

SYNTHETIC PARADIGM: A COLLECTION OF SHORT FICTION

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short fiction has two primary functions: (1) to demonstrate the author's creative writing abilities alongside a comprehensive understanding of short narrative prose forms; (2) to explore the ways in which contemporary literature responds to an ever-changing modern era. Contained herein are several works of various forms: three pieces of microfiction; eight pieces of flash fiction; three short stories. These works were composed across the author's academic career; they have been revised, edited, and compiled to serve as the author's graduate thesis.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
MICROFICITON:	
Day Labor	4
Let's Say	5
Mexico	6
FLASH FICTION:	
Scene from a Diner at Midnight	7
The Mourning After	9
A Wineglass in a Piano	11
Monolith	14
Excerpt from a Moment of Inner Dialogue	17
Experiments in Sonder Pt. 1: The Ongoing Invisible Dialogue	20
Decisions, Decisions	24
Name-Brand Butter	28
SHORT STORIES:	
John's Stupid Wedding	32
Of Love & Existence	40
Roaches	54

INTRODUCTION

Throughout my academic career, I have amassed an assortment of short fiction. This collection, which has been compiled, revised, and edited specifically for use as my graduate thesis, demonstrates a variety of fiction forms and writing processes. Arranged in ascending order by word count, I have included three examples of microfiction, eight pieces of flash fiction, and three short stories. Each of these categories, due to respective length limitations, presents unique challenges when crafting a narrative.

Microfiction demands conciseness. When telling a story, one hundred words appear more quickly than an author might anticipate (Towell). As a point of reference, here is the hundredth word of this introduction (excluding the title and parenthetical citation). The challenge arises when attempting to expand as far as possible the bounds of a fictional universe with only those one hundred words—an author presents a snapshot and insists it is panorama. A reader will likely walk away from microfiction with unanswered questions, expanding the fictional universe within the mind of that reader, satisfying the author’s intentions. Keen attention to detail allows authors to create vivid scenes for their readers. Especially in microfiction, the intentionally omitted details often provide as much context and substance as those in print. I demonstrate this tactic in “Day Labor” and “Let’s Say,” stories that leave their protagonists with difficult decisions; with “Mexico,” I exaggerate the missing information by making it a focal point. With each of

these pieces, I strove to narrate a story that exists beyond the confines of the very few words available.

Flash fiction accommodates a far greater word count, typically in the range of five hundred to one thousand, which allows it to function differently (Thomas). To ease the transition from (or to bridge the gap between) microfiction and flash fiction, I have included a short work entitled “Scene from a Diner at Midnight.” This piece behaves similarly to the previous microfiction stories, but it contains just over three hundred words. This larger word count allows for richer details; however, the inclusion of these details narrows the story’s focus. In other words, the snapshot I provide is of no greater size; I have merely zoomed in on a specific subject. I employ this tactic in most of the flash fiction pieces.

Many of the stories presented, while they hopefully do encourage the idea of worlds larger than the space they occupy on the page, focus acutely on specific details. In other pieces, however, I take advantage of flash fiction’s additional space, extended freedoms, and its promotion of experimentation. The most obviously experimental work of flash fiction here is the aptly titled “Experiments in Sonder Pt. 1: The Ongoing Invisible Dialogue.” This piece contains more than seventy snapshots that form a sort of collage. It does not form a focused, cohesive narrative about specific characters; rather, it endeavors to expose the myriad unseen characters who populate the world. With other flash fiction pieces, I experiment more subtly. In the metafictional “Excerpt from a moment of Inner Dialogue,” for example, the protagonist (a writer) interacts with his surroundings in three ways: he speaks, he mentally processes, and he narrates the scene

as if he were writing it. As the story progresses, these modes of communication begin interacting with themselves.

The short story form, with word counts ranging from 1,000 to 7,500, provides an almost overwhelming sense of freedom (Masterson). Endeavoring to write a one of these lengthier pieces may feel to some like staring into an abyss of empty pages. I often imagine these early stages as an intersection that branches into far too many directions to decide. To counteract such dilemmas, I tend to limit my experimenting with short stories. The three pieces I have included adhere to linear timelines and follow more strictly narrative conventions. The two longer stories, “Of Love & Existence” and “Roaches,” employ elements of magical realism, sometimes stopping just short of fantasy. The realism in “John’s Stupid Wedding,” on the other hand, I derived from personal experience, fictionalizing minor details and altering plot points where appropriate.

Lacking from this collection is an overall, unifying theme. With several of the pieces, however, I attempt to encapsulate a contemporary aesthetic paradigm known as *metamodernism*. The basic tenets of metamodernism involve oscillation between polar opposites, such as irony and sincerity (Van den Akker and Vermeulen). My first endeavor, “A Wineglass in a Piano,” became my blueprint. In that story and others, I strive to manifest lofty, whimsical ideas that I then dismiss as commonplace. I cannot claim that every piece follows those rules. With this collection of stories, I hope to exhibit my creative efforts and demonstrate a comprehensive ability to craft narrative fiction.

DAY LABOR

The afternoon sun had beaten Donny's hopes into almost full submission when the shiny white Lexus pulled up and rolled down its passenger-side blackout tinted window. The middle-aged WASP with fake tan, fake tits, and bleached hair offered Donny the easiest money he'd ever make. He wouldn't have to *kill* her husband's mistress, just bury her. They drove out of town on back roads until dusk. When she opened the trunk, Sancho saw a pile of cash, a shovel, and the mascara-streaked, ball-gagged, still blinking and breathing face of his wife.

LET'S SAY

Let's say your buddy brings his new gal to dinner and she looks real familiar. Let's say you place her. Let's say there's an Internet video of her, and not one you'd pull up at work, if you catch my drift. Now let's say you didn't just run across this video in one of your lonely late-night scavenger hunts. Let's say your drinking crew picked her up at the bar one night and took turns with her, and you filmed it. But let's say it's not your buddy at dinner. Let's say it's your son.

MEXICO

When I was in college in Texas I had this girlfriend named—man, what was her name? The one I went to Mexico with. In that beat-up Mazda. With no air conditioning. So we stopped at every little map-speck town for ice. And we listened to that same Pixies cassette like a hundred times. Then when we got there they wouldn't let us across because we'd both forgotten our IDs. And an hour outside of town on the trip back, we figured out the AC knob was just stuck. It was like finding God. Man, what was her name?

SCENE FROM A DINER AT MIDNIGHT

We're three cups of coffee deep and already delirious from lack of sleep or maybe just in love with and high as kites on life. We hit that euphoric moment in the night when fears and inhibitions dissolve faster than sugar and sweeten conversations with the distinct flavor of honesty. We laugh in face of past devastation realizing it's shared, and since nobody cared about our sadness then, tonight we transcend and celebrate. Broken hearts, broken dreams, broken families. Bring whatever brokenness to the table. Expose it beneath the flickering halogen dangling overhead like the brightest bright idea—an unconditional halo above all us freaks and sinners. We are united and strong and ready for battle against the darkest demons in ourselves and the entire world.

But then she tells me what she's done. Jukebox pop music saturates and stains wallpaper, becomes no more than decorative kitsch to be ignored. The late crowd shuffles on and off and elsewhere. Booths and tables await the post-bar scene in magical midnight calm. And she tells me what she's done, her posture slumped and head low in self-conscious spiritual defeat. She tells me what she's done and drops her tough-girl armor as the clamor of a clumsy busboy dish tray sounds from the kitchen. She awaits my reaction, sitting soul-naked across from me, her long sleeves in summer now understood.

I ask her what it was like.

And like a diver she emerges past the surface of an ocean of regret, breathes deep and savors her atmospheric savior. Exhaling, she piles her hands palms-down like pillows

to catch her head as it follows a gentle dreamy gravity to the table. Exhaling, her eyes sparkle and roll to that nowhere focal point where we keep beloved memories. And with a smile more sincere than any girl that cool ever dared, she seems to sort of sigh, “Phenomenal.” And singing softly to herself, “Phenomenal.”

THE MOURNING AFTER

The morning paper arrives on fire. A dead fish inside is already half-cooked. Front page obituary: America, may she rest in pieces, fractured and failed. Should have known from the noise last night. Hooting and hollering, guns blazing, redneck neighbors sprayed the night sky with yee-haws and hot lead.

Yards littered with either empty beer cans or extinguished smoldering crosses demonstrate the neighborhood's racial diversity. One family's garage door becomes a black spray paint billboard advertising "ISIS Head Qarters" [sic(k)]. High school band members march down the street at gunpoint performing a cacophonous medley of Hail to the Chief and I Wish I was in Dixie in front of an impromptu parade of Klan members. Rhinestone hand grenades arc through the air, releasing a haze of glitter upon impact. Drag queens built like linebackers and armed to the teeth meet the parade in a full-force head-on collision. Terrified students wet themselves and retreat. Freshly starched pointed robes glisten in morning light. Heads down, the Klan charges the opposing army. One of the queens is impaled below her fake breasts, all the while clawing at her assailant with perfectly manicured press-on bayonets. A bloody cantaloupe rolls to the gutter. Feather boas swing wildly for necks and strangle their marks. Somewhere engines rev. Techno dance-pop blasts from a sound cannon knocking down seven of ten Klan members in formation. No way they'll pick up that spare. Leather-clad bikers pour in with tire irons and wallet chains ready to crack skulls. Mexican day-laborers throw rotten fruit from the

sidelines and prep their best roosters to go for the eyes. Radical Muslims kickflip skateboards. Elderly members of Quilters for Christ spit sewing needles at machinegun speed. An upper-middle-class white guy tries to figure out where he should stand. Second-wave feminists catcall combatants ironically, riding into battle atop oversized bloodthirsty bulldogs. An unwed mother applying for food stamps submits to a drug test while a bureaucrat live-streams her urination. Native American tribes on painted carousel horses ride circles around the skirmish, followed closely by attack dogs and riot police. Young black men are shot dead and taken away for questioning. Big Pharma CEOs scatter generic narcotic painkillers from a diamond-encrusted gold float and bill insurance companies at ten times the name-brand rate. Helicopters overhead order everyone to—interrupted by fire hose blasting pepper spray—disperse immediately. A fleet of bulldozers powers through the people. Street sweepers manage only to kick up dust and polish lost teeth. Construction crews dismantle houses and rebuild them as strip malls, hotel casinos, payday loan sharks, and real estate universities.

The newspaper becomes a pile of ashes by burned out journalists awaiting libel lawsuits. There's nothing left but the funny pages. And even those are depressing.

A WINEGLASS IN A PIANO

Christoph goes to the china cabinet of intricately carved oak and bowed glass displaying Marie's mother's special occasion silver serving platters, gold-rimmed cups and saucers, and family heirloom wineglasses with matching decanter. He opens the door echoing metal hinge squeaks down timeline corridors strung with Christmas lights, pumpkin pies cooling on countertops. He chooses a crystal wineglass from the top shelf, presents it to Marie, and invites her to follow him. He leads her down the hall, ending at an open landing, storing an out-of-tune upright piano, serving more as a picture frame shelf than an instrument. Christoph removes a row of photos as he paints a picture—the big picture—for Marie.

“How long has that wineglass been in your family? Three generations? Four?”

