It’s already a success. I’ll be shocked if it isn’t sold out by the end of the night.”

“Does it look like I care about that?” she sighs, rifling through her purse. I don’t know how I didn’t notice before, but she cleans up nice. Elegant make-up, hair still wild but pinned back to not be as distracting.

“Great dress, by the way” I add. “Is it new?”

She laughs, darker than I’m used to. “From my secret stash. The one you haven’t found yet.”

I take another hit. “Just when I thought we didn’t have any secrets between us.”

She shrugs, takes the joint back. “You don’t have the chest for it anyway.” She rolls her neck, cracking bones in pops like static shocks. “I take it I’m being summoned for something?”

“Well—yes,” I reply. “But we can take our time.” She nods to herself. “What’s that you got there?”

Her bag reveals a glint of silver in her rummaging. She fishes out a flask. “This? A little of this, a little of that. Mezcál, mostly. With a few pinches of extra cherries on top.” She raises her eyebrows, offering, and I take it. The second I open it I feel like I’ve been slapped in the nose with a burning bush. I take a swig, and when she laughs, for real, I double down and take a few more. My mouth is tingling like I’ve just finished an hour-long rim job on Smokey the Bear.

“*Jesus*—” I cough. “Where the fuck did you get that?”

“Home,” she answers, sighs. “I wish I was there now.”

I hand it back to her, letting the quiet draw out. I know her well enough at this point to get when she’s waiting to say something big.

“You know our talk? When I asked you about... you know.”

I nod, take another shot, which I immediately regret.

“I’m the opposite. I feel... *everything*. Too much. What’s going on outside? It’s my nightmare.”

“I know,” I tell her, hope she understands that I mean it. “I’ve watched you long enough to see that. And it’s there, in your work. Your feeling. The way you feel is how everyone feels.” – *Fuck, I’m high*. “Not everyone, everyone. Like you feel like any other person. It’s more like... you *feel* how everyone feels. That’s what I saw that first day, in your studio. That’s why I did all this. For you. We’re opposites. But the same. Cari, I—”

I’m trying to come up with the words to describe this, but my throat is on fire and my face is getting hot. It feels like the bathroom’s breathing. I’ve said this a million times before, to so many people, but I’ve never ever meant it. Not like I do now.

“I love you, Cari.” I say. “That’s the truth. I love you like you’re my own flesh and blood. Like you’ve always been a part of me, even before we met.”

I look up and meet her eyes. Her face is the same as it was that day in the studio.

“Is there anything you want to tell me, Daniel?” she asks, voice even, almost flat.

“What—what do you mean? More than what I just said?” I ask and laugh. I can feel the vibrations of it travel from my stomach to the inside of my thighs.

She holds her gaze a second longer, then stands, brushing off her dress. She flushes the dead joint and reaches for the flask, returns it to her bag.

“*Claro*—let’s go mingle with *los monstruos*.”

...

When I reemerge with Cari the room’s looser, a bit noisier. I lead her over to where Marilyn is sewing her face to Bernie’s buttock and do the necessary introductions.

“This is a revelation, my dear,” Bernie says to Cari. “It reminds me of Aquinas. His postulates on angelic speech—understanding without thought. Communication untethered from the fallacy of human meaning.”

Cari thanks him, sips her champagne. Luckily no one but me would be able to detect the snort that preceded it.

“And Daniel, our new gallery *ingenue* tells us that all this stems from his campaigning? That you weren’t interested in showing?” Bernie winks at me over Marilyn’s shoulder. What’s old person for ‘not in the fucking mood, perv’?

“Yes, it’s true. Actually, Daniel was the one who inspired the most recent addition to everything” Cari gestures at the installation with her flute.

“Really?” Marilyn asks, turning to me. “How intriguing. I see you’re to be underestimated at our collective peril.” She giggles, a girlish noise that makes her seem older.

More than you imagine, Marcooz—I think to myself, face smiling appropriately humble.

“Please, show us this collaboration!” Bernie demands, taking Cari by the hand. “Daniel can describe the process to us while you do.”

“I haven’t seen the changes, actually” I reply, though I make sure to hook Marilyn’s arm through mine to take her with us. “It’s been very secret society at Cari’s studio the last few days.”

“Well—he helped point out a weakness, a transition that needed complication” Cari murmurs to Bernie as he picks their way through the crowd.

A gurgle from my stomach makes a loud enough noise that Marilyn takes notice, asks if I'm alright. I don't know if it's the stench of her perfume or the flashbacks of Bernie's ball texture the last time I saw him or the mix of coke and weed and booze but I'm feeling hot and queasy. My stomach pulses and I scan for the nearest exit if I need to run out and puke.

"Oh my... this is. It's—unexpected. Remarkably unexpected."

The expression on Bernie's face, his thin-lipped mouth dangling open, is enough to divert attention from my stomach to the section.

