

The Contortionist

*A Visceral Account of an American Mutiny,
Wanderlust and Failure in Four Parts*

By
Kris Krainock

To Sam P.
without whom this book would not be possible
and without whom I would not be possible

*if you've known me personally or have been a follower of my early and totally inconsequential work, you've seen this dedication before, the androgynous and anonymous name of *Sam P.* That name (and all equally cryptic notes of dedication to follow that name) belongs to a woman that I once passionately loved. As these feelings have permanently atrophied due to life events occurring during the many years process of writing this book, my first instinct was to remove her name and simply dedicate my magnum opus to someone else, perhaps even going as far to say someone more deserving. However, upon rereading my dedication, I realized that the words remained true. This book would indeed not be possible without first witnessing her defunct approach to love and life, nor would I be the same man I am today without enduring the pain she caused and the love she inspired.

E.E. Cummings once wrote: *undead isn't being alive.* I leave my dedication intact, not for her benefit, but for mine, as a way of celebrating the love I discovered I was capable of, even in the face of total dissonance, and in the genuine hope that one day she'll be born.

Please allow me to begin this book with an ending.

with Special Thanks to: Christian Flynn, Alison Moore, Dylan Gallagher, Colby Bryant, Erin Granat, Vivian Martin, Don Lucente, Kyle Oddis, April Allen, Vincenzo de Michelis, Lucienne Boyer, Federico Fellini, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, William S. Burroughs, The Lost Generation, Don Quixote, along with Idioms, Puns, Clichés, Similes, Metaphors, & Hyperbole

Author's Note

It is the dream of almost every American to travel abroad, experience the world in which they feel they have been deprived. For a writer especially it is a sentimental yearning to do the things and visit the places that the great writers of years past had done and visited. This book is one such journey seen through the eyes of a man who bears no relation to me, and it is in the hope that I'll be able to debunk the illusion of American rebellion while retracing the footsteps of those bold enough to cross the Atlantic Ocean to capture what they envisioned the world to be. In my travels I've found a particular uniqueness to the American mentality toward Europe; other parts of the world as well, but Europe especially. It would seem as though Europe is a much better experience for Americans than it is for Europeans, for what is magical, elusive, exotic and devastatingly beautiful to me, is commonplace and banal to them. How they dream of being soaked in the manufactured lights of Las Vegas that I despise so much is similar to how I validate myself by staring at what one Italian referred to as "old rocks." Why we romanticize these places, why we willingly submit to cliché after cliché is what prompted me to write the book in which you are about to read. You are most likely an American and perhaps hold the same sentiments about the world as so many before you, but perhaps you're a European or someone hailing from the Far East, and if that's the case, I hope you anticipate the pathetic manner in which my hero conducts himself in your land. He is foolish and brave, brilliant and dim, heartless and compassionate, misguided and driven, a conformist and a rebel, he is you, he is me, he is what lives within all of us: a big, fat, lousy, lice-ridden contradiction, full of fears, passions and good intentions... So, if there isn't anything else, find a comfortable spot with plenty of light, as not to strain your eyes, let go of all your inhibitions and enjoy...

Oh, and before I forget: while reading this book, you, the reader, are undergoing an experiment in contemporary literature. I am the mad scientist behind this experiment and you, my friends, are the lab rats. Within the pages of this book is implemented a technique of my designing, which I'm calling "*Morphic Resonance Writing*." It should be every artist's goal to create something new and this is my leap into the abyss. No amount of explanation will aid you in deciphering the mystery, but I ask only that you use your heart, your gut and your mind to guide you through, for with or without this book, those are tools invaluable to the human spirit.

The Author
Paris, 2011

Cast of Characters

(in order of appearance)

Part One

Homer Miller, (1) Graham, (2) Max, (3) Phineas, (4) Dr. Chin, (5) Penelope, (6) Samuel, the Terrier, (7) Edith, (8) Xavier, (9) Baybrooke, (10) Mildred, (11) Thaddeus, (12) Gwendolyn, (13) Blossom, (14) Ulysses, (15) Nina, (16)

Part Two

George, (17) Mayhew, (18) Nick, (19) Cassandra, (20) Byron, (21) Juan, (22) Monray, (23) Miss Ursula, (24) Marion, (25) Miranda, (26) Blanche, (27) Sid, (28)

Part Three

Hugo, (29) Robertino, (30) Hogarth, (31) Adona, (32) Nero, (33) Eva, (34) Dora, (35) Cypress the cat, (36) Felicity, (37) Gertrud, (38) Hilda, (39) Cleopatra, (40) Hugh, (41) Verna, (42) Waldo, (43) Ernie, (44) Faith Duvall, (45) Ingrid, (46) Charlotte “Lottie,” (47) Marcel, (48) Hattie, (49) Simone, (50) Francesca, (51) Josephine, (52) Margot, (53) Maude, (54) C.G. Flynn, (55) Franz, (56) Ludwig, (57) Céline, (58) Chastity, (59) Francois, (60) Pier, (61) Hal Mavet, (62) Felix, (63) Grace, (64) Otto (65)

Part Four

Solomon, (66) Hannibal, (67) Gosia, (68)

“All good things are wild and free.”