“At least.” Marie thinks aloud, “We're four generations deep on the American side, and these came over from Italy.”

Christoph relocates a black and white of Marie's mother as a teenager. Small town beauty queen material. The boys' flirtatious whistles trapped silent behind glass. “So think about all those people in your family. Think about all the glasses of wine poured—for celebrations: birthdays, anniversaries, new babies.” He removes a photo of a great-uncle, one of the last remaining family members with eternally unspoken stories of the Dust Bowl, the Depression, and WWII. “Or the mournful occasions: quietly commiserating the death of a loved one.” He takes the last framed photo from the

piano—a store-bought portrait by a professional amateur of Marie’s sister, brother-in-law, nieces and nephews, no longer grumbling at suburban responsibility behind forced smiles. “Or maybe just an evening meal on any given day.” Christoph props open the piano’s lid, embarrassing it with detuned exposure and forgotten dusty aroma wafting from within. “Think about all those glasses of wine, all the hands that held this glass,” as he takes it from Marie, “the lips sipping and the tongues tasting.” The nail of his middle finger strikes the glass at perhaps the same point of contact shared by butter knives before someone stood, spoke, and commanded the attention of the room. The crystal wineglass chime rings in their ears. Christoph, as if intentionally spilling wine into the piano, all over its dusty, rusting strings, holds the glass just below the lid, just inside the lip of the instrument’s open mouth.

And from the material makeup—the chemical composition of the crystal and shape of the glass—to every spiritual and sentimental connection, collections of natural resonant frequencies dance with piano wire partners of their choice and arrange vibrations into melody.

Marie’s throat tightens. Her hands reach to clear moist, blurring vision as wide eyes wonder in amazement at perfectly still piano keys while her ears absorb a tune that moves in and out of major and minor keys, somber and vivacious motifs, spanning the spectrum of every emotion she’d ever known. She chokes out, “It’s—It’s beautiful.” Hanging hallway family portraits gaze mesmerized as sound sweeps past them into the kitchen, the dining room, filling the home with song to leak out of windows and doors to blend with breeze and sunlight. Tears in her eyes, she looks to Christoph, finding him almost expressionless. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Christoph shrugs as he admits, “I don’t share these connections. To me it just sounds like a wineglass in a piano.”

The music plays on for Marie. She listens intently as Christoph patiently, quietly empties the wineglass drop by drop, note by note.

MONOLITH

They all said I was crazy. Everybody. My family. All my friends, even the depressive ones. My coworkers. My therapist. Especially my therapist. The clerk who totally profiled me like I couldn't possibly be the hunting type. The state-issued analyst. That fidgety social worker who kept looking at her watch like she had somewhere more important to be. That nice older couple from my yard sale who invited me to their church and said they'd pray for me and bought my couch anyway. I don't guess I'd argue. In hindsight, yeah, maybe I wasn't exactly all there to think killing myself for her would bring us closer together. But whatever.

She had this giant black bookcase in her apartment. A singing monument to herself. Vintage vinyl and oversized art books anchored the bottom, then her old psychology textbooks, knitting guides up from there, and her graphic novels, sketchbooks, journals. Every shelf packed tight. On top she'd organized a sort of shrine to her dead friends. Framed photos, kitschy trinkets, funeral programs, all manner of memorabilia no one understood but her. Mostly suicides. Maybe a motorcycle accident or drug overdose here and there. But mostly suicides.

I don't think we ever had a single conversation that didn't end in lamenting nostalgia for one of them. And then I'd lose her again. Everything triggered something. Somebody used to drink his coffee the same way as some guy in the smoking lounge at our favorite café. Or one of them used to love whatever 80s movie we were watching and

they'd quote all the good lines to each other. Especially the romantic lines. Art shows were the worst. They were all—each and every last one of them—artists. I'd lose her every time to something.

Nothing made any sense without her attention. We spoke the same language. Imagine that, right? Feeling like an alien abandoned on some desolate planet all through childhood, adolescence, well into adulthood. But not an alien at all. No, just a freak for no good reason besides popular opinion in a cruel town where cruel kids never fully develop empathy. But then to find another, my god. That's what it was like. It was like finding God.

Or it was at first. At least until the realization set in that, yeah, God totally loves me unconditionally, all my faults and flaws, and we can exist as one. But then I ask for too much, pray too much, talk to her too much, and she stops listening. And then she starts talking. Someone else used to gently caress her cheek and tuck her hair behind her ear as he made a move to kiss her just like I did. And I'd lose her again.

I pawned what I could. Set up shop outside my place and sold what I could to the weekend bargain hunters. Donated most of my clothes. Saved some valuables to give to friends. One of them offered to pay me for my laptop, but I knew he didn't have the money for it. And I'd already made enough to afford the shotgun, which was way more expensive than I'd anticipated. But whatever. Then I quit my job, ditched my duplex and spent my last two weeks on Earth with her. She wasn't working at the time, so we'd stay up late making art or discussing social politics or listening to AM jazz broadcasts on the roof. We'd wake up late and get coffee and smoke cigarettes in the sunlight and brainstorm bigger projects to unite all the lonely souls like we used to be. But then

someone would drive by in the car that used to belong to the would-be Romeo to her would-have-been Juliet. And I'd lose her again.

She has a new boyfriend. They seem to get along okay. He makes her evening tea just the way she likes it. But then he holds out his lighter for her cigarette in a familiar way. And she talks about me.

EXCERPT FROM A MOMENT OF INNER DIALOGUE

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t do this anymore. Seriously, if I have to listen to any more of your conceptual literary projects that will never come to fruition just to validate your daydreaming and feed your ego, I may very well kill one of us.” *Pausing. Glaring. Standing ridged in universally understood no-nonsense body language.* “Or both.”

Holy shit. Now there’s an idea for a story. An aspiring writer searching for the next wave in literature loses his girlfriend to his obsession. Or loses his life to his girlfriend to his obsession. Would anyone read that? What kinds of things was he writing before? And what kinds of things would he write after this happens to him? From beyond the grave? We could probably . . .

“Are you even listening to me?” *Frustrated arms in the air.* “Are you taking mental notes right now?” *Agitated fingers searching eyes to claw or a throat to clutch.* “Looking for the best way to describe this in one of your stories?”

Christ, how does she do that? “No, Sweetheart, I’m listening. I just don’t really know what to make of all this.”

“I’m taking Kerouac. You’ll just sit in front of your laptop not writing and forget to feed her.”

I suppose I could get a new dog. What kind of dog would this character have? Maybe a mutt. Yeah, some scrappy shelter reject—a melting pot of various breeds to match his hodgepodge, eclectic literary style. Or maybe . . .

“Hello?” *Rapid-fire finger snapping could be breaking bones or hammers against his spine in her mind.* “Are you aware of what’s happening right now? Do you even care?”

Maybe some terrier variety. “I do care. I love you, but I completely understand your position.”

“You do?”

Do I? Wait, which part does she want me to clarify? The last part would make the most sense, right? Or is she asking if I really do care, or if I really do love her? “I do. Very, very much.”

“Then you’ll understand why I have to leave.”

I wonder if I’ll be able to get more work done without her, without having to worry about keeping her happy. Or maybe I’ll be too sad to get anything done. It’s just as well, I suppose. Misery is good for the creative process, right? Not that I’ve been tremendously happy lately, but I sure wouldn’t consider myself miserable. Would I?

“Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Good luck on your novel. And goodbye.”

Heavy footsteps to the door, opened and slammed shut. She had been planning this. Not just planning, but executing slowly and quietly for some time now. He had failed to notice their dwindling library or the now surprising amount of space in their closet. Now nothing in the house did not belong to him.

Except the regret, *he thought*. This regret belongs to her. I wish she’d taken it.

It was unlike any sadness he had previously experienced. He wondered if it actually was sadness, or something else. It had become remarkably difficult for him to judge such matters, as it had been months (if not years) since he had processed emotions through feelings, rather than words.

Such is the life of a writer, I suppose. I mean, what time is there to process these things in life when I'm so busy putting them on paper?

But what validity will they hold on paper if they have not yet been fully explored? Do you really think the events of your favorite novels are completely fabricated? Anything with any level of sincerity or honesty or truth is rooted in the author's experiences. You need to feel this. You need to experience this heartbreak in its entirety for your art.

I want to. I mean, I think I want to. I can remember feeling it before. I mean, I'm pretty sure I've felt it. I'm pretty sure I've felt more than my fair share, actually. And I get it, you know? I know it's important, and I know I just write garbage, and I know it won't ever get better without it. And sometimes, yeah, maybe I process things too objectively. And maybe that's not exactly the healthiest emotional state [*in which*] to confine myself, constantly processing unfeelingly through words alone, but it hurts less that way.

You need to try. Look around. Do you see this empty apartment? This is your life. This is your empty life, your meaningless existence. You need to feel this. You need to try.

"I am trying!"

Heavy sighs through an increasingly tight throat.

"I'm sorry," *he whispered*, "but I just can't do this anymore."

EXPERIMENTS IN SONDER PT. 1: THE ONGOING INVISIBLE DIALOGUE

How many conversations are happening right now; how many acquaintances sipping coffee chatting about the weather; how many strangers on bus stop benches wondering aloud what's taking so long today; how many school children on playgrounds teaching each other naughty words giggling in amazement; how many consumers purchasing single-serving essentials from corner stores opting for no receipt; how many librarians reminding patrons of late fees but checking out new material anyway; how many customers complaining to outsourced call center representatives; how many politicians making speeches; how many friends debating breakfast options through head-pounding hangovers; how many families intervening on someone's problem that has yet to be admitted; how many pretty girls turning down dates; how many art critics deciding the fate of creative livelihood; how many teenagers negotiating logistics of sex and drugs and rock&roll; how many academics responding to literary analyses of centuries-old work; how many menial employees calling in sick; how many parents actively considering divorce across the dining room table; how many dog-owners training basic verbal commands; how many doctors explaining treatment options to patients; how many newlyweds scribbling thank you notes for toasters; how many lost travelers needing directions back to the highway; how many souls engaging in prayer; how many hands fluttering signs to those who listen with their eyes; how many flight attendants demonstrating proper application of oxygen masks; how many elderly widows

whispering to late husbands' photos; how many sports fans recapping last night's big game around water coolers; how many bartenders cutting someone off; how many teachers answering asinine but innocent questions; how many hungry diners hearing about today's specials; how many astrophysicists lecturing on the origins and nature of the universe; how many preachers warning congregations of fire and brimstone and teenage sex and drugs and rock&roll; how many tables opening fortune cookies; how many shoppers agreeing they are yes finding everything all right thank you; how many young lovers awaiting the right break in friendly banter for a first kiss; how many caller number nines cursing their cell phone providers for poor service at the worst possible time; how many morticians orating eulogies to bereaved loved ones; how many news anchors reading teleprompters; how many imaginary characters in my head flapping their imaginary gums about imaginary solutions to my very real concerns; how many directors pleading with their actors to emote for fuck's sake; how many nice guys receiving fake phone numbers; how many baristas nodding to half-caff skim milk sugar-free vanilla syrup instructions only to make the drink how they always make it anyway; how many board members fighting to stay awake during this week's meeting; how many nervous fathers of brides raising glasses for impromptu toasts poorly thought out but nonetheless sweetly sincere; how many readers jotting notes in the margins of novels; how many junior high school English students counting haiku syllables on their fingers; how many star-gazers abandoning answers to fall in love with the questions; how many police officers directing traffic; how many one-night-stands announcing pregnancy; how many folk singers melodically pontificating remedies to racism to sexism to whatever isms that infiltrate our collective consciousness; how many little boys and girls inquiring where