And—honestly I have no idea how Cari did it. *None*. Like not even the technique, not even the *mediums*—let alone the final scene.

There's the initial snake, which now sheds its skins as it slithers, disappearing from view. The husk is opalescent, made of light, but milky. It glows where the snake sparkled. The change is the husk and cocoon are melded. There's an overwhelming sense of fullness. Of satisfaction.

It looks three-dimensional—I have to stop myself from reaching out to touch it—when without warning, a series of neon fangs flash in sequence seem to strike it and then—this is the real mind fuck—it breaks open and emits *darkness*. Not smoke, not air—but actual *darkness*. Through *light*. It feels like it's going to fill the room. But looking to either side it's clear that whatever we're seeing isn't actually there. Nothing else is affected. The dark hangs, inert, then slowly begins to compress to a spherical void. It compresses and compresses, it feels like the floor is going to start shaking beneath our feet, until a split appears in the middle and there's a flash of blinding, painful light. We're

all forced to close our eyes, reflexively, and when we open them there's a holographic golden shower of sparks.

Bernie raises his hands to clap, but Marilyn—of all people intervenes—grabbing his hand.

“Wait,” she murmurs. “Watch.”

Once the sparks dissipate an amorphous image pulses on a screen behind everything—the neon the hologram, the darkness—and it becomes clear it's been there all along. With every pulse it seems to refine, becoming clearer and clearer, an eerie negative developing in time, in synchronicity to our heartbeats. And just when the suggestion appears to be one pulsation away from solidity, to revealing its true form, the snake slithers back to center again, resetting the whole cycle. Seamlessly.

Marilyn is the first to speak. “Cari was going on and on about this piece—I tried telling her that I *liked* the original section, that I thought it offered a greater accessibility, but then—” she shakes her head, still amazed at what she saw, it seems, not for the first time. “I would never have thought, with the rest of the work, but it's strangely—”

“—Necessary,” I say. “It's a counterpoint.”

“That's *it!*” Bernie exclaims, “Opposite and the same! Daniel, I couldn't have said it bet—”

I turn to look at him and even with the spots in front of my eyes I can see his expression looking at me isn't his typical pervy adoration.

“Daniel, are you ill? Do you need water?”

There's a river of sweat draining from my back into my butt crack. I shake my head to reassure him and suddenly the gallery is tilting at an angle.

*No, do **not** throw up. What are you, a fat sorority girl? A garden hose?*

I sense Cari at my side, hear her tell Marilyn something about air, and the next thing I know I'm stumbling out onto the sidewalk with ears that are now ringing out of nowhere.

A voice I don't recognize asks if they should call 911. I try to steady myself on my feet, demonstrate the lack of need for it, and the concrete abruptly tilts towards me. Smack. I get my hands underneath me before my face hits the sidewalk, but now I'm stumbling around like a dying cow on my hands and knees.

"Nooo!" I manage to yell to whoever's listening. I don't have health insurance and I'm not paying for a goddam ambulance. "Nooo! No! *No!*"

"It's okay," I hear Cari somewhere north of my head. "I'm going to take him home."

I close my eyes for a second and when I open them again we're in the back of a car, my head in Cari's lap.

"Heyyy," I whisper up at her.

"Hi," she sighs, looking down. Her hair is loose again. She seems tired.

"Can I ask you a question?" I whisper, though the jostle of the car is lulling me back to sleep against her thighs.

"Shhh—sleep" she replies.

Oh fuck—I hope she's not mad.

"Please?" I ask and nuzzle against the small soft roll of her stomach.

Women. Fucking *gross*. *Haha*.

She rolls the window down, letting the breeze flow through the car in response.

“The thing, at the end of my section, the one we saw right before it became a snake again? What was it? At the end?”

Cari looks down at me, her eyes dark sockets in her face, shadowed by sporadic streetlight. I can feel her heartbeat in her chest beside my head. She reaches out with the tips of her fingers, tracing them lightly over my eyelids until they close.

“The only thing it could be,” she says finally, her voice a flickering match in the black. “—A ghost.”

...

I fall. I sleep. And in my sleep, I’m falling. Sinking into black, into the void.

This is the abyss.

I thought it was inside of me, that it would take control. But I’ve been inside it all along. Not afraid, now. Now, it’s familiar. A comfort. There’s nothing to reflect back. No work to be done.

—Peace.

...

The cocktail of drugs I’ve taken in the last twenty fours have combined to go full Stanley Kubrick on my sense of time and space. Sometimes it’s *2001*, sometimes it’s *The Shining*. It feels like hours have passed, maybe days, but every time I open my eyes we’re still in the back of the car. Once I felt myself waking, mouth cotton-dry, and when I opened my eyes I thought it was daytime. But when I closed them, the next time I wake it’s night. And Guy’s driving. I think.

Ghosts.

...

My head is splitting in two. No—three. Maybe more. The ringing in my ears is back, too.

