"THE WAY IT GOES": STORIES

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This collection of short stories attempts to examine the role of a changing and often indifferent world has in the way various characters achieve maturity. Though the past is not always obvious in each story, each protagonist is characterized as holding onto some aspect of his or her past life in a way that is detrimental to their growing as human beings. The stories attempt to portray the indifference of the world as it moves forward to the plight of these characters, and to portray the manner in which they each come to terms with such a world and with their own lives.
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PART I
PREFACE
In the time before televisions, there were radios in nearly every American home. Millions of people came together to listen to the adventures of their favorite pulp hero. One of these was Flash Gordon, the “internationally famous athlete” who, through the machinations of scientist Hans Zarkov, makes his way to another world. Listening to the programs now, it’s easy to find the offensive clichés, the quick pacing, the intrusive narrator. But the effect was magical, complete with soundtrack, sound effects, and voice actors that bring the characters to life.

And make no mistake: it was the characters that everyone tuned in to hear about. The adventures, the action, were only secondary. Flash Gordon is a hero; a man of action. He will not think twice when, being tossed into the arena, he throws punches at the “red monkey men of Mongo.” He will not hesitate to fire his raygun. The way the audience knows this, within the space of the first fifteen minute segment of the serial, is precisely because, soon after he is introduced, he leaps into action. And the action speaks volumes about the character—more information than even the narrator can give us.

As a rule, action revealing character lends itself well to radio. There are only two ways the audience can glean information about the characters portrayed is through narration—being directly told—or through the character’s actions—being shown who the character is. The question becomes: would the audience believe the narrator if he told them that Flash Gordon is man of action? Probably not. Nor should they. Unless the audience is shown through action who the character is, there is nothing to truly anchor them to the story. The two go hand in hand.
And yet there is a debate that dates back to classical philosophy, a kind of chicken-and-egg argument that every writer will hear at some point in his or her creative life: which takes precedence, plot or character? The dichotomy posits two kinds of story: plot-oriented and character-oriented, the former focusing on action-heavy stories and the latter focusing on the realistic portrayal and development of a character. Ask any writer, and you’ll find a different answer. The truth, as with most things, lies somewhere in the middle. A real story emerges at the intersection of plot and character.

Separating plot and character, treating them as if they were different currents in a story, is akin to asking Flash Gordon not to fire his raygun. It simply cannot be done. The action is the character, and vice versa.

Janet Burroway, in her seminal *Writing Fiction*, outlines the three crucial moments that any plot must contain: conflict, crisis and resolution. These are the basics. This is the skeleton of every story, an overly simplified definition of plot, but it serves as a starting point. To put a finer point on it, plot begins with desire. Without desire, there can be no conflict—the first crucial element in Burroway’s schema. Without character, however, there could be no desire. In order for a story to contain desire, in order for conflict to arise from that desire, we must have characters, sketched well enough that their desires shine through on their page. It is with these characters and their desires that we must sympathize. Characters desire. People desire. And from that desire stems the entire plot.

Let’s look at this through the lens of the radio serial before moving on to examine contemporary literature: if Flash Gordon were the main character of the serials named
after him (which, ostensibly, he is), then it would stand to reason that his plot too would begin with *his* desire: the desire to return to Earth. After all, he and his “companion,” Dale Arden, are essentially kidnapped by the mad scientist and caught up in his schemes to stop the machinations of a ruler on another world, a world which is incidentally hurtling towards Earth (it’s best not to think too long about that aspect). So the desire crops up immediately in the first installment, thus giving us a catalyst (which, if we so desired, could be added to Burroway’s schema before conflict begins). Conflict emerges when the Earthlings are blocked from returning, quite forcefully too.

In more abstract terms, conflict arises when the character is barred from fulfilling his or her desire. Because the start of the plot is intricately tied to a character through desire, it becomes impossible to fully separate the actions which follow and which complicate the plot even further from the character. Flash Gordon insists on speaking to “Emperor Ming” as an equal, which only infuriates the alien overlord and leads to Gordon’s being thrown to the “red Monkey men,” taking him even further from his goal. Complication makes a plot interesting. Complication puts pressure on the character, builds the plot to its second point: the crisis moment.

But before we get to that moment—for the crisis moment is when everything changes—let’s make a distinction. Robert McKee, in his bible of screenwriting, *Story*, draws a line between character and characterization. Characterization is “the sum of all observable qualities of a human being” (100). This is everything that the narrator must tell us about the characters—the color of his or her eyes and hair, the kind of car the character drives or the home in which he or she lives, how much schooling he or she has.
True character, though, cannot be told but must be shown through action. True character lurks beneath the surface, and cannot be revealed through details about the characters, but through descriptions of their actions. Only in action can we witness the truth of who this character is. “As he chooses, he is.”

So all of those actions that lead to conflict in the story, those moments that lead up to the crisis moment, stem from character. The character either acts—often in small ways—or more frequently he or she chooses not to act in those moments in a story. Every decision that the character makes is a possible crisis moment, but the fact that there is no change in the character, that the character reacts instead of becoming an active character, serves to build up tension until the crisis moment becomes a last-minute save, evoking in the reader some kind of emotion—elation at a last minute change for the better, or a heartbreaking defeat. Either way, the crisis moment reveals something even more crucial about the character. If there were no pressure on the character, what value would his or her choices have?

In a short story, then, there is no moment more crucial to plot development than the crisis moment. This is the moment in which the character chooses who he or she is, in which the character acts, definitively. Or perhaps the character does not act. What to do about stories in which the protagonist does not change? There is no criteria stating that a change must be made, only that it be possible. The character can choose not to change. What is important is the choice itself.

But the crisis moment, no matter the outcome, must come toward the end of the story, after the writer has had a chance to build tension, to make the choice matter. And
then we must see some inkling of how the character has or has not changed: the resolution. It is enough, in a short story, for the climax, the crisis moment, to imply a resolution. There is less room in a short story for an extended denouement.

The crisis moment—or crisis action as Burroway labels it—is the moment when the wires touch. Sparks fly, and the character is forced to make some crucial decision, one that will effect the desire which first sparked the story. Will the desire go fulfilled or unfulfilled? Which path the character chooses is ultimately unimportant to the craft, only that the character ultimately chooses. As readers, we can read the falling action largely in this choice.

Stories that tend toward the character-oriented side of the schism between plot and character tend to have as their crisis moment a moment of revelation in which the entire mental landscape of the character changes. Since Joyce, in many stories “the true territory of struggle is the main character’s mind, and so the real crisis action must occur there” (Burroway 47). Joyce referred to the moment of mental crisis, in which the entire landscape of a character’s mental outlook is changed, as the epiphany.

The trouble with the epiphany as crisis moment is that it leaves the reader feeling cheated. There is no choice; the epiphany only alters the character’s outlook. There is no resolution that we can read in this kind of climax. It leaves the crisis moment—the most important moment of the story—as little more than another moment of characterization. Charles Baxter also famously comes out against epiphanies. In those moment, the “world of appearances falls away, and the essences show themselves” (46). This would be well and good if fiction were intended to be a piece of philosophy, but fiction is, at its heart,
about entertainment. The problem with the epiphany is that it strips away any
verisimilitude a story might have developed. “Insights leave one stunned. Sometimes the
vision causes the world to fall away...but quite often the truth of things is so
overpowering that one simply has nothing to do and nowhere to move. Following the
radiance comes immobility” (Baxter 48-9). After an epiphany, action is simply not possible.

Thus we have the problem: a mental crisis does not allow the character to show action. The “only way to know the truth is to witness [the character] make choices under pressure to take one action or another in the pursuit of his desire” (McKee 101). It is through action that a character reveals who he or she is underneath whatever appearances and whatever characterizations the writer has provided. Human beings show their inner essence not through thought but through action. “The moment of recognition must be manifested in an action” (Burroway 47). While an epiphany or any change to the character’s mental landscape is essential to a change in the character’s action, it is through those actions that both the reader and the other characters will notice any change or any decision whatsoever.

Take, for example, a moment late in Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Little Dog.” The main character, Gurov, a womanizer, has had an illicit affair and has fallen in love with his mistress. Both characters are married. Gurov looks at his reflection in a mirror, and comes to a realization:

His head was beginning to turn gray. And it seemed strange to him that he had aged so much in those last years, had lost so much of his good looks. The
shoulders on which his hands lay were warm and trembled. He felt compassion for this life, still so warm and beautiful, but probably already near the point where it would begin to fade and wither, like his own life. Why did she love him so? (375)

This mental state marks a reversal from an earlier moment, in the first pages of the story, in which Gurov is quite confident. He is characterized quite differently in these initial passages: “In his appearance, in his character, in his whole nature there was something attractive and elusive that disposed women towards him and enticed them; he knew that, and he himself was attracted to them by some force” (362).

Gurov’s moment of reflection on his physical and mental change (it’s seeing himself in the mirror that triggers this epiphany) would mean nothing if it did not lead to an action to reveal the change:

[Anna Sergeevna] could not speak because she was crying. She turned away from him and pressed a handkerchief to her eyes [...] She was crying from anxiety, from a sorrowful awareness that their life had turned out so sadly; they only saw each other in secret, they hid from people like thieves! [...] He went up to her and took her by the shoulders to caress her [...] “Stop my good one,” he said, “you’ve had your cry—and enough...Let’s talk now, we’ll think up something.” (375-76)

Gurov’s reaction to Anna Sergeevna’s crying in this scene stands in opposition to a similar scene earlier in the story. Immediately after the pair have returned to her hotel room and in effect consummated their relationship, Anna Sergeevna bemoans her situation:
Anna Sergeevna, the “lady with the little dog,” somehow took a special, very serious attitude towards what had happened, as if it were her fall—so it seemed, and that was strange and inopportune. Her features drooped and faded, and her long hair hung down sadly on both sides of her face, she sat pondering in a dejected pose, like the sinful woman in an old painting.

“It’s not good,” she said. “You’ll be the first not to respect me.”

There was watermelon on the table in the hotel room. Gurov cut himself a slice and unhurriedly began to eat it. At least half an hour passed in silence. [...] Gurov was bored listening, he was annoyed by the naïve tone, by this repentance, so unexpected and out of place; had it not been for the tears in her eyes, one might have thought she was joking or playing a role. (365-66)

And so, by having a moment on the opposite side of the crisis moment, Chekhov shows both the reader and Anna Sergeevna just how much Gurov has changed throughout the events of the novel. The events have changed him from a womanizer, who ignores a woman’s crying and is annoyed by it, to a softer man, who first lets Anna Sergeevna “have her cry,” and then comforts her. The crisis moment makes this change possible, and the moment he exhibits different behavior, the story is over. The crisis moment, to paraphrase Burroway, implies the resolution: that Gurov is a better man because of the events of this story, and that his desire has somehow been fulfilled through this pledge to Anna Sergeevna.

We can take two things from Chekhov’s climax: first, that without there being earlier scenes to relate to the climax, this reversal would lose its power—we can clearly
see, because the situation is the same, that the only thing that has changed is the character. Secondly, we see this through action. The change in the character is manifested in an action, how Gurov responds to the same set of circumstances. The link between character and action is solid.

What we see in these scenes is Gurov’s first refusal to comfort Anna Sergeevna in her moment of self-pity—opting instead to eat a watermelon—is reflective of who we have been told the character is. So too does his allowing her to leave Yalta, and his intention that they should both return to their lives. The scene in Anna Sergeevna’s hotel room drives home the characterization Chekhov has already provided in his exposition, and serves to push the plot forward incrementally by forcing a wedge between Gurov and Anna Sergeevna. Gurov telling Anna Sergeevna “‘Good-bye forever,’” sure that “all that was left was the memory” and sending her off on a train back home is a turning point in the story, and occurs specifically because it springs from Gurov’s character (368). He acts in accordance with his characterization, and his decision to send the woman away in the middle of the story is a significant plot point, without which the entire second half of the story would not occur.

If Chekhov is a master of this kind of interrelated plot and character, then it is no wonder that my own stories follow in his example. Much in the same way, I have my main character, Misha Ivanov, come to a sudden realization, after he has been betrayed by a woman he trusted, in “Wake Me When We Get to Leningrad:”

The officer pulled him up yet again, and he went back down.
Then, Misha Ivanov looked up, and he saw the sun breaking through the winter clouds. A small break, but it was there, if you looked. And in the distance, he heard Sergei Grigorovich speak:

“Misha Ivanov,” he said. “Stop fighting.”

Comrade Gorbachev was killing the old ways, replacing them with new Western ways. This was a new decade, a new world. And Misha Ivanov was terrified by it.

Misha looked at Sergei Grigorovich, and in the new sun, he looked like a martyr. He had the same peaceful smile Misha had seen on the paintings his grandmother had shown him in photographs.

We can’t all be Yegor Letov, he thought. Eventually, there would be no system to define themselves against. (147)

Here, there is a stunning moment of epiphany (aided by the fact that the protagonist is already physically immobilized), and a revelation about the worldview that has shaped Misha Ivanov’s actions. Throughout the piece, I have attempted to show that his actions are guided by a longing to hold on to the past. He leaves town and goes on the road trip that frames the story because he is alone. As he tells the girl he meets in Yaransk:

“When Sergei Grigorovich showed up and asked me if I would come with him on this idiot trip, he was all the family I had left in Sverdlovsk.”

“That’s terrible,” she said.

He shrugged. (138)
The loneliness here is akin to the snow in the background: it is setting, it is character. All of Misha Ivanov’s actions are motivated by his loneliness, even when he is in the company of Sergei Grigorovich. For it is being awake and alone when Sergei Grigiorovich snores late on the night they arrive in Yaranks that motivates Misha Ivanov to leave their room and go back down into the tavern, wherein he meets Tatiana Petrovna once again. The action ultimately is what sends the rest of the plot rolling, from Tatiana Petrovna’s kiss, to Misha Ivanov’s invitation, to Tatiana Petrovna’s ultimate betrayal. I attempt to characterize Misha Ivanov as someone far too trusting, someone whose trust ultimately earns him an arrest and an uncertain future. Even in the final scenes, this trait does not entirely disappear, but is replaced by a sense of pride walking into an uncertain future. His lot has been cast with a man, Sergei Grigorovich, who would fashion himself as a martyr in the State’s acts of repression against artists, and a woman who would betray him to feed her family.

The plot begins, of course, with desire; here, it is the desire, of all three characters, to simply reach Leningrad. For Sergei Grigorovich, Leningrad is the grand stage. For Misha Ivanov, Leningrad is a place he might finally become more than a factory worker. For Tatiana Petrovna, it is a way to escape her quiet village. The desire turns, however, in that each of the characters is somehow blocked from achieving their desire. Misha Ivanov, we must remember, is motivated by his loneliness. As he tries to make conversation with Sergei Grigorovich, in both the current and past action of the story, he is met by a traveling companion who can speak only of the state and its oppression of musicians, whose only other real act is to sleep. And so we come around
once more to the act on which the story swings: Misha Ivanov leaving Sergei Grigorovich and talking with Tatiana Petrovna. He seeks company, and the plot hinges on this action.

It is for this reason that I have Sergei Grigorovich find Misha Ivanov at a bus station, alone. By the time his story comes to its end, he has no choice but to identify with Sergei Grigorovich. While he may march boldly into whatever future awaits him, be it labor camp or freedom, he does so fully engulfed in the kind of radical martyrdom that Sergei represents, precisely because he has by this point no other choice to make that is in keeping with his character. Unlike Chekhov, Misha Ivanov does not so much change as choose, in that last moment, to solidify his character.

But, as in “The Lady with the Little Dog,” the real moment in which the apparent wall between character and plot comes down comes at the center of the story. In Chekhov’s story, it is the moment that Gurov allows Anna Sergeevna to leave; in my story, it is the moment in which Misha Ivanov flees Sergei Grigorovich in order to find a cure to his loneliness. Were it not for this moment, the second half of each story would not be possible. Gurov’s dismissal of Anna Sergeevna allows the conflict of the latter part of the story; Misha Ivanov’s choice to invite Tatiana Petrovna along to Leningrad inevitably destroys him.

Of course, this same plot-character dynamic also applies to more subtle texts. In Raymond Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From” (to which I must express a debt of gratitude), the story is told from a first-person point of view, which allows for Carver’s trademark subtlety. The story is told by a man in a “drying out facility.” Here, it is true, the actions taken by the main character reveal his own deep character, and propel the
story forward. When J.P., his companion, is telling him a story, and suddenly stops, he reacts adversely:

J.P. quits talking. He just clams up. What’s going on? I’m listening. It’s helping me relax, for one thing. It’s taking me away from my own situation. After a minute, I say, “What the hell? Go on, J.P.” He’s pulling his chin. But pretty soon he starts talking again. (457)

Here, the reader is offered the action through the filter of the first-person narrator. The narrator is intrigued by J.P.’s tale because it’s “taking him away” from his trouble. Of course, given that the point of view, we can almost instantly take this to mean that the character is avoiding something.

What Carver does here is to link plot and character by giving us a glimpse inside the character’s mind. The threat of epiphany is somewhat more acceptable in first person. Though this is not a moment of epiphany, it nonetheless gives us a glimpse inside the character’s head—we see how he immediately reacts to J.P. suddenly stopping—and then following up on this by having an action that follows suit. In this case, something as simple as speaking acts to reveal character and propel the plot forward—insofar as the story that J.P. tells is also the narrator’s story, and it is only after J.P. finishes his story that the narrator can come to terms with his own and attempt a change.

What is important to note is that we are repeatedly told of the narrator’s girlfriend, and how the two have had no contact since the narrator arrived at Frank Martin’s drying out facility. His girlfriend brings him to the facility:
She was driving my car. She drove us through a rainstorm. We drank champagne all the way. We were both drunk when we pulled up in the drive. She intended to drop me off, turn around, and drive home again. [...] She also had this mouthy teenaged son. I wanted her to get a room in town, spend the night, and then drive home. I don’t know if she got the room or not. I haven’t heard from her since she led me up the front steps the other day and walked me into Frank Martin’s office and said, “Guess who’s here.” (460)

Once again, we see everything treated matter-of-factly. Carver makes us work to understand the conflict that’s going on under the surface here, but it is revealed when the narrator’s relationship with his girlfriend is compared to that with his wife, who he has tried to call, but who never answers. There is an undercurrent of avoidance here, made all the more immediate when we learn, a few lines after this, that “her Pap smear came back, and the news was not cheery” (460). Later, the narrator even comes out directly with the news that “I hope she’s okay. But if she has something wrong with her, I don’t want to know about it” (463).

So, if every plot begins with desire, then we must read the plot as beginning prior to the start of the story: it emerges in the narrator’s recalling that he has become estranged from his wife, and thus leaps into a new relationship with a girlfriend, who he also has now come to avoid. The desire here is of course to avoid reality, as we can read in the narrator’s lack of any real desire to talk to his wife, since she will “ask me where I’m calling from, and I’ll have to tell her” (466). Thus, in the final moments of the story, we find the crisis moment, when the narrator asks J.P.’s wife, Roxy, for a kiss. Following
this, the entire tone of the story changes. Suddenly the narrator is willing to call his wife, to get his fire going, so to speak:

I bring some change out of my pocket. I’ll try my wife first. If she answers, I’ll wish her a Happy New Year. But that’s it. I won’t bring up business. I won’t raise my voice. Not even if she starts something. [...] After I talk to her, I’ll call my girlfriend. Maybe I’ll call her first. I’ll just have to hope I don’t get her kid on the line. (466)

The change of tense here is also important to note. No longer is this the past or future tense, the tense that the rest of the story is told in. Instead, this last paragraph, the resolution of the story, stands out because it is in future tense, which seems to imply the resolution of the story in the narrator’s willingness to face the uncertain.

My own story, “Gaddafi,” owes a debt to Carver’s “Where I’m Calling From.” There are the obvious similarities. Both my story and Carver’s are told from the first-person, and both feature similar themes of avoidance that the events of the story change in some way. The climax of both stories features the narrator coming to terms with the object they’ve been avoiding. The desire is still there in both stories, and therefore the catalyst is the same: both men want to avoid the present in order to hold on to the past. And in both stories, the narrator’s story is told not so much by the narration but through other characters’ stories and through the actions of the main character.

For example, early in “Gaddafi,” Sam and the narrator sit and share a drink. The subject is ostensibly the work of the day, and the strange things that have occurred:
I’m still there when Sam closes the shop that night. He takes off his apron, sets it on the counter and looks at me with one arched eyebrow. So I walk over to flip the sign on the door to closed. A few minutes later, Sam walks out of the back with two beers in hand. He pops the tops and sits across from me. One of the bottles, he slides along the table, and it slaps into my hand.

“Another satisfying day?” I ask as Sam takes a swig of his own beer.

“It will do,” he says. His eyes have that distant look. He’s staring out one of the windows.

I take a drink, but I don’t take my eyes off the guy. “You gonna tell me who that woman was?”

He looks at me. “Who? The Libyan?”

“Libyan?”

“Yeah,” he says. “From Libya.”

“You could tell where she was from?”

He nods.

“So,” I say. “Gaddafi.”


The undertones of the conversation bring forward the child that the narrator has lost, and the conversation heads naturally in that direction.
The actions of the main character also reveal his character. Should the narrator go over and put his hands on his wife’s waist as he wants, it might represent a turn for him. But because he does not, because he makes the choice to continue on as he has, the story must go on, and it puts more pressure on the narrator:

I wake up to the smell of eggs and bacon and coffee. I check my watch, but it says it’s only just after five. [...] I cross my arms and sigh. Liz keeps cooking. She’s lost weight, and I never noticed it until now. But she has. Her hips are as wide as I’ve ever seen them. I remember when she was afraid I wouldn’t love her because her hips were settling. She has childbearing hips these days. I used to tease her with stuff like that. Now all I want to do is go over and put my hands on those hips and pull her as close as I can and tell her everything is okay.