babies come from; how many poets brooding over the perfect combinations of words; how many depressive goth kids sitting in the dark with loud industrial music and razor blades; how many retirees popping pills with tomato juice and the morning paper; how many car salesmen throwing in the invisible topcoat to keep a vehicle's finish pristine guaranteed at half price because a buyer looks like someone who's smart and doesn't like to play games; how many filling station attendants doling out keys chained to slices of orange road cones for restroom access; how many activists presenting clipboards for a minute of your time to save the planet; how many cheating husbands promising it was a one-time thing in a moment of weakness and will never ever happen again; how many graffiti artists claiming trains in the name of unanticipated beauty for those stuck at blinking red light railroad crossings; how many casual text messages wanting to know what's up where you at; how many estranged siblings hugging apologies for the first time in decades; how many transients begging spare change with palms to the sky; how many lawyers defending criminals; how many passersby smiling at each other; how many wives reluctantly forgiving mistakes; how many volunteer coaches reminding little league players to just do their best and have fun and we'll all go out for ice cream after; how many proud grandparents congratulating milestones with stockpiled greeting cards; how many nosey neighbors eavesdropping and just wait 'til the gals at the salon or the guys at the shop get a load of this; how many museum tour guides pointing the way to the gift shop; how many people desperately in need keeping it bottled in and no I'm fine everything's fine; how many cocktail partygoers mingling; how many Internet café singles asking what time is it and has anyone seen any other attractive lonely individuals who asked what time is it; how many writers not writing dialog in favor of writing about

conversations; how many hearts fluttering at romantic email replies in their inbox; how many sinners confessing; how many crowds singing happy birthday . . .

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Denise watches politely, quietly for a moment, assuming the deeply engaged typing woman will notice and greet her, or at least acknowledge her, as she presumes customary in offices with waiting rooms and receptionists at desks partially behind glass. Denise tries to locate a break in the rhythm to announce her presence with any of the myriad appropriate options. She considers *Excuse me* and *Pardon me*, but decides against them for two reasons: it is not Denise who need be excused or pardoned, for she in this instances is the client, the customer, the signature on the check for services rendered, and if they want her business, they most certainly must at least allow her a chance to utilize said services; and these phrases, casual quick and simple utterances as they are, still require more syllabic space-time than the woman's furious data entry seems to accommodate. Denise chooses *Hi* as a potentially more fitting alternative. She will still need to time it just right, though. The intensity of the receptionist's keystrokes might easily drown out Denise's voice, forcing her to repeat herself. And what if her second *Hi* is not necessary? What if she simply doesn't allow enough time for the receptionist to respond? She might come off as outright rude. Denise reconsiders her previous options, feeling somewhat guilty for her implied sense of self-importance.

She watches from what she considers a polite distance—about six feet: close enough to be seen but far enough away to avoid risk of accidentally viewing the potentially sensitive personal information of other clients she assumes to be on the

receptionist's computer screen. Denise clutches her purse ever tighter with both hands. She leans forward slightly, angling herself only a few degrees inward from her posture previously perpendicular to the floor, opening her mouth and inhaling the breath that will vocalize her arrival; but she reaches her pinnacle and slowly recedes, breathing out instead a sigh of disappointment for another in a series of missed opportunities.

Denise closes her eyes, breathes in slowly and deeply, imagining the pressure in her lungs as a thick, wet mass of clay she can force down through her body and wrap around her feet, anchoring her firmly to the floor so she may stand unwavering and state plainly, confidently, *Hello, I'm here for my appointment*. Upon completion of her envisioned pedestal, Denise opens her eyes to see Dr. Emerson standing beside the receptionist.

"Hello," and scans the clipboard in his hands, "Ms. Magalia, correct?"

Denise opens her mouth hoping for a replied greeting or confirming Yes, thank you. But only a single nonverbal syllable escapes her mouth.

Dr. Emerson's widened eyes extend above and below the edges of his spectacles' narrow rectangular frames. "Bea," tapping the back of the receptionist's chair with his pen, "I'll see Ms. Magalia now. We can get her paperwork on the way out." A wave of his hand leads Denise to a door beside the receptionist's window. He opens it for her and invites her to follow him to his office.

She politely declines his offer of coffee or tea or anything else within midmorning reason to drink, though only after considering it thoughtfully, during which time the assessor either rightfully assumes her impending decision or grows weary of waiting, and

he seats himself behind his desk. Denise follows his lead. She sits quietly, watching him study his clipboard.

“Well, Ms. Magalia, tell me—what brings you in today?” He lays the clipboard on his desk, folds his hands in his lap, and casually leans back awaiting her reply.

Before this very moment, Denise could have sworn she had a lengthy list of reasons to schedule this appointment. At this moment, however, that list scrolls endlessly in her mind as she searches for the most reasonable introduction. Perhaps it would make the most sense to start at the very beginning, if only she could pinpoint it. Is the beginning of her story the end of her marriage? Or perhaps some event during? Maybe even the marriage itself. Charles would know, and he could tell her, or tell Dr. Emerson for her, just as he had done with their financial advisor and their realtor and the waiters at all those date-night restaurants, if only he had stuck around. She thinks back further and wonders if she should discuss her concerns that may or may not stem from her childhood. If only her father were still alive, he could tell her beyond all doubt, as he had so many times before in regard to her selections of friends and extracurricular activities in school, and later her choice of university and field of study.

Denise considers whether or not in this case she might be better off to start more recently and work backwards. She might even accept that cup of coffee after all, since she hadn't eaten breakfast, since she couldn't decide if an English muffin or a bagel was more appropriate for her day ahead, and even then her dilemma was less about her starchy centerpiece and more about the sweet or creamy condiment with which she might enhance it. Obviously, she realized at the time, the toaster would be a crucial element, but

she certainly had enough time before her appointment to use the stove and prepare a serving of oatmeal, or even something protein-heavy like bacon and eggs.

She thinks in the office about apologizing for being a few minutes late, due to all the time spent on not having breakfast, followed by the arrangement of eight possible outfits on her bed, six of which she had tried on in the mirror before dismissing each of them and arriving in the flannel pajama bottoms and baggy shirt she had been sleeping in since Charles had left her more than a month ago.

NAME-BRAND BUTTER

I shop for groceries exclusively at night. It's not that I just happen to be up at that hour and it's the most convenient time of day for me to do so, because it's not. Not in the least. I leave my shopping list on top of my alarm clock so I'm not as confused about why the hell it's going off at one in the morning. My excessive stumbling around my apartment seeks to remind me I'm probably in no condition to drive, but I do it anyway. And the parking at that hour is fantastic. I can't stand crowded parking lots, but that's no bearing on my decision. I like to shop when the stockers are working, but not because the items are a few days fresher. I mean, if they're doing their jobs properly, they old items get pulled to the front and the new ones go behind. It's obvious when stockers don't realize this or just don't care. Once I grabbed a bag of shredded bacon—salad toppings, you know?—and the next one in line was fit for a middle school science fair. And it's not like I intentionally go to be around the workers. It's awkward enough trying to navigate around other shoppers, but interrupting someone trying to earn a measly paycheck just so I can sneak past to get some frivolous thing like cinnamon-flavored organic honey, which is simply magnificent in chamomile tea, but try explaining such a luxury to some guy with prison-grade facial tattoos who's sure as hell not working that job with those hours because he wants to, and it's just embarrassing for both of us. But he's shelving more products, and that means I don't run the risk of taking the last of something, or even the

second to last. Someone else will have to accept that responsibility, if their conscience permits it. But how could it? My god, how sadistic would a person have to be?

I used to go to the grocery store whenever I needed something, like on my way home from work or maybe a bigger trip on the weekend. But last time I got the last of the name-brand butter. And I did hesitate, don't get me wrong. And I mean, I've always heard people talk about these generic store-brand perversions of quality products—how they're actually made in the same factories, and probably even from the same batches, just in less flashy, professionally graphically designed packaging—but, and I really don't think it's just me, but I can tell a difference.

After a mild eternity in the 5:30 checkout rush, I had made it to the front of the line. As the elderly woman, who looked more like she should be doling tiny plastic cups of the newest healthy-looking-but-preserved-loaded snack foods on Sundays, scanned my barcodes and weighed my various selections of produce, I overheard a suburban mother on her phone, a lane over and a few carts back. She said things like, “Yes, sweetheart, I got everything for the cupcakes. I'll be home—What? No, that's okay. I didn't need the list. Because it's Grandmother's recipe and I've been helping make it since I was your age. The butter? No, they were out, but I got the store's brand. What? No, sweetie, it'll be fine. No, the judges won't be able to tell a difference and neither will you. Oh, really? Well, if that's the case I'll just pull out of line and put everything back. You can just take a tray of waxy cupcakes from the store bakery. Or maybe I should bring home a box of those plastic-wrapped cream-filled gut-bombs.” I might be exaggerating some of her verbiage, but my decision was obviously ruining some young person's life and potentially destroying his or her, probably her I'd guess, relationship

with her mother. The glossy eyes of the magazine rack knew it. I could feel them all shooting their judgmental laser beams, which isn't a big deal with the fashion magazines and movie star entertainment reviews and healthy living publications—those jerks are always looking down on people, even from the bottom shelf—but when the smiles on the would-be June Cleavers of the cooking and gardening and decorating magazine covers turn to scowls of contempt, that hurts.

My items amassed to the left of the checkout woman. A young bagboy approached and asked with way too much enthusiasm, either from amphetamine usage or mild mental deficiency or both, if I wanted paper or plastic. I looked at the bags, “Um.” I looked back at the mother who had just hung up her phone, “Uh.” Back at my groceries, “Um.” To the mother fighting back the onset of tears. And then a wrinkled hand clutched my butter, the last of the name-brand butter on the shelf, maybe in the store, maybe in the entire tri-state area until the trucks came in later that week, and beeped it across the red lines of the reader, securing my purchase and the demise of little Suzy or whoever's bake sale tomorrow. I snapped at the bagboy, “What difference will that make? I've already ruined the lives and devastated the emotional wellbeing of innocent people I don't even know! And no amount of name-brand anything will ever fix it!”

I left empty-handed, without paying, and I haven't been back to that particular grocery store since. Now I go out of my way to shop at the way-too-big, way-too-corporate 24-hour place with migraine-inducing fluorescent lighting across town, where I'm sure little Suzy will one day seek employment with the other dregs of society who may have had a real chance in life, if only their dreams hadn't been cut short by the shear

humiliation of their grade school bake sale culinary catastrophe. I only hope she can take comfort in knowing they're store-brand butter isn't all that bad.