- *Henry David Thoreau*

Part One

re·bel·lion (rĭ-bĕl'yən) n.

1. An act or a show of defiance toward an authority or established convention.

1

There was nothing left to do.

I had only enough money for one plane ticket, no return. I chose Italy by tossing a dull dart against a map, which hung on my wall like some twisted mirror, reflecting back to me all my dreams of adventure and exploration. The dart fell to the floor, dead. The crude dent it left in the map was over Florence, Italy, a few hundred miles north of Rome. Florence was a city literally rupturing with culture and beauty, as though a flamingo had swallowed a peacock and was now gorged with turquoise feathers bursting out of its beak- the city which housed Michelangelo's David. It seemed as though the dart had been fated to land on Italy, for I had some Italian ancestry on my mother's side and it was the only country in Europe that I knew anything about, though I wasn't sure I believed in fate. I wasn't sure I believe in possession, either, but something had come over me now that I had never experienced before. It was a blind passion, a feeling of absolute suffocation, a feeling that if I did not leave this little room at once, if I did not escape this drab city and did not board that plane to Italy that I would die. I even began to sweat cold drops, as though a woman was flicking ice chips at my bare back with her tongue. I could almost see her lying on my bed like an hourglass that had tipped over, her long porcelain arm draped over her hip, a hip capable of baring the most obese child... My small world consisted mostly of what I was able to imagine, for my reality was rather barren. Quaint would be a way of describing it if I were an optimistic mother gently criticizing her child's first home-away-from-home, but the truth was my apartment was a tiny scourge infested with roaches and rats large enough to owe rent. I would not miss this place, I would not miss the splinters which dug themselves into my feet from the wooden floor, I would not miss the mucus filled nose I always woke with due to the crack in the windowpane, and I certainly wouldn't miss the faceless neighbors, locked up in their own worlds, refusing any form of good-natured friendliness. I was in a room in a building full of people, in a city crowded with humans, in a country filled with hearts, on a planet overflowing with life, yet I was alone, plotting my escape, pacing back and forth, searching my brain for what I'd need... Everything had been decided about my trip within moments as I leapt out of bed and scurried to fill a bag. It was as though the walls began to close

in, like sharp spikes had surfaced from the plaster and were now inching towards me with sinister intent, to impale me and keep me hostage forever, wearing the same clothes forever, wearing the same face forever, my features frozen like a sculpture dooming his figurine by perfecting a grimace.

I stopped cold, dead, looking toward my bookshelf. Everything else had been done in careless alacrity, bumbling around like a chicken with its head cut off, like a bull in a china shop, and whatever other clichés you can think of, but choosing the one and only book I could afford to bring along was one of the most profound dilemmas I had ever found myself in. What could endure my entire visit abroad? What could sustain the plane ride? Looking through every book as though I were an appraiser, I recalled how each opening sentence made me feel, every emotion that coursed through my veins and made my heart leap up and dangle from my rib cage. How about Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*? No, *Don Quixote*! How could one live without *Don Quixote*? It went on like this for close to an hour. I eventually settled on *The Brothers Karamazov*, for it never seemed to tire. The first time I read it, and forever after, it bashed my brain like a brick, squeezing out every ounce of useless knowledge and replacing it with information vital to any human being that ever opened their lungs to oxygen and their stomachs to food. A rich, but completely soulless, friend of mine, who often looked for reasons to flaunt his wealth and did so superbly, paid for fifty copies of Dostoevsky's masterpiece when the idea cropped up in my skull that we should sneak into a church and swap out all the bibles with the big book itself. They could get so much more use out of it than they could their bibles, was my reasoning. It made him laugh until he was sick, and he patted me on the back, complimenting me in the degrading sort of way he had come to be known for, "Homer, I'd leave it up to you to come up with something with such a childish simplicity. Bloody brilliant!" he'd say. His name was Graham and his father was born in England, which I suppose gave him the right to say things like *bloody* or *cheers* when we were toasting at the bar, though I always hated it. But I couldn't crucify him too badly, for the bulk of the money I had for my plane ticket came from him. He was always spotting me money here and there, not because he cared for me, of course, but because he wanted to remind me of the rung in the economic staircase which I seemed to be stranded. "I'm in the attic and you're in the basement!" he'd say. He had given me two-hundred and fifty dollars. It was enough for a plane ticket and to find lodging once I had arrived. Two-hundred and fifty dollars was an extravagance any way you cut it and I owed the bastard. When he gave it to me he said,

"Put it to good use, Homer. There is something within you waiting to get out."