But I don’t. I go back to the bedroom. (71)

The choice to walk away builds up more pressure, until the inevitable confrontation not only between husband and his estranged wife, but between the narrator and the dead child, the very thing he has been trying to avoid throughout the entire text. Once again, the plot action—the turning away which furthers the plot—serves not only to push the story forward, but to reveal the narrator’s character, and his desire to avoid his wife and the child she represents.

And of course, in this story, I appropriate Carver’s strategy in the final paragraph. When the narrator finally comes face to face with his dead daughter, finally crosses the physical boundary of her room that he had been avoiding throughout the story, the tense suddenly switches:
I know how all this will end. Gaddafi will start bombing his own people. The center cannot hold, right? And Liz will leave. We’ll stop being the walking dead, stop haunting this house, and finally split. Because it’s better that way. I’ll go on to a Ph.D. program in the Midwest somewhere. Someplace warmer. She’ll promise to keep in touch but never will. We’ll lose our last link to Christine—for her, the constant reminder of the pain, and for me, maybe, the feeling that she’s not really gone. Not as long as Liz still wears those dresses.

But she won’t wear them. Even if she does, I’ll never see it.

We’ll both watch the news hoping for word of each other but of course none will ever come. None of us is that important. There’s just the constant drama in the Middle East. From different coasts, maybe, we’ll watch Libya burn. (82)

By doing this, by appropriating the strategy and by switching the tense, the conclusion of the piece takes on a different feel. It does not just sit with our heartbroken father in his daughter’s room, it goes beyond that crisis moment. The crisis action, to paraphrase Burroway, implies the resolution.

In “Cinema Verite,” too, the plot stems from character. The first glimpse the reader is given of the protagonist sees him sitting on a sofa. His initial outlook is reflected in his view of both his behavior and himself:

In their work clothes, [my two girlfriends] both look better than me—the fat slob in jeans and a tee, McDonald’s remains on the couch beside me, Playstation controller in my hands. And there’s the fact that I haven’t shaven in a few days. Definitely not leading man material. (25)
Immediately in the story, we are introduced to the idea that Brandon, the protagonist, is a passive character. He is someone who, despite his desire, will stay on the couch rather than joining the two women who share his home. As the two women talk in the kitchen, Brandon sits still.

    In the old days, when it was just me and Janine, I would have gone into the kitchen, both of us would have grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge, and while we drank, we’d talk about the kind of day we’d had. And there wasn’t the half-wall separating us, not all this distance. That was before Melanie came into our lives. Before I got fired. I can still taste that beer, still feel my legs aching. And now I’m sitting on the couch, watching a frozen screen, listening to the two of them, while I try to pretend I can’t hear them. (26)

So two things happen immediately: first of all, there is the desire—we can read in his action the desire to return to the way things were before when there were only two people in the home. He desires Janine. There is a very obvious obstacle in the form of Melanie, Janine’s girlfriend and the other third of the love triangle. The clash between the two takes a noticeable form when Melanie states her intent to buy a new couch, which Brandon has already told us is the only thing left of his in the apartment.

    The plot carries on—the trio shops for a sofa, and Brandon and Janine film scenes for their movie together. Throughout most of the plot, Brandon merely reacts. Finally, when he and Janine are filming for a second time, he has a bit of an epiphany. Janine and the character she plays merge, and the venom finally comes through—or rather, Brandon
finally notices it: “I pull back. Howard’s not supposed to. That’s ad libbing. But the venom and the hatred feel real, cut through the veneer of the movie” (39).

It is important to note here that though this moment does function as an epiphany, it is not the crisis moment. It informs the crisis moment. The moment when Brandon must make a decision comes in the final scene. The couch becomes the central set piece for the story, and Brandon’s choice to accept or reject the new couch is symbolic of his attitude about his relationship:

The movers walk our new sofa down their metal ramp, set it on rollers. One of them runs ahead, runs up the stairs. He stops in front of our door and looks at me.

“Hey,” he says. “We’re looking for Melanie Dupont’s apartment.”

He’s dressed in brown coveralls. The stitching on his right breast says “Dale.” He has long hair and a few days’ stubble. I purse my lips, nod slowly. I think how easy it would be to send them away, to sabotage everything, to keep my couch and my life, to hold the line in everything.

“Yeah,” I say. “You’ve got the right place.” (41)

Brandon does not only to acquiesce to the removal of the old couch and the arrival of the new but takes an active role in the replacement by leading the movers to their goal. He becomes an active part of his relationship’s move into a new phase. Unfortunately, the move also involves Brandon’s realization that he is, in fact, miserable. But this scene echoes the first scene of the story. Here, Brandon is no longer seated, but is moving. He does not avoid his misery, but embraces it. He makes a choice. Even at this point in the plot, the choice reveals something new about his character: when the pressure has built,
Brandon is a character who makes a choice not for the better, but changes so that he is more accepting of his situation.

This idea of movement reflecting a change in the characters carries over into “The Way It Goes.” My goal in that story is to chronicle the nostalgia felt at growing older, at becoming a new person. To illustrate this, the two characters in the story spend the larger part of the plot moving toward Stephen’s past. The Starbucks that they come to becomes another objective correlative, and Stephen’s move into adulthood is reflected in his reaction to the site of his final concert being replaced by an anonymous coffee shop, a sign of the modern age. It is no mistake that Stephen announces the site with the comment that it is one of “the benefits of urban renewal.”

The moment of truth comes at the end of the story. Stephen leads Brenda toward the more dangerous neighborhoods. It is his choice to go on this journey. His desire to return to the past serves as catalyst to the story. Conflict emerges in the fact that he is unable to literally return to the past, but also in the fact that he and Brenda have to walk to the site. And when he finally arrives, Stephen is confronted by the physical representation of his inability to return to his former life. He cannot return because the building has been destroyed and replaced with something completely different, much in the same way his study is being taken apart and has been “steadily converting over the past few months into a nursery, painting over the walls with pastels and hanging up a mobile and plastering cartoon animals on the ceiling” (89). In the end, the realization that he experiences forces him to walk away, to walk back toward the present day. It is
ultimately his decision to take Brenda’s hand and lead her away from the Starbucks, back into real life.

In all of these stories, I attempt to link the crisis moment with some kind of action on the part of the protagonist to mark whatever change or whatever decision is made in the climax. Frequently, the best way to illustrate this is through movement, whether it is physical movement or movement through time. In “Wake Me When We Get to Leningrad” and “The Way It Goes,” it is movement; in “Gaddafi,” the action takes the form of a crossing of a physical boundary that has defined the character; “Cinema Verite” portrays a complete reversal in the character’s demeanor.

In all of these cases, however, what is true is that the distinction and connections between plot and character can be seen best when first writing the story. The writer must consider the character before he or she considers the plot. After all, it would not do to have Flash Gordon put through the same rigors as Leopold Bloom, or vice versa. Plot naturally stems from character, especially considering that desire is both the defining characteristic of a character and also the catalyst for any plot action. Plot and character are interconnected, and this interconnectedness follows through the entire plot, through every moment of rising action, until the crisis moment, even through the resolution. If there were ever a disconnect between the two, the reader would feel it. There would be no unity. Desire serves as catalyst and so the crisis and resolution must also stem from the character’s desire. To do otherwise would rob a story of any power it might otherwise have.
Works Cited


PART II
STORIES
Cinema Verite

My two girlfriends, Janine and Melanie, carpool. They walk through the door at the same time. In their work clothes, they both look better than me—the fat slob in jeans and a tee, McDonald’s remains on the couch beside me, Playstation controller in my hands. And there’s the fact that I haven’t shaven in a few days. Definitely not leading man material. And when she sees me, Janine wrinkles her nose. It used to be a cute gesture, her brown bangs framing a face of freckles and disgust. But when she met Melanie, Janine grew out her bangs.

I follow her eyes to the bag. “I was hungry,” I say. “Don’t give me that look.”

Melanie laughs. She’s hanging her coat on the rack behind the door. She runs a hand through her blonde bob, shakes it loose. Her jewelry, gold bracelets and a gold necklace following her plunging neckline, catches the sun. She says, “You know we’re going out for dinner, right?”

Her eyes are brown, a lighter shade than Janine’s. She has a half-smile that I find vaguely comforting. I can’t stare into it for long without feeling like I’m losing myself, so I turn away and look at my wrappers, which the cat has claimed as a makeshift bed. He looks at me and mewls pathetically. “I was hungry,” I say.

Janine shakes her head and, together, the girls go into the kitchen. They fuss around in the wine fridge. I turn my attention back to the television. It’s a huge HD set and, like most of the changes Janine and I made to this place with Melanie’s money, it doesn’t fit. We had to wedge it into our old entertainment center. Even now, it looks like it could fall and crush you any time it wanted. And there’s the vase and flowers that are
almost as wide as the table they sit on. Books in a language that looks like French, piled on bookshelves we owned when we first moved into this small space. But Melanie said we needed to dress it up, because the bosses would come over and be impressed and put Janine on the fast track to a better position.

Enter the wine fridge.

Pretty much the only thing left in the apartment that was mine is this couch.

I look at the kitchen, and I nod. After a moment, the girls pick up their conversation where it left off. In the old days, when it was just me and Janine, I would have gone into the kitchen, both of us would have grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge, and while we drank, we’d talk about the kind of day we’d had. And there wasn’t the half-wall separating us, not all this distance. That was before Melanie came into our lives. Before I got fired. I can still taste that beer, still feel my legs aching. And now I’m sitting on the couch, watching a frozen screen, listening to the two of them, while I try to pretend I can’t hear them.

“Have I told you?” Melanie asks in the kitchen. “I want to get a new couch.”

The restaurant that the girls inevitably pick is expensive. I walk in the door and look around and even before someone shows us to a table, I feel like I should be charged a cover fee. It’s a balance of light and dark, lit well enough that you can tell that there are four walls around you and someone else at the table, but dark enough that you can’t see the other tables. Except when you pass directly. And as we do, I see lawyers from Janine
and Melanie’s firm, at least two of them partners. I’m sure Melanie knew that before we came.

They’ve put me in a monkey suit for the occasion, a gray getup and a white shirt that I’ve chosen to protest by wearing a skinny tie. I wear the tie loose, to boot, and keep the jacket open. The girls smile, make conversation, while I scowl away while the waiter takes our drink orders. Water for me, thanks. Lemon, hold the ice.

Someone comes up to the table, an older guy with white hair and thick rimless glasses. He puts a hand on Melanie’s shoulder, gives it a squeeze. Melanie introduces Janine to this man who she says is a partner at the firm. A great paralegal, she tells the guy. Really hard-working, He smiles and laughs and pushes closer to Janine. He puts a hand on her bare shoulder and leaves it there. No squeeze, just keeps it there. Eventually, he starts swaying, and it gives him an excuse to run his fingers across Janine’s skin. Back and forth. I can see the goosebumps from here.

After the lawyer leaves to rejoin his wife, Janine, clutching a glass of white wine, looks at me. Her smile fades. “Cheer up,” she says. She leans across the table and drops her voice, suddenly conspiratorial. “Six months ago, we could never have afforded this.”

I smile. “You’ve always had a knack for the finer things in life, Janine.”

And I flag down the waiter and order a beer.

Cue flashback:

I’d like to say that there’s a good story to how this whole mess got started. But there’s not. One day, the bookstore chain I had worked at since I graduated college went
belly up, and took my day job with it. That left me as a freelance screenwriter, and not much else. Which doesn’t leave much disposable income. No more entertainment budget. Date nights between me and Janine consisted of ramen and TV on the couch.

Then the fights started. Sparks flew. Anytime two people in close proximity are stressed, they’re going to fight. That’s nature. There was yelling, things were broken. Words were uttered that could never be taken back. Janine started working longer hours. I started hanging out more with Frank. One day, on the way home, I bought Janine a bouquet of tulips with what was supposed to be my bus fare. She threw them out, straightaway. The next day, she came home with another woman. Melanie.

Janine, that night, had introduced Melanie as a woman she worked with, an attorney and a partner at the firm. Melanie said herself she didn’t have much of a home life. So she lived vicariously through other people. She had a bag with her, a duffel bag that I kept looking at. Janine took her into the bedroom.

“What’s going on, Janine?” I has asked when we were alone.

Janine looked at me with innocent eyes. She spoke slowly. “We’re going to have a threesome,” she said. “We needed something to spice up our relationship.”

And Melanie opened the door, wearing a leather corset and fishnet stockings. Melanie, I learned that night, was about as subtle as heroine.

She came back the next night. And the next night. And every night for a month. And sex with three people at first did feel new and exciting. Janine and I and Melanie all laughed and had a good time. And then Melanie started bringing more of her things over, started staying nights and weekends. Until there was nothing else to call her but another
girlfriend. Until the three of us weren’t so much involved in a threesome anymore, but a three-way relationship.

On the weekends, we film Janine's scenes in pretty quick order. It's how it has to be. She can't take off from work, so we have to plan around her schedule.

Janine's a pretty good actor. I met her through Frank, after me and him met in a screenwriting class. That was after my college sweetheart, also an actress, had dumped me and made off for Hollywood, too good for our little films. I still see her around sometimes. She pops up in the background of about half a dozen films a year, and a few commercials. It's always shocking, seeing her as an extra in a scene or peddling makeup. It's always heartbreaking.

Today, me and Janine are playing the lead roles in Frank's movie. We're filming in Frank's house, in his kitchen. Our movie. Technically, I wrote the first draft of the script. I'm now a husband, she's my wife. I start out the movie as just another poor schumck. Then I die. Those scenes we've already filmed. Janine didn't have to be around for that. But then I come back to life, as a zombie. Only I don't lose my mind. I can think, I can speak. And I go after my wife, like nothing happened, totally unaware that I've died and been resurrected.

In my first draft, I went back to work. But we cut that pretty early on. Frank said it wasn't believable.

I'm made up like a zombie in a business suit. Janine wears a dress and theatrical makeup, and the combination makes her look like an entirely different person from the
girl I know who wears pantsuits to work. She's talking to Frank between takes, and I'm not really paying attention, until he asks me if I've got it.

"Yeah," I say. "Got it."

"Great," Frank smiles. "Then let's get going on this one."

When he calls action, I'm up first: "Izzy," I say. "Isabella. It's me. Don't you recognize me?"

Janine's face is twisted, her eyes wide. She makes a little squeak that's not in the script. I take a step closer.

"Honey," I say.

"You're not my husband." Her voice is breaking, like she's about to cry. Good.

"I'm the same person I've always been."

"My husband died," she screams. "Killed by those...things that are walking around out there. You're not him."

I take another step toward her. "Izzy, it's me. Think about it. I remember our entire life. Our wedding day. The day your dad died. The day my dad died. But not dying. It's really me." I emphasize the last words, trying to make my voice break the same way hers did.

Her eyes are wide, and I can see the tears, the studio lights reflecting on them. The next words are weak: "Howard."

"Izzy," I say. Take another step. We're almost pressed against each other, her back arching where she's up against the kitchen counter. "I remember it all. Love, honor, obey. Every dark day we had, every good morning."
"You need to leave," she whispers.

"No," I say. "I'm not leaving. This is my home. I made a commitment. I'm not leaving. Hell, I don't think I'd know how to live without you."

The last line wasn't in the script, and so I'm sure that some of the shock in Janine's reaction is real. "I can't do this," she says. "I can't love a dead man."

"I'm not dead," I say. "I'm real. Here."

And I press my lips against hers. She's shaking, and whining, crying right there. I close my eyes, put my hands on her hips, get a little too caught up in my acting.

We break apart, and her hands are on my chest. "Howard," she says. She licks her lips. I can see some of my gray makeup stuck there.

Frank calls cut. Janine takes a few steps back and sighs, shakes her head. Then, "Whoo!" She smiles at me. "Good job, baby," she says. And she high fives me.

Frank is smiling behind the camera. "Nice take, guys. Let's set it up and run it again. Tone down the emotion a little, and let's see how it plays that way."

I look at Janine, her hands on her hips. She's nodding, but her lips are a straight red line on her face. And I can't stop staring at her.

We get home that evening and Janine goes into the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee. It's been ages since I've seen her do that. So I go in with her. She's fixed a whole pot, and I pour a cup.

I ask her how work's going, and for a while she holds back, looks at her coffee cup and not at me. Then we fall back into conversation, like it's old times. Like we're in
a relationship. And then she does something truly unexpected: she kisses me, wraps her
arm around my neck and presses her lips against mine and I can’t remember the last time
we did anything but fuck like animals and this just feels good. She tastes like coffee and I
can smell her shampoo, like gardenias and rain water. And before long, we’re stumbling
to the bedroom, shutting the door behind us.

The bedroom is dark. The sun sneaking past the gaps in the black curtains draws a
line down Janine’s chest, and I can’t help but stare at it through the corner of my eye. I
watch it’s rise, and it’s fall, watch the way her ribs appear and disappear. And all I can
think is Thank you, God. I needed that. I needed something.

It’s been months, since before Melanie, since it was just the two of us. Since
before the fights turned from hot to cold. And now things are hot, and Janine rolls over
into my side and puts a hand on my chest, and it feels good, doesn’t feel hollow. All the
months with three people in bed, I got off and got out, left the two girls alone. And it got
impersonal. This is different.

“Maybe,” Janine says, “this is what’s supposed to happen.”

“I don’t do fate,” I say.

“But this is it. The way you and me were friends, then lovers, then friends again.
Two planets caught in each others’ orbits, never really able to get away. Maybe it was all
leading to this.”

“Yeah,” I say. “And all it takes is a third party.”

She puts a hand to my mouth and I clench my jaw. “Don’t be rude,” she says.
I sigh through my nose.

“What if we all have these roles we have to play out?” she says. “What if that’s life, and we’re just caught in some cycle until we can learn our lesson and move on.”

“We had sex, and now you’re a philosopher?”

“Don’t tell anyone I told you this,” she says. “But I’m happier now than I think I’ve ever been before.”

I start to think about how that’s because she’s got more money, how she now has two people focusing on her. How she’s been a spoiled brat from the day I met her, and she’s right, I couldn’t say yes or no, couldn’t make up my mind until some drunken party and she was right there in front of me.

But I don’t say any of that. What I say is: “Janine. I love you.”

She stops moving. And she doesn’t say anything else, but I feel her muscles tense. So I put a hand on her hand, hold it, probably tighter than I should.

“I know,” she says. “I know.”

I walk out of the bedroom, and Melanie is sitting there at the bar. She has a cup of coffee in front of her. I’m buttoning my pants, but I stop and stare back at her. Our eyes meet and for a second, that face is not Melanie’s. Melanie is always smiling, and the girl looking back at me is not Melanie. Her eyes are wide. And she looks old and sad.

Then she looks down at her coffee and stirs it, and I go back to buttoning my pants. I go over to the couch and fall into it, pick up my shirt from where Janine and I left it earlier.
“Is this what you thought life would be like?” I ask. “When you were a kid, was this what you imagined.”

I can hear Melanie take a deep breath before she says, “No.”


And I want to ask her who she’s more upset at, me or Janine. Or if she’s jealous because we left her out. But I don’t. I reach for the remote and find something mindless on the television.

Melanie and I are still in the same place. I'm watching something on Food Network, and she hasn't gotten up this entire time. Her coffee's run cold, I'm sure. Then Melanie comes out. We both look to her. Her eyes are wide, her hair's messed up, and she's not wearing a bra. Melanie looks her over, then glances at me.

"Get dressed," she says. "I was just thinking today, we need to get a new couch."

I look down at the couch I'm sitting on. "What's wrong with this one, anyway?"

"Too old," Melanie says as she disappears into the bedroom. Janine looks at me and shrugs, then follows her in. I stay on the couch, watching a slab of meat on the televised grill.

The furniture shop is a minefield. I learned a long time ago that shopping with women is unavoidable in long-term relationships, but when you do, the best thing to do is usually just to shut up and agree with everything.
This, however, does not work with Melanie. Five minutes into sofa shopping, and she’s already baiting me for an answer. The three of us stand over a black, flat, very sleek couch, all rectangular edges. Janine is leaning against it, scanning the display models. Melanie stares at me. “Well,” she says.

“Look,” I say. “When I want to sit somewhere, I just want to be comfortable. I want to think I’m home. This doesn’t make me think of home, it makes me think of the Enterprise.”

“This is stylish,” she says. “This is what Janine and I need if we’re gonna push her up in the firm.”

“Does it have to be black?” I say. “The cat is gonna shed all over this.”

“The cat can go too,” she says.

“We bought that cat together,” I say. I look at Janine, and when she catches my eye, she furrows her brow.

“It is a little too fancy for my taste, Mel.”

Melanie looks at her, her face blank. It’s a lawyer face, I realize, a practiced lack of emotion.

“Fine,” she says, finally. She looks at me, and gives me that maternal smile, the one that makes me want to trust her. “What color would you like?”

I say beige and Melanie cuts across the floor to those models. I hang back, and so does Janine.

“I don’t think she’s happy with me right now,” I say.
“Well,” Janine says, still leaning against the sofa. “We did sleep together. Without her. It’s kinda…different from the usual.”

“Shouldn’t matter,” I say. “Why does she even have to take it out on my couch?”

Janine turns and faces me. “I know it’s hard,” she says. “But we picked up that couch at a thrift store. It’s time for some change.”

“I don’t want change,” I say. “I want the old days back. I want it to be just me and you again.”

“They’re not coming back,” she says. “I told you. I’m happier now than I think I’ve ever been in my life. And it’s not just because of Melanie, and the things she gives us. It’s because, ever since she came into our lives, we’ve fought less. The highs have been higher. I don’t want to go back to the way things were. The way things were sucked.”

I look at her, lick my lips. I want to tell her that I’ve been miserable, that I haven’t said anything because, yes, I’ve seen just how much happier she is, and I’ve kept quiet more for her sake than anything else.

“All right,” I say. “Then let’s go get a couch.”

She lights up, her dimples coming out as she smiles. And she hugs me, and together we take off after Melanie.