My stomach roils, and I go to retch—dry heaves. Nothing. That’s when I notice we’re not in the car anymore. I’m lying, facedown, on the floor. And it’s made of fucking *dirt*.

There’s a shuffling somewhere ahead of me, and when I twist my neck to look, a thunderclap of white hot pain ignites every nerve running from the back of my skull through my spine. *Jesus*.

Am I having a nightmare? Where’s the void? That was better. This is like a third-world version of the set of *Saw*.

A low sing-song humming begins in the same place as the shuffling. I don’t want to risk turning my head again, so I try rolling. That’s when I notice—my hands are tied behind my back. Trying to get to my feet, I realize what else they’re tied to. My feet.

Well—that explains the back pain.

“Hello?” I ask. Or try to. My throat and mouth are so dry it comes out as a faggoty croak.

“—Help,” I say, trying again. “Help. – Help me.” I sound like a dying fish puffing out the last of its air supply, asphyxiating on dry land.

A shadow blocks the light shaft on the floor. Where am I? What *the fuck* is happening?

Footsteps recede toward the shuffle-humming.

“¿Está listo?” a new voice, speaking actual words. That I don’t understand. –
Wonderful.

“No te preocupes—mi amigo tomó el auto. — ¿Que? ¿Estas segura?” -- more murmuring and shuffles in response. “¿Por cuanto tiempo?”

The ringing in my ears is obscuring every other word, but I think it’s a woman’s voice.

Am I being sex-trafficked? Where the fuck in New York is there a *dirt* fucking floor? I didn’t think there was any actual dirt left in the entire city.

A moment or two passes when nothing happens. It worries me enough to start squirming, attempting to see what the fuck is going on. The footsteps come closer and I wriggle faster—I can sense whoever it is crouching down and I try to fart in their face as a last-minute defense mechanism but my asshole is traveling back inside my body like it’s pulled by a magnet. There’s a new, sudden tension in the rope connecting my hands and feet and then—just when diarrhea is about to replace the no-show tactical fart—release. The ache along my spine eases, enough that I can roll on my back and lay flat.

“That must be one hell of a hangover,” a voice says to my right.

A *familiar* voice. What? *Who?*

Hands grip the collar of my shirt, dragging me back and upright, propping me against something. When the sharp stab of pain dulls to a throb behind my eyes, I open to see—

“— Cari??”

“I was wondering when you would wake up. There were a few moments when it looked like you had stopped breathing,” she crouches down next to me, crossing her legs in front of her on the floor.

I try to respond but whatever reserve of saliva I had is completely spent. She seems to notice, and reaches behind me for something.

Something hard is pressed against my lips. She tilts my head back and water—beautiful, cleansing, reviving *water*—comes gushing out. I swallow giant mouthfuls, regretting them immediately when the heaving starts up again, bringing it all back up. Cari seems to expect this, waits, then tilts my head again, forcing smaller sips.

“Cari—” I hiss, as soon as my vocal chords will allow. “I don’t know what’s happening or where the *fuck* we are, but we’ve gotta get out of here. Like *now*.”

“I do,” she replies and leans back on her hands. “We’re with my *abuela*

I have enough of a vantage point now that I can look around without turning my whole head. My eyes are coated in sandpaper, but I can make out a wood stove in the corner, and the back of someone in front of it.

“Did she die or something? Why are we here? How long was I asleep?”

“No, she’s not dead. We’re here because I planned it. And you’ve been out three or four days. On and off.”

“You—” and that’s when her words actually sink in. “You... planned it.”

She nods. Exhales a long, forceful breath. “We agreed on honesty, yes? Do you think you can do that? Keep that promise? I can’t do this and play pretend.”

The abyss opens up again. It’s back inside. And it’s returned with a new straining— an awakened sense of pressure. Of being pulled along on a track that I’ve been unconsciously following.

I swallow, mouth freshly dry. There are no words I can speak, so I nod.

“This was always going to happen. Or some version of it. Maybe not *this*,” she waves her hand in a circle, indicating the whole dirt-floor-in-the-middle-of-Bumbfuck-desert-scrub situation we’re in. “But if the illegal contracts and back deals and attempted theft of my work hadn’t been enough, what you did to Guy would have. To push me over. Lying to me when I gave you the chance to fix it just convinced me it had to happen soon.”

It? What the fuck is ‘it’? Is Cari in the goddam mafia? Is this a hit? Am I being Punked?

A memory resurfaces, a moment in a car trip that ended up longer than even I thought it could be while dreaming it.

“Guy—he drove us.”

She nods, then reaches into her pocket. She pulls out a cigarette and lights it.

—More of a smoker than I thought, too.

Also, not dead. I got the call from King’s Country Hospital, where he was taken. I’m his emergency contact.” She exhales through her nostrils. I want to laugh, tell her she looks like a cartoon dragon. I don’t. “Didn’t take much to figure out what had happened when he woke up.”