JOHN'S STUPID WEDDING

My car's making that weird noise again, so I try to keep it under 55mph. That's like 25% slower than normal, which means 25% more time in the car, which probably means like 50% more Red Bull and cigarettes. And some of these albums will have to get played twice. Professional tip: save the adrenalin-pumping hard rock and heavy metal until sleeping at the wheel starts to sound appealing. Could be sooner than later. I set out from A-town after work (worst job ever—don't get me started) at like 11pm. Yeah, awake for an eight-hour workday with an eight-hour drive all night. Fuck my life.

The original plan was slightly more responsible: US-87 for four hours until Raton, sleep at a highway rest area, I-25 for the second four hours in the morning. But Raton sneaks up fast. Maybe just a bite at the Denny's and hit the road again. Trinidad's not far off. I could stop there. Or, no, because Pueblo is just up the road. Ah, what the hell, why not try for the Springs? Oh, and that's apparently where they keep the sun. So, coffee? And Denver's just right there. I can practically reach out and touch it.

A few unanswered text messages confirm that Stephen and Amy are asleep. I'm totally jealous. So I park outside their house and try to grab a little shuteye in the rapidly increasing morning light and summer heat. My eyelids are fusing shut when here comes Stephen knocking on my window. "Mornin'." Yeah, I guess it is. And please tell me you have coffee. Mmmm, and the good creamer.

And then it's the usual: how's the drive; how's things; can you believe that John's getting married; etc. Honestly, no, I can't, especially not after the conversation I had with Linda. But here we are. "What was that all about?" Oh, nothing. Never mind. John's not answering his phone. Several voicemail greetings later, I give up. Coffee and a few cigarettes and I'm ready to try sleep again. I drag myself upstairs to the old futon. Hello, old friend. This time I get maybe—*maybe*—five minutes before John's sister calls. "The boys [John and his younger brother] are passed out. Evan spent most of the night puking over the balcony." Glad they have a first-floor apartment. Wait, what time is it? "We're going to meet at the shop to pick up tuxes when they open at eleven." Christ, with the half-hour drive there, that gives me like an hour. There's no way I'm waking up coherent from one hour of sleep at this point. Back downstairs for more coffee.

When I arrive at the formal wear shop, a couple customers are already awaiting service—a woman and a young man, possibly her son. No John, though. I suspect I'm stumbling and mumbling by now. Yeah, I'm here to pick up a tux. "Okay, what's the name?" I tell her. She types and clicks and looks at her computer screen. "Hmm, I'm not finding anything." Oh, right. She probably wants the names of the people getting married, not mine. "Ah, yep. There it is. Let me grab that for you." Then I meet the other customers: John's future mother- and brother-in-law. Another exchange of pleasantries, which dwindles quickly. John and his crew [mom and siblings] show up just as I'm considering commenting on the carpet in here just for something else to say. It looks very—what's the word?—soft.

The wedding party occupies all the fitting rooms for a while. I'm on the verge of passing out in the most comfortable wing-backed chair ever upholstered. But then John's

like, “Have you eaten, dude?” Oh, I guess not. I’ve been surviving pretty well on caffeine and nicotine since Raton. “You wanna get dim sum?” I’d love some. So we’re off to China Jade, just down the road from Stephen’s place. John hasn’t been smoking lately as a courtesy to his bride-to-be. But those rules, like cigarette smoke, go out the window when I’m around. I remind him I’ve been awake all night and probably already killed two packs. Maybe I should try to lay off. “No, dude, they’ll help keep you awake. You should definitely smoke more.” Thanks, John. You’re a shitty friend.

Long story short: dim sum is not for everyone. And it’s the first and last time I try chicken feet.

Okay, so break time? “No, we have to get to the hotel for the rehearsal.” Where’s the hotel? “Breckenridge. I’m riding with you.” Christ, what have I signed up for? Denver to Breck is eighty miles (that’s about an hour and a half) on I-70. And it’s not the mostly straight and flat highway I’d been traveling; it’s twists and turns and tunnels on a mountain road with certain death waiting beyond the guardrails. Sure, man. Yeah, let’s do this. Good friends can make life worth living, but sometimes they drag you into situations that require a shrug like: Why not; I’ve had a good life. So we’re off to Breckenridge. Buckle up.

The hotel doesn’t look like much from the front, but the balcony out back is a postcard for romantic weddings. The spot overlooks a valley beset on all sides by the Rocky Mountains. It’s that I-want-to-cry-because-it’s-so-beautiful kind of beautiful. We run the rehearsal. I’m one of three on John’s side. He and Sarah each have co-ed parties. Their respective brothers take the first spots: Evan is best man and Tim is maid of honor. John’s sister and I are the groomsmen (groomspersons?) opposite Sarah’s bridesmaids

(whom I've never seen before). I'm assigned one of them to walk down the aisle (not the hot one, and I feel shitty saying that, but whatever, there it is). Sarah's mom directs us in several attempts to lock into the proper rhythm with the music. "Nope, that's too fast. Let's try it again." Easy for you to say, lady. You've slept!

Parking in a touristy mountain town (even in the off-season) presents enough problems without sleep deprivation thrown into the mix. Full lots leave only parallel parking as an option. Maybe I could luck out and find two open spots and pull in headfirst. And maybe there'll be a rainbow lighting the way and a leprechaun directing traffic. Nope. Just tight fits on curvy roads lined with kitsch. How can they even call this parallel parking? It's always going to be at an angle. But we land a place right outside the restaurant. Now to make polite small talk with someone else's grandparents and cousins. John later tells me I did fine, but the rehearsal dinner is a blur of baked potatoes and awkward chitchat and would now be a good time to step out for a smoke, please.

Time to head back. Sarah's mom takes her to a relative's rented room where she'll finish work on the bouquets and wedding cake. Yes, the bride did all that herself—such a badass. Evan stays behind at the hotel, ignoring his duties as best man. It's up to me to make sure John's transported safely and on time and blah blah blah. "Oh, and by the way," Sarah's dad adds, "you'll be staying at our place with Sarah and John. We need you to make sure there's no *funny business* before the wedding." Wait, what? I mean, don't get me wrong, I'll run interference, but I'm damn sure not taking one for the team. "Are you gonna make it?" He notices my thousand-yard stare and questions my abilities as chauffeur. "Why don't you leave your car here and ride back with us?" Because I have half my life in this vehicle and for whatever reason the doors don't lock. I'll be fine, I

promise. We'll stop and grab me another Red Bull on our way out. That, some cigarettes, and heavy-hitting post-hardcore tunes should do the trick.

The drive back seems longer. Maybe it's the darkness. Maybe it's that, even if we could see anything, we'd already seen it on the drive in. Maybe I've just been awake too long (what's it been, like pushing 40 hours?). Or it's probably everything that contributes to our somber mood. Now's as good a time as any, I suppose. So I ask him. Are you sure, man? "Yeah, dude, I'm sure." Yeah, I know, but are you really sure? Like, you're convinced; I get that. So just humor me here. Why is she the one? But it's like pulling teeth. Eventually: "We balance each other out." Okay, sure, but how? "She's a chef. I'm a sommelier. Someday we'd like to pool our resources and expertise and open a restaurant." And, hey, if nothing else, they'll throw exceptional dinner parties.

Still too many miles to go. And John doesn't know that I know what I know. But people talk, right? Christ, John must have been drunk when he did it. Should I ask him? I mean, do I need to hear it from him so when they ask tomorrow "if anyone here knows any reason these two should not be wed . . ." I can stay silent with a clear conscience? Look, maybe it's none of my business, but what about Sandra? John doesn't answer right away. He's piecing it all together: he told Sandra, Sandra told Linda, Linda told me. "I guess I just had to know." Would you have done it? I mean, if she'd said okay, would none of this be happening right now? Quiet contemplation. A heavy sigh. "I don't know, dude. But here we are."

We park outside Sarah's parents' place. I finish a cigarette and ask John about this whole anti-pre-marital-sex vibe. "Yeah, that came about when I announced my intentions to her father. We've snuck around a couple times, but it's been hard." Rimshot! "And

I've been attending their church since then. It was sort of a prerequisite for the family's approval." So let me get this straight: you found God to get laid?

Lo and behold, it's wedding day morning. Sarah's mom, we're told, got in around 3am, slapping herself in the face to stay awake while the bride slept in the backseat. *Pfft*, amateurs. Coffee and cigarettes for breakfast. Let the games begin. Ever play chubby bunny? It's a lot like that, only the mouth is the short window of time before we have to hit the road *again* to Breckenridge, the marshmallows are asinine activities—a couple's massage, hair and makeup appointments, shave and a haircut (two bits)—that might be awesome if I had been invited, and instead of saying chubby bunny, we're all asking each other "Oh, shit! What time is it?"

We're en route to pick up John and the maid of honor from some ritzy barbershop downtown. I'm riding shotgun, trying to keep my big mouth shut about God and Sandra and whoever else when it becomes apparent that Sarah cannot parallel park. No worries; I've got this. We Chinese fire drill around the car. I land in the driver's seat, look down, and what the hell is wrong with this gearshift? And why are there so many pedals? Yep, Sarah can't park and I can't drive stick. Cue the 80s sitcom laugh track. Okay, how about you drive and I'll get out and guide you in? Translation: I'll stand over there and flail my arms so it seems like I'm helping. Good luck, Sarah.

After a dive-joint lunch, we [John, Sarah, Tim, and I] pile into Sarah's car and hit that I-70 drag yet again. I feel gross. Like, filmy. "No problem, dude. We can take showers at the hotel." Oh, good. I was hoping I would have a chance to get naked while your family watches basic cable in the next room. And then the tuxes. Black, white, and red make for a very rock&roll-esque wedding. John looks like he stepped out of a White

Stripes video. Tim's looking sharp. Wait, where's Evan? "He's around. Lying down, I think. Said he wasn't feeling great." Still recovering from the bachelor party, I take it. Don't worry, best man, I'll make sure the groom's tie is straight and his feet stay warm. Sheesh.

Guests begin to pile in. The parking lot accommodates more than it should. I sneak a couple cigarettes in my tux against John's insistence. Soon the guests' meandering settles down as seats are found. Music drowns their murmurs. Here we go. Just like we practiced, right? A little too fast, but whatever. Sarah's mom is too overcome with emotion to notice. And here comes the bride. Sarah and her dad are silhouettes against the setting sun. Tim sees his mom crying, so that makes *him* start to cry. I see Tim crying, and damn it, Tim! I was doing so well holding it together.

John takes Sarah as his lawfully wedded wife without a shred of apprehension. I want to believe him. So I do.

At the reception it becomes painfully obvious that I'm the only person who's prepared a speech. The heartfelt, off-the-cuff ramblings of Sarah's dad and brother are sweet enough, I guess. But seriously, Evan? Don't you earn a paycheck from live theatre? I still can't believe this clown got best man over me. But then my turn comes around and I realize I don't have an opener. Shit. All the months I'd been revising and rehearsing and it never occurred to me how awkward it would be to just dive into it. Shit. Okay, introduce myself. Look around the room and announce: I'm not related to anyone here. *Whew*. Close call.

Dinner. Drinking. Dancing. The newlyweds perform a professionally choreographed tango to the Cure's "Love Cats." The evening is magical in that yeah-I-

know-it's-cliché-to-call-it-magical-but-it-totally-is kind of way. John and Sarah eventually escape to their honeymoon suite for their first family-sanctioned fuck. Have fun, you crazy kids.