We go back to the house, and I give one final look at the couch, which the movers will take tomorrow when they deliver our new one. Janine goes into the bedroom and leaves Melanie and me alone in the living room. I look at the woman, see just how little
makeup she’s wearing, how little jewelry. And I notice for the first time how small and fragile she looks, how the bones in her wrists protrude just a little too much, and how pointed her cheekbones are.

“You don’t have to be pissed at me,” I say.

She looks at me. Then there’s this long moment where she blows out a sigh and massages the back of her neck.

“I love that girl,” she says. “When I got divorced, I thought I’d never love someone the same way again. And then you two come along. Her, in particular. And I think, I don’t know what the world would be like if I didn’t have her, if I couldn’t wake up next to her every morning.”

“You’re not the only one that feels that way,” I say.

“No,” Melanie says. “Janine feels the same way. About you. And you do about her. The difference is, to you, I’m an interloper.”

This catches me off guard. I tuck my hands in my pockets, lick my lips. She walks over to me. Melanie is about a head shorter than I am, but the fierceness in her eyes makes up for the height difference. I’m more than a little scared of her.

“You have to realize,” she hisses through her teeth, “that if it were up to me, you’d be gone. But trust me. I want that girl in there to be happy just as much as you do. And that means keeping you around. Understand?”

I hear the bedroom door open and I catch a glimpse of Janine coming out, looking up at us, surprised. Then Melanie is grabbing my hair and pulling me down and pulling
herself up. Our lips touch and part, and I close my eyes. She tastes like cigarettes, mint barely concealing the smoke. And it might be the loneliest kiss I’ve ever gotten.

Sunday. Midmorning. We’re filming in an abandoned warehouse that Frank has transformed into his studio. The four walls of the makeshift set have been decorated to look like a bedroom belonging to a young married couple.

Janine is on the bed, in full makeup. Her skin has been painted gray. In the world Franklin and I are creating, zombies are created by infection. And the infection spreads when you’re in close proximity.

Yesterday, we filmed a kiss. Today, Janine will kill me.

I’m wearing the same suit as yesterday, with the same dirt stains to suggest that I crawled out of the ground recently. My flesh has been made to look as if it’s falling off. Janine’s is still intact. In the film’s narrative, her character has only been exposed since her husband returned, five days ago. The world is going to shit outside. We’ve been having a second honeymoon.

Frank starts filming, and I’m looking out through a window. “It looks bad out there,” I say.

Janine groans behind me. I helped write the script. I know she’s supposed to be in agony right now. “Oh god.”

“What the hell are we going to do?”

“Howard.”
I turn. She’s lying on the bed, clutching her stomach, her eyes closed. Her lips are parted. She moans.

“Help me,” she says.

“What’s wrong?”

But the pale skin is answer enough, after all. Situational irony. Howard doesn’t see what’s wrong, but we do.

“Oh God, it hurts,” she says.

I go over to her and I put my hand on top of hers. It’s cold.

“What’s wrong?”

“You did this to me.”

Her eyes open and lock on mine. Dark, angry eyes. Her teeth clench. “You did this to me.”

I pull back. Howard’s not supposed to. That’s ad libbing. But the venom and the hatred feel real, cut through the veneer of the movie.

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“I’m cold,” she says. “I’m hungry.”

Her whole body convulses.

“Oh, God.”

I stare. I can feel Frank zooming in tight on my face. There’s no call for a new setup. There’s emotion here and he can feel it. He’s not going to stop us.

I grab her hand. She squeezes back.

There’s Janine, and there’s Isabella. Both in pain.
“This is all my fault,” I whisper.

She starts moaning again. It becomes a wail. There are tears in her eyes.

Isabella is dying.

Janine breathes her last breath, this long exaggerated sigh that completely deflates her chest.

“Izzy?” I say. “Izzy, no! I love you!”

Then the eyes snap open, and Isabella lunges at me. I wind up on the floor, her knees in my chest, her hands on my throat. She buries her head in my neck and starts to eat. I feel her teeth against my skin.

Later, all the makeup has been cleared off. We filmed several more scenes, several more times, but never that one final scene. That only took one take. Now, we’re back home. Janine looks at me one last time. She gives me a weak half-smile. Then she goes inside.

I walk over to the edge of the stairwell and lean against the metal railing. On the street, the movers are pulling up. One gets out of their beige truck and starts looking around. I know they’re looking for us. I don’t help them.

I know how this will work. Janine and Melanie will stick around. I won’t fight to make either leave, because I care too much. I’ll stay quiet. I’ll mope around the house. And eventually, I’ll find another job, and it won’t seem all that bad anymore. I’ll flirt with the secretary and come home and screw my two girlfriends. I’ll make every sacrifice they ask me to make. Because I know how Janine feels. Because I know that all that
matters is making her happy, that if I can’t be happy, that’s the next best thing. I don’t want to think about life without her.

The movers spot the numbers on the building. One looks at his printout and points. Then they notice me. I smile and wave. They disappear back into their truck.

I’ll be miserable in some ways. But that’s okay. Because I’m not altogether sure I’d know myself if I wasn’t miserable.

The movers walk our new sofa down their metal ramp, set it on rollers. One of them runs ahead, runs up the stairs. He stops in front of our door and looks at me.

“Hey,” he says. “We’re looking for Melanie Dupont’s apartment.”

He’s dressed in brown coveralls. The stitching on his right breast says “Dale.” He has long hair and a few days’ stubble. I purse my lips, nod slowly. I think how easy it would be to send them away, to sabotage everything, to keep my couch and my life, to hold the line in everything.

“Yeah,” I say. “You’ve got the right place.”

Dale cracks a smile and consults his clipboard. “Great. Says here we need to pick up a sofa.”

I push off the rails. “Come on in,” I say. “I’ll show you.”

He calls to his partner, who comes up the stairs two at a time. I hold the door for the two of them and point at the sofa, then I follow them inside. The door slams shut behind me.
Poseurs

Mel opens his eyes, and the stars in the sky above are framed by the white-hot glare of construction lights. In the back of his mind, he can overcome the fiction his frontal lobe tries to craft, telling him he is in fact the subject of some alien abduction. There’s a pounding in the back of his head, and a ringing in his ears. He tries to remember the last moments before he went down, but can’t. He just remembers the world spinning, and blackness.

There’s that ringing in his ears. He swats at a fly, his stomach protests. That damn ringing, evolving into a whine. And his head is pounding.

He tries to sit up, and it hurts even worse. The ground kind of goes fuzzy for a second, and he doesn’t know what to do with that except keep pushing himself up. He’s got a stabbing pain in his side, and his right hand sails to it, cupping his rib in his hand. It’s hot and soft, even through his jacket he can feel a lump.

“Think I broke my rib,” he says to that whining sound. It seems to be coming from just behind his head.

“Pretty sure you did,” says the voice he’s known since college. Right now, with that buzzing, it just sounds annoying. He turns, and the landscape is all hard edges and betrayal. Gravity and Mel aren’t exactly getting along at the moment.

“My head is killing me,” Mel says, and just to help emphasize the point, he puts both his hands to their respective temples and gives his head a squeeze. “Know anything about that?”
Brad stops blowing on his mouth harp, but the throbbing is still there in Mel’s chest. It’s a foreign feeling, like a syncopated heartbeat. And the whine still presses against his cerebellum like a tumor or a clot, like he might die at any moment.

Mel doesn’t need any more clues to know he’s at a punk concert.

“I just found you,” Brad says. And Mel finally manages to turn to look at the other man, his blonde hair finally losing some of its coiffure, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his only tattoo, a snake the length of his right forearm, showing, his tie pulled loose so he could open the top button on his shirt. He gestures around, using the harmonica like it’s a pointer. “I set up a perimeter. I don’t know how you managed to injure yourself on the most level piece of ground at this place, but I figured if anybody was gonna keep you from getting trampled, it was gonna be me.”

Mel surveys the landscape. You can see it whenever the crowd surges to the left or the right, or when someone goes exactly the wrong way, and the reality of this pit shows up—all the jagged slabs of concrete these kids are perched on, pumping their fists and grinding to the music. The better ones have Mohawks, like that makes them punks instead of kids. But there beneath them are the remains of this stadium, the one that’s been here for all of Mel’s life. It’s in ruins now, and these people are standing in top of it, grinding it beneath their jackboots.

“What would I do without you?” Now the hand Mel keeps on his head isn’t just for show, it’s a real attempt to make the hurting stop.

Brad shrugs. “Probably die.” And he goes back to blowing on his mouth harp.
On the stage, Priscilla is still hammering away. It takes a second for Mel to realize that Brad is blowing the countermelody. They wrote this song together in college, all three of them, for her:

_Don’t you wanna bring me down, hey baby?

Don’t you wanna feed me charcoal ‘fore I even get a chance to get so high?

_Cause a prophet ain’t a prophet ‘less she gets stoned in her own hometown._

Mel finds his legs, gets them under him, manages to support his weight. His knees shake a bit, knock together. He feels like he’s twelve and standing up in front of the church so he can promise himself to Jesus. But he looks out over the ruins of this stadium and he feels the urge to get back out there in the crowd. Because there’s a Punk rock princess on stage, pink and blonde hair and piercings, tattoos tracing half of her visible skin and safety pins coating the leather jacket. She’s the second coming of Punk Rock wearing a leather jacket and calling out her songs to a crowd that fluctuates between indifferent and resentful. That’s the center of this crowd, the center of the universe.

That’s Priscilla.

How many _Priscillas do we know_, Brad had said earlier in Mel’s cubicle. Mel didn’t want to believe. _How many Priscillas do we know sing punk rock?_

Mel starts walking. It’s not hard. Gravity does most of the work. He just has to keep himself from tumbling down in the stereotypical tumble of a drunk bastard on an inclined plane.
The sight of Mel starting to walk is like Lazarus rising from the tomb, at least according to Brad’s reaction. “Where are you going?”

“I think I’m gonna walk around and drink some more,” Mel says. And he tucks his hands into the pockets of that mottled gray peacoat he wears, and he looks back at Brad, like he’s either asking for permission or daring the other man to deny him such a privilege.

But Brad doesn’t say anything. He just looks at Mel, his expression unchanging. He stares and his stare is a bit clueless. Brad’s lips part, like he wants to say something. But the only thing that passes between the two of them is a moment that hangs in the air, just hangs there making itself known, proclaiming itself. It won’t be ignored, until finally Mel smiles and says, “I’ll be fine,” and starts walking away. He pulls a pack of cigarettes and lighter, bound together with a rubber band, from his pocket, pulls a cig and lights it.

It’s like an art form to Mel, that cigarette stuck between his lips. Puff on it, cheeks bubbling inward, take a breath of it like a Scuba diver on his respirator. Let the smoke rise up, up, away from you. The mouth isn’t really necessary for breathing, and all you really need the hands for is the occasional flick of the cigarette to shake off the excess ash. When he does so, the wind, awkward and autumnal, carries the ash down into the arena’s bowels.

When Mel can’t take the walking and the being upright any longer, he plops down next to a group of refugees. There’s a guy with a headband and a soul patch who’s bare-chested and has his leather jacket in his hand, ripping holes into the sleeves and repairing
them with safety pins he’s got stuck between his teeth. He looks up at Mel with a raised eyebrow.

The girl next to him, her long brown hair falling over her shoulders, she looks at Soul Patch and says, “Am I punk rock enough yet?”

Mel sees the way her cheek looks. She’s got three safety pins stuck through it, fastened around the corner of her lips. But she stops what she’s doing, one pin still in her hand, when she sees Mel.

“Can I get a light?” Mel asks.

The three look at him. The third turns around, and Mel sees him going for something in his pocket. When Soul Patch gives him a look, he stops. There’s something there that Mel’s missing. A story told entirely in glimpses.

“It’s already lit, man,” Soul Patch says, and when he talks his voice reminds Mel of Sid Vicious, with the British accent tinting it. It might be Mel’s been drinking too much, but the way the accent resonates in Mel’s ear just makes him want to reach out and deck the guy.

Mel tries to look down his nose at the cigarette, but only gets his eyes crossed and loses his focus. He plucks the thing from his mouth and looks at it, sees the little orange glow of life. “Oh,” he says. “Guess you’re right.”

“I think you’ve had too bloody much to drink, man.” It’s the second guy. Not Soul Patch. But he’s got a British accent too, even more exaggerated than Soul Patch.
“On the contrary,” Mel says. “I don’t think I’ve had enough.” He points out over the crowd, gathered on the uneven pavement that the city’s government can’t decide what to do with. “Friend of mine’s out there trying to wrangle us up some beer.”

“Looks to me like you’ve already been hitting it,” Soul Patch says. He’s not looking at Mel. His eyes are focused on his jacket. Through the sound of “Fairytale in the Supermarket,” Mel can hear the sound of leather tearing. He sees the knife Soul Patch has in his hand and he’s using it to slit the sleeve of his jacket again and again. Beside him, his girlfriend licks her lips, and when she gets to the safety pins, her tongue stud gets caught, metal on metal. She looks like she’s about to cry.

“So how’d you guys get here?” Mel asks.

“We took the fucking bus,” the guy closest to Mel says. He’s in a hoodie, a blank, military green hoodie. “How’d you think we got here?”

“I mean to America,” Mel says. His hand feels empty and his cigarette is running low. He wishes he had a beer and can almost feel one in his hand.

Soul Patch gives Mel a look that tells Mel what this guy really wants to do is take that blade he’s currently using to slice up his jacket and make it so punk rock and slice Mel up a little so Mel has to hold his skin closed with oversized safety pins. That would be so punk rock.

And then Soul Patch does something Mel never thought of. Soul Patch smiles, flashes perfectly British teeth, all yellowed and uneven. And he says to Mel, “Listen, mate. I know you’re probably drunk off your ass. But I think you need to find your friend ‘fore something bad happens. Savvy?”
Mel looks at Soul Patch’s hand, sees the way he’s spinning the knife, turning it over and over in his fingers. And the glint in his eye, the sparkle that matches the gleam the knife catches off the construction lights above.

Mel smiles. “I think you’re probably right,” he says. He pushes himself up, but when his feet are beneath him, he starts to stumble. The guy closest to him stops him from falling, gives him a non-so-gentle shove back onto his feet. And Mel stumbles forward, away from the trio and the stage. He turns and gives a wave.

Soul Patch jerks his chin up, then goes back to work. Mel turns away and looks at the stage. Priscilla is up there, her hand a blur as she strums away at that pink guitar of hers. It catches the light as she just keeps banging out the lines they used to play in college.

Mel tightens his jacket around his waist and turns his back on the stage. Behind him, he can hear the last vestiges of the conversation between Soul Patch and his girlfriend.

“Am I punk rock enough now?” she asks again. Her voice is high and whiny in Mel’s ears.

There’s a pause before Soul Patch answers, “You need a fucking Mohawk.”

So in college, these three kids had a band. This was back when Mel had long hair, longer than Priscilla’s, and it all lasted for about a week. And the third kid, Mel couldn’t even remember his name, didn’t even know if he was still alive, but Priscilla and him, they stayed together, were together all the time, but they were never together.
This girl with the chestnut hair bordering on darker hues, hair that cascaded down over her shoulders and Mel desperately wanted to run his hands through. This Priscilla girl with the green eyes that looked through you, your soul, saw the way you were put together and laughed at you. Laughing in the face of eternity.

And the ears. The ears verging on elf ears, tips pointing through her locks, how he wanted to touch them, to run his fingers along the length of her ears, feel the skin and the tiny hairs against the pads of his fingers. In a thousand fantasies, that’s exactly what he did.

But they never touched. And her boyfriend was always there, even when he wasn’t. And before the boyfriend there was Mel, too scared to make a move.

But there were those fantastic afternoons, after the classes they both shared, the cigarettes and the fast food in the courtyard. There was her, strumming on her guitar, acoustic versions of old Punk songs, The Clash without the thunder, and him with his Moleskin, scribbling notes about everything that went on in this wicked little town.

“The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” she said while her hands were preoccupied with Spanish Bombs.

“Thoreau,” he said, leaning back against the grass, cigarette stuck, like it so often was, in his teeth, words coming through a clenched jaw. “That’s not even a hard one.”

“That’s my point,” she says, picking up her own cigarette with her right hand, taking a break from the strumming for a well-deserved drag. “Even way back then, there was a problem. Sell your soul to the company store and all that. You knew there was something wrong.”
“I’m with you,” he said. “I don’t know what we’re talking about, but I’m with you.”

“Patience,” she says, strumming an A chord. “I’ll get there eventually.”

“Fine,” he said, waving a hand with an actor’s flair. “Continue.”

“Punk’s a lot older than a lot of people give credit for,” she said, strumming away. He watched her. There were clouds on the horizon, and a peal of lightning split them.

“Think of The Beatles, hell, they had some Punk in them. And even all the way back. Walden was nothing if not rage against the established order.”

“Why are you not an English Major again?”

She took a drag from the cigarette, held it for a second before blowing the smoke from her nose. Then she fixed him with a look, her bangs falling out of the grasp of her pony tail, falling in her face. “Don’t make me hurt you.”

“Your point?” He puffed on his own cig.

“It’s a time honored tradition,” she said. “Rebellion. Hell, it’s an American pastime. It’s what we do when we’re bored.”

“Revolution is motivated by a need to change society,” he said, looking at the cigarette in his hand, watching it fading away into a dead butt. “You’re saying that’s the same thing as ennui?”

“Why the hell not?”

And he shrugged and let her keep playing. “Someday you’re gonna get outta this,” he said, tossing the dead cigarette into the grass.

“Doubtful.”
“You are,” he said. “You’ll be out sooner than I will.”

“For what? The writing I never do or the music I can hardly play?”

“Pick one,” he said. “You don’t wanna stay, you’re not comfortable here. So you’ll make it.”

“Whatever.” She didn’t look at him, not when he said things like this. She watched the guitar, every person walking by. Anything to avoid his gaze. And he dropped the issue. He always dropped the issue. And then she ran off to Nashville with a guy named Hank, the day after they graduated. They’d known each other three months.

And Mel had tried Jesus. It seemed the likely response. And in that little bible study, he’d met another guy who’d spent too much of his youth listening to music his parents blamed on the devil. And Brad and Mel had been friends ever since.

So now Mel sits, perched on a block of rubble that’s close enough to a bench to work for him, clutching a beer he doesn’t remember picking up. He sips at his beer, and hearing Priscilla sing, it’s like no time has passed at all. Like he’s still in college, and they’ve snuck away to some festival two towns away. Back in the days when all you needed to have a concert was a stage and a PA, all you needed to have a party was beer and a willingness to share.

When he was a junior in high school, him and Kevin, his best friend, snuck away to a concert, a day concert. Rare for their bands. One of those word of mouth things. That’s why they’d done it. They had to see it. They had to be one of the only people who were there, who were in on the secret. And they’d spent the entire day. Mel had gotten a
chewing out at home when he couldn’t explain how he’d gotten that suntan if he’d been in school.

He sips at his beer, and he can suddenly taste the barley turning bitter in his mouth. It’s a wheat beer, he realizes, and then he realizes just how much he dislikes Heffeweizen.

Priscilla, onstage, sings a new tune. It’s one Mel doesn’t recognize. He keeps drinking.

That concert with Kevin, he’d gotten too hot. Mel had. And they’d taken him to a tent that wasn’t as hot, but was hotter in some ways. Sure it was out of the sun, but after he’d gotten rehydrated, he’d realized just how suffocating that tent was. And the “nurse” taking care of him was a flat-chested woman who had worn a Ramones tee.

Just like the guy he’d run into shortly after they’d gotten here, when Brad was gone seeing if he could get backstage, see if he could get his hands on free beer. The guy in a faded Ramones tee, and his girlfriend with “Husker Du” emblazoned across her boobs. Mel felt like a pervert staring at the words, but he had more respect for her than the guy.

“Did you know,” he said to the guy, “that there’s been more Ramones t-shirts sold than actual Ramones albums.”

“What’s that supposed to mean,” the guy had asked.

“I’m just saying,” Mel said, “everybody talks about Green Day fans being poseurs and stuff. Maybe it’s the people in Ramones shirts that are the real poseurs.”
The conversation had gone downhill from there. It ended with Mel with a sore jaw, lying on the ground and staring up at the sky. He had just laid there, looking up, not really needing to lie down, but, really, he thought, what better thing did he have to do? And he had so wanted a nap. So he took one, the bass and Priscilla’s lyrics pressing against his head.

So now he sits and stares at the stage, his face blank, the beer bitter in his mouth. He drinks.

And Brad comes and sinks down onto the slab next to him. Together they watch this girl who only one of them met but both of them know, pounding out her melodies on stage, and the crowds swaying below them like the basslines were salvation. They sit together for a minute, Mel draining his beer, down to the last drop, then he lets it go and it clinks against the concrete floor and starts to roll.

“I saw Nirvana at this place,” Mel says. He pulls out his pack of cigarettes and lights up another, holds out the pack and the lighter to Brad, who waves his hand and shakes his head.

“You know I gave that shit up,” Brad says.

So Mel tucks the pair back into his pocket, forces them down further when they get caught. “I don’t know where I sat. Could’ve been right here for all I know. I snuck out, way past my curfew, and I saw fucking Kurt Cobain before he died. Nobody’s ever gonna have that again.”

“Nope,” Brad says.
Mel looks at him. It’s because of Brad, this dirty-blonde, scruffy looking accountant, that he even has the sucky job that he does have, working in the paper’s mail room, spending his days in a windowless room, only getting free to push a cart through the floors of the buildings, never allowed into the bullpen, that sanctum sanctorum.

Something counter passes through the crowd, and its like a car going the wrong way on the freeway. There are shouts, near the center, and a shoving that is not moshing. Both men look there, heads snapping to attention. But from here, it’s impossible to see. And it’s like a flashbulb blaze, gone just as quickly, only a ghost image haunting the eye.

“Did you see something?” Mel says.