“So for the past week, you’ve been planning on kidnapping me and transporting me to Mexico, where you’re going to do what? Kill me?” I ask, flabbergasted.

“To trick, *then* drug, *then* kidnap and transport you to Mexico. Where I’m going to kill you,” her tone is even, matter of fact. “Longer than a week, though. For planning. Maybe three? – At least the trick and drug part,” she replies.

I'm about to ask her why, scream that she's fucking out of her mind, paranoid, hallucinating, and demand to be released—when I look in her eyes and know, just *know*, how much more they've seen than I ever thought.

“How much do you know?” I ask, because I can't help it. Deep down I already know the answer. I guess that's not lying.

“Everything. From the first time I saw you. I saw you— *you*, the thing you didn't even want to see in yourself. To give a name to. And you saw me the first time too. We tend to recognize each other, out in the world. Some adaption from evolution, maybe. Even if others don't. Or can't. I knew what you were. Once I knew that, nothing else could be hidden.”

She stands, pats the dirt from her ass. She walks over to the stove. She talks softly in Spanish to someone who I'm guessing is her witch-demented grandmother and returns with a clay mug, curling steam.

“You're pretty smart,” she offers, folding back into position on the floor. “Not nearly as smart as you think you are, but you have your moments. Enough for me to want to give you a chance—to let you make enough decisions that it would still feel fair.”

“Decisions?” I ask when what I want is to scream up at the ceiling. “To do what? Take some drugs? Help *your* career? Make *you*, rich?”

“Daniel—don't pretend. All of that was for you. Your career. Your fifty percent commission,” she finally stubs her cigarette out next to her. “I have so much money from my father's business, I never have to work a day in my life. – Which I'm still shocked that you didn't figure out. It seemed too—basic, I guess? – to not wonder where the money was coming from as long as it wasn't from you.”

“Oh, your big drug cartel dad? Is he going to kill me?”

“No, which you should feel lucky about. He’s dead,” she replies.

“Oh, did you kill him?” I ask, sarcastically. Her eyes answer for her. She doesn’t need to use words.

—Okay, so *not* sarcastically, after all.

The realization slowly begins to dawn.

“You’ve done this before,” I say, out loud.

Cari shrugs, but doesn’t blink. Her gaze is steady and unwavering.

“Do you think I’m going to let you?” I ask, getting angry. “That I won’t fight back? That I can’t win?”

She just stares back. Her eyes say enough. At least as to what *she’s* thinking. I notice the rise and fall of my chest as the moment expands. Settles.

Finally, she breaks the silence.

“Like you said,” she informs me. “I’ve done this before.”

I try to wriggle, to squirm, but my hands and feet are both still tied.

“Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ll cut you free before we go.”

I look around the place, assess the exits, the tools. There’s only one room, and there doesn’t seem to be anything other than the table and chair I’m propped up against and the wood stove in the corner, where the shuffling has come to an end.

“This is your grandma’s place?” I ask. “What is she, a fucking monk?”

“It’s hers now. Or mine, I guess,” she replies. “It was my father’s.”

“Where you killed him, *supposedly*.” At least now I don’t have to control the impulse to roll my eyes.

“Not him, no. But the others. Yes.”

As much as I pride myself on playing the game, cataloguing the vulnerabilities, the opportunities—there’s a part of this that I can’t wrap my head around. That doesn’t fully compute.

Because I *know* Cari. I do—because I know myself. I know how people react to me, why they react to me—how to use that to control them, to bend them to my will. And she’s not lying. Not now. But she wasn’t lying to me then, either. None of this was fake. She isn’t Guy—she isn’t like anyone else I’ve ever met. That’s what we share. What brought us to each other. We’re the same. I *know* this. We’re the same.

But then how *the fuck* am I tied up in a shack in the middle of the goddam, ass end of motherfucking *nowhere*—where she’s calmly telling me she’s been planning to kill me?? Like, *kill me?! Not just cut ties, ruin my career, ruin my life—no, she’s going to try to end it? I mean, what?*

“I’m sure this is confusing to you, on some level,” she interrupts.

Well, woo-woo, guess you’re a fucking mind-reader now too, huh? Like you and G-ma over there are some supernatural, sociopath hunting duo?

The very thought makes me want to laugh out loud.

“It usually is, for people like you—at this point, anyway.”

“There are no other people like me,” I retort. Because whatever else happens, I won’t let her diminish this.

She sighs, softly, barely loud enough to hear. If she hadn't been the one responsible for this low-budget horror movie cliché I would think she feels sorry for me.

“There are,” she states, finally. “Too many. I realized that after my father was gone. That it's not a rare or unusual evil. That you exist, everywhere. All over. In so many forms.”