I catch a ride to Denver with Stephen and Amy. She had been in the car for I don't know how long, apparently crying about something. Maybe the wedding reminded her of Stephen's lack of commitment. I tell them about John's newfound religious beliefs—no surprise there. I tell them about Sandra. “What?! And you didn't say anything?!” Should I have? I mean, is it really any of my business? “Well, I guess not. But still . . .” I know, man. But still.

They drop me off at my car. “You sure you don't wanna crash with us tonight?” I've already called in sick for two days. I've got to get back to work tomorrow. That's right: awake all day for a wedding and an all-night drive left to go. I stop for some Red Bull and cigarettes, crank the music, and hit the road. My car's still making that weird noise, so, again, I try to keep it under 55mph. But the drive back seems longer.

OF LOVE & EXISTENCE

Maybe it was a summer morning like any other. Maybe neighbors paced lawn mowers across grasses progressively greener on all sides of white picket fences. Maybe elderly women scouted garage sales in slow-motion minivans and creeping Cadillacs. Maybe two-wheeled, trouble-making youths scoffed handlebar safety for firecrackers and bottle rockets tossed haphazardly in the street. Maybe the sun provided formidable opposition to the apartment's overworked and underpowered air conditioner, scorching any lingering night coolness.

Ryan drank cold, day-old coffee as Lexi slept. He stood in the doorway tracing her gentle androgynous curves with his eyes, romanticizing moments that, in this reality or any other, would never happen. He thought about what their first place would be like. Perhaps a renovated warehouse or loft with hardwood floors, high ceilings, and exposed brick walls could accommodate her painting and their shared domestic aesthetics. He imagined taking her parents, whom he had never met and never would, to dinner to ask for their blessing. Perhaps a slightly overpriced steakhouse might serve appropriate atmosphere for such an occasion. Picking up the check in a place like that would surely silence any doubt about the sincerity and seriousness of his intentions with their daughter. He pictured dark flowers in her hands popping against a white wedding dress backdrop as she walked toward him down the aisle. *Would she wear her Chuck Taylors with it?* he wondered. He always thought he'd have found the right girl if she was the type to want to

wear Converse sneakers on her wedding day. *Don't go there, man*, he told himself. *That's not why she's here*. He raised his coffee cup in agreement to his invisible conversation partner, turned, and walked away from yet another of his absurd daydreams.

Outside on the rickety porch, hovering above the downstairs unit of what was quite possibly a remodeled single-car garage, Ryan lit his morning cigarette by the heat of the west Texas sun. After three or four drags, he heard Lexi stirring. *She's getting dressed*, he thought. *She'll come out to bum a cigarette and be fully clothed and useless to me*, and was fairly disgusted with himself. *That's wrong. She's alright, I guess. Way too young, though. At least to be serious about*. Some kids rode past on skateboards, hard plastic rattling against gravel, inciting vocal protest from neighbors' dogs. *Christ, why is that even a thought right now? She's better conversation than Karen was. Maybe this game is less about understanding women and more about understanding people*. A soccer mom stereotype drove past, her American-made SUV full of young athletes. *I mean, she was older, but apparently that's no indication of anything else. Probably mentally the youngest person I've ever dated. And that includes high school*. The door opened. *Christ, I'll get this figured out at some point, right?*

"Jesus, what time is it?" rubbing her eyes. "Do you have another cigarette?"

"I don't know. Somewhere between nine and forever?" handing her a cigarette and a lighter, which he had prepared in anticipation of her arrival. The few elements of their relationship (which should be noted, as they both would confirm if asked, was in no way romantic) were clockwork. When she came over, they had sex. When she stayed the night, he provided a breakfast of coffee and cigarettes. She had already helped herself to the coffee.

“What do you have going on today?” exhaling her first drag.

What bearing does that have? “I don’t know. Some writing, maybe. Or trying to, at least. Maybe. I don’t know. Probably nothing, actually.”

“Sounds exciting,” in her usual sarcasm.

“Totally exciting,” either playing along or offering a sincere counterpoint, he couldn’t decide which. “It’s pretty much all I have left to prove that I exist.”

“What does that mean? You exist right now. At least I think you do,” playfully kicking him.

Ryan flicked his cigarette into the street. “Yeah, it seems that way now, because you’re around. But then you’ll leave, and I’ll be by myself, and I’ll start fading away.” Feeling her suspicious glare, “I’m serious.”

He was quite serious. After back-to-back failed romantic endeavors, focusing his mental majority on them, feeling he had no purpose in life beyond his girlfriend-at-the-time’s happiness, Ryan had no proof of his own existence outside of his relationships with women. His time with Lexi, however empty, provided his life purpose in brief doses.

“So let me get this straight: you think that if I leave, you won’t exist?”

He sipped his coffee and nodded. “Try it,” motioning down the stairs.

Shaking her head with a cynical laugh, “Right.” Taking a few steps down the stairs, “I don’t know what you think is going to happen,” and a few more, “but you’re not going to simply cease to exist just because I walk away.” And reaching the bottom, turning to look up at Ryan, as speechless as he’d ever seen her, “Oh, my god.” Ryan’s eyes had become tunnels. She looked through them into clear blue sky. A block behind

him, kids wasted roman candles against the sun. Faint yellow flashes replaced the space of his face, fading as Lexi's slow backward steps and wide-eyed amazement continued past the curb, fading as she crossed the street, and disappearing as she stepped onto a neighbor's freshly cut lawn.

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Maybe it was a summer afternoon like any other. Maybe the smell of fresh cut grass lingered in the air, competing with backyard barbeques marked by car-lined curbs. Maybe a young suburban couple returned home from grocery shopping, still playfully bickering over the color or quality of paint for the nursery. Maybe walls and window treatments hid minds melting into televisions and bodies into couches, people passively absorbing whatever their respective screens displayed.

Ryan sat somewhere between Susan's front porch and nowhere in particular. She must have thought it was the wind or her imagination when he knocked, drawing the door's half curtain, almost making eye contact, seeing only her Volkswagen in the carport behind him. It took him calling out her name for her to open the door and greet him through the screen.

"Oh, hey! I didn't," pausing to reevaluate her meaning, "or rather, I *don't* see you there." She examined a faint outline of her friend. "How are you doing that?"

Ryan's shrug went unnoticed. "Chemical reaction, maybe? I don't know. I used to tune out my science teachers and write poetry."

"Do you want some coffee?" Susan retreated in full and correct anticipation of his answer, then with increased volume from the kitchen, "I made it this morning, but it's still warm."

“I’d love some, thank you,” matching her level and wondering if his voice might also fade at some point.

Susan was one of the few female friends for which Ryan had no romantic interest. Her son may have been a contributing factor. Even as he approached his thirties, understanding options for childless, single women of his immediate generation were increasingly limited, he always considered children to be *deal-breakers*. Her son was spending some of his summer with his father, which allowed Ryan easier access to the one female friend he could talk to about his romantic life.

Susan returned with coffee and cigarettes and joined Ryan on the porch. “So this is new, right? Or have I been missing something for a while?”

“It’s new,” lighting one of his own cigarettes, skin beginning to show hints of color, face coming into focus. “Or new-ish, I suppose. Probably been happening for a while now.”

Reaching for the tabled lighter, “Oh, there you are. That’s, um. That’s weird.”

“I know, right? But it puts my theory into practice.”

“What theory is that?”

Ryan sipped the black coffee, not hot but too warm to enjoy fully in such heat. “It’s going to sound absurd.”

Susan laughed. “Well, I sort of just saw you basically appear out of thin air, so under the circumstances, I’d say absurdity is to be expected.”

“Valid point,” setting down the coffee and leaning over his lap, elbows on his knees, body language begging seriousness. “My existence,” turning his head to watch an elderly bicyclist creep past, pointing questioningly.

“Oh, yeah, he rides past two or three times a day.”

“Huh.”

“Alright. Your existence,” inflecting upward, inquiring more details.

“Yeah. Like my full and total and complete existence, not just as an idea, but as a person, right? You know, because ideas can’t *not* exist, can they?”

“Like once they occur?” Susan thought about this over a drag of her cigarette.

“No, I think once an idea happens, it exists indefinitely.”

“I think I agree. I mean, I have some kind of awareness all the time, even when I’m,” trailing off, undecided on how he should or even could describe his situation. Was he really invisible? It didn’t seem possible—fathomable, if only in terms defined by a childhood of science-fiction movies, sure, but not possible. “Well, you saw it. Or didn’t, I guess. Either is fine.”

“Yeah, but what was it?”

Taking a drag of his cigarette, “I’m fairly convinced that my existence is conditional.”

“Conditional on what?”

“On my relationships with women.” Ryan had been in one serious relationship after another since his marriage ended nearly two years prior. His longest stretch of time without a girlfriend or female companionship of a physical nature had been just under two months. He did not know (or even know how to know) himself under any other circumstances.

“I could see that about you,” nodding in agreement. “What about Lexi?”

“Too young.”

“And Karen?”

“Too stupid.”

Choking on coffee and laughter, “That’s pretty blunt.”

“Yeah. The way I usually explain it is that I did not feel sufficiently stimulated intellectually. And then I follow it up by pointing out she preferred word-searches to crosswords.”

Susan cocked her head slightly, perhaps pondering the idea of sharing a long-term relationship with someone like that. Staring in no particular direction, “Yeah, that’s a problem. And Mary?”

“Too crazy.”

“I thought you liked crazy.”

Puzzled by her comment for a moment, “Oh, I do. I like it very much, but I mean me. I was too crazy.”

“How so?”

Ryan was paranoid, not necessarily in this moment, since he felt quite comfortable with Susan, but in general. He questioned people’s motives. He debated the meaning of their every word, factoring contexts of venue, situation, body language, and all in relation to himself. “I always thought she would cheat on me. Constantly. And she got sick of it.”

“That sucks, man.”

“No, it’s cool. I found out later that she totally cheated on me. It felt pretty good to learn that. Justifying my paranoia is probably the least healthy thing for me, though.”

“What about this,” pausing to find a means of describing or defining Ryan’s situation, for which there may have been no better term than “existential crisis you have going? That doesn’t seem to be paranoia. Or it’s completely justified if it is. What are your plans for that?”

“I don’t know,” extinguishing his cigarette in the ashtray. “I guess I’ll just sit at the coffee shop and write, as per usual. I don’t have any connection to those people, so I can pretty much just take it all in.”

“Good inspiration?”

“Not really, no. It’s like I just go there night after night hoping for something to happen that’s life changing, or at least worth writing about. Either would be fine, I guess.”

“Hey, maybe you’ll meet somebody and fall madly in love,” either joking or offering sincere hope to his situation.

“No, I think I’m done with all that. I think I’ll just embrace the crisis.” Standing up, “Thanks for the coffee,” meaning conversation.

“Sure, man. Good luck.”

Ryan’s footsteps became lighter and lighter as his distance from Susan grew. She watched as he became a shimmer, a mirage of himself, blending into wavy lines of summer heat above tar-bubbling blacktop streets.

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Maybe it was a summer evening like any other. Maybe the sun quietly fell at the corner of 6th Avenue and the horizon, setting the high plains sky on pink and orange fire. Maybe motorcycles played their expected weekend countermelody cacophony as a

streetlight song began to hum and buzz and flicker. Maybe young hipsters were out in droves, engaging in pre-party-night coffee and discussing who in town had the most cost-efficient recreational drugs. Maybe a touring band shuffled equipment from their rusted Chevy van to the coffee shop stage.