“Yeah,” Brad says. “Think this crowd is starting to turn.”

“They do that,” Mel says.

“Better talk to your girl before that happens.”

For his part, Mel just turns his attention back to the stage and watches as Priscilla shreds the last notes of one song and, without a pause, bridges over into another.

“You’d better get down there before all hell breaks loose,” Brad says as he pulls out his mouth harp again.

So this one night at the bar after work, eating typical crappy bar food, getting drunk off crappy tap beer, Mel says to Brad, “So Priscilla.”

And Brad says, “Oh Christ, this again.”

“This girl, I met her Sophomore year.” A frown. “Well, I say sophomore. It was my second year. Back before I met you.”
“Who extended your sentence?” Brad, tie pulled loose, his blonde hair still perfect, product still in place, sat beside Mel. He didn’t look when he talked to Mel. He faced the back of the bar and took a huge swig of his beer.

Mel waved a hand dismissively. “Life Sciences and a misspent youth. But that’s a different story. Anyway, this girl--”

“Priscilla.”

“What?”

“Her name, man. Y’know, nombre? Nom de plume?”


Brad snorted. “I’ve heard this story before, Mel.”

“I know.”

“You couldn’t get the balls to tell her how you felt, she left with some loser, you were depressed. You tried Jesus. We met.”

“You had long hair,” Mel said, sinking lower and lower, closer to the bar with every second. A country song played on the jukebox.

“I had long hair,” Brad said. “And acne.

Mel took another sip. He was relying on his forearm to keep him vertical.

“Anyway, freshman year.”

“Sophomore.” There’s Brad trying to be helpful again.

“Sophomore.” Mel corrected himself, both verbally and in stature. “Sophomore. She wanted to sing. Wanted to do punk. Settled for country.”
“Fascinating stuff.” Chair scooted back, Brad stood as the legs of his chair rubbed against the linoleum floor of the bar, announcing that he was in fact rising. That was so Brad, Mel thought as he looked up at him. Always just like a fucking king, had to announce everything with a goddam trumpet blat. He grabbed Mel’s arm, pulled him up, set a tip on the bar, a twenty. “Come on. Let’s walk some of this shit offa you.”

“Walk?” Mel says. “I can’t even feel my fucking feet.” This is usually how their evenings end, Brad carrying Mel out, giving him a ride home because Mel’s missed the last train in his drunkenness.

“Moved to fucking Nashville,” Mel said as they walked out, earning him a sideways look from a family of four walking down the sidewalk. Under his breath:

“Nashville.”

Mel doesn’t walk or run toward the stage, but falls. It takes every effort to keep his legs beneath him, to keep from ending up speeding down the bowl-shaped ruins of the Arena like a snowball down a hill, picking up other concert-goers like powder. He’s a man gasping for breath, fighting the current to keep his head above water the way he tries to keep Priscilla in his eyes as he rushes down the hill. He might call out her name, but what’s the point? The crowd’s gotten louder now that the music’s ended.

The crowd is pushing against him, surging upwards. There are stragglers, those that believe Priscilla isn’t done, is just pushing for an encore. He’s grateful for those.

When he breaks through the front line of the crowd, he sees her, walking away from the stage, guitar in hand. She heads for a van parked about a hundred feet from the
slab of concrete she’d used as stage. Mel starts to break into a run, but it’s slow going even at that pace, how the ground slows him down.

The concrete angles up, then back down, forming the roughest terrain Mel has ever been on. He stumbles, has to throw his arms to his sides to keep from falling. And when he’s almost on Priscilla, when he think he’s not going to catch her, she turns, and he almost plows into her.

“Whoa, there,” she says. “What’s the hurry?”

Mel straightens. He’s gasping for breath. The cold autumn air is supercooling the sweat on his face. “Hi, Pris,” he says. And he smiles.

Priscilla’s face goes blank. “Oh my god.” Then she laughs. “No way. No fucking way.”

Mel nods. “Yup.”

“Mel?”

“In the flesh,” he says.

“Oh my god.” And she throws her arms around him and gives him the tightest hug he’s ever had. The guitar swings around and hits him in the small of his back.

The hug lasts for far more than the socially acceptable fifteen seconds, and Mel can feel Priscilla so close to him and her arms so tight around him that his breath gets shallow. He does a count in his head and thinks about baseball to keep from embarrassing himself.

When she finally breaks away, Priscilla is beaming. “What the hell are you doing here?”
“I, uh.” At this point, Mel understands just what it must be like to have an aphasia. Only his is selective. “I came to see you.”

She shakes her head, smiles, crosses her arms over her chest. “Damn. Look at you,” she says. “If I’d known you were still in town, I would have facebooked you, or something.”

“Yeah,” he says. “But, you know, I surprise a lot of people still being in town.” Mel tucks his hands into his pockets and thinks about how she has never friended him on facebook.

The crowd is getting rowdy. Apparently, someone out there remembers real punk rock, because somewhere behind Mel, there’s the sound of glass breaking followed by a war cry. Someone’s getting into a fight while he and Priscilla just stare at each other.

“So what are you doing these days?” she asks. “Still writing?”

He shrugs. “I guess.”

“Working for the hometown paper?”

He laughs. “You, um, you might say that.”

She frowns. “What?”

“I’m, uh.” He wants to say so many things. That he’s in love with her. That he’s missed her. That he’s thought about her every day for the past four years, ever since she ran off to Nashville. Everything but the truth. And when he does manage to spit it out, it’s like a blow to his chest. “I’m working in the mailroom, Pris.”

She nods. “Lots of people start in the mailroom.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess you’re right.”
He takes a sharp breath. “So how was Nashville?”

“Shitty,” she says without hesitation. The smile fades. Something high and whiny and altogether unnatural, like the sound of a man being murdered, tears through the night. “Shit, it’s getting bad out there. Walk with me.”

She turns and walks toward the van. The drummer and the bassist are there waiting for her, loading their gear. Mel looks back toward the crowd. He can’t tell the difference between this riot and the moshing and throbbing and swaying the crowd was doing earlier.

“They’re gonna tear themselves apart,” Mel says. He’s almost on Priscilla’s heels. “You gonna do an encore?”

She looks back at him, her face twisted in disgusted confusion, one eyebrow raised, her mouth a crooked line. “You kidding? They’d rip me apart.”

“That’s kinda your job,” he says.

And she stops. “I took my lumps in Nashville.” He lifts her hair to show him a scar on her temple, still pink and jagged. “Not my fucking job anymore.” And she keeps going.

“What happened to that whole careless attitude we had in college?” he asks. His hands are out of his pockets, and he’s talking with them. “What happened to damn the consequences and fuck the man and all that? Every gig you played that me and your boy had to fight your way out of?”
She hands off her guitar to the drummer, a guy with a shaved head, a beard, in a shredded tee with tattoos running the length of both arms. He gives Mel a look and puts Priscilla’s guitar into its case.

“Am I not punk enough for you anymore, Mel?” She turns and he can see a hardness in her eyes that wasn’t there when he knew her in college, some lowlight, like her eyes have gotten darker. “All that cavalier bullshit went out the window when some redneck nailed me in the side of the head with a fucking beer bottle.”

Prisilla takes out a cigarette, lights it and puffs on it. “No,” she says. “I think maybe we’re all like this place, somewhere inside. See all those kids out there? They’re younger, meaner than we could ever hope to be. They’re what punk is about. Or whatever evolved to take its place. We’re all falling apart, in ruins. We’re the poseurs here. We got too old and something else took our place. So excuse me for not sticking around.”

“Then why are you still doing it?” Behind Mel, closer to the street level, the fight seems to be getting worse. Mel can hear the real punk rock soundtrack, shouting, the screaming, the die, motherfucker, die. “Why are you still doing any of this?”

She shrugs. “God only knows. But look at us, Mel. We’re pushing thirty. Things are gonna change. I feel a little older every day I wake up. All that partying and shit we did when we were young, none of it seems to matter anymore. We gotta grow up eventually. I don’t know what I’m gonna do, but I can’t keep putting on these little gigs forever. I can’t keep selling CDs I make in the van.”

The two guys in the front of the van start it up. Priscilla climbs into the back through the sliding door, but looks back at Mel before she shuts it.
“So you’re just leaving?” Mel calls, trying to be heard over the crowd.

She shrugs. “Never stay in one place too long,” she says. “You of all people should know that. You get soft.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Think about it,” she says. “You’ll figure it out.”

And there’s another moment where the crowd just gets louder and louder, starts ripping itself apart. Mel wonders how long until the fight spills over back here.

“Come with me,” she says. “We can drop you anywhere. You don’t need to stay here.”

And Mel looks out over the crowd, surging. “My friend’s out there somewhere,” he says. He turns back to the van. “I can’t leave him here.”

“Suit yourself.” She shrugs. Then her eyes get wide. “Find me, Mel,” she says. “It was good to see you. I don’t wanna lose you.”

And she slams the door. The van hesitates, shakes as the drummer puts it into gear, then peels off. The tires squeal, and the van fishtails a little, but then it’s off and throwing up rocks in its wake. Mel just watches it go, and tucks his hands into his pockets.

Brad finds Mel, eventually. Mel hasn’t gone far from where Priscilla left him, just far enough to keep from getting involved in the riot. And he keeps moving back. He’s found a beer, an abandoned cooler. Brad walks up, stumbling. He’s got something
pressed against his head, and Mel sees after a moment that it’s a tissue, and it wasn’t red originally, but it’s red now.

“Shit, this turned nasty,” Brad says.

Mel raises his bottle. “Welcome to Punk,” he says. And he drinks.

He reaches into his pocket as Brad falls onto the concrete beside him. In the distance is the sound of sirens. Mel finishes the beer and keeps the bottle close, but reaches into his pocket for his pen and pad.

Out there, on the edge of the crowd, Mel spots a man, tall and lanky, his black leather jacket put together with safety pins. He’s smiling a wide yellow smile, long face framed by a headband and a soul patch, as he puts his fist into another man’s gut. He notices Mel and just winks.

And Mel gives the ballpoint a lick just for that metallic taste, and puts pen to paper. When the sirens and police tear through the roaring crowd, he’ll take out his press ID, flash it to the beat cop so quick he won’t know what hit him. In the back of his mind, he knows Priscilla’s gone. She was gone before tonight. And this isn’t the girl he knew in college. But he doesn’t need her. He’s got a journalism degree, a friendship with Brad, his life, and they’ve all given him something. Even Priscilla has. He’ll lie, flash his skills at that cop so fast it’ll make the poor sap’s head spin. He’ll ride in the ambulance with Brad, watch as the doctor’s scan him, check for concussion and wrap his skull, pay him back for all the times Brad’s bailed him out. All the while, his pen will scratch out rhythms on the little pad, yellowed with age. He’ll feel like part of a crowd tonight, picture Hemingway as he watches other people swinging bottles like billy clubs. Put it to
the cause, he’ll tell himself. All for the writing. You can’t write what you don’t know. Even as the blood seeps down over his eyes, he’ll write. And the train whistle and the sirens will be his soundtrack.
In 2009, my wife and I were living in a small house we rented from a realtor she’d gone to school with. We moved to Bedford, Upstate New York, because the community college there had offered me a job—teaching two comp class with an optional lit class every semester. It didn’t pay a lot, but hey, what back then did? When I wasn’t teaching, I’d try to escape my students, and since my office was under permanent renovation, I’d go to this little deli between the college and our house, because I sure as hell wasn’t going to the house. I didn’t go back most days until my wife was in bed asleep.

It was a nice place, this deli, run by a Jewish guy, first generation from Israel who’d come over when the violence flared up a few decades ago. Sam, his name was, and he was this skinny guy with a paunch and a bald spot and gray hair. He was usually the only one there. You could hear Israel in his accent, so much I had to squint to be able to understand him. There were never any hours posted on the door, but this guy kept it open late into the night sometimes, and you could almost always drive by and see the fluorescent lights blazing.

This was back in the day, when Muammar Gaddafi was going to speak at the UN, and everyone was talking about how he was a murderer and crap like that. I could care less. But Sam did. Sam didn’t shut up about all that.

This one day, Sam says to me:

“He’s not being allowed at any hotel, because they all say he is a murderer.”

“That what you think?” I’m sitting there in the deli with my plate covered in crumbs after the sandwich I devoured. “You think he’s a murderer?”
Sam shrugs. “I think, he attacks some places, some people he kills. Like the Lockerbie thing? He’s still paying for that. Not exactly Satan, you ask me. And now, Donald Trump won’t let him pitch a tent.”

“Donald Trump?” I raise the glass of water to my lips. It’s gotten warm. I look down at the stack of student essays in front of me that I’m ignoring. “What’s Donald Trump got to do with it?”

Sam shrugs again. “I can only say what I told you. He tried to pitch a tent at the UN, on the floor of the general assembly. This is what I heard on the radio. Only place I can get news now I’m running this place with only one helper.”

“Why does--” I shake my head. “Never mind. What’s it matter where he pitches his tent? He can sleep in the airport. It’s neutral ground. It’s like that movie, you know the one?”

Sam looks at me, his eyes blank. He blinks.

“Never mind,” I say, and I grimace.

Sam mutters something under his breath, and he walks back toward the employees only area of the deli, which in this case amounts to a kitchen and a walk-in freezer. I’ve been back there. It’s not much to look at.

A few minutes after Sam disappears in the back, I’ve made it through approximately half of one student’s paper on the themes in Huck Finn. I’m tapping my pen on the desk, wishing this’d just get on with it, and the bell on the deli’s front door rings. I look up in time to see this large woman walking through. She looks around, her
eyes narrowed and her nose scrunched up. People never expect a deli to smell the way it does.

She stands halfway between the front door and the counter. I figure she’s taller than me. But I’m kind of short so that doesn’t take much. When Sam doesn’t come back for a while, I decide to speak up. After all, I’ve been in this place enough to practically work here.

“Help you?” I ask, and I crane my head up so she can see just how helpful I’m being.

Her face scrunches up even more. “You work here?”

The dark hair, eyes and skin, and the accent—she’s middle-eastern. My post-9/11 senses are tingling. “No,” I say. “But still.” I turn toward the back and call, “Sam!”

Sam comes out, red-faced. “What, what, what?” He looks up at the woman. I say “up” because Sam is a small Jew, smaller even than me. His face pales and he loses his typical attitude.

“Can I help you,” he says. “Ma’am?”

“I understand you make Ruben for Pope?”

I can see Sam’s Adam’s Apple bob from where I’m sitting. Screw the papers, this is more interesting.

Sam laughs nervously. “That story might be...exaggerated. A little.”

The woman smiles. “You are being modest. Tomorrow, you make Ruben for my boss.”

“Your boss?”
The woman nods. “I have been sent to make sure area is secured. And to make sure Ruben is indeed fit for His Excellency.”

“His Excellency?”

The woman nods again.

“You want a Ruben?”

“I must sample before His Excellency.”

Sam nods, and he goes over to his counter. He pulls the rye and the corned beef, and the tray of sauerkraut. I can see his hands shaking as he makes the sandwich. The woman sits at a table across the door from me. She doesn’t meet my eye. I try to pretend to grade, but I can’t stop watching Sam. It’s like watching a violinist with stage fright, the way he puts that sandwich together.

And I look at this woman. She’s military. She’s in civilian clothes, but you can tell, the way she carries herself. I’m still not sure where she’s from, but I can’t imagine there’s too many countries in the Middle East where women can serve.

It’s the longest I’ve ever seen Sam take making a sandwich. He turns to look at his shop, and he sees the woman sitting. That’s new too. Sam never waits tables. He’s the only one ever working the deli, ever since his son got himself killed in the fighting in the West Bank when he was back visiting his grandparents in Israel, God rest his soul. But now Sam takes the plate to this woman. He sets it down, the fake china scraping and clanking. And he heads back behind the counter.
The woman looks down at the sandwich he’s put before her and scrunches up her nose again. That’s another thing you don’t expect if you’re new to them—the smell of a Ruben.

But she tears into it, picks it up in two hands. Sam doesn’t bother to cut his sandwiches. “Cutting sandwiches is for pussies,” he said one time when I asked him about it. So this woman picks it up, chews a bite. Her eyes are closed. Her nostrils flare. I can hear her breath all the way over here. She takes another bite, chews it. She’s looking in my direction, but not at me. I can see the way she pushes the lump of food around her cheek. I half expect her to aerate it the way people do when they’re tasting wine, give that little Hannibal Lecter sneer.

But after the three bites, she sets the sandwich back down. In those three bites, she’s managed to finish half the sandwich. She stands up and looks at Sam. “It will do,” she says. “His Excellency will be most thrilled.” She looks at me, then back at Sam. “He will be here at this time tomorrow. Be ready for him. The restaurant should be empty as it is now.”

“I can’t stop people from coming in here.” For a second, I think Sam is going to find his balls and jump over the counter to give this woman a piece of his mind, so to speak.

She hands over a small rectangle of paper, the international symbol for kickback. Sam looks at it, then nods at the woman as he pockets the check. When she’s out, and we’ve been there alone for a few minutes, Sam says, “Speak of the devil and the devil will appear.”
I’m still there when Sam closes the shop that night. He takes off his apron, sets it on the counter and looks at me with one arched eyebrow. So I walk over to flip the sign on the door to closed. A few minutes later, Sam walks out of the back with two beers in hand. He pops the tops and sits across from me. One of the bottles, he slides along the table, and it slaps into my hand.

“Another satisfying day?” I ask as Sam takes a swig of his own beer.

“It will do,” he says. His eyes have that distant look. He’s staring out one of the windows.

I take a drink, but I don’t take my eyes off the guy. “You gonna tell me who that woman was?”

He looks at me. “Who? The Libyan?”

“Libyan?”

“Yeah,” he says. “From Libya.”

“You could tell where she was from?”

He nods.

“So,” I say. “Gaddafi.”


I lick my lips, sip my beer. I look at the lighting behind the bar. “As well as one could expect, all things considered.”

“Still sitting shiva?”
I shake my head. “No. And yes. You know how that is.”

Sam nods. “I do.”

Sam and I get drunk together. When we finally shut it down, he goes his way, I go to my car. The world is still there waiting for us. The wars, the pain, the ungraded student essays. I drive home, ten miles under the speed limit. They say that’s a perfect target for cops, going under the speed limit.

I go in through the back door. The lights are all out. When I open the door, the cat tries to bolt. I push her back with my shin. She mewls, begging for her freedom. But if she ever gets out, my wife and I know, we’ll never see her again.

Once I’m in, I think about taking my Xanax. I missed it this morning. But it’s probably not the best choice after drinking as much as I did. So I set my stuff in the living room and when I set my back down it almost takes me with it. Back in the back, my wife sleeps with the bedroom door open so the cat can leap up onto the bed with her. I walk for it past the empty room, like a kid afraid of ghosts. It’s that strange way you stop yourself from looking through the corner of your eye, but look just the same.

I want to shut our bedroom door behind me. It’s just habit. But I know I’m not staying long. I see Liz toss, roll over and tug the blankets up toward her neck. I want to go over and brush her hair out of her face and wake her to let her know I’m home with one single kiss on her cheek, the way I used to let my lips linger by her ear and whisper my greeting. But I don’t. I take one whiff of the room and it smells like another world.
Liz has folded up my blankets and set them on the chaise in the corner of the room. I grab them, and a pillow and head back out to the living room. When I retreat, I have to be careful not to trip over the books she’s got piled all over the floor. I turn on Craig Ferguson and curl up, don’t even bother taking off my clothes. Just my shoes. The cat comes up and scratches the couch a few times. When she sees I’m not going to invite her up, she settles into position right there on the floor, standing guard. I sigh and watch Craigy Ferg without watching.

Instead, I think of the woman at Sam’s today. The way she was built. Muscle and tanned skin. She was military, obviously. I think of all the women I’ve known in my time, and I wonder if it’s safe to call that woman a woman. I think of her curves, how they’d been hardened. They’re like Liz’s curves and not at the same time. All jagged edges. I think I might be attracted to her, but it might also be the fact that she scared me, more than a little.

The last thing I’m thinking as I drift off into darkness is her face, and those dark eyes, sizing up Sam’s joint.

I wake up to the smell of eggs and bacon and coffee. I check my watch, but it says it’s only just after five. The TV is tuned to the early news, still on the same channel it was last night. I sit up, and it feels like my head is going to explode. Like my neck can’t support the weight. But I stand, somehow, and I make my way toward the kitchen. The world is a blurry mess around me, and it refuses to stand still as I walk. I lean against the doorframe. I cross my arms and sigh. Liz keeps cooking. She’s lost weight, and I never
noticed it until now. But she has. Her hips are as wide as I’ve ever seen them. I remember when she was afraid I wouldn’t love her because her hips were settling. She has childbearing hips these days. I used to tease her with stuff like that. Now all I want to do is go over and put my hands on those hips and pull her as close as I can and tell her everything is okay.

But I don’t. I go back to the bedroom. The light is off and the covers on the bed are still a mess. I can still smell her, the way her scent infects the room. I see our wedding photo on the nightstand, turned away from the bed. I go into the master bath, to our closet, and I pull down the clothes I’m going to need for the day. I throw on a tee and jeans, then put on a dress shirt. Have to look at least somewhat professional. From behind the mirror, I pull my Xanax, count the pills as I pour them into my hand. I put five back, take two.

After I’m dressed, I come back out into the den, grab my stuff. Liz has already folded up the blanket I’d used last night and it’s sitting on the edge of the couch. She’s eating her bacon, watching the Today Show.

“I’m headed to work,” I say.

She nods. She keeps crunching. Keeps watching the TV.

“Might be another late night.”

She nods. I turn toward the door.

“Be careful out there,” Liz says. Her voice is small, distant.

“I will,” I say. “You too.”
I stand there, holding my bag back with one hand, and I feel like there’s something I should say. I feel like there’s something in the air between us, like when you can feel the static right before it arcs in its tiny little lightning bolt between people.

But Liz keeps crunching on her bacon while her eggs grow cold, forgotten on the coffee table.