“I'm not fucking *evil!*” I shout, losing it. “I *care* about you! I do! I know you think that's a lie. And sure, do I do fucked up things sometimes? Break rules? Take advantage? Yes! Okay? Yes. I do. But that doesn't mean I'm not a fucking *person*, Cari. That doesn't mean I don't feel things—” I'm surprised at the hitch in my throat, the heaviness in my voice. I didn't intend them, but they're there. “I mean, I meant what I said. About your work. About our friendship,” I break my gaze to glance down at my lap. It hurts too much to say this while she's looking at me the way that she is. “When I said that I love you, that was real. It wasn't a lie.”

I feel her deflate, if only slightly. She reaches her hand to touch my face, and even though I *want* to jerk back, to spit in her face, to kick her away—I can't. I want her to touch me, to see me—to feel that recognition, that *acceptance* I felt that time in her studio. I want that honesty.

“I know you did, Daniel. I know.” She returns to herself, seems almost as upset as I am, if she's not delivering the acting performance of her lifetime. “If I didn't know my father. If he hadn't helped raise me, *love* me—then I could deny you. I could judge. But I know—” she grabs my hand, and the love I feel for her in my heart is *real*, I can't deny that, even now. “I *know*—that won't change you. Or make you better. Make you stop. I know that you're a person, that you have feelings. Or some experience of them,” she

stops to clear her throat, as if she's feeling the same weight I am. I mean—is this *seriously* fucking happening?

“My father loved me. I know that. I could tell—I could *feel* it. And even though abuela told me these things, what he did to my mother, what he did for money—how everyone we ever met felt terror as soon as they saw his face—I still knew he loved me. I couldn't reconcile it. He could come here, peel someone's skin, rip out their tongues—and he could take me out in his car right after. Take me to the desert to hunt rabbits. Build fires. Tell stories.”

She shifts, as if there's a chill, though the room is warm and dry.

“It wasn't until he killed someone in front of me—shot them for begging on the side of the road. That's when the two came together. In my mind.” She snorts for a brief second, looks at something far away that I can't see.

“Was it funny or something?” I ask. “Or did you enjoy it too?”

I can't help myself. Even now I sense the few openings left to me, the impulse to strike at them.

“They put dirt on the window of his car, crying for him to open it. To help them,” she replies. “It was enough for him. All it took.” She stops, looks back to me. “What did it take for you to leave Guy? To try to steal my work?”

I swallow, but my mouth is dry.

“Don't lie,” she whispers. “I'll know. You know I'll know.”

“Because I could. I guess.” And even though I'm tied up, my stomach and throat and mouth burning from the drug coma I've been in—it's a relief to say it. To reveal myself. To not play-act at shame.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Or not you, anyway. Even Guy. But—” I shrug, look around for a better answer, even though I know there isn’t one. “I can’t help it. It’s just—”

“—the way you are. I know.” She finishes for me.

“I wasn’t sure if I would have to, at first. It doesn’t always come to this. I thought maybe, after the day in the studio...” She smooths the fabric of her pants over her thighs. “You couldn’t be honest. Not with me. Not with yourself. It wouldn’t stop.”

“Well, not if you’re going to peel my face off in the middle of the desert,” I joke. Honestly—I don’t know what you expect. Humor is a defense mechanism. – Kill me. Otherwise I’m kind of tied up at the moment.

She laughs—actually *laughs*—and the sound is better than water, better than a cool breeze. It’s windchimes and sweetness and light.

“You are funny. And smart. Like I said—not as smart as you think, but...” she trails off for a second, searching for the right thing to say, I guess. “You did help me. Push me, as an artist. Even if it was for your own purposes. Still—” she pauses, looks deep in my eyes. “I don’t take that lightly. I do wish it could be different.”

“*Well—*” I yell, getting frustrated. “Why *can’t* it be? I mean, you’ve done your little thing, had your come-to-Jesus talk. I mean—you brought me all the way to fucking *Mexico*! Why couldn’t you just dump me in some alley in Brooklyn. That would have been bad enough!”

“Jesus, you and your thing with Brooklyn,” she replies, rolling her eyes.

“Overalls are stupid,” I say, full of truth. “And ugly. As fuck.”

She laughs again, softer this time. Sadder.

“Yes, I suppose they are.”

She pushes herself up off the ground, the typical awkward stumble to her feet.

“I’m not going to peel your skin off. I’m not even going to kill you. Technically. I’m going to give you a choice.”

“A choice?” I hiss. “Like, what? Whether I die from a sense of shame because you knew what I was doing? Or what? To live differently? Make amends, get born again?”

“No,” she replies, patient again. “A choice. Like the one you made with Guy.”

“With Guy.” I repeat, dumbly. “—I don’t get it.”

“You poisoned him. Left him not knowing whether he lived or died. Not caring.” I huff, annoyed with the caricature. “Or not much,” she amends.