Ryan sat on (or of) the patio at (or of) a table by himself, chain-smoking cigarettes and transcending existential singularity, which may have placed him at every table, and everyone at his, if anyone had cared to notice. Notes of the evening passed from his perception to his pen and spilled themselves onto yellow legal pads, including the usual dialogues of youthful angst transcribed with cynical notes between lines.

And then somehow the drifting clouds just hung, and someone killed the volume of revving engines and mindless chatter, and time slowed to a halt. Ash from his cigarette hesitated between its glowing origin and the ground. Ryan's eyes moved left to right as he read what he could of the scene, turning to take in three hundred sixty degrees of unanticipated peace. Street traffic silently idled. Sidewalk traffic stood mid-step motionless. *Well, that's something unique, isn't it?* he thought. *I wonder what else I've never experienced.* He marveled in this moment where time had somehow broken, not caring how or why. He certainly did not question if things might ever be the same, and it's probably best he didn't, because they wouldn't. He turned back to his table and found a beautiful (especially by all the standards to which Ryan agreed) young woman sitting across from him.

"Hi. What are you writing?"

Sound waves traveled effortlessly to Ryan's ears and left him wondering if he'd been deaf his entire life until this aural awakening. What else would there be to think

when *Christ, you spend a lifetime between walkman headphones and then someone sits you in front of a symphony?* This voice, cutting perfectly still, perfectly peaceful silence struck Ryan with such awe that he neglected answering her for some indeterminate amount of time (since there were no noticeable points of reference). He blinked in rapid succession, sometimes tightly, and shook his head attempting to escape an early morning's lingering dream. "I'm just," scanning his short-term memory for the question, "taking notes, I guess."

"Do you write a lot? I mean, I see you up here a lot, and you're always writing."

He could not answer her. He could not even acknowledge her since his own question had appeared. Ryan was baffled, not at the stillness of the surrounding moments, the ones that didn't need or notice him, but at the energy of the one in which he was, without a doubt and without warning, participating. "Wait, you can see me?"

The young woman smiled. "Yeah. Can you see me? I feel like someone in there just walked right through me."

Ryan had finally broken past the safety of his mental barriers and was charting new territories in the furthest reaches of insanity. He had no other explanation. He knew with all the certainty he knew could not exist that *she* could not exist in any capacity beyond his own wild imagination. "That happened to me, too. It's like it leaves you feeling," with his cigarette for a baton, conducting an orchestra of unseen words, hoping for notes in tune with his thought and in time with its delivery.

"Violated?" Her word crashed like cymbals and timpani, and right on cue.

He compared her suggestion to countless other descriptions and their countless synonyms, and they all added up to “Yeah.” And he nodded. “Yeah, totally. Can you see them, too?” motioning with his hand. “Do you see what’s going on here?”

She broke what could have otherwise been endless eye contact to examine time frozen all around them. “I know, right? It’s pretty crazy. I always used to wish I could stop time, you know?”

“Yeah, me, too. Like, I would think about how much fun it would be and all the trouble I could cause.”

“But then you get older,” gradually slowing her speech, perhaps to see how Ryan might conclude.

“And you think about all the sleep and reading you could catch up on.”

She either smiled again or, perhaps more likely, had been smiling the entire time. “Do you suppose all this is really happening? Or are we just imagining it?”

I might ask the same thing about you, he thought. “I don’t know. I mean, what’s more likely: that time just forgot about us, or that our imaginations are somehow working collectively to manifest,” pausing to consider how he might define the situation, “whatever *this* is?”

“Um, well,” surveying the scene again, “I guess either is just as unlikely, but I’d bet that it’s not really happening. I mean, look at that guy on the motorcycle.” They examined him together and decided he was about average, if not even a little cliché, with his leather vest displaying arms loaded with tattoos acquired in prison, or at least of the same poor quality. “I bet he disappears when we come out of this.”

Ryan turned to her and squinted in suspicion. “And how exactly would you propose we do that?”

“Well, I think maybe we just have to acknowledge that *this* moment,” pointing back and forth between them, “is really happening. Maybe it seems too unlikely for us to share this under any other circumstances, you know? So we just see it as having to be removed from everything else. Does that make sense?”

It did make sense. But Ryan puzzled over *why* it made sense, since he could not imagine anyone else finding it the least bit logical. “Oh, yeah. Totally. So what do we do?”

“I don’t know. Let’s try this,” leaning over the table and into the moment slightly more than before. “I think we’re real and that we’re really here having this conversation. What do you think?”

“Yeah.” Reaffirming, or perhaps attempting to convince himself, “Yeah, I think so, too.”

A white minivan drove through the space from which the motorcycle disappeared. Streetlights picked up the sun’s slack, having dropped further behind the horizon. Some coffee shop patrons were replaced by others, while some remained, as they would for perhaps the entire night. Ryan’s cigarette, still between his fingers, had burned down to the filter. Through the patio door wafted tuning electric guitars and microphones being checked one two, checked one two.

~

Maybe it was an autumn day like any other. Maybe elongated shadows cast in golden sunlight played puppet shows across leaf-littered lawns and sidewalks. Maybe

school bells rang and boys becoming young gentlemen walked girls home, inching ever closer, hoping a casual brushing of hands would give way to embraced palms or interlocked fingers. Maybe light jacket chill hovered hot cider steam over cups and saucers, drifting upward and onward, freezing like so many lofty daydreams in the stratosphere.

Ryan did not immediately notice Susan on the patio, bundled behind a scarf and buried in a book. He strolled past, held the coffee shop door for an exiting elderly gentleman whose bicycle was padlocked outside, and ordered a cup of hot tea, making friendly, casual chitchat with the barista. Stepping onto the patio to enjoy a cigarette in his favorite season's briskness, "Oh, hey!" And setting his still steeping tea on her table, "I didn't see you there."

"Hey, man," setting down whatever first edition novel she was reading, perhaps by some contemporary author searching for the new aesthetic, the new paradigm. "Long time no see. I mean," pausing to admire the restored opaqueness of her friend.

And navigating flame to his cigarette around laughter, "I know what you mean. How have you been?"

"Good. Pretty good. You, uh," patting her face gently on both cheeks, "look like you got some color back."

"That I did," blowing out his first drag, watching a light breeze dance it away.

"What's the scoop on that? Did you," articulating the remainder of her question with clicks inside her mouth, punctuating with a wink.

"Meet somebody?" Moving his cigarette to his lips in a proud, grandiose wave of his arm, "What on earth would give you that idea?"

“Probably the fact that you haven’t been by for coffee in like two months.”

“Yeah,” and smiling, “I met somebody.”

“Nice, man,” returning his smile. “So you successfully ended your existential crisis, I take it?”

Ryan sat in the open chair at Susan’s table and rested his cigarette in the already half-full ashtray. He warmed his hands against his mug and breathed the tea’s steam, taking it in slowly, and releasing it as a blissful sigh. He nodded. Then looking up at his friend, “But isn’t it just the beginning of another?” Seeming to smile with his entire being, “I mean, what could be more perfect, more peaceful, more,” holding his excited hands in front of him, cradling an idea too big for the confines of his own mind, “more real, you know, than existing and not existing all at once?” Sipping his tea, “Pretty sure I’m in love with her, man.” And setting it down, “Yeah. Pretty sure I’m in love.”

ROACHES

No one ever rids an apartment of vermin, not with finality. Rats at least offer the advantage of learned behavior. Enough of their pals get their skulls cracked open by spring-loaded traps or spew their bloody dissolved poisoned insides from every orifice and they might take a hint, start scavenging elsewhere. Roaches are a different story. One place has them, everyone has them. They're in the walls. They're in the pipes, coming up through the drain in the shower. Lose the toothpaste cap and smear their little insect eggs all over an unsuspecting smile. Shouldn't take more than a sprinkle of boric acid in the corners, they say. Eat the little bastards from the inside out, they say. But those filthy little creatures keep crawling back. I thought waking up with one on my face was invasive enough. Pouring a breakfast of frantic cereal that scatters right out of the bowl was worse. Still waiting for the day they figure out how to open the fridge. Suppose a person can get used to just about anything, though. Hell, I've had roommates that were less pleasant company. And anyway, I'd sooner take roaches than have to deal with meth-heads. Not that I have any say in the matter either way.

Normal day at work. Bland watery break room coffee. Ignorant customer bullshit call after call. Smoke breaks bitching about the monotony, equally monotonous. Come home and my door's unlocked. Personal oversight not possible. I check it twice every morning. Maybe Jerry finally got off his ass to work on that POS AC unit I told him

about two weeks ago. Probably helped himself to the liquor cabinet again. Nothing super about that guy except Guinness-worthy laziness. More of a scotch man, myself.

Walk in and my television's gone. Window curtain billows in a draft. Clear mosaic of criminal intent on the floor below. Fuck my life. I close the door and listen to my apartment. Traffic hums outside. Voices mumble behind the walls. Neighbors are home, but I'm fairly convinced I'm alone. Not certain, though. Step softly to the kitchen. Arm myself with a knife from the drying rack. Check the closets. Check the bathroom. Even yank the shower curtain aside against a drumroll heartbeat. Dramatic, but thankfully anticlimactic. They're gone. Looks like the TV's all they got.

Cops take their sweet time getting here, just from the next building over. Guess I'm not the only mark today. Show up with questions and a camera. Dipshit shoots three times before removing the lens cap. Probably pulls the trigger with the safety on, too. "Did they take anything of value?"

"With the dwindling quality of commercial broadcasts these days, not really."

"What's that?"

"My television's gone," and I point from the couch to my empty entertainment stand.

He rolls his eyes off his notepad and his head follows, checks out the ring of dust around the shape where my TV should be. "Anything else?"

"Don't think so. Any hope of finding it?"

"Oh, yeah," clicks his pen and pockets it. "You hit enough pawnshops, I'm sure it'll turn up."

Whatever. Pound on Jerry's door until he shouts acknowledgement. "Hold yer damn horses! I'm coming!" Hear him rocking back and forth gathering momentum to eject himself from his bowed-out loveseat. Fits more like an armchair. Opens the door and looks me over. Snorts and chokes some phlegm, "Oh, you. What is it this time?"

"Broken window."

Heavy sigh. "Oh, yeah? How'd you break it?"

What the fuck, Jerry? Seriously? "Damnedest thing. I went to work today and forgot about the Rob Me sign I'd hung up. You got a board to nail up there or something?"

Another heavy sigh, maybe just how he's forced to breathe behind his excess body mass. "Yeah. Yeah, I'll be there in a minute."

Meant idiomatically, of course. Close to half an hour later his quarter-ton waddle creaks every hallway floorboard. Brings me a piece of plywood, some nails, and a hammer. Drop it off in the office tomorrow, he says. Only works after hours for emergencies, he says. Thanks, Jerry, you lazy fat sack. Whatever.

Shuffle the furniture around. Monolith bookcase in front of the windows, dining table to stabilize it. They'll be back. They've seen everything else, right? So why not? Prop the box spring over the bedroom windows and push the dresser into it. Two deadbolts and the knob lock should suffice at the door.