I could tell he was being sincere, but he was simply incapable of telling you anything without making your blood boil in some unmistakable, but completely involuntary way. As if by saying those words to me he was insinuating that I wasn't functioning to my highest capability, that I wasn't reaching my fullest potential, that he was giving me this money out of some vague hope

that I would use it to become more like him, and maybe out of a little pity. No, if I truly believed that was the case I would have tossed the money in the nearest gutter. It was just something Graham had said that got under my skin, but it got me thinking, as well... had I been using my potential? I had never really thought about it. Days had turned into months and months into years, and before I knew it I was an adult, pushed out into the world like an unwilling child from the womb, screaming *I'm not ready yet! I'm not ready to come out yet! Just a little bit longer! Close the door! Shut the window! I'm not ready yet!*, thrown out of the airplane without a shoot, tossed from the train, carelessly brushed aside like a housefly, forced to face a world that did not know my name, nor would remember it once I had died.

The world was a harsh place, but I only knew of its harshness from the collected acknowledgment of its brutality, the chewed, recycled life lessons that float above you from the time you are born, instilled in you without question, without explanation. The world was harsh. We knew that, we didn't know much else, but we knew that. Personally, I only knew one thing, that the world lay in wait, waiting to be altered, bettered or destroyed.

2

All the love of which I was made often sprang from me like a fountain, but then at times it bottomed out like the wet copper lid of a drain. And in those dark times I was capable of becoming something subhuman, devoid of all compassion, but it was not one of those times. I seemed to be an ocean, lazily tossing myself at the mercy of the beach, asking for its forgiveness, seeking repentance, completely consumed with irrational emotion, raw with it, like an exposed nerve, shocking jags of pain at the simplest lick of air. I wasn't certain for whom or what my love was reserved, but it was there, within me, I could feel it splashing about. I was under the influence of love, I was drunk on it. I felt love was the most important thing we had as human beings. As functional, spine-baring creatures with hearts, we had a duty to explore that muscle's potential, to match the strength of our loins with the heart, to have them compete with one another, to have the heart overflow like some diseased well. Not necessarily romantic love, the love of another human, but love at its most simplistic and instinctual. Just love, pure, unadulterated love. The love of anything except nothing! It was essential to making this sadistic slideshow pass without losing one's mind, to keep it from becoming a deflated mound of fleshy tissue. I have seen men who have abandoned love and I have seen the oatmeal like substance that trickles from their ears when life becomes too grandiose for them, when the obscurities of it all become too great and break through their flimsy guard railing. Everything at once comes pouring down on them, a dream dam finally breaking, finally cracking under the pressure of their own self-strangulation. They were smothered by their own pillow, strangled by their own hand. They reached within their own bodies and choked the soul, consciously or subconsciously turning off the switch that turned on the light to self discovery.

I couldn't help but think that my sudden escape to Europe had something to do with rebellion. Although, it wasn't as sudden as I thought. I had many loose ends to tie up before I left on my journey and after fleeing my apartment and getting down onto the street, the feeling of death left me, my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov* pressed tightly to my chest. I could breathe again, all distortion resumed in normalcy, the spikes withdrew. I began to question my motives for leaving. Wasn't I the one always hollering about this place, about its stench, its musk, its fragile sensuality and its grotesque sense of superiority? Why leave it now? Had I given up on the American dream? Had I ever believed in it? What kind of perverse nightmare had I been living in? Everything seemed like a foreign land already, nothing seemed like home, the streetlamp look cockeyed and queer in the misty aftermath of that evening's rain, as if it had been replaced with a duplicate, which hadn't paid attention to the minute details. The stone sidewalk was turned from beige to brown and the streetlamp's light refracted in the small puddles which found themselves in the uneven grooves of the sidewalk. The air was perfect for breathing. I decided to take a walk. It would do me good, allow me to clear my head, get my thoughts in order, piece together my mind, which had shattered like a windowpane sometime before.