And I head out the door.

Me and Liz, we both deal with depression different ways. I run away from it. I pop Xanax to make it through the day, I go talk to Sam and when that gets old I get smashed and watch whatever sport is on at the bar. And I just don’t think about what’s wrong with my life, what’s missing. Liz quit her job. She dwells in it, spends all her time reminding herself just what it is that’s making her miserable. She reads books on depression, on grief, on self-improvement.

My students all want their papers back. The few that I have graded aren’t good.

I clutch a cup of coffee as I give my lecture. Very unprofessional. But I need it. This semester, I’m lucky enough to be teaching the full load, two comp classes and a literature. The comp class is the earlier, and the hardest to get through. The coffee is my lifeline, because they frown on whiskey while teaching. Teaching under the influence.

The students are in various states of disinterest. They don’t care about Gilman and the Yellow Wallpaper anymore than they cared about Huck Finn or half as much as they care about their facebook feeds. These kids, their attention span is limited to 140 characters. Welcome to America. A generation of fucking ignoramuses.
My mind is back at Sam’s. I think of Gaddafi’s woman, the military girl. And I think to myself, there’s someone who’s serious. It’s just this country that’s fucked up.

A girl in the back of the class comes to see me after I let them go. She’s a teen, can’t be out of high school. But she’s pregnant. I can’t figure out what to say when she walks up, but I force a smile. My eyes are wet.

“I missed last class,” she says. I didn’t even notice. There’s a note in her hand. “I was having a prenatal checkup.”

She hands over the doctor’s note. I glance over it, read it without reading.

“Do you know what it is?” I ask. I’m not sure where the question came from. It sounds so low, like it’s not me that’s saying it.

“A boy,” she says. I look at her smile. It’s pride. She places a hand on her stomach.

My mind clears up and I can feel my shoulders relax. I tell her not to worry, everything’s okay, is going to be okay.

There’s no ring on her finger. In another country, she’d be stoned for this. In Libya, maybe. Where I suppose you have to be hard if you’re going to survive.

I don’t keep office hours that day. I’ve only been back a few weeks, so my boss can pretty much forgive these little sins. He doesn’t know how bad I feel, he says. He can’t imagine what it’s like, but he’s willing to be as flexible as I need him to be. So I take my stack of papers to grade and I go back to Sam’s deli. The sign says it’s closed, but the door’s unlocked. So I walk in.

Sam is there. He paces behind his counter.
“So,” I say. “Are we ready to meet Colonel Gaddafi?”

Sam glares at me. “You were not born there,” he says. “No matter how Jewish you think are, you are not connected to your heritage. Don’t mock this. Not now.”

“Ouch, Sam,” I say. “Really, I’m sorry.”

Sam looks at me. He doesn’t go to make the sandwich. He wags a finger at me.

“Give me your bag. Gaddafi is coming”

He reaches across the counter and starts taking the bag before I’ve even managed to work it off my shoulder. He takes it and disappears through the back door. When he comes back, he’s holding a spare apron. He looks at me, frowning. “You will have to sixty-eight the dress shirt,” he says.

“Eighty-six,” I correct him, “not sixty-eight.” But I do it anyway. I know where he’s going with this. I wad up my dress shirt and toss it to him at the same time he tosses me the apron.

Two customers come through the door, and Sam barks a “We’re closed” at them. The couple cusses him out as they walk out the door. But we don’t have to wait long. About half an hour later, a group of women walk in, all with the same military demeanor as the woman the day before, but without the hard edges you get with years of that kind of experience. Six of them, all piling into the restaurant. They come in and try to look relaxed, but it’s the strict military version of relaxed. You can tell they’re not comfortable. They’re all in their gray uniforms. I can’t spot the woman from yesterday. These are all young girls.
I stand behind the counter with Sam and watch it all happen. Try not to let my discomfort show. A woman comes next. She’s big, pale. She doesn’t look like the others, no, her blonde hair sets her apart. But she comes in and stands beside the cash register.

Then he comes in. I know who it is from a mile away. The bright robes that look like they came off the set of *Lawrence of Arabia*. The face, too bleached and unemotional. He reminds me of a Muppet.

The woman from yesterday is at his side, and I feel my heart flutter a bit.

Gaddafi comes up to the counter, and stands right beside the large, pale woman. He speaks, but it’s in Arabic.

The woman translates: “His Excellency has heard that you are renowned for your Rubens. He would like one.”

Sam nods. The man smiles, but it looks forced and muddled, like he’s had too much botox, like he’s straining the muscles in his face just doing this. And he turns to the woman at his side, who draws out a small wallet and begins to pull out a twenty.

“No,” Sam says. “It’s on the house.”

And he goes to work on the sandwich. The six members of the virginal bodyguard detail move with their leader, surround him at the table Gaddafi chooses. There’s a regal quality to him, a kind of practiced air. But it’s false. You can tell it’s false.

Sam brings the sandwich around, and when he sets it down in front of Gaddafi, he takes only a few steps back, like a master chef before a critic. Gaddafi takes a bite, then smiles again at Sam. He starts talking in Arabic, and the woman translates.

“His Excellency asks if you know why he chose your deli.”
Sam looks at the man, and I swear I can see the sweat on his forehead. “The woman yesterday said I was the best—I had the best Ruben in the world.”

The translator doesn’t translate this, and I find it hard to remember if Gaddafi speaks English. But apparently he does, because he responds to Sam in Arabic, looks at him, no emotion on his face.

“It is not only that. It is because you insist on your butcher saying the Halal over whatever you serve.”

“And keep kosher. For those that want it. Those that don’t don’t have to know.”

Gaddafi nods. “You know what it is like to serve,” his translator says.

“I know what it’s like to own a business.”

“If they ever catch you, they will brand you a terrorist. They will not kill you, but they will destroy you. It’s a dangerous life. It’s what they do to things they don’t understand.”

The language switches. Gaddafi says something that neither the translator nor me understands. Sam responds, and I realize they’re speaking Hebrew. They exchange a few lines, then Sam looks over to me, still leaning against the counter, and calls me over with a finger.

Gaddafi looks up at me, and it looks like there’s something familiar in his eyes.

“Let me tell you a story,” his translator says. Gaddafi speaks with his entire body, which doesn’t translate. “A man is in the desert for three days. Lost. First day, he begins to thirst. He thinks nothing will kill him. He is returning home to his family when he leaves the desert. Second day, thirst and starvation and desert heat begin to take their toll.
He thinks he may die, but he refuses to do so until he sees his wife and daughter. He wanders for most of the third day but finally finds civilization near nightfall. *Bang!* He is shot through the spine by an American GI."

Gaddafi mimics the trajectory of a bullet meeting a spine with his hands. His robes tremble and he whistles like he’s a bomb dropping. The meeting of bullet and spine is punctuated by an explosive *pfft*. “Bullet stays lodged in his spine. But he keeps walking. This does not stop him. Finally, on the fourth day, back home, he wanders through the door, bullet still in his back. But he is told there was a raid. His daughter and wife had been killed in the night. The man screams and dies.”

Gaddafi’s eyes meet mine. “You and I,” he says through his translator, “and even the cook. We know loss. We know what it is like to lose a loved one. Who was it?”

I look at him and I try to find something in those eyes, a hint maybe of how he can read me like that. But there’s nothing in those eyes. And that’s probably more frightening than the women’s hard eyes. “My daughter,” I say.

“What was her name?”

I pause, lick my lips. My entire mouth feels dry suddenly. This is not something he should know, this man, this murderer. “Christine.”

Gaddafi nods. “My daughter’s name was Hannah. Killed for my pig-headishness. We never recover from such things, do we?”

It takes a moment for me to realize I should shake my head. “No,” I say. “No we don’t.”
“We must learn to live with pain, for it is what makes us who we are. We are devoured by it or made stronger by it.”

He says nothing else, but turns back to his Ruben. Me and Sam stand beside each other watching him. When he leaves, Sam follows behind and locks the door. He disappears into the back, and I sit at a table. Sam emerges carrying two beers, the tops already popped, and sets them before me, settling in across the table from me.

We drink in silence for a while. “So,” I say. “Gaddafi walks into a deli.”

Sam laughs, just a chuckle at first, then it turns into something deeper and heartier. “You know those stories,” Sam says. “About the Pope? About Ariel Sharon? They were not true.”

“I figured,” I say. My hand makes the bottle shake. “What did he say to you?” I ask. “When he switched to Hebrew?”

Sam’s eyes get distant. He looks out the window. He’s leaning on the table, both arms, his back hunched over, and he looks older than he’s ever looked before. “It’s not important,” he says. “Just some lunatic.”

We finish the beers. Sam comes out from the back with two more, along with my bag and shirt.

He raises his bottle and I follow suit. “To our children,” he says.

“May they rest in peace.”

And we drink.

I start to laugh. It starts as a chuckle, then gets louder and louder, until it’s echoing off the walls of the little Jewish Deli.
“What is so funny?” Sam asks.

“Nothing,” I say. “It’s just, we should have asked for an endorsement.”

We both laugh. In my mind, I see Gaddafi, Ruben in one hand, giving the camera a thumbs up. In my mind’s eye, he is smiling as he does this. But I have to wonder if, in the real world, Gaddafi ever smiles at anything.

I go home, and my wife is still on the couch. Two empty plates on the coffee table in front of her. She’s watching the local news. Another car crash, another person killed. The cat meows at me, darts in front of me as I’m walking, cuts me off. I almost trip a few times. It takes me a minute to realize that she’s out of food. When I pick up the bag, she’s right there, tail flopping side to side, waiting. As soon as the food goes in, she chows down.

I want to get angry with my wife over not feeding the cat since she’s been here all day. In the old days, I would have. But now I don’t. I want to tell her about Gaddafi, about everything that’s happened to me today. But I don’t. It all seemed like a dream to me, but nothing has exactly seemed real since Christine.

And then I see the books.

There are two on the table in front of her. *Beyond Tears* and *When the Bough Breaks*. And I look at Liz and I see the running mascara, the way she keeps herself locked in with this thing. I go over and I pick one up, then the other.

“Are you kidding me?” I turn to her with the books in my hand. “This is what you do all day?”
She looks up at me. Her eyes are wide and blank at the same time.

“You sit here and you read these damn books and you just focus on all that hurt. It’s fucking ridiculous.”

The scary thing is that her voice is calm when she says what she does: “You wanna know what’s ridiculous? You pretending that she’s ever going to come back. You, acting like nothing’s wrong.”

I want to say something back, and my tongue flaps in my mouth. I lick my lips, ready for a comeback. But there’s nothing.

“At least I’m trying to go on,” I say.

“Right,” she says. And she nods.

“Life hurts,” I say. “We either get on with it or it eats us.”

I stand there with the books in my hand. And then I toss them to the couch. One bounces off and falls to the floor. Liz goes back to watching the news.

I head for the bedroom, just wanting to get away. The hallway seems longer than it ever has before. I stop outside the empty room that’s not as empty as I wish it was. Christine’s room. It still smells like baby powder, even two years later, so much that it trails out into the hall. Everything is still inside that room. I take a breath, try to make my heart stop pounding, and I go in. I open one of the drawers, and I pull out a dress, yellow like a sundress in miniature. Liz wore stuff like this all the time, before.

The dress still smells like baby. I inhale it, and my eyes burn. Press it closer to my nose, shut my eyes and breathe it in again. My shoulders heave. It takes me a minute to realize I’m crying.
I want Liz to come in, to put her hands on my shoulders, to tell me it’s all going to be okay. To be the strong one. To just give me one damn day.

But that’s not going to happen.

I know how all this will end. Gaddafi will start bombing his own people. The center cannot hold, right? And Liz will leave. We’ll stop being the walking dead, stop haunting this house, and finally split. Because it’s better that way. I’ll go on to a Ph.D. program in the Midwest somewhere. Someplace warmer. She’ll promise to keep in touch but never will. We’ll lose our last link to Christine—for her, the constant reminder of the pain, and for me, maybe, the feeling that she’s not really gone. Not as long as Liz still wears those dresses.

But she won’t wear them. Even if she does, I’ll never see it.

We’ll both watch the news hoping for word of each other but of course none will ever come. None of us is that important. There’s just the constant drama in the Middle East. From different coasts, maybe, we’ll watch Libya burn.
The Way It Goes

They walk down the street, the two of them, side by side. She’s not his wife, but she’s old enough to be and that’s saying something considering the club they just stumbled out of. It’s late, but he’s somehow convinced her to wander down the ill-lit streets of Dallas at night. Here, the lights are flickering in and out of existence. There’s a siren in the distance and to Stephen Miller it sounds more homey than the pounding bass of the club, like he were back in one of those seedy little pop-up clubs, like he were back in high school.

“It’s somewhere around here,” he says.

“How much farther?” she asks. In the club the bartender called her the cougar. It made him shiver. Because she didn’t look that old, and still doesn’t.

“It can’t be that much further.” He doesn’t look at her when he says it.

He takes his hand out of his pocket, looks at his watch, but his gaze lingers on his hand, on the ghostly line on his ring finger.

“This isn’t the best neighborhood,” she says.

“I know,” he says. But even so he picks up his pace. “I grew up in this town. In the old days, the seedier the neighborhood, the better.”

“Grunge?” she asks. Her heels click against the pavement.

He shakes his head. “Punk,” he says. “We grew up on it. All of us in the band. And we wanted to make a statement. To hell with Green Day and all that pop punk crap. We wanted real punk. Fast and furious.”

“Back when music meant something,” she says.
“And nothing.” He nods. And Stephen gets that distant look in his eye, as he remembers the times he would play his father’s old vinyl records for his friends in the band, and they would play their own inherited records, all of them listening to some handed down music. All of them writing their own music, hanging around each other’s garage, all of them banging out their sounds on borrowed instruments. That was the day.

“Half of all punk was just acting out.” And then she laughs. “Listen to me. Like I’m old enough to know. Punk rock is older than both of us.”

“Yeah,” he says. But he tucks his hands into his pockets and keeps walking forward, slouches forward like he’s walking into the wind, because in the distance, it’s not a row of aged storefronts that he sees but his own past, glorious and bright and still brimming with potential. He walks toward it as if he might enter it again, as if he might pick back up where he was—where they were—when the band broke up, back when they were in the middle of writing their breakthrough song, back when he had just penned the words to what he thought was his best song yet, “The Way It Goes,” all about those moments when life gets away from you, when your girl or your boy dumps you, and the whole world goes topsy turvy, and the only thing to do is not get sad, but get angry. Because that’s what music these days is missing—its attitude. The statement. The kind of power you find when you get the balls to say to the whole world that it’s going to have to change.

And to do all of that while, at the same time, knowing just how truly fucked up everything was.
She hugs herself. Even in her jacket, you can tell she’s cold. Her name is Brenda. She’s a teacher. “I don’t know how safe this is,” she says. And she looks around.

“It’s fine,” he says. “Just about a block more, and then we’ll catch a cab or something.”

Or have to walk back to the club for their cars. Public transportation at this time of night is probably more dangerous than being out on the street.

But for the moment he feels like a teenager again, leading girls on through these alleys, heading to the converted warehouse that was his venue for the evening, wearing his shredded leather jacket, picked up at Goodwill for ten bucks, the one he took to with the knife, then stitched back up with safety pins and thought was cool. With his guitar in the back of Greg’s van, already waiting for him there. And whatever girl was two steps behind him because he had the momentum and the energy of the show calling to him, making him smile in anticipation, and that was more of a turn on than the girls whose names he could never remember, the girls he never quite managed to score with.

And already, the city is returning. They are reaching the outlands of modernity, reaching the conveniences of the twenty-first century city. The first marker is a McDonalds. But even before that, there is the return of the neon glow, like lighthouses for wayward ships.

“Here we are,” he says. And they’ve stopped in front of a Starbucks.

“No way,” she says.

“Yup,” he says. “This was the spot my band last played. Behold, the benefits of urban renewal.”
She just stares up at the green sign, lit even after the store has closed down for the night, its employees gone, its chairs stacked on the tables. Even the lights behind the bar are still on.

And then she walks up to the door, presses her hand against the glass. “What did you call yourselves?”

The sound that escapes his throat is more of a scoff that grows into a chuckle, but doesn’t quite make it to a full-fledged laugh. “Spontaneous Combustion.”

“That’s a terrible name,” she says.

He grins, looks down and grinds a rock under his shoe. “Yeah.”

Three weeks after this gig, after they had played their set at the little club in the little abandoned storefront called Spot, the band had broken up. He remembers the way nothing lined up, and how “The Way It Goes” still sits incomplete, somewhere in one of his high school notebooks.

She walks over, leans against the railing that lines the outdoor seating area, looks up at the stars, what few stars can be seen through the city’s light pollution. “Maybe we need to stop living in the past,” she says.

“To hell with that,” he says, and he goes over to stand next to her, props one foot up on the bottom rung of the railing and leans against the top rung with his elbow. “The world just needs to figure out it has a past.” He looks at the Starbucks.

“Punk starts at year zero,” she says.
He licks his lips. “Maybe we were never as Punk as we thought. Maybe we were just pretending. Maybe we really were angry because the world had forgotten its past. Maybe we had.”

She laughs. “You’re starting to sound like a philosopher.”

He rubs his fingers together, looks down at them. “Maybe I was. In another life.”

She sighs. “I need a smoke.” And she unzips her purse, starts digging around until she pulls out cigarettes and a lighter. And when she lights up, he sees the subtle outline glowing as the fine hairs on her face catch the light. She closes her eyes even before she inhales and he watches as she blows the smoke out her nose. After a few drags she hands over the cigarette.

He takes a puff then looks at the coffee shop and says, “Why do we do this to ourselves?”

She shrugs. “My opinion? It’s because we don’t want to grow up. Not even that. We can’t grow up. We’re a generation of kids who can’t grow up and all we’re doing now is wearing our parents’ clothes because they’ve left us home alone.”

He hands the cigarette back and she takes a drag. And he watches as she closes her eyes, maybe enjoying that cigarette too much, but enjoying it nonetheless and really, what else did you have to hold onto in this life except the little things? He thinks about how the world has broken them. How it’s not really what he thought it would be, in the old days. But it could be worse. Your life might be a punk rock song called “The Way It Goes” that isn’t really a punk rock song at all, just a folk song, weary with the world and sped up until it was not just weary but angry, until one word didn’t so much escape your
lips as the next pushed it out, and you wrote it all twenty years too early, not in the
timeline of punk, but in your own timeline. As if your life were just one mass of
undifferentiated experience, no future and no past, just one eternal present, scraping itself
against the world until you found yourself here, standing outside a Starbucks that used to
be an abandoned storefront that for a few weeks was seedy little pop-up club where you
and your band had your last stand, and then there were the fights and it was time for
college anyway so no one really put much effort into keeping the gang together.

“Does your wife know where you’re at?”

In the momentary reverie, he has missed the fact that Brenda is staring at him, that
she now holds her cigarette away from her lips. He looks down at his left hand again.

“No,” he says, unable to take his eyes off that vacant ring finger.

“Should she?” she asks, taking another drag, turning her face away as she does.

He looks out at the vacant street, looks at the buildings on the other side of it.
Anywhere but at her. “Probably,” he says.

She tosses the cigarette off toward the street. It crosses his path, and he watches
its arc until if finally crashes to the ground, bursts, its embers dying on the concrete.

“Come on,” she says. “I think it’s time we head back. Tomorrow’s a school day.”

She pushes off the railing, walks around to stand in front of him.

“I don’t,” he says. “Can we just stay for a while longer? One more cigarette.”

She shrugs. She leans against the railing again and pulls out another cigarette. But
his mind is in another world. It’s with the wife who is either busy or asleep by the time he
gets home most nights. It’s the room that used to be his study that they’ve been steadily
converting over the past few months into a nursery, painting over the walls with pastels and hanging up a mobile and plastering cartoon animals on the ceiling. He wants to stay here, just for one more day, to linger in the space that used to be his own.

But all it takes is one look at the mermaid on the sign above his head. The world has left him. And he feels very much like a rock in the river, unchanging, even as the river around him changes.

His eyes are still on that sign as he moves away from the railing.

And he wonders which takes more strength—moving or standing still. He takes Brenda’s hand, the one she’s not using to smoke, and leads her away.
This is Henry’s day:

He wakes up, and for a second that lasts an eternity, he doesn’t know where he is. For a moment, he’s back home and his wife is still asleep beside him, and he’s risen before her so that he can get to work on time. It’s still dark outside, both in the real world and in his fantasy, and he has to work to make himself rise. But then the firmness of the cot starts to get to him, and he rubs his eyes as he swings his feet over the side, and he remembers that he’s sleeping in a room with strangers.

Another cold shower. He does it Navy style, like his dad did. And the cold air between the blasts of cold water is actually comforting. He puts on a suit, one of the five he still has, one of the five shirts and five ties he still has. He gave the rest of it up. He still has a coat, and he needs it because it’s winter. Almost the new year. He heads out, catches the bus, eats breakfast at work. In the months since the news of his loss spread through the office faster than cancer through his wife’s body, he has become isolated, does most of his work alone. Like no one expects anything from him. And he turned into the skid.

Even giving up his house after that, he didn’t give up this job. Because there was something familiar to it, something comforting—some rhythm, like the groove he’s made in his seat over the years. His first and only job after college. And there’s nothing of her in the office to remind him. At lunch, and after work, he reads the book he’s checked out of the library. Today, he finishes it. So he walks from his coffee shop to the library, passes the homeless who’ve decided to camp out on the stone courtyard. They carry their
lives on their back, put down sleeping bags. He watches them, pulls his duffel bag a little closer, and hurries past as fast as he can. He trades in one murder mystery for another. Then Henry heads back to the homeless place himself.

It’s late when he gets there, and the cafeteria is mostly deserted, but they still give him a sandwich. He could have brought his dinner. But then again, there’s something to being able to show up somewhere and have your food handed to you. Almost like being home again.