Start calling the pawnshops. Nothing yet. Leave my name and number with every last one in a ten-mile radius. I don't expect to hear anything. Nor do I anticipate watching anything. Whatever. Two fingers of scotch and some light jazz to wind down.

Next day at work I tell one coworker about it, and suddenly the whole office knows. Repeat the same story at least a dozen times. They offer sympathies but not much else. More than the cops had to contribute, at least. My smoking comrade Amy laughs with disdain at the police. "They won't do shit. You know, I used to live on that side of town. Had my car broken into one night."

"That sucks."

"Yeah. My insurance guy called me back on it before the cops even got there."

"Damn. And nothing came of it? They didn't do anything?"

She lights another cigarette off of her last one. "Shit no. Said it was probably just some meth-head. They're terrible over there. Spreading out more and more all the time." She demonstrates the addict expanse with intentionally gnarled fingers of both hands grasping at enlarging concentric circles.

I take a drag and shake my head. "Jesus. Some people, right?"

"Crazy bastard didn't even use anything to break the glass. There was spots of blood so they figured he probably just punched it out," emphasizing with more corresponding hand motions.

"Yikes."

"Yeah, people go crazy for that shit."

Make it home that evening and wish I'd called in sick. At least Amy's thoughts on my break-in were more than contrived condolences. But had I stayed home, I could have caught the fuckers. How great would that have been, right? To catch them in the act, maybe beat the living shit out of them. Leave their faces looking like my front door,

footprint and all. Frame's shattered, even chunks of drywall busted out. For fuck's sake, guys. Two days in a row? Got the stereo this time. Sons of bitches.

Neighbors weren't home. Or if they were, they didn't hear anything. Or if they did, they didn't think anything of it at the time. Christ. Back pounding on Jerry's door.

"Again with you?"

"Fix it, Jerry."

"What now?"

"Just go fix it. I can't be here right now. Shit to do."

"Hey now, you're not the only one, pal." But I'm already walking away. Hear him cursing me even after I'm outside.

Hit the pawnshops in person. Nothing. Waste most of the evening and half a tank of gas in a blind rage. Come home and find Jerry's piss-poor work on my door. Even a half-assed job from a guy with an ass that massive should be worth something. Whatever. Call the cops again. They don't even bother to show up. Too many break-ins lately, they say. Add it to the report they haven't filed yet anyway, they say. Right, guys. I'll just call back if I need someone to write me up for some bullshit traffic offence. Worthless. Two fingers with a cigarette. Two more to calm down and try to sleep.

Friday at work. I don't bother sharing last night's story. Just be wide eyes of shock followed by more phony sympathy. Only person I mention it to is Amy. Smoke with the same person every weekday and there's only so many conversations about the weather, right?

"No shit? Again?"

“Yeah. I’d guess it’s probably the same guy. Or guys, maybe. I don’t know. Cops didn’t do shit.”

“Told ya.”

“Yeah. Hey, you ever meet any of these meth-heads?”

Amy looks away, takes a drag. Then hesitantly, “Yeah, I dated a guy who got into it.”

“Oh?”

“Fucking asshole,” quietly lamenting and staring at nothing in particular.

“Do you know, I mean, did he ever,” but I sort of trail off.

“What?”

“He ever take you along to score? Like, do you know where a person would buy it?”

“You’re not serious. You don’t want to fuck around with that shit.”

“No, not like that. I just, I don’t know. Research, you know?”

Her raised eyebrows ask if I’ve lost my damn mind. Probably, but whatever. Anyway, I get her to tell me. She shudders, goes pale, looks like she might vomit. Sorry, Amy. But I get a name and an address. Best I can ask at this point.

That night I cruise by this rundown duplex. Pit bull behind a chain link fence out front. Park around the corner beneath a broken streetlight, slump in my seat. Watch and wait. Before too long the parade begins. Dirty scumbags. Get creeped out just watching them. Clothes hang off skeleton frames, unstuffed scarecrows with heads darting around. They glance over one shoulder, then the other, then again, like any minute their heads might spin full way around and pop clean off. And twitching. Jesus Christ, that twitching.

Arms almost a blur reaching up to pick at their faces, fall back, up to scratch their heads, twist at their hair, back down to pull up their drooping pants, up again picking at their faces. Walk like film missing frames. Somewhere between a limp and a skip, and fast.

Nothing inconspicuous about the transactions, either. Dog standing guard announces every passerby with nightmare snarls. Pavlov's pooch bloodlusting at the bell. Buyers know better, bang the gate. Too many seconds pass and they fidget anxiously, shout out for him. "Marky! Hey, Marky, you home?"

Yeah, this is the place. And here comes Marky. Doesn't look much different than his customers. Calmer, maybe, but otherwise I'd peg him for one of them. He commands the dog in what sounds like, I don't know, German or Russian or something, not English. It backs down. Marky crosses the yard and makes the deal right over the fence. Small, even tiny bicycles litter yards and driveways on either side of his place. Christ, there are kids on this block. Right out in the open. Marky takes the cash. Meth-heads claim their prize. Dart away faster than ever, everything but animated smoke doppelgangers as vulgar caricatures vanish into the night.

Ten or so customers in and there's a break. What the fuck am I doing? Whatever. Here we go, right? Light a cigarette and get the cherry bright and hot. Nothing else on me. Figure if there's trouble I can jam it in someone's eye. No one else around now. Eerie stillness to the night. Bang the fence, "Hey, Marky!"

He stops on the porch to look me over. Guess I don't spasm as much as his regulars. "Who the fuck are you?"

Pit bull growls deep, feel its rumble in my crotch. Try to stay cool against the wet heat of its breath. "I'm buying. You selling?"

He nods. Midway across the yard he stops for another look at me. Shakes his head and continues, subdues his attack beast. At the fence, hands in his pockets, “You a cop?”

Drag my cigarette. “No, I have a real job.”

Seems to lighten the mood enough. He even chuckles a little. “How much you want?”

Oh, fuck. Can’t help but hear about how it’s cooked in bathtubs and all the exploding labs in otherwise quiet suburbs, but I haven’t the first clue what this shit costs or standard quantities or anything. Hold out a twenty, hoping not to be insulting.

“Is that all?”

Look down at the bill in my hand. “Oh, shit. My bad.”

Pull more cash from my wallet until he nods. He snatches it and passes me two baggies. Pocket them, exchange nods, and that’s that. I don’t look back, but I can feel his eyes. Walk past my ride and circle around the next block. Police sirens approach from behind. Fuck, keep walking. Squad car speeds past. Sigh of relief.

Back at my place, toss the stuff on the coffee table. Survey my disheveled domicile. Drugs don’t seem so out of place with furniture strewn everywhere. Turn on the kitchen light and roaches scatter and hide under the stove, the fridge, wherever they fit. No ice. Damn it. Two fingers of scotch neat, then. Make it three. Whatever. Pull the Borax out from under the sink and sprinkle barricades around the appliances.

Fix myself on the couch, sipping scotch and staring at the bags of white powder in front of me. Pick one up by the excess plastic. Not even a baggie, just a cut corner tied in on itself. Christ, my stereo went to this? To support some scummy habit? Looks like the

shit I use on the roaches. Toss it to the table. Light thud and plastic crinkles almost echo. Yeah, it looks a lot like the Borax.

Do I have any baggies? I'd swear I did. Where'd I put them? Christ, another roach in the drawer. Trapped, though. Squash the little bastard with a wad of paper towel. Give him a boric dusting and toss him under the stove. Cannibals, right? So I hear, anyway. All right, baggies. Scissors? Check. Chop the corners and set to work with my white powders and a teaspoon.

Trial and error time. What's the good ratio on a poisoned meth cocktail? Try one to one. Shit blends pretty well. Up it to one part meth, two parts Borax. Baggie after baggie. Wonder if I should be wearing gloves. Maybe even a face mask. Yeah, and a white lab coat. Mad scientist style. Bunsen burners and test tubes and the works. And hunchbacked assistant. Or a humpbacked whale. Fuck, why is that so funny? Baggie after baggie, spooning and tying. Yes, this'll be great. Scumbags won't see it coming.

Spoon and tie until the drugs run dry. Switch to roach repellant solo. Baggie after baggie until I have to cut some more. Coffee table screams Possession with Intent to Distribute loud and clear. Count them. Count them again, back across the table by twos, by threes. Count and recount little bundles of slow death. Reach for my scotch without looking and spill a little on my hand. "Damn it," switching hands to shake away the wetness. Try to sip at high velocity and wonder if I chipped a tooth. Thumb and tongue my incisors trying to recall the landscape prior. Quiet long enough to notice my heart pounding and agro metal backbeat pulse in my ears. Shit. I got a whiff of it, maybe. Or got it on my fingers. Soaked right in. Or it got from my fingers to my glass and to my lips and I'm just covered in this shit now, aren't I? Oh, Christ.

The shower won't get hot fast enough. Damn it. Is that hot? Whatever. My god, this water feels amazing. Scrub hard and stop to see my skin rubbed raw. Christ, I need to calm down. Probably wasn't anything to do with that shit, right? Just excitement. Then just anxious paranoia. And maybe some lingering late-day break room caffeine. Yeah, no, that's all. My shower becomes too short for pacing when I realize I'm trying to. Towel off a little and pace naked through my apartment, leaving wet footprints in the carpet. Scope the mass of baggies. Still tonguing my front teeth. Back and forth past the coffee table. Eyeing the baggies. Yes. Yes, this'll work. "All right," and I clap my hands.

My wardrobe fails to offer the all-black inconspicuous urban ninja outfit I had envisioned. Piece together something dark, at least. Load the shit in an old backpack and head out.

Creep past Marky's place. Hopping again, packs of them this time. Follow the trail. River flows in two directions. Big loop from Alles Park to Marky's and back. Clusters of them. Under trees and unlit lampposts, around tables or knelt beside trashcans. Lighters sparking like a field of fireflies. Friday night Meth-Stock. Park a block away from the far end of the festivities and stroll in casually. Right?

Pretty sure they notice I'm out of place. Don't seem to make me for any kind of threat though. Christ, why would they? Only one of me. Swarms of them. Oh, and two breeding behind the bushes. Gross. Babies born addicted to shit like this are the stuff of nightmares, they say. Unrelenting inhuman screams, they say. Where exactly does inherent chemical dependency fit, Maslow? Begging for it since birth. "Hey, man, help me out." And even now. "I ran out of gas over there and just need a couple bucks to get home," a loner pleas, palm to the night sky beside a barrel overflowing with trash.

Stop in my tracks and look him over. Pile of bones and soiled rags. Facial scabs of a flesh-eating disease. Chaotic patchwork of short brittle-looking hair and bare scalp.

Mangy dog of a man. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Just trying to get home." Begging hand shakes. "Just need a couple bucks."

Other hand scratches and picks anywhere it can reach.

"Couple bucks, huh? Just two dollars?"

"Just two or three to make it home, man. Help me out."

"What kind of car do you drive?"

"It's," and he darts his head around, "it's uh, I mean the bus. I need a couple bucks to catch a bus home."

Glance around the park. Little cliques everywhere, but far enough away from this one. Kneel beside him. "Sure, man. I'll help you out, if you help me out."