“The knots are loose enough. You’re still weak from the drugs, but you’ll get out,” she describes, matter-of-factly, like we’re back in her studio discussing neon hook-ups. “And then your choice begins. Whether to rely on yourself, to make it through the desert, find someone. Trust your will to survive,” she stops to indicate the cup she had brought over earlier. “Or you drink that. And fall asleep.”

“And don’t wake up,” I finish for her.

“And don’t wake up.” She repeats, firmly. “Abuela,” she turns to address the hunched witch in the corner. “Vete, por favor. Te veré afuera.”

The old woman shuffles past me. The three gray hairs she has left are pinned in a bun to her head. She looks like a tree stump wearing a bad drag wig. She stops in the doorway to spit on the floor, then seems to evaporate in the air.

“It won’t hurt,” Cari says, her hand brushing my face once more. Maybe for the last time. “It’s what we used for my father.”

I try to make a derisive noise in the back of my throat, but it comes up phlegmy and I start to cough.

“I promise, Daniel. I watched him. To make sure. Of all of it,” she replies. She’s still stroking my face. If we weren’t here I would be in heaven.

She straightens up, dusts her pants for the second time. She takes a final walk around the room, making sure there’s nothing left to help me. Maybe.

“Before I leave,” she says, after a moment. “I leave you with the truth. This place is miles away from anything else. Many.”

“Like how many? Are we talking a marathon here, or like a long walk to a gas station?” I ask.

I told you, I can’t help it.

“And people from here know what this is. This place. What it’s been used for,” she looks in my eyes, like she’s trying to tell me something. Help me one last time. “I don’t think anyone will be looking for you. Able to find you.” She pauses, considering. “But you never know.”

“People can surprise you,” I offer. One last time.

“Yes,” she replies. “We can.”

“There’s always a chance, you know,” I say. “You never really know.”

She walks over to me, stoops to kiss the top of my head. She smells like she always does. Like electricity, and growth. Like something wild. I wish the moment could last forever.

She stops on her way out the door, turning to me. For a second I feel a savage, desperate hope.

“I love you too,” she says finally. “In the way that I can, for what you are. If that helps. I don’t want to leave without you knowing that.”

I nod. There aren’t any words that I know that could answer her.

And then she’s gone. And I’m alone. Again.

The sun tilts down, making darker longer shadows. I should probably try to stand, see if there’s any water, but my body feels like it’s melting into the ground. Maybe leftover from the drugs.

People talk about your life flashing before your eyes, right before you die. That shit’s not happening. Maybe that means I’m not going to die. Or I’m not dying right this second, at least. Maybe there’s not much to think about. I’ve been pretty present. Aware. There’s not a whole lot to remember.

There’s a chance this isn’t really happening. That I’ll wake up in a hospital, that someone called an ambulance. Or that I’m back home, sleeping it off in Cari’s bed. I’ve had worse trips. And I took a lot of shit. Fuck knows what was in that flask of Cari’s.

You might think that if I had the chance to do it all again, knowing what I know now, all the blind sides, the failed strategies, what I would change. How I would maneuver out of it. I don’t blame you—it’s natural. I’m trying to stop from thinking about it myself.

But I’ve said it before, I can’t regret. Things are done or they aren’t. I could not have gone with Guy, not inserted myself in Cari’s life, her work. But then I wouldn’t

have her. I wouldn't have been able to push her to find the part of herself that I lived inside. The darkness she knows exists on the other side of light. I wouldn't have known her, or myself. I wouldn't have those priceless, perfect miracles of truth that we shared.

When I think back on that day in her studio, our conversation—even that last kiss she gave me before leaving, I know myself well enough to know I'd do it all again.

Would do it still. Of course I wouldn't change it.

I can't help myself.

It was too beautiful.

Chapter 6: The Surgeon Dreams

The shell of an egg does not know the glory of its insides. The yolk spilling forth, the shimmering golden splendor it holds. A shell is self-evident, aware only of its own intactness, the looping ellipses of faultless perfection, blankness without beginning or end. They are each an infinity, and infinity means nothing left over.

What then exists beyond the bound of the infinite? What whets the edge at the periphery, the force that hones with each revolution? Where is it born, the ending? That, which after circling such completeness, senses the secret within blindly? That which forces it open, by breaking it apart?

How did that first sharpness know, even while it cradled the infinite, of all that could come after? The dripping, oozing mess of life that awaited.

...

The Surgeon dreamt of difference. Different choices, different futures. Each returning darkness begot a parade of past possibilities.

Every night he held out his hands and stared hungrily at the rotted fruit of his life, his spoiled pickings. He examined their skins with the calm, exacting patience of his profession, but the dim silvered shadows played tricks with his eyes. He could no longer differentiate. Could not tell whether it was the dapple of decay or shades from the leaves of his unlived lives branching out above him in his bed. His pale eyes strained in the

adumbration. They had grown weak, in and through time. He had become an old man. He could not heal the wound that had formed between before and after.