He sits at one of the table, and someone has left a newspaper here. He thinks of the people outside the library, for whom this would be priceless. What a difference a roll of toilet paper and a cot can make. He pulls the newspaper toward him.

Then there’s a noise from the line as someone new, a girl with her hair dyed purple tucked up in a ponytail showing her brown roots, drops a tray onto the railing there at the serving line. She gets a cup of soup, the sandwich. And she comes over and sits across from him. He looks at her, frozen in his motions, sandwich poised in his hand with only one bite out of it. She reaches over and grabs the business section of the paper he’s working his way through.

She glances up halfway through unwrapping the spoon. “Hi,” she says, her tone telling him that he’s invading her space, not the other way around. Instantly in control, this one. “I’m Abby.”

“Henry,” he says. She wears fingerless gloves and a heavy green coat, and he thinks she smells of jasmine or lavender or some similarly peculiar scent, but that might
just be his mind playing tricks on him. He’s been so long in this place though, he’s glad
for something different. “Did you...wanna read the paper with me?”

She smiles graciously. “That’d be great, thanks.” She looks back down at the
paper, takes a bite of her own sandwich, and says, “There’s hardly ever anything
interesting to read at this place. The hoarders get all the good books.”

Henry smiles, and he would pull out his book right now if he thought he could
trust her with it. “I just found this here,” he says. “You’re welcome to it.”

“As long as I sit here, with you, right?” She looks up, an eyebrow raised. “I know
how this works. And the beds hereabout aren’t even big enough for one, Hank.”

“Henry,” he says.

“What, you don’t like Hank?”

His eyes dart across the room, to the people behind the serving line settling down.

“Sorry,” she says, slurping soup from her spoon and returning to the newspaper.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“It’s no problem,” he says, and forces a smile. “Nobody’s called me Hank in...a
long time.”

“Well,” she says without looking up from the paper, “maybe it’s about time.”

Henry doesn’t say anything, just looks at the girl as she keeps eating and reading
her paper. When she finishes, she stands, and pushes the paper back in his direction.

“Thanks for the great conversation.” She does nothing to hide her sarcasm.

“Maybe I’ll see you around, Hank.”
And she walks away, leaves her tray and her dishes where they are. Henry watches her go.

Henry wakes up on his own, his eyes snapping open in the dark. Who needs an alarm clock when your body won’t let you sleep past five? Just to be sure, he pulls his watch from under his pillow, and the laminated face tells the story: 4:42 AM. He sighs, shoves the watch back under his pillow and cups his face in his hands. Pinches the bridge of his nose. So he grabs his watch and his cell phone, throws his legs over the side of the bed, and heads to the locker room. He changes his overnight items for toiletries, a towel, underwear. The water is cold. It hasn’t had a chance to warm up. So he showers as quickly as he can, and he’s tired enough that his eyes are closed the entire time.

He looks over the clothes he keeps in his locker. Crammed in are three suits, four shirts. A laptop that he uses to telecommute at times sits at the bottom. There are his ties, his tees, his boxers. He dresses, alone in the locker room. He has himself convinced, by this point, that this place is a converted YMCA, or some other kind of gym that went belly-up.

When he sits to tie his shoes, he stops, just sits there for a second, trying to collect his thoughts. In his mind’s eye, he can still see Shelly. When he closes his eyes, it feels like he’s back home and she’s just in the next room, still sleeping, waiting for him to make his way to work. And he can’t shake the feeling, even when he opens his eyes and sees the harsh concrete of the locker room’s floor, even though he can smell the stench
coming from most of these lockers. He sprays himself with the cologne he has hidden behind his shower gel and shampoo.

And then Henry, still carrying the ghostly weight of his wife, heads upstairs. He keeps going, goes to where he always goes to clear his mind. He keeps going past the top floor of the shelter, and he winds up at the roof. It surprises him that the door is not better monitored, but the homeless he has met don’t seem depressed enough to try a leap from a three-story building.

The cold air hits him as a shock. His lungs contract, and he feels like all the air has been drawn out of him, a reminder that it is still winter and that the season has some bite, even here. A reminder that he left his coat back in his locker. He looks up, and in the breaks in the light pollution of downtown, he sees the stars. He watches them, and just for a moment he can breathe freely. He can feel as if he isn’t alone in the universe. That there might be something up there.

“Beautiful night, huh?”

He looks back down suddenly. And she’s standing there. In this light, he mistakes her for Shelly, just for a second. But it’s enough to make him uncomfortable. He suddenly feels the cold, and his teeth clack together instinctively. But there is Abby, still bundled up in her long coat, still wearing her scarf. He moves a step closer. She’s smoking a cigarette, and in the cold the smoke snaking out of it is clearly visible, draws a contrail in the sky. She looks at him, her eyebrow arched like she’s waiting for an answer. The whole setup just makes his skin crawl.

“Yeah,” he says. “It sure is.”
She raises the cigarette to her lips, and he watches, just standing there, mouth open like an idiot, as she closes her eyes and sucks in her cheeks as she takes a drag. Her nostrils flare and the smoke emerges as she exhales. “So you come up here a lot?”

He nods. “Only when I need some air.”

She looks at her cigarette and smiles. “Me too.”

He takes a few steps closer. The wind blows his jacket open, and he struggles to button it closed. “So what’s got you out of bed this early?”

She shrugs, takes another quick drag. Her hair blows loose and makes its way into her eyes. She tucks the purple and brown strands behind her ear. “Jumbled thoughts and the like. You?”

He shrugs, tucks his hands into his pockets. “Ghosts,” he says, and he crosses the gap to stand beside her, glancing at her from the corner of his eye but trying his damnedest to focus on the cityscape, the lights of the early commuters and the blare of the commuter train’s horn.

She keeps her eyes on him for a moment, then turns back to the city, taking another drag as she does. “City’s kinda beautiful from this angle,” she says. “You might think it’s actually a nice place.”

He looks at her, raises an eyebrow. “You don’t like it here?”

She shakes her head, crosses her arms and manages to keep from burning herself with her cigarette. “I’ve never liked downtown,” she says. “Lived her most of my life, and I’ve always avoided downtown.”

“What brought you back?”
She looks out over the city, her eyes growing distant. She manages to keep her smile up, but there’s a slip, a darkening, a crease that appears in her forehead. “Work,” she says finally, and takes a long drag, her eyes still focused in the same spot.

“That all?”

Abby takes another drag. There’s the sound of the wind rushing about them, the sounds of the city waking up, the tangible pulse of a hundred building tugging on the city’s power grid. But there’s no answer.

She turns to him, suddenly smirking, and says, “What about you? What are you doing here?”

“I’ve lived here all my life.”

“No,” she says. “Not the city. Here. This place. You’re dressed nicely. You go to work every day. You look like a perfectly adequate human being. What the hell are you doing in a place like this?”

Now it’s Henry’s turn to stare out at the horizon. “Ghosts,” he says.

“Right,” she says.

He looks over at her. The cigarette is burning down, an inch from her lips. He swears he sees her eyes glisten, just slightly, just enough to be visible. And he sees the tattoo now, wrapping around her neck, that he didn’t see the night before. It’s a tree, looks to be a cherry blossom tree, and the parts he can see over her scarf look like the uppermost branches.

She turns to meet his gaze. “You’re not gonna tell me, are you?” She shrugs, and before he can get anything out, says, “That’s fine.”
“No,” he says. “Look, it’s not been exactly a walk in the park.”

“Life never is,” she says. “We live. And we all show our scars for it.”

Another distant look in her eyes, another drag. And then her cigarettes dead. She tosses it down, smashes it with her toe, and as she does so, she says, “And our novacaine.” She pulls the pack from her pocket, loosens another cigarette, but doesn’t smoke it. She just looks at it, a white twig hanging half out of the plastic packaging. “I know I should quit this.”

Henry licks his lips. “Sometimes,” he says, “there are those necessary evils. Sometimes, we just need a little help.”

She laughs, but it sounds like a scoff. “Yeah,” she says. “Painkillers just make me numb.” And with her thumb, she forces the cigarette back into its sheath and tucks the pack back into her pocket.

She turns, and he can see her shoulders heave in a sigh. Then she looks up at him. He hadn’t realized before that she is a full head shorter than him. “Look,” she says. “Life’s short. I don’t have time to be numb.”

“Wish I could say I was the same,” he says. He bites his bottom lip.

“I’ll show you,” she says. “Meet me at the bar a few blocks from here. Mike’s. You know it.”

He nods. “Used to go there all the time when I was young.”

“Great,” she says. “Be there at three.”

He raises his eyebrows. “I don’t get off work until five.”
She shrugs, and starts to smirk again. It makes her look even younger. “Take off early.”

“Bit forward, aren’t you?” He straightens his shoulders, keeps his hands in his pockets.

“Maybe,” she says. “But like I said, life’s short. Live a little. Take off work. Spend the afternoon with the only person at the homeless shelter you can stand to have conversation with.”

He thinks he should correct her, tell her that she’s actually the only person he’s had real conversation with in over six months. But he doesn’t. He’s not as forward as she seems to be.

But despite his better judgement, he says, “Okay. Three.”

“Great,” she says, smiling. She brushes past him, headed to the door back into the stairwell. He watches her go, and she doesn’t turn.

For the first time since he drunk himself into a stupor after Shelly’s family left him alone and his own family left him alone, since he broke down after the funeral, Henry walks into a bar. He has to stop in the doorway for a moment to let his eyes adjust. Even the diffuse sunlight, oppressed by clouds, that characterizes winter is brighter than Mike’s. He looks around at the televisions hanging in the corners, all playing ESPN. He looks at the bar proper, then to the tables. And he sees Abby there, already with a drink, a book in her hands. He looks at his watch. He’s late. He didn’t leave work until after three.
A cocktail, complete with a cherry, sits in front of her, already half gone. He walks over to the bar, orders a beer, and then heads for her.

“Hey,” he says. And his heart is pounding. He doesn’t know if he’s more nervous or guilty.

It takes her a moment to look up, and as she looks up at him and cracks a smile, her hand slips a bookmark into place. “Hey,” she says. She waves at the chair opposite her. “Sit.”

He hangs his jacket on the back of the chair, sets his bag there beside him. He isn’t exactly sure how to start this. He’s suddenly amnesiac, forgetting how to start up a conversation with a woman who is not your wife. And then it occurs to him that this is a date, and he feels sweat breaking out on his forehead. So Henry goes for his beer.

She looks at him and starts to chuckle. “God, you look like a kid on his first date,” she says. She reaches for her own drink. “Loosen up a little.”

“Sorry,” Henry says. “It’s, uh. It’s been a while.”

“Don’t sweat it,” she says. “If it helps, picture me naked.”

And Henry almost chokes on his beer. The reaction only makes Abby laugh harder.

“What?” she says. “That’s what they tell people when they do public speaking, right? This isn’t that different, is it?”

Henry is still coughing when he sets down his beer. “I don’t think it works that well when you’re on a date.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Oh? Is this date now?”
Henry can feel his face slacken, and for the second time, he feels himself flush.

And she laughs again. “Hey, this is fun.” She sips her drink. “How long can we keep this up?”

“I don’t know,” Henry says. “I have no comebacks. This is starting to feel one-sided.” He drinks. “So why don’t we start with the basics.”

“What’s that?”

“Well,” he says. “How about where you work?”

So they talk. They go on for a while about their work—she’s a barista, he’s an accountant—and life at the homeless shelter.

“Here’s a question,” he says. “If you grew up here, why are you living at a homeless shelter? Don’t you have family here? Friends?”

She bites the straw in her drink, and her eyes dart to the corner of the room. “Not really,” she says. “We don’t really get along that well.”

“Why’s that?”

Now she does look at him, straight in the eye. “We all have dark secrets,” she says. “I could ask you the same question.”

He takes another sip at his beer. It’s getting lighter in his hand, almost gone.

“You’d get the same response.”

“And I wouldn’t believe it,” she says. She leans forward onto the table. “Because as much as I’m sure you’re running from something, I don’t think it’s really that dark.”

He looks over and realizes her drink is empty. He knows he should buy her another. “Maybe I’m not ready to share.”
“I mean, I can see it in your eyes.” It’s like she didn’t even hear him. “You’re carrying something, and I can tell it’s wearing you down. But I don’t know what it is. All I know is something, or someone, hurt you. And I’m pretty sure that’s why you’re where you are today.”

His face is solid, not smiling but blank—like a stone. “You should stop now.”

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

He nods at her empty glass. “How many of those have you had?”

“Come on,” she says. “Be nice and play along.”

He sighs, and he looks at his own empty, and he says: “My wife died. Okay? My wife got cancer, and they couldn’t catch it in time, and she died. That good enough for you? That dark enough? I watched my wife wither and die. Happy now?”

Her face goes blank, like he just dropped the nuclear bomb of conversation topics. The Big C. And she sits back, fingers her glass and then, realizing it’s empty, snatches her hand away. “No.”

He grimaces and looks at her drink. “Let me buy you another one.”

“No,” she says, and starts backing away from the table. “No, I think. I think I’m gonna head back. Home. Or what passes for home these days.”

And he watches, just sits there, as she gathers her things and walks out. Watches her until she disappears in the bright light outside the door.

Then he orders another beer.
A day goes by and he doesn’t see her. Then two days. He’s starting to wonder if she left. Because of him, because of something he did. Or didn’t do.

And then, on the third day, he finds her alone at dinner time, after he’s returned from work and from the library. He grabs food and then goes to sit beside her.

“Hey,” he says.

She nods a little. After she swallows, she says, “Listen, I’m sorry about the other day.”

“No problem,” he says. “But...if you don’t mind me asking. What happened?”

She shakes her head, takes another bite and downs it before she answers. “Look, it had nothing to do with you. Not really. Just...people don’t like being reminded of their scars.”

“Well,” he says. “Maybe we can try again.”

“I just,” she says. “I need some time to process, okay? Just, a little time.”

He nods, stricken. He looks around at the yellow-orange lighting tinting the blank walls. It doesn’t inspire a good mood. It doesn’t inspire hope. “Okay,” he says, finally.

And she grabs her leftovers and walks away, dumps them in the trash before she exits into the main facility.

The only time he sees Abby within the next twenty-four hours is at dinner. And she doesn’t even look at him. Just walks to the other side of the cafeteria and sits down. He watches her, from a distance, as she chomps on a sandwich.
On Friday, the last Friday before the New Year, and the Monday holiday, which he will have to fill somehow, he goes to work. He is sitting there, pounding away at his ten key, when Anderson comes by and hands off an envelope. His next project.

“Everything going okay?” Anderson asks.


Anderson raises an eyebrow. “What’s going on, Hank?”

He holds up a hand and is about to correct Anderson, but thinks better of it.

“Nothing. I just...I dunno.” And he puts his hands together in his lap, looks down at them.

Anderson leans against the wall of Henry’s cubicle, looks down at him through those thick glasses of his. “I don’t buy that,” he says. “Is this about Shelly?”

Henry looks up suddenly. “What?”

“It’s only been, what, six months? And word is you gave up your house when she passed?”


“Rumors spread everywhere,” Anderson says. “Is it true? Are you really living in a shelter now?”

“That’s no important,” Henry says.

“Look,” Anderson says. “We’ve all been there. We’ve all lost someone. But we all have to get back on our feet eventually. That’s what makes us human. Getting back to it.”

“I already did,” Henry says. “I’m back at work.”
“Not what I meant,” Anderson says. “Look, before Shelly passed, you were always going out, inviting people over. What happened to that Hank?”

Henry rubs his hands together, feels the sweat growing in his palms. “He died.”

“No,” Anderson says. “No matter how dramatic you want to be, you and I both know that’s not true.”

He stands straight and gives a little smile and says, “If you need me, you know where to find me. Anytime you want to talk.”

Henry gives a weak smile and nods. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime,” Anderson says.

It’s nearly midnight. Just about everyone else in the shelter has gone to bed, but Henry is still awake. Still plagued, still haunted. Still the same old Henry.

But something inside of him feels as if it’s snapped, changed, realigned. Some blinding flash of light occurred behind his head and he was not privy to it, but it restructured his entire world. And it’s like Shelly herself came down and touched him while he slept and said it’s okay, date the damn girl.

It’s a different kind of haunting now.

He hears the door behind him.

“Oh,” Abby says. “Sorry.”

“No,” he says, turning. “Stay.”

She stops. “After all that went on?”
He shrugs. “I want you to stay. I want people. And I don’t care what’s gone on. Whatever you’ve been through. Yeah, we might remind each other of our scars. But who the hell cares? Maybe that’s the point. Maybe we’re all of us just trying to pull beauty from ashes.”

In the distance, they can hear the crowds roaring. Waiting for something new. Something better. Abby walks up to him.

She speaks softly, so softly that he can barely hear her over the crowds and the roaring winter wind. “I want you to see something,” she says.

Henry looks, and his throat sticks as he sees her opening her jacket, then going to unbutton her shirt. She’s wearing an undershirt, but even still, even in the light, dim as it is between the clouded moon and the streetlights below, he can see the tattoo. The tree weaved into an actual scar, a pink ribbon wrapped around it. And he understands.

“I’m sorry,” he says, as she starts to button her shirt again. “I shouldn’t—I was wrong. I owe you an apology.”

“No you don’t,” she says. “I ran away. You didn’t do anything. It’s just.” She licks her lips, looks off to the crowds cheering down by the river. “There was this guy, and he ran away when I got sick. And my mom was there, but after everyone knew I would get better, there was no one. They all left. Because I had run away with this guy when I was eighteen.”

Henry reaches over and takes her hand. In the distance, there’s the chanting of numbers to ring in the new year. “Hey,” he says. “It’s a new year.”
She smiles, and he smiles back. Both of their eyes are watery, reflect the lights that are starting over by the river. And together, as the count reaches zero, they turn and watch the fireworks explode around them.
SafariZone

I am the first female Zach the Zebra in the history of SafariZone franchise 4578.

My day consists of navigating the floors, filled with rampaging kids. This happens occasionally. The bulk of my time is spent in the elaborate pantomime that is a kids birthday party.

It’s great practice for an out of work actress. Most of all because I have to pretend like I actually like it.

The costume consists of three parts: the pants, a pair of twin zebra legs with khaki hiking shorts. The torso is also that of a zebra, covered by a khaki shirt. The head is a cartoonized version of a zebra with a safari hat on its head as khaki as the shirt and shorts. I don’t always wear this outfit at work. Sometimes I walk the floor in my human persona, just an ordinary, post-college loser named Marissa, who keeps her brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and her corporate issue SafariZone polo half-tucked.

Bud, the manager who I’ve also known off and on since elementary school, teases me about it. In an okay, I’m not going to fire you kind of way. Bud is the reason I work here, the reason I’m currently performing daily as the only Zach at this location. Bud got me into the costume as soon as he found out that I had majored in drama—and as soon as he caught the previous Zach with a bottle in his hand, trying to shove it down the tiny little slit you get to look through, about five minutes before his final performance at a kid’s birthday party. It might be worth noting that at that final performance, Zach the Zebra wound up puking in the kid’s cake.

We try not to scar the kids too badly in these parts.
Today, I get off at nine. That’s closing time. Bud follows me into the locker room to help me with the costume. He lifts the head so I can duck out of it. I look down at my foot.

“Shit,” I say, looking at the crusted white stuff caked on my furry hoof.

“No,” Bud says. “I’m pretty sure that’s vomit. Baby vomit.” He unzips me.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll clean it up.”

“Like hell you will,” I say, wriggling out of the torso. “I’ll do it. It’s my fault anyway.”

“No,” Bud says, and he takes the torso from me and holds out his hand as I slip out of the pants. “You’re going to go home, and you’re going to get some rest. Consider it an order.”

“You’re my manager,” I say, “not my drill sergeant.” But even as I say it, I give him the legs to the costume. I know he’s gonna win this. He usually does.

Before I leave, I give him a hug. The thing about Bud these days is that he’s so soft with that spare tire. And warm. After taking off my costume, I’m standing there in the AC wearing nothing but gym shorts and a t-shirt.

Outside, the air is clear, cool. I’m actually getting a chill. I blame the rain. It wouldn't be nearly this cold without it. I have to walk through puddles on the sidewalk. But it’s good. I like the world this way. I like the way it shines. While I’m walking, while I’m avoiding the few random people who happen to be out on the street at nine on a Thursday, I pull out my phone, turn it back on.
When it comes up, there’s four messages from him. I don’t even have to check them to know what they say.

I miss you. Come back. I’ll leave my wife if you come back.

The worst part of all this is that I knew he was married before we got involved. His ring was the second thing I saw on that first day back when I took his class.

The first was his face. Well, his smile to be exact.

But right now, I go into that coffee shop, and I look for a place to sit with my laptop and do some serious surfing to find out if there’s jobs on craigslist, if any of my facebook friends need extras in their movies, or to see if they’ve emailed me about the million and one parts I’ve talked to them about in whatever film they’re currently obsessing over.

But there’s a girl in my usual seat. There’s this blonde, skinny girl, sitting there with her laptop. At my table. She’s looking intently at I have no idea what, this stereotypical little girl. And she’s wearing a jacket. I mean, I know it’s been raining all day, but who the hell wears a jacket this early in the year?

So I act like the bigger person and choose a different table, set my stuff down at one in the corner, one that doesn’t have windows, which is a big sacrifice for me, since I like having windows around me when I work. And then I go up to the counter to order, and once I do, I go over to the stickpin board to see the listings.

There’s one about somebody making a film and they need extras. It never hurts to follow a lead, so I start to grab one of the little leaflets you usually expect to find at the
bottom of these pages, and it’s only then that I figure out that someone has torn off the
last one. I say dammit under my breath.

When I go to the bar, I ask Beth the Barista who took the last one, and she kind of
sighs and jerks her head toward the new girl.

“She’s an actor,” Beth says.

“Really?” I say. I sip at the coffee—well, the foam, really, cause that’s the only
part cool enough to sip.