He looks anywhere but at me. "I ain't queer or nothing, man. You trying to fag, you got the wrong park."

Swallow a sudden burning tinge of bile in my throat. "Nothing like that, man. Just want to help you out." Pull my backpack around and he holds focus better by the second. Drop a baggie in his hand. Eyes light up like Christmas. Tries to bolt, but a handful of his greasy flannel foils his escape. "Where you going, man? We're not done here."

Tries to fight me off. Guttural animalistic objections. "Let me go, motherfucker!"

Grab him by the elbows, squeeze them into his ribs and thrust him into the stout metal receptacle, shaking loose discarded fountain drinks that spill on the sidewalk.

"Chill the fuck out for a minute." Survey the scene again. No one seems to care about our commotion. "I helped you out, and I'll do more than that." He relaxes a little, rubs the

back of his head where it clanged the thick lip of the trashcan. Traces of blood glisten black in the moonlight. Stand up and toss him the backpack, all the goods. “That’s for you. Share it, sell it, I don’t give a fuck. Go make some friends.” And I start my trek back, lighting a fresh cigarette. Hear his childish glee behind me.

Caught more attention than I realized. Pack of filthmongers approaches me. “Hey, what did you give him?”

Keep walking. “Go ask him.”

Then the onslaught of “You got any more? You got any more?”

Shake my head, still walking. “Cleaned me out.” Magic words to redirect their course.

Blood still pumping, even against euphoric sighs of relief. Go home and finish a bottle in hopes of knocking myself clean out. But sleep doesn’t come until almost noon Saturday.

Wake up sometime Sunday evening. Jesus Christ, my head hurts. Stumble around my apartment, eyes tight shut to keep them from exploding out of my face. Bang my knee on the dining table. Oh, right. That’s where I put that. Pop some Tylenol and back to bed.

Monday at work means cigarettes with Amy. She takes note of my lethargy. “Fun weekend?”

Mumble disgust as I light a cigarette clenched between my teeth.

“Damn, must’ve been. Any luck on your stuff?”

Shake my head and sit on the bench beside her. “Met Marky.”

“Yeah? How’d that go?”

“Well,” exhaling a drag, “I guess we’ll see.”

Taken aback, displayed in her posture. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

With a playful shrug, “I guess we’ll see.”

Rest of the workweek drags. Quiet, solitary evenings. Buy another bottle of scotch and nearly kill it before the weekend.

Friday evening. Anxious awaiting nightfall. Pacing. Plotting. Wardrobe configuration. Leave a little early to stop off for a new backpack. Buy a few. And more baggies. Then down to Marky’s, this time with more cash. Back home to measure out my problems and solutions with a spoon. Forgot to get rubber gloves. Fuck it. Whatever. Set to work and take breaks to pace frantically. Almost midnight and the coffee table is piled deep. Furious energy like I’ve never felt. All right, shower and change and then hit the fuckers again.

Try to maintain focus and not scrub my skin raw this time. Hot water hits below the belt and feels good. Really good. Like, really exceptionally good. Rapidly pumping blood fills my member so I rub one out in the shower. Barely towel off and pace again, air drying against my own velocity. Okay, slow down. Need to get dressed. Stand in front of my open closet, look down and I’m throbbing again. Jesus. Polish that one off and wipe it on a dirty shirt in the hamper. Suit up and fill the packs. Last couple swigs from the bottle and hit the road, chain smoke en route to Alles Park.

Creep on group after group. Drop pack after pack on them. Some scamper away together. Others divvy it up and scatter. It’s the only part of the weekend I remember. The rest is claimed by yet another bottle and dreamless passed-smooth-out sleep.

Power through two or three, I lose count, however many more weeks of this routine. Food budget reallocates to supplies. Could have replaced my shit by now.

Whatever. Spend it all on baggies of bathtub poison and Borax. Break for a smoke at work and Amy asks if I'd seen the news lately. Remind her of my stolen television. "Oh, right. Sorry. Anyway, they picked up like five or six addicts from Alles Park the other morning."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Took them all to the hospital. Said they were convulsing and like puking blue or something. One's in a coma."

"Crazy," then savor a drag with a side of accomplishment.

"Scary shit. Coma guy's still there, but the others got out. Said they probably should have been dead, but, I don't know. Yeah, real crazy." She takes a long drag and speaks through smoke. "And they found one like ripped to shreds."

"Cannibals," under my breath.

She blows out the last of it. "Said one hand was still like," and she grips the air tight, "clutching this empty backpack."

Next weekend's run feels different. Looks like the same crew at the park, but a few pockets of them move in slow motion. More spread out, too. Just sort of meandering in the night. Leave some tainted goods with a few of the livelier groups and hightail it out, trying to outrun the hair on the back of my neck standing straight out.

Detour the drive home for a cup of diner coffee and some cigarettes. Take comfort in the harsh fluorescent lighting, outdated pop jukebox and post-bar drunken gibberish of surrounding patrons. Christ, at least these people are real. Couldn't begin to describe those wandering vessels back at the park. Shudder to even think about them. Startled by the waitress, spill my complimentary water across the table. "Oh, fuck. I'm

sorry. No, I'm good. Just the check. Sorry." Drop some cash in the table puddle and jet before she gets back.

Roaches retreat against the light back at my place. Dust some Borax under the couch. Stomp a straggler and don't bother to clean him up, just cover him with chemical. Pace a path in my carpet until gravity leads me to the mattress on the floor. Would swear I can feel them crawling under my pillow. Pass out anyway.

Awake to slow steady pounding at the door. No telling how long it's been going. "Who's there?" as I stumble out of the bedroom. No reply, just another thud, and another, steady. Press my face to the peephole. Door bashes me in the nose. Refocus, hands as a buffer. What the fuck? Thud. Some dirty meth-head. Thud. Steps back, lunges forward. Thud. Eyes open and straight ahead. Thud. But blacked out, hollow. Thud. Mother of God. Thud.

Retreat for a kitchen knife. Time the rhythm of the door and throw it open as the thing marches forward. Back up and thrust the knife straight out. Doesn't even seem to notice me. Just wobbles back to balance and walks forward, arms out. Grabs the first thing it feels, an empty fruit bowl on the counter. Turns around and heads for the door.

"Hey!" Keeps walking. Shove hard, palm to chest, resonates like an empty drum. "Hey, fucker!" Keeps walking. Block the path to the door with knife pointed out firm. Pierces stained white cotton shirt. Keeps walking. Breaks skin but doesn't bleed. Keeps walking. Brace my stance and push back. Keeps walking. Brittle crunching of splintering sternum, hand lost in chest cavity void. Keeps walking. Drop the knife inside and retract with eyes as wide as mouth. Scream whispers of disbelief stepping backwards into the

hall, guided by fear as it keeps walking. But it slows. It slows and staggers to the floor. A few more steps on its knees before landing facedown and motionless.

Oh, Christ. Oh, fuck. Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. Leave him in the hall? Maybe drag him to the dumpsters out back. And how does that happen inconspicuously? Probably doesn't. Plus there's a knife somewhere in there covered in my sweaty fingerprints. All right, drag him by the ankles to the living room and lock the door in triplicate. Then lock myself in the bathroom. Splash of cold water. Slap my face. Bloodshot eyes with adrenaline pupils stare at me from the mirror, begging guidance or comforting reassurance. "No! I don't know either!" Slap myself again.

Crack the door open. Peer out and catch sight of tattered sneakers, toes to the carpet. Creep on it, stepping softly. Doesn't move. Test the waters. Kick lightly and the legs wiggle, but no response. Face down, arms stretched out toward the door, still gripping the fruit bowl. Okay. He's not too tall. Maybe he folds up and fits in a trash bag.

Couple roaches sneak out from under the empty entertainment stand. Tap antennae around the clothed perimeter. Make their way to the head. One crawls from a cheek to the back of the neck. Other disappears beneath the face, resurfaces through an ear. Bolt back to the bathroom and manage to puke mostly in the toilet. Rinse and spit. Try to breathe.

Back out to the corpse. More roaches marching toward the buffet. Cannibals. Tiptoe between them to slip on some shoes by the door. Crunch them into the carpet walking back to the kitchen for a trash bag. All right, let's do this.

Flip him over and try not to look at his hollow face, shiny insects crawling in and out of eye sockets, nostrils, mouth, everywhere. Start at the feet. Bend his knees up to the

hole in his chest. Dry crackling. The legs go limp. What the fuck? Tug at an ankle and the calf follows. Soiled sock gives way to scabbed over skin and just keeps coming. Torn bloodless flesh and jagged bone. Drop the detached lower leg, shoe and all. Catch myself from fainting against the counter.

Pace my apartment in a daze. What the hell is that in my carpet? Should have just let him have the fruit bowl. Okay. Right. I started this, didn't I? Can't stop now. All right. Yeah, just pull him apart and shove him in the bag. Easy.

Bag the loose leg. Grit my teeth and crack the other one off. Bag it. Arms next. Step on his shoulder and yank. Bag it. Bag the next. Bend the torso at the waist and the spine splits and pokes out of his back. Jesus. Hoist it. Rattle the knife inside until it shakes loose and drops. Bag the body. Fall on the couch. Stare at my Hefty sack of dismembered meth-head. Heart pounds. Heaving breaths. Dumpster? No, they'll find it. Just take one person seeing me taking out the trash at, what is it? Christ, five in the morning. Sunrise hits before too long. Don't want him hanging around here. Box of Borax beckons from the kitchen counter. Yeah. Cannibals.

Almost dawn and the Alles Park meth party's still in full swing. Just a little slower than usual. Hop the curb and drive right into the action. Jump out and pop the trunk. "Feeding time, motherfuckers!" Toss the bag spilling body parts covered and stuffed with white crystal boric acid. Peel out on the grass and speed away. Glimpse the rearview. Filthy creatures hobble toward their prize. Darkest corners of the park move in waves of living shadows. Shady scumbag armies marching. Chemical warfare time bomb set to detonate in three. Two. One.

Zero sleep Sunday. Just pacing. Cleaning. Vacuum empty cockroach husks. Dust more Borax along the baseboards. Hit the bar around the corner for a double, maybe two, before last call. Wander home for a few passed-out hours before work.

Amy offers her usual Monday smoke conversation. “Man, you look like shit. No offence. Fun weekend?”

Light a cigarette. Nod and slump on the bench.

“You catch the news last night? Oh, right. Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. What happened?”

Her eyes widen. Cheeks go pale. “Creepiest shit. They found all these dead meth-heads over in Alles Park. They were just like laying all over curled up. Showed a picture of one on his back all,” and she mangles her hands in the air, lifts her feet off the ground, “like a bug. Like, just like a dead bug.”

Friday night. Run out for a fresh bottle of scotch. Top shelf this time. Why not? Cruise by Alles Park. No meth party. Just some guy out late walking his dog. Mellow scene tonight. Creep up Marky’s street. No jittery packs making the rounds. Couple clusters of front porch gatherings. Family and friends. Slow drive past Marky’s place. He’s at the fence, pit bull panting beside him. Passes something over to a couple young boys, teenagers at best. They skitter away giddy down the sidewalk.

No one ever gets rid of vermin. Not with finality.

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