But his hands knew the weight of life's measures—the heaviness of shadow and the lightness of rot. He was a very good Surgeon, a surgeon more than he was anything else. Between his hands and his eyes he knew which one to believe.

...

All who wish to attain such knowledge must learn the strange orientation of his craft—the surgeon's backwards art of healing. The cutting to make clear, to remove, to liberate. The second before the rupture, before the division, the knowledge gained only to be lost, the dark hidden heat rushing to the surface. Before the blood. This is the space in between.

Between the surface and the sundering lives the magic of smooth gliding pressure applied to the thinnest possible point. The spell of the knife's edge. The magic of medicine not by addition— by drugs ointments salves viral husks or companionate hours— but by subtraction.

The taking away to make whole. The science of abscission: reparatory calculations against recovery.

In mastering his technique, developing the language of his profession in the smallest movements of his hands, the surgeon speaks to the pronate body under his fingertips. The insensate flesh depresses and elevates beneath the tools that the surgeon will use to restore it. His hands the medicine that will restore it. The surgeon's cure is the creation of loss.

The flesh is epithelium, plasma, cells of subcutaneous adipose, of smooth and striated tissue, of vascular sponge. These together are a body, but the body is not life. The matrix of cells beneath his tools rise and fall, but the surgeon knows this is not life. Life is what continues after him. Life is the outward force, pushing the body onward, redirected in his wake.

The surgeon's tools—his hands and knife— are his medium. They translate the knowledge of his abilities into words decipherable in the mute language of the flesh. The surgeon's knife pierces through the perimeters of the body so that the body may speak. His medicine is liberation.

The surgeon is a young man when he first begins to sift through layers of being in search of disease. He will cut through the malformed cadences of growth, gland, and lymph. He will excise the body from itself. His tools probe the cavity he has created while he separates the material of the corpus from its matter, removes being from being. To cure the body, the surgeon will dissect the body's darkness.

He will recode what was the body into that which is now and that which is no longer. The surgeon's hands and the surgeon's knife will bless these revisions with his specialist's bestowal of absence.

In the course of his medical education, the surgeon realizes that his treatment is carving a path through the body to life.

...

In the years that follow, the surgeon's abilities will sharpen against the whetstone of his certainty. He will cut the human fabric of being. He will cut and cleave and split the pulsing interiors of his patients. He slices life into the disabled and dying. He will

smile benign acceptance in response to their prayers and petitions. The surgeon slices into the coded sequences of death. He will become fluent in idioms of aphasic tissue. The surgeon reorganizes his mind around the dialects of the vascular, gastric, and intestinal vernacular. He will shape his understanding to the closed circuits of somatic meaning. He finds and severs the terminating sentences of his patients' commonplace corpus. His tools infiltrate their human being.

...

Years grow into decades and the surgeon's success grows in attendance. The surgeon is a savior. The surgeon is adored. He attends to them as head attending physician.

The surgeon never fails to respond graciously to their homage. He humbly refuses excesses that veer too close to idolatry. He is careful in his miracles. In severing the limits of time from their secret inside spaces, he has sown ruptures in their supplicant flesh—crafted voids through which will grow more time. The surgeon leaves each of his patients with immaculate, divinely-rendered margins—the perfection of which will become his surgical signature. At the peak of his performing he rejects the popular mythology of this as his signature, too legible in the language of the body to believe it is his presence rather than absence that mends. He offers no perceivable resistance to his patients' repeated referrals to miracles.

With more time the surgeon will struggle to recognize the random arrangements of his infirm disciples superficial exteriors. His tools will only divine meaning in the language of the body's hidden darkness. That is all they have ever done. They cannot deviate from the purpose for which he honed them.

From the divisions of his scalpel the surgeon generates a remainder of words that cannot translate. Signs without signifier on the surface. The surgeon fails to find significance on the surface. He keeps himself at a remove.

...

But in the nights that stretch out longer and longer between his excavations of compromised somatic systems, the surgeon's mind lingers on the beginning of his training, the millimeters of potential energy that pulsed in his memory, the thrum in the distance between the sharpness of his scalpel and the unknown possibilities below the skin's surface that spread languorously beneath it.

In the repeating sequence of subsequent nights the surgeon finds himself grasping at something he does not recognize, a new secret he has no language for. And in the course of each night's creeping incremental dilation, the space between will birth the Surgeon's dream.

...

The Surgeon dreamt but he could not sleep. He used to dream of sleep. Of respite from the unused time swimming on either side of him in his bed. But now the decades have fallen behind him, time multiplying indefinitely and churning him up in its wake. Unrecognizable time—without reason, limit, replicable quantities. Time lost to him, without meaning, without knowing. Soon, each night the surgeon finds himself silenced, a prisoner to illegible time that makes nightmares out of his sleep's unknowing. Now when he closes his eyes he sees shapes grow out of the darkness. Obscure forms worry the wrinkles lining his vision's edges. Each night deepens the creases time has cut into

his flesh. The surgeon attempts to sleep and instead pulsating masses divide behind his eyelids. The surgeon, now an old man, is becoming familiar with futile searching.