“Yeah,” Beth says. “Really.” She starts wiping down the bar to make it look like
she’s working. It’s my cue to walk away.

And then I see Bud come in. He doesn’t notice me, but I damn near drop my latte.
He goes over to that girl by the window, that girl in my seat.

And she stands up, puts her arms around him, and, just when I think I’ve seen
enough to vomit on my own damn feet this time, they kiss. Right there in public.

It’s no wonder when he finally does notice me, because I’m just standing there,
staring at them, my latte burning my hand even through that little cardboard sleeve.

“Marissa,” he says, like he’s both surprised and glad to see me. He waves me over.

“Marissa,” he says again, this time looking at the girl. “This is Tiffany. Tiffany,
Marissa. Marissa works for me. She’s my Zach the Zebra.”

This girl, Tiffany, she smiles and looks toward me. “Really?” she says. “That’s
cool.”

“Yeah,” I say, brushing some phantom hair from my face. “Yeah, cool.”

“Tiffany here is an actress,” Bud says.
“Well.” She laughs as she says the word, and I know that tone. It’s the tone of the actress trying to find a job. “I’m not really an actress yet. I mean, I’ve done a few student films, a few university plays when I was in college, but…”

“That’s something,” I say. I feel like I’m looking around the shop too much, like I’m one of those old-school shifty-eyed villains. “At least you’ll have lines on your resume.”

“Marissa is a bit of an actress too,” Bud says. “Got a degree and everything.”

“Lot of good it’s doing me,” I say. “I work at SafariZone.”

“It’s not that bad,” Bud says.

I shoot him a look.

“So,” I say. “How’d you two meet?”

She looks at Bud, and says, “Well, Bud was at the theatre where I was rehearsing one night—”

I blurt out, “You’re in a play?”

She waves her dainty little hand dismissively. “It’s just community theatre. Pro bono. Anyway, yeah, Bud was there while we were rehearsing, he was a friend of the director and all that.”

I look at Bud. “You know a director?”

He looks at me, and the smile freezes on his face, kind of gets stuck halfway between that and a frown. “Yeah.”

“And you never told me.”
Now he looks shifty-eyed. He looks back at Tiffany. “Finish your story, sweetheart,” he says.

I hold up my hand. “It’s fine. We can talk later. I don’t wanna interrupt your date.”

“That’s all right,” Tiffany says. She smiles. “We can swap stories about Bud. How long have you known him?”

I narrow my eyes at him, and the look on his face says he knows he’s been caught. “Not long enough,” I say. “Anyway, I was about to head out.”

Bud looks at me. He knows me well enough to know my nightly routines. But he doesn’t say anything.

Why the hell’d he pick this place anyway? He knows this is my coffee shop.

“That’s cool,” she says. “We’ll see each other at work tomorrow anyway.”

I look at her. “Excuse me?”

“Oh.” She frowns. “He didn’t tell you? Bud’s letting me work at SafariZone.”

“Temporarily,” he says.

I nod, slowly. “That’s what everybody says.”

And I walk over, grab my bag, and head out. I start to sip at the coffee. The wind’s picked up. When the hell did it get so cold out here?

By the time I get home, I’m freezing. I’m used to Bud giving me a ride, that old truck of his rattling and roaring all the way to the front door. I’m hugging myself, and it’s not out of love. I have to dig the keys out of my bag and my hands are trembling. It’s not
cold enough to see my breath in front of me, but after ten, when you abandoned the
suddenly chilled latte about three blocks after you forget it’s in your hand, it’s damn sure
cold enough to not want to wear short sleeves anymore.

Ever since I moved back here, I’ve been living with my mother. It’s not the house
I grew up in, she moved out of that about five years ago.

As a point of reference, my dad died ten years ago.

It’s an old house, and when I walk in the front door, the floorboards creek.
There’s a bit of a hall, where my mom’s put both an umbrella basket and a coat rack. I
give my jacket a dirty look. Yeah, it’s been sitting there since last winter, but it wasn’t
with me when I needed it.

I walk into the living room, throw my bag over the back of the sofa and head for
the kitchen.

There’s a tupperware dish on the counter, and a post-it on top. It’s a sky blue post-
it. My mom likes those pastel colored sticky pads. There’s one stuck to the fridge.

The note tells me how much my mother loves me. I smile, tuck the note into my
pocket. Inside the tupperware, my mom has left a full dinner. I close it again, put it in the
fridge and grab a beer. Then I head for the living room to watch Letterman.

“We need to talk about last night,” Bud says to me.

The store hasn’t even opened yet, and we’re standing out front by the cash
registers.

“What’s to talk about?” I say.
He’s whispering. “I know you,” he says. “You had just gotten to Grinds. You weren’t just leaving. Tina might believe that, but I don’t buy it for one second. You lied, and you bolted.”

“You were having a date,” I say.

“A cup of coffee.” And there’s a tone of disgust to his voice, like he can’t believe how stupid I’m being.

“Are you dating this girl?” I cross my arms so he knows I’m being serious, straighten my left leg and stick it out, invading his personal space. It’s a sign of authority.

He looks around. I can tell he’s uncomfortable. “Yes,” he says. And it’s in an even lower voice.

“Then it was a date,” I say. “You were with the girl you are dating at a specific time and place that you two had arranged in advance. Ergo, date.”

“But why’d you storm out? There was plenty of room there for all of us.”

“No,” I say, and I shake my head. “There really wasn’t.”

I start to break away, but he says something to stop me: “I want you to show her the ropes.”

The image in my head is of a noose. “Like, train her.”

“Yeah,” he says. “She’s gonna be your backup.”

I have a sneaking suspicion that I already know the answer, but I cock my head to the side, and I ask, “Backup what?”

“Your backup Zach,” he says. “Corporate's couriering another costume this afternoon. We’re finally giving you a breaker.”
I take a minute, trying to make sense of the jumble of thoughts in my head. “I’ve been doing this for six months without a breaker. Why do I need one now?”

“Because we’ve never had a reliable breaker before.”

“Oh, right,” I say. “And, what, she’s reliable because you’re fucking her?”

“Marissa,” he says. And he’s angry now. “Shut up and think for one goddamn second, will you? This isn’t as personal as you’re trying to make it.”

“It sure as hell is.” And even as I say it, it’s like something clicks in my brain, like my thoughts suddenly hit a switch in the tracks and now I’m going a completely different direction, and things start lining up.

“Why?” Bud isn’t aware of the switch. He’s still going as if nothing’s changed in the conversation.

I listen to my thoughts. I don’t like them. They scare me, if I’m being quite honest. They scare me because of two things: first, I had no idea that this was going on or I forced myself not to know, and second, because the last time I felt anything remotely like this, I fucked a professor, graduated, and moved back home.

Hell of a record.

“Did you hear me?” Bud says. His face is red. “Why?”

I look Bud over. His tie and his short-sleeve shirt. His high hairline. The paunch. What the hell, man?

“I don’t wanna talk about it,” I say, voice weak, and I start to turn away, to head for the locker room.

“What, that’s it?” Bud says. “Why is it so damn personal, Marissa?”
I turn. “Think about it,” I say. “You’ll know.”

And I head for the locker room, leave him standing there.

My morning. It’s stellar.

It must be a staff development day or something, because there’s a ton of kids here. Most of them aren’t older than seven, but the oldest one, a pudgy kid with curly brown hair, whose mother has forced to wear a plaid button-down shirt to SafariZone, comes up to me on the floor.

“I hate zebras,” he yells, and he kicks me in the shin.

Ordinarily, I would get security on his ass, get him and his no-good parents kicked out of this place. But when I see his parents, I only see a woman. The mother. And no ring. So I let the kid slide.

I also keep thinking about Bud. What the hell is going on there? I shouldn’t have feelings for Bud. He’s a loser.

Nothing ever happened between us when we were kids. We would play together most summers. But at school, we barely saw each other. He was that invisible kid who sat by himself at lunch. And then, in high school, he’d disappeared entirely. Probably because our circles didn’t connect, what with me spending all my spare time either at drama club or cruising around town with friends with cars.

At lunch, I walk into the break room to eat lunch. Tina is in there, cleaning up her trash. She smiles at me and starts to walk away.
Back on the floor, my mind drifts back to LA, before I ran out of town, before his wife found out about us. When things got too hard, I thought of my mom, of her house with its two stories, the smell of her own blend of coffee wafting upstairs in the morning, waking me up before my alarm.

And I thought, compared to no real career path, that sounded like heaven.

The last thing I heard before I left, from one of the few friends I had in college, was that he was sleeping with someone in one of his classes, the same class we met in.

And now he’s calling me. Again.

“Marissa.”

You have to remember, in all things, that you’re completely replaceable. Realize that, treat it like a mantra, and it will make things go much smoother. Make things not hurt as much.

“Marissa!”

I turn and see Bud standing there.

“We’ve got a party,” he says.

I look toward the back, the party area, and there is indeed a child and his mother there, waiting.

“Right,” I say. And go to work.

I lose myself in the performance. Concentrate on each movement, syncing it up better than I’ve ever done.

Sometimes, you’re just grateful to be a dancing zebra.
The courier arrives sometime that afternoon with another zebra costume. It looks and smells exactly like mine. Tiffany looks at it, half-excited and half-dismayed. Your first mascot costume is like the first time you had sex. I know this from experience.

The next day, I'm on the tail end of my lunch break. I'm sitting in the break room. We had a party come in right before I broke, so I’m still wearing one-third of my Zach suit. I shove the last bit of crust from my sandwich into my mouth at the same moment Craig, our afternoon cashier, sticks his head in the door, disappears, then reappears, looking both relieved and terrified at the same time.

“Bud’s looking for you,” he says. “He needs a Zach. We’ve got two kids with birthdays at the door. One’s ready for their performance.”

“Shit,” I say. And I end up spraying bread crumbs all over the table. “All right, help me get this suit on.”

He does. And in a few moments, I’m headed out to subdue a rowdy four-year-old.

But I stop before I get there, because I almost bowl into another identical creature. Zach the Zebra’s black, lifeless eyes are staring into mine. All of this in clear view of the party area.

I can feel the tension from here. One kid says, loud enough I can hear him over the music, “Mom, why are there two Zachs?”

“Tiffany,” I hiss. “I got this.”

“You’re on break,” she says. And I can tell she’s angry, even if she is whispering. “This one’s mine.”
“I got it,” I say.

“Go change,” she says. “We’re freaking out the kids.”

I look through the corner of my eye, at least as much as this giant equine head will let me. She’s right. The kids are all staring. And this is most definitely something we don’t want here at SafariZone. This is a no-no.

But I don’t see Zach anymore. At least, I don’t just see Zach. I also see Tiffany. The bitch who has been in my life three days and has sufficiently managed to fuck it up.

I do the only reasonable thing. I punch her in the face.

At this point, all the kids are crying. Tiffany leaps up in her Zach suit, grabs me. In the surprise, I fall, and I end up falling on top of her. And Bud comes out, yelling, and has to pry up apart.

We’re in the locker room, both of us stripped of our suits, sitting there in shorts and our SafariZone polos. Bud is standing there between us.

“How could you do this,” he asks. And he pinches the bridge of his nose.

“It was my family,” I say. “I’m First Zach. It’s my responsibility. I have seniority. If anyone should be in trouble, it’s her.”

“You’re supposed to set an example,” he says. “It’s scary because his voice is even. But you can read the signs, if you look closely enough. He’s angry, holding back. You’re supposed to be a role model for new employees.”

“I--”
“Was on lunch break,” he says. He puts his hands on his hips, and that makes his stomach stand out. He looks every bit the middle manager now. “We needed a Zach. I gave the go-ahead for Tiffany to take it.”

“But--”

“Save it,” he says. He looks up now, looks at me, his eyes dark. He is angry, I realize. Angrier than I’ve ever seen him. “I think you need to go home and think about this. Just think about what you’re doing here.”

I’m on my feet before you can blink. “It wasn’t me!” I’m yelling. I point at Tiffany. “She--”

Apparently the floodgates open. Bud yells, “Who threw the first punch? Who instigated this? Ask yourself that. It wasn’t her.”

“But--”

“You think you’re such a victim,” he says. “You’re doing this shit to yourself.”

I clamp my mouth shut. I look at Tiffany. She actually looks scared. Like a kid called to the principal’s office.

“Go home,” Bud says, words mixed with a sigh. “Think about what you’ve done. Come back when you can put it into words.”

I start to say something. But I don’t actually know what to say. And I head out. Out of the locker room. Out of SafariZone. I don’t take the time to grab anything. I just storm out.

I’m stepping up onto the bus before I realize that this means I have left my wallet in my locker. Along with my bus pass.
I smile at the driver. “Sorry,” I say. “Wrong bus.”

So as I walk home, there’s plenty of time to think. About Bud. About LA.

And those words Bud said echo in my head. They won’t leave me alone, like a bad song. They just settle in, like houseguests measuring the drapes. You do this shit to yourself.

It takes about an hour to get home. But when I do, I’ve had plenty of time to think things through, like Bud said to do. I need to talk to someone. But my mom is nowhere to be found. I find her in the kitchen, at the counter. I go in and I sit at the table. I don’t say anything for a long time. I just trace the wood grain pattern of the kitchen table.

“Mom,” I say.

She turns and looks at me, raises an eyebrow. She gives her trademark Hm.

“I fucked up,” I say.

She turns and starts stirring again. I can hear her sigh, see her shoulders sink from the news. She is not happy about this conversation.

A few seconds go by and I can’t stand the silence. “I think I screwed up and there’s no way out of it.”

For a second, she doesn’t respond, doesn’t do anything but keep on mixing whatever is in that bowl. This is my mother: when she’s not cooking, when she’s not moving, she’s less than alive. But when she’s cooking, when she’s standing in the window with the light shining on her just so, or when she’s in the harsh fluorescent light
of her restaurant, she looks more than alive: she looks like some Renaissance ideal of a woman, bathed in white light that descends from the heavens.

She finally turns and looks at me, turns her whole body, somehow managing to keep her arms in place, mixing. Until she stops, just for a second, to raise her eyebrow at me. And she just looks at me. The only sound in the room comes from the dishwasher.

And she comes to sit beside me at the table. She brings the bowl with her. The thing about growing up the daughter of a chef is that you learn to tell cookie batter when you see it.

“Do you know what I did when your dad died?” she asks. She doesn’t look at me. She just keeps mixing her dough. “I baked cookies. Honest to God, cookies. At that moment in time, when my world fell off its axis, that’s all I could remember how to do. Bake cookies. And it took me five years in therapy to forgive myself for it, for not screaming and mourning or sitting shiva like your grandmother did when my dad died.”

“You’ve been making those all my life,” I say. “Dad loved them.”

"That's the point. When your dad would call me at lunchtime, this big-shot CPA calling his wife to whine at lunch, whenever he’d call me, if I could tell he was having a bad day—if he complained about a client, complained about his boss, complained about the weather, what have you—if he did any of that, I’d make him cookies."

She’s still stirring, one hand pressing the bowl to the table and the other working her wooden spoon through the dough. “You wanna know what the therapist said? He said somewhere, deep down, I was thinking, ‘Hey, if this made the bad days seem not so bad, if he came home and we were all happy when he ate these cookies, if I can just make
enough, what’s gonna keep him from coming back?’ So I went into that kitchen because it’s what I knew. It’s what I’d always known, all my life, since your great-grandmother would take me in her kitchen and teach me how to cook. It was comfortable, it was safe. And if I stayed in that kitchen, just stayed where I was safe and comfortable, I could live in this little bubble where your dad was still alive and always would be and I could bake cookies and everyone would live happily ever after.

“And then, said the therapist, when that bubble finally bursts, you have a psychotic break.”

“You never did,” I say.

“We’re not talking about me anymore, dear.”

“Oh.”

“My question,” she says, pointing a finger at me, “is now, ten years later, you’re done with school, you come back from Los Angeles to live with your mother, work a crappy little part time job I wouldn’t have taken even before I went to school. And now you tell me you fucked up. And to that I say, no shit. I’m your mother. I’m not stupid. I knew that the moment you called and said you were coming home to stay. My question is, do you wanna sit in the kitchen with your mother? Do you really wanna be here? Or are you here because it’s comfortable.”

“But all the things I did,” I say. “Mom, I made a lot of mistakes.”

“And?” she says. “You think I didn’t? You think my life has been entirely formed by a string of good and right decisions? You’re twenty-four. You know better than that.”
She stands, takes off her apron, goes over to hang it on the hook by her stove, a little standalone gas model my dad got her when she started working at her first real restaurant, back when she was just a sous chef herself. “I gotta get to the restaurant,” she says. “They’ll be panicking without me. It’s almost two already.”

I nod, and she heads for the exit. But I see the bowl, sitting there unfinished.

“Wait,” I say. “What about the cookies?”

She stops, her hand on the doorframe, and looks back. “I wasn’t making them for me,” she says. “350. Twenty minutes. Don’t eat all the dough before you can bake them.”

She smiles at me and heads out. I watch her go. Then I stick my finger into the batter, move it around, pull out a nice glob of cookie dough, and smile as I shove it into my mouth.

I walk into the theatre. It’s dark. The only lights they have on are on the stage. To look at the actors up there, you’d think they were acting out a more modern play, and not Much Ado About Nothing. Tiffany, in her jeans and pink blouse and tank top, is strutting around, her hands on her hips, with all the attitude Beatrice needs.

I watch them for a long time, stand in the back of the theatre, hoping the darkness hides me. But then the director—you can tell he’s the director because he’s standing in the seats and yelling directions at the stage—turns around, does a double take, then yells: “Hey! What’re you doing in here?”
I want to say that if they wanted a closed rehearsal they should have locked the doors, but I don’t. I can’t think of anything to say before Tiffany-cum-Beatrice sees me and says, “It’s all right, she’s with me.”

The director looks back at her. “Fine,” he says. “Let’s run the scene again.”

Tiffany squints at me for a second longer. I sit down and wait for them to take a break.

But while I watch her, I realize that she was made for this. I start to wonder why, after all this time, I’ve never acted at a community theatre. It always seemed beneath me. But to see her there, acting her heart out, like this was actually important, I don’t know if I can still hold that opinion.

When they do break, she hops off the stage and comes toward me down the aisle. She doesn’t look very happy. I sit there but I sit up straighter, like she’s the principal.

“What do you want?” she asks.

I look at her in the eyes. She’s probably right to be angry. “I wanted to apologize,” I say.

She crosses her arms, waits for me to go on.

“Look,” I say, “I acted like a jerk. I took it out on you.”

She still stares, cocks her eyebrow.

I lick my lips, trying to find more words. “I had—have—some stuff going on. That’s got nothing to do with you. At least, it’s not your fault. And...I shouldn’t have...done what I did.”

Now I do look her in the eye: “Look, I’m sorry I punched you in the zebra face.”
She looks at me, just holds that stare for a minute longer, a minute longer than what’s comfortable. “All right,” she says. “Thanks.”


“Yeah,” she says. And she looks me up and down. “See you at work tomorrow.”

“Yeah,” I say, and I stand there as she walks back to the stage. “Tomorrow.”

Here’s what I do:

I stay up late typing a letter. The first draft is nearly two pages long. I retype it. The second is only a page. Good enough. It’s nearly midnight, my eyes are bleary, so I print it. And with the TV off, and no noise in the house but what’s leaking through from outside, that inkjet might as well be screaming.

The letter includes an admission of guilt, and, worse, me saying that Bud was right. I do bring this shit on myself. And it’s time to take responsibility for the shitstorm that my life has become.

The journey of a thousand miles and all that shit.

In this case, it starts with not being the zebra.

I fall asleep on the sofa. I call in, first thing in the morning, say I’m going to be late. For the first time in six months, I sleep late. I watch Today and drink a cup of coffee that I made myself. My mom is coming down in her pajamas when I leave. She wasn’t even home before I fell asleep.

When I leave, I slide the letter into my purse. I go down a few blocks and catch the bus that will drop me right in front of SafariZone.
Bud is at the register with Craig. He greets me with a smile. “Hey,” he says.

I hand him the letter. “Read this,” I say.

“What is it?” He still has that jokey tone. He doesn’t know any better. But as he reads the first few lines of my letter, his face falls. The smile disappears. “What the hell is this?”


“Are you fucking kidding me?” It’s my superpower, I realize: to make Bud immediately lose whatever calm he has.

Tina is in the play area. She comes over, looks at me, and then at Bud, her mouth wide.

“You’re kidding me,” is what Bud says.


As I’m cleaning out my locker, Bud comes up behind me. I turn around and I see him with his arms crossed, leaning against the wall there by the door.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” he says. “Leave. You don’t have to leave.”


“Why? You’ve got a job here as long as you want.”

I look down at the bag I’m packing. It’s fairly empty, all things considered. This is what you get for working in a place for this long. Jack shit in a bag. “Maybe that’s the problem,” I say. “Maybe I don’t want a safety net.”
“That’s bullshit,” he says. And he starts walking toward me. “Everybody needs a safety net.”

The locker’s empty. I slam it shut and turn around, heaving my shoulders in a heavy sigh. It’s exaggerated, I’m playing him. And I don’t care.

“No, Bud,” I say. “You need a safety net. Some of us like the idea of working out there in the real world, of taking chance. Of not keeping ourselves in the kitchen.”

Bud’s brow furrows. “What?” He shakes his head. “Nevermind. My point is, we can work this out. Whatever’s going on between us. We can fix this.”

I smile. “Oh, Bud,” I say. I pat him on the shoulder. He looks at my hand like he wants to chop it off, burn it, then salt the ashes. “It should have been you I punched yesterday.”

I walk out, all the way out, onto the sidewalk and the sun. It’s getting warmer. The random rise and fall of temperatures in this rainy season. My phone is vibrating in my pocket. I look up at the sun and squint at the same moment I slip the phone out of my pocket. Even with the glare I can see who it is, his name, the one I never paired with a picture. Just a name in generic white font.