For relief the surgeon looks beyond the tumultuous spray of lost time behind him to the placid, untroubled order of his childhood. He recalled how when he was young man and not yet a surgeon, black blankness would unfurl in endless, nocturnal hours. How his mind was each day wiped clean of consciousness, leaving him whole and clean and rested. In the confines of his old man's body the surgeon sought safety. Behind closed eyelids the surgeon grasped at sleep in fruitless pursuit. He prayed for small, selfish miracles. But when he opened his eyes to the still quiet of his bedroom, the black recesses of his mind fled into its corners, pulsing with life. Misshapen growths illuminated by internal, metastatic glowing that reached him wherever he hid.

The surgeon no longer had tools to brandish in defense. The scalpel of his mind had dulled too much with age to excise the nightmares from the night, to cut deep enough to allow him to escape.

And even at its sharpest he never knew how to cut darkness out of darkness, to separate the thing from that which made it, was it, and keep alive the live left over.

...

The daylight of his late life hurt the surgeon's eyes, over-bright and baked hot from the Sun. When the surgeon could no longer be a surgeon he had moved to the south of his second country with his second wife, hoping gravity would move their orbits closer together. He wished that a great force outside of himself could pull them in unison as they approached the equator, that now being south and an old man, he tried not to realize he was on the wrong side of.

He hated this new house that was not a home, his recently flaccid marriage, the flaccid state he now lived in with his wife he remembered loving. The surgeon envisioned himself dangling off the eastern edge of his old new country, aging just as poorly as he was. Clinging to the lip of past happiness.

Here was wrong instead of different. The pastel colors of the building echoes of the jacaranda blossoms of his childhood, dipped in bleach leached of fragrance and fecundity.

...

The surgeon dreamt without sleeping of southern skies, of constellations he could no longer name in a language that had become strange shapes, hard words from once soft vowels that cut across his tongue. He realized too late his prize for the near-native familiarity of the intricacies of internal phrasings was the loss of his first system of meaning. His mind seeped with the ineluctable secretion of gall bladder and pancreas, disparate parts of a whole without composite meaning.

His first country, his first family, his first home lay beneath him now, sleeping in his memory. He had abandoned them in their fracturing, hoping in doing so to keep himself whole.

He did not have the nightmares of those that remained, bought American cars with false memories of liberated nations, armies charioted to victory, liberating camps in trucks, and not pulling up to doorsteps in the night to disappear those sleeping within.

Still even now, an old useless man with old useless meanings, the surgeon did not worry, could not see past disease and cure. Those nightmares unearned terrors—memories that had never been his to keep.

He left everything behind knowing he had the inheritance he needed. His father's surgeon's hands. His own surgeon's knife.

His cuts were clean enough to remove himself from the complications and continuation of what was left over. He was an old man with blurring vision, far from any passing miracle, but his margins remained clear-cut and definitive as his own name.

...

Time passed and lost itself behind the surgeon. He learned to let go of decades when he discovered how absent they were of meaning, after afternoons spent holding them up in his aimless days to the hot, scouring Sun, revealing the signifying nothingness within.

Here, now, nearing the end of all his lives, the surgeon's scalpel was worn down. Exhausted now as he was—edgeless and thin. He held these up too. In their illumination discovered they, like him, had lost their purpose. The surgeon passed his scalpel in his hands, his two vestigial poles, and recalled how resolutely he had committed them to nothingness. The surgeon held his scalpel in his hand, and wondered where, in his place, he could return it to.

The edge had narrowed with use to a diminished point. The surgeon's scalpel, like the surgeon, was diminished. He wondered if its absent particles perhaps accompanied his own, connected in their absence in the meaningless of lost time.

Perhaps, the surgeon thought, it had just enough life left, if he chose it to. If he chose to. He thought of his first home, the country that made him, how he had spooled out from his origins, realizing only now how he had been tied to it, only realizing now how grateful he was for its anchoring. His life a continuous thread doubling back on

itself, north and then south again, away from his family and towards it, a loop without escape, but if used correctly, if he chose correctly, without end.

The surgeon knew what he could trust of himself, and with trembling, hopeful hands, his curse and his gift, he felt for the thread and tied it to the dulled edge of his knife. He pressed the tip of it into his palm, surprised at the relief of his sharpness, proud of the small bead of blood that arose at the joining of his two most treasured tools, his hands and his knife. He did not know how he had forgotten, but then he had forgotten so very many important things. Glad now, to have been forced by his lack to remember more than just a knife, a true surgeon knew to truly heal, he must have a needle.

And in finally waking from his dreams to his life, the Surgeon picked up his needle, and began to sew.

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