My thumb trembles as I slide the unlock button. I put the phone up to my ear and say hello.

“Marissa,” says the voice on the other line, out of breath and panicky like he’s not sure he’s really gotten through and this is all some kind of dream.

“No,” I say. “You’ve got the wrong number.” And I hang up before he has a chance to respond.
Wake Me When We Get to Leningrad

Two men, dressed for winter and for travel, arrived at the tavern just before dark. The short one was Misha Ivanov, the other Sergei Grigorovich. The two of them had been driving across the country for the past week, stopping in every town along the way to trade and sell magnetic tapes of their music. It was a quiet tavern. There were few patrons. The few present ignored their vodka to stare at the new arrivals.

The two of them walked up to the barkeep, but it Misha, with his black hair matted and his face unshaven, that spoke. "Good evening," said Misha Ivanov. "We were traveling through, and we noticed that you keep a room upstairs."

The barkeep narrowed his eyes at the two strangers. Sergei, whose black hair was curled and whose eyes were dark, looked around the room. Both travelers wore black jackets, fur lining the necks. Both clutched hats, similarly black, similarly fur-lined. The barkeep surveyed one, then the other.

"Yes," he said. "Fifty a night."

Misha nodded and reached into his pocket. "We will take it."

"The room comes with a two drink minimum," said the barkeep.

Misha Ivanov stopped, frozen in his motions, and looked up at the barkeep, his mouth hanging wide. "A two drink minimum?" he asked.

The barkeep nodded, and crossed his arms over his chest, which made his large belly that much more noticeable.

Misha Ivanov looked to his traveling companion. Sergei Grigorovich looked back at him and shrugged.
"Fine," said Misha, turning back to the barkeep. "We will take the room, and we will take the two drinks."

And he handed over a pile of bills to the barkeep, who smiled a yellow, toothy smile and uncrossed his arms and said, "Then welcome, Comrades!"

The two sat at the bar, and a girl brought them two glasses of vodka. Misha took a swig and had to hide his disappointment. It had been three days since he had last had anything to drink besides water. He had hoped for better. The barkeep moved on to other patrons. But the girl stayed. Her blonde hair fell to her waist and was tied back in a thick braid. Her clothes were too large for her slender frame. She smiled at them both, but her eyes locked with Misha’s.

"Where are you from?" she whispered, leaning against the bar in front of them.

"Not around here," said Sergei Grigorovich. He downed what remained of his vodka and slid the glass across in signal for another round. The girl picked up the bottle.

"We hail from Sverdlovsk," Misha said. "The less we say about that, though, the better."

The girl knitted her brow, frowned. "Why so far away from home."

Sergei smiled a bitter little smile, his lips tucking themselves inward. He raised his glass in a sweeping motion. "We are traveling minstrels, spreading joy throughout the land with our song."

The girl watched, her eyes wide, her lips slightly parted, as Sergei Grigorovich downed his second glass. Then he slid his stool away from the bar.
"My apologies," he said. "It has been a long trip. I am going up to the room to rest."

Both men leaned forward to watch the girl reach under the counter. When she emerged again, she handed over a key attached by chain to a scrap of wood. "You'll need this," she said.

Sergei took it with a nod. "My thanks to you."

The girl and Misha watched Sergei head toward the corner of the room where the restrooms and stairs were kept. He crept up the creaking stairs slowly, his boots thudding against the wood with every step.

The girl then turned her attention to Misha once again. "Tatiana Petrovna," she said.

"Misha Ivanov. And I'm afraid you won't find me nearly as entertaining as my companion." He raised his glass and downed the remainder of his first vodka.

Tatitana Petrovna grabbed his glass and refilled it. "I think you're the better conversationalist."

Misha laughed. "Sergei does prefer to be the silent brooding type," he said

“Well,” said Tatiana Petrovna, “perhaps that works on the girls in Sverdlovsk. I prefer conversation.”

Misha lifted one eyebrow at her. He was not particularly in the mood for this, but he had an entire glass of Party Vodka left in front of him. He took another sip. He was beginning to feel it.
“So what are you doing so far from home?” She leaned over the bar once again, further this time, close enough that Misha could smell her. She smelled of alcohol and work.

Misha sighed and raised his glass, speaking around its lip. “My friend wasn’t joking,” he said. “We are actually musicians. We’re traveling west. To Leningrad.”

Her eyes widened, and she inched backward, probably from the shock. When she spoke again, it was in hushed, conspiratorial tones. “You’re going to Leningrad? I’ve always dreamed of going there.”

And Misha once again found himself regretting that he mentioned the city to anyone. “The road isn’t as easy as you think it is. We’ve been at this for weeks. Staying in places like this. Depending on the kindness of strangers.”

Misha could not discern whether the look on her face was a smile or a grimace, only that one corner of her mouth was twisted up while the other went down. “I’m afraid you won’t find much of that in this place.”

Misha frowned. “It can’t be that bad.”

Tatiana Petrovna scoffed and pulled a towel from her apron. She started wiping off the counter in front of him. “You do not know this place very well. We’re all hurting here. There’s no one alive in Yaransk who wouldn’t sell you out for a crust of bread.”

Misha raised his glass. “Comrade Gorbachev will save us all.”

“Or destroy us all.” But she said the words so lightly that, even in the quiet of the tavern, Misha had to strain to hear her. She stopped in her motions and looked straight into his eyes. “Is there room in your car for one more?”
Misha sat, taken aback for a moment, but managed to raise the glass to his lips to hide it. “You’ve only just met me. How do you know you can trust me?”

“I don’t,” said Tatiana Petrovna.

At that moment, the barkeep called over Tatiana Petrovna. Before she left, she told Misha, “My father is a very demanding employer.”

Misha looked at her, then at the barkeeper. Suddenly he saw the resembled. He took the opportunity to down the rest of his vodka, leave a handful of kopecks on the bar, and disappear up the stairs. As he climbed, he considered his dwindling monetary reserve.

He found the door to the upstairs room unlocked, and only a single candle burning when he entered, electricity being too expensive for the innkeeper to waste on his guests. The voice that greeted him from the darkness was rough and lined with exhaustion. He was reminded once again of just how nonhuman he felt. “Where are we this time?”

Misha began taking off his jacket. Beneath was a sweater that his mother had knitted for him, long ago. “This is what happens when you sleep through most of my driving.”

“Where are we?” Sergei Grigorovich repeated.

“Yaransk.” Misha threw his coat onto a wooden chair in one corner. The only things he could tell from the darkness were the bed and what looked to be an icon of Saint George on the table against the far wall. He wondered how the innkeeper got away
with that. But then he thought that perhaps Yaransk was too small to be noticed by
anyone other than wayward travelers. Certainly too small to be noticed by the state.

“There aren’t even any decent bars in Yaransk,” Sergei said. “There’s no
amphitheater to swindle away from the Party. There’s nowhere to play. Why are we
stopping here?”

“Because I’m tired of driving.” Misha fell onto the bed. He worked off his boots.
“You get to sleep all the way here, but I only get to rest when we stop.”

Misha could feel the way the bed moved as Sergei threw himself over, tossing
himself onto his side. He could feel, even in the darkness, Sergei’s back to him. “Wake
me when we get to Leningrad,” said Sergei.

“Of course,” Misha said. “That’s always your answer.”

Sergei Grigorovich had returned to Sverdlovsk weeks before and tracked down
Misha Ivanov. The two had met at the bus station. Misha had been reading a newspaper
when Sergei Grigorovich sat down beside him and announced that Girgori Nikolaev,
Sergei’s father, had died. These were the first words he had heard from Sergei
Grigorovich in years. Misha took a moment to collect himself, but said that Grigori
Nikolaev had been a good man. After all, the older man had worked at the same
Uralmesh factory that Misha Ivanov now worked at, and, after Misha’s own father had
died when Misha Ivanov was seventeen, the older man had become like a second father
before he became ill and was forced to retire and wither away in his home, out of sight.

“He was a father,” Sergei Grigorovich had said. “All fathers are good men.
Misha noted that, as they spoke, Sergei Grigorovich refused to look at him. The
other man would only stare at the apartment block opposite the bus station. Mothers and
children were emerging from their apartments. Misha Ivanov noted that, in the years
since his childhood friend had left their village in order to make a life in a city closer to
Moscow, all softness had fled from his features. His face had become hard and long,
ragged, as if the baby fat had been beaten away and replaced with sorrow. This hardly
seemed like the same boy he had grown up with, the same boy who had first told him of
Yegor Letov and his dangerous music, the boy who Misha Ivanov had started a band
with.

“I have inherited my father’s Moskovich,” Sergei had said. “I’m leaving in two
days’ time for better country.”

“Where are you going?”

“Leningrad.”

In the middle of the night, Misha awoke, not knowing how long he had been
asleep or even if he had really slept at all. Sergei snored beside him. So Misha rose from
the bed and crept downstairs.

Tatiana Petrovna was still at the bar, no on the opposite side, and the electric
lights had all gone out. She kept several candles lit on the bar in front of her. There was a
bottle of vodka and a glass there with her, and she stared at a book in her hands in the low
light.
He stepped closer, and the floor creaked. Tatiana Petrovna looked up and smiled.

“Hello, Misha Ivanov.” She patted the stool beside her. “Come, sit.”

As he crossed the taproom, his bare feet cold against the hard wood, she moved to the other side of the bar and brought out another glass and set it before the empty stool. She poured a glass as he sat, refilled her own and raised it in a toast.

“What are we toasting?” Misha asked, taking his own glass in two fingers.

“Take your pick,” she said. “You’re a musician. Shall we toast Melodiya? Or perhaps Comrade Gorbachev and the decline of the secret service?”

“Both,” Misha said. He downed the shot and groaned in his throat a bit.

“Although to hear my friend talk, there is a pair of KGB agents following us across the country.”

Tatiana Petrovna was turning the glass in her fingers. “I’m sure they are,” she said. “Because you are such well-known musicians, and so subversive to boot, with your sleeping in terrible rooms and talking to small town girls.”

“It’s quite the subversive lifestyle,” he said. In another age, this kind of talk would never have happened. There would have been too much fear that someone else was listening in. Now, Reagan and Thatcher and even Gorabachev himself had done so much to degrade the state of fear that the nation had been shrouded in for decades. “Do you stay here all night?”

She shook her head. “No. We live next door. But I cannot read when I’m there. So, I come here. No one questions me when I’m here alone.”

He looked at the book. “What are you reading?”
She flipped the book over so that he could see the cover. “Anna Kareninina,” she said.

“A classic,” Misha said. He reached over and refilled her glass first, then his own. “And dreadfully long-winded.”

“So you’ve never read it?”

Misha sipped at the vodka. “Every word of it,” he said. “When I was in school, I would read a book a week. Even the banned ones.”

“What stopped you?”

He downed the rest of the shot. “I grew up. Had to do the responsible thing. Got a job at the factory my father worked at until he died. I had to support my mother until she passed. When Sergei Grigorovich showed up and asked me if I would come with him on this idiot trip, he was all the family I had left in Sverdlovsk.”

“That’s terrible,” she said.

He shrugged.

She slipped a shred of paper into her book and shut it, and reached across and took his hand in hers. “Maybe it doesn’t have to be,” she said.

And she leaned over and kissed him.

At one of their many stops, Sergei had said to Misha, “For you and I, Leningrad is the land of milk and honey.”

The two had been standing outside of another shut bar. It had formed into a pattern over the weeks. Closed underground taverns that had once hosted underground
bands. Their trip had been an itinerary of such scenes, closed taverns and closed amphitheaters. A long list of avenues that were no longer open to them. All of them with plastered signs put up on behalf of the state, all of them with peeling paint and shattered windows.

They had sold a handful of their magnetic tapes, and that was getting them by, but soon, they would be left alone, without any funds. But the new roads Comrade Gorbachev was building made reaching the cities easier, and made reaching the villages harder. These two men, in their inherited Moskovich, had crossed the countryside, carrying with them a bag of magnetic tapes, the guitars that strapped to their backs, and the synthesizers that made up the rest of their band.

All the while, Sergei had gone on about how Melodiya was ruining the music scene, but that Melodiya was only a tool of the State. About how Melodiya oppressed artists and artists gave the amphitheaters revenue, brought the young and their money to the bars, and if that was shut down, then an entire generation—his and Misha’s—would find themselves lost once the Party finally fell. And all the while, Misha Ivanov would argue that Melodiya was losing power, that it had let Yegor Letov get through its censorship. That this was a new decade, and the 90s were not the 80s.

“I hope not,” Sergei Grigorovich said, smoking a cigarette he had rolled himself as Misha drove the Moskovich. “I certainly hope not.”

Tatiana Petrovna lay tucked into the space beneath Misha’s arm. Her warmth carried over to him. He was unsure whether she was sleeping, but he was wide awake. It
could have been a side effect of the weeks spent in Grigori Nikolaev’s car, now Sergei’s car, weeks and months spent alone, with not another car traveling with them, only the random sights of men and women and children and cattle walking along the sides of the streets during the day, and the buses traveling the back roads at night. But he had not been sleeping well, even when they stopped to spend the night somewhere new. Even now, with sleep threatening to take him, he fought the sleep he had craved. When confronted with it, it scared him. He could feel his own heart beating, could feel Tatiana’s own heart beating against his ribs, could feel her warmth and her breath. It was calming and alarming at the same time.

He sighed. And Tatiana stirred beside them. The two were twined together on the floor of the taproom, but there was the blanket underneath them and the fire that Tatiana started in the fireplace to keep them warm.

“I grew up in Sverdlovsk,” he said, keeping his voice as low as he could manage. “My whole family did. My grandmother showed me pictures she kept hidden in a lockbox under her floorboards of the church they had torn down to put up statues of Lenin and Stalin. It was beautiful, and she said she had been inside of it. Before the revolution. It was beautiful. It had a bell tower that, she said, when she was a girl, looked like it stretched all the way up to heaven. Made you believe in God. And inside were these murals, painted by the masters, she said, of the Epiphany and of the crucifixion. In the Spring, they would baptize new believers in the river behind the church.”
Tatiana Petrovna made a noise, a small groan, and shifted. He wondered, not for the first time, if he was talking to anyone. And, if there was no one there listening, if that was really such a bad thing at all.

Then she spoke: “My grandmother told me similar stories. About the church. She had pictures of her own baptism. And then my mother’s. When my mother was a few months old, they took her out to the river. My grandmother kept this old, yellowed picture in a volume of Lenin. It was of my mother and of her, and my grandmother was waist-deep in water. She said my grandfather had taken the picture, and afterward, they had to run, in their wet clothes, from the militsiya.”

She laughed, a hearty laugh that threw her head back and forced her onto her back. Then, suddenly, there was silence.

“What do you think you will ever really get to Leningrad?” she said. “Do you think it’s possible to escape the places we’re born?”

“It’s happening,” he said. “It will take work. But what doesn’t?”

She said nothing in response. Instead, Tatiana Petrovna rolled over and put a hand on his chest.

Misha was with his mother and father one moment and then the next was awake to the sight of Tatiana Petrovna up and dressing herself.

“You should get up,” she said. “You should go back to your room. My father will be waking up soon, and I should not be here.”
He watched her dressing, watched as she pulled her shirt back on, and the act of watching her dress was somehow more arousing than that moment, only hours before, when they had roughly pulled one another’s clothes off. He reached for his pants, and he saw something in her that he couldn’t name, saw something in the way the firelight and the new sunlight filtering through the windows touched her skin and he wanted her to not leave. He didn’t know anything about this girl, and maybe it was because he had been alone with only Sergei Grigorovich for so long but he wanted her to stay with him.

“That’s not true, she’s staying with me.”

Her eyes widened and she stopped as she slipped her shoe on. She looked straight at him. “Of course.” Her voice sounded like she wasn’t sure if she should trust him. “I have to get a few things from my house, but...yes.”

She finished dressing and left out the door, locking it from the outside. Misha was putting on his shirt when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned to find Sergei coming down the stair.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing,” Misha said. “Comrade.”

Sergei made a face to let Misha know that he was not amused. He walked behind the bar, picked up the bottle of vodka and turned it over in his hands, and then took a swig of it.

“Isn’t it a little early to be drinking,” Misha said.

Sergei put the bottle back on the bar. “I take it the girl is coming with us?”
Misha narrowed his eyes at the other man, unsure how he knew this. Unless he had been listening at the top of the stair. “Yes,” Misha said.

Sergei’s twisted smile returned. “You were always a hopeless romantic.”

The two of them had spent some time working to finish the bottle of vodka when the door suddenly flew open. Tatiana Petrovna stood there, two small bags in her hands. She rushed into the taproom and said, “We have to go now.”

“What’s wrong?” Misha said, standing.

“My parents,” Tatiana said. “They are very...protective.”

“What did you do, girl?” This from Sergei, who still stood behind the bar.

“They found out I was leaving.” Tatiana Petrovna turned her eyes down toward the floor.

“What did you do?” Sergei repeated.

“The militsiya is coming,” she said. Then, to Misha, “I’m sorry.”

The apology seemed out of place. Sergei spoke before Misha could. “We need to leave,” he said. “Now.”

“I agree,” Misha said, and downed the last of the vodka. Both men rushed back upstairs, both putting on their boots before anything else. Downstairs, Misha paused. Tatiana Petrovna was gone, and the door was open.

He did not spend long worrying, thinking that she had only gone ahead of them. The car was parked half a block away. They headed for it, sinking ankle-deep into the piled snow and the mud and grass.
Sergei was in the lead, and Misha was looking down. But then Sergei stopped. Misha nearly plowed into him before he realized what was happening. He looked up.

“What are you doing?” And then he saw them. Two men in dark uniforms coming toward them at a steady pace, their faces set in stone and their gait official. “Shit.”

“Yes,” Sergei said. “That would be the militsiya.”

“What do we do?” Misha said. “If we run, they will chase us across the country.” Sergei looked at him. “You set this up,” he said. “Now we both must deal with it.”

As the two men neared them, Misha put on his best smile. “Officers,” he said.

There were no words: the closest officer slammed Misha’s face with a right cross. Misha’s vision blurred, and then he went down onto his knees. But behind the man, he saw Tatiana and her father. She was crying, and shaking her head.

He groaned, his hand covering his face. He could feel the blood. “What was that for?”

The officer offered no explanation, only a kick in the ribs. Misha felt as if he would shatter. “You dirty bastard. You come here and you make a mockery of this town.”

“What?”

The officer kicked him again, and Misha was prostrate on the ground, trying to get himself back up. He looked up and saw the other officer working over Sergei.

“Stop this,” Tatiana Petrovna screamed. “You said you would not hurt them!”

The first officer’s voice was rough. “Go home, Tatiana Petrovna,” he said. “You have your reward.”

Reward, Misha thought.
“I will not,” Tatiana said. “You can’t.”

“Go home!”

Misha looked up, on his hands and knees. The officer spat, not at Misha but onto the ground beside him, right in front of his face, so that Misha was forced to look at it as he sat there trying to find his footing. He heard the officer’s boots crushing dirt and grass and snow, coming around, until he passed beyond the scope of Misha’s vision.

Tatitana Petrovna’s voice was barely audible as she said, “I’m sorry.” Misha dropped his head. He saw her father leading her away. “Bread is more important than ideals.”

The officer behind Misha reached down and grabbed the young man’s hands, slapped them into handcuffs. Once Misha was secure, the officer used the cuffs to pull Misha to his feet. Misha’s shoulders burned from the strain.

The other officer also had Sergei Grigorovich on his feet, was forcing Sergei to watch as he went to the car and pulled their bags from the boot. Sergei Grigorovich also had blood pouring out of his nose and down his face.

Misha’s guard walked over and began going through the bags too. He was the one to find the magnetic tapes.

“What have we here?” he said, holding one up between gloved fingers.

He threw it down and crushed it beneath his boot heel, rubbed it into the snow. The only thing left when he moved his boot was crushed plastic and metal and magnetic film.

“Garbage,” he said.
And then he and his partner took turns smashing tapes. At least fifteen minutes passed that way. Then one came up, circled around Misha and pulled back on his handcuffs.

“In the old days,” he hissed into Misha’s ear so that the hot air actually hurt, “the KGB would have dealt with you. You would have lived out your life in a labor camp, and no one would dare question in.”

Then, to his partner: “Come. We will let the magistrate decide how best to deal with these two traitors.”

“We are musicians,” Sergei Grigorovich said. The remark earned him a punch to the stomach.

“You are not,” said the officer. “You two are cowards, who come into town, prey on the girls, leave us in shambles. You are traitors to the country and to the Party, and you should be executed as such.”

“Everyone wants to be Yegor Letov,” said the other officer.

“Get moving,” said the officer behind Misha. He punctuated this with a shove.

Misha went down onto his knees. He knew they would be moving away from the car, away from Leningrad. They were actually moving away from Leningrad. The officer yanked him up onto his feet again, and Misha resisted, fell back into the snow.

“Move!”

Misha could feel the tears stinging his eyes. The hot and the cold. He could not. He would not. His legs were shaking.

“On your feet!”
The officer pulled him up yet again, and he went back down.

Then, Misha Ivanov looked up, and he saw the sun breaking through the winter clouds. A small break, but it was there, if you looked. And in the distance, he heard Sergei Grigorovich speak:

“Misha Ivanov,” he said. “Stop fighting.”

Comrade Gorbachev was killing the old ways, replacing them with new Western ways. This was a new decade, a new world. And Misha Ivanov was terrified by it.

Misha looked at Sergei Grigorovich, and in the new sun, he looked like a martyr. He had the same peaceful smile Misha had seen on the paintings his grandmother had shown him in photographs.

We can’t all be Yegor Letov, he thought. Eventually, there would be no system to define themselves against.

So, when the offer put his hand on Misha’s shoulder once again, Misha jerked it off. He would not let this man, this man who had surrendered to the State, lead him to his fate. He stood, under his own power. Misha Ivanov would walk into his unwritten future under his own power.