As I walked I thought about breaking away from everything I called my own. If I had my way I would give up all my worldly possessions and assume a position in negative space, floating nude, wholly detached, my arms and legs stretched out as far as they would go, touching nothing, just floating, perhaps only the sound of music to keep me company for eternity. But I'd miss women, who are the reason for doing anything worthwhile, meaningful, honorable, dangerous, stupid, dishonest and all around foul. I'd miss their tenderness and their complicated ways of doing things. I'd miss their hot flesh against me. I'd miss their eyes that would peer into mine, talking dirty without uttering a word. I'd miss their hair and I'd long to stick my face in it again, being overtaken by the avalanche of smells that erupt from their scalp, taking some in my mouth and eating it. I'd miss their cunt, the wonderful cunt, so wonderful that when I am deepest within, it is the closest I've ever come to reaching the negative space. So deep within that time stops and the head floats, coming apart by molecule while her sap seeps around each atom. I thought about defiance and how sweet it could taste, the sour sting it provides. Would people gossip about where I had gone? Would they look for me? I would just vanish; cease to exist on their plane. How long before they notice I've gone? How long would it take them to forget me? Would they even care? I doubt it. I wouldn't think twice if they all got swallowed by a cosmic vortex that opened up from the heavens and reached down with seedy fingers, plucking them like apricots. I wouldn't mind one goddamn bit. In fact a part of me wished for that, for this earth to rear up and belch, sucking in my cohorts with a fiery intake. Though there was one that I desired to remain, Max. Max was beautiful, Max was clever, Max was filthy, everything I looked for in a woman, but it was a matter of fire. We were not the same color flame. And by that I mean I was white and she was blue. I was constantly aflame, the hottest and brightest, as if always about to

reach supernova. Max was blue, hotter than red or orange; she was the bottom portion of the flame, which lay at the base of the wick of a candle and burns defiantly in its cool, collected and completely rational way. While the top of the flame danced wildly and out of control, the blue base always stayed still, calm. It mocked you with its heat, so hot, yet so composed, so deep in its blue as if the deepest part of the ocean. I did not know how she remained so level headed. In fact I had never once seen her come apart, which I wasn't accustomed to. Every woman I have known both romantically and platonically, which inevitably became sexually, had visible seams that you could give the slightest tug and watch them unravel like a cat's yarn ball. No, Max defied me. It was always a battle of wits with her. If I'd say one thing, she'd say another, if I said the grass was green, she'd say it was hunter green, if I said the sky was blue, she would say it was baby blue, if I said the day was lovely, she'd ask why it was lovely, and I could never think of a reason. I loved being alive. That's why the day was beautiful, because all the days were beautiful, even the depressed ones. I had no responsibility, to work, to a woman, to an art. I was undecided on almost every front and it was completely freeing. The subject of painting and writing had come up from time to time, but they both seemed too demanding. I'd rather ride out this wave as long as I could, see where life took me. Maybe I'd learn a trade, provide a service, I thought, but that seemed too simple minded. I didn't want to sacrifice intellectual superiority, but I didn't want any responsibility, and this drove Max nuts. Max was a painter and she lived it, she wasn't just a painter by chance or by choice, she was a painter in her bones, in her very capillaries, in her spleen, in her breasts, in her fingers, in her toes, in her pubic hairs. She practically drank the paints, and I honestly believe she would have done so if she was ever twisted enough to think of such a thing. As I said, Max was filthy, but in a very straight forward way. She liked to fuck and she was good at it, gyrating and humping, baring down hard like my prick was a children's joystick, running the poor man ragged, sometimes all night, until the muscles in my bottom felt like stretched jerky hanging on the rack stiffening, but she'd never even consider the possibilities of perversion. Sex was foul enough, sinful even, what else could there possibly be? Once while we were in the shower together I began to urinate on her backside, thinking it was the safest place for such a perversion...well, she about castrated me. I was the vilest, scum-soaked, flea-bitten monster she had ever encountered. I had never seen a woman so angry, but all the while she remained rather calm, dictating to me how I must sleep on the sofa, rather than shouting, her face completely pinched and twisted, but mellow voiced. That's what I mean about her blue flame. She was on fire that night, but every word that came from her mouth sounded cold blooded. I practically begged for the slightest twitch in her voice, to let me know that her flame could become white and that somewhere in the future we could sync our rage with the world and storm the castle together, bursting outright with fire, and be completely intoxicated by passion.

I, myself, was going through an awakening. Sexually, that is. I wanted to try it all, do and

see, and feel everything. Despicable only meant exciting, alive. I had decided in my heart sometime before that Max was not the woman to experience this awakening. I needed a practiced woman, or a girl willing to try anything at least once. I believe that's partly why my arm absentmindedly aimed toward Europe when throwing the fateful dart. I had heard stories about its liberation, about the mysterious things that happened there, the orgies, the parades, the brothels, entire streets flooded with beautiful women that had done everything and more, inventing new things as they went along, women that could suck your wildest fantasy from you like a soothsayer and then play it back to you in fullest realization. Europe was where the sexual revolution was happening, the waves of the Atlantic Ocean sprayed me in the face with the mist of their rebellion, their pure defiance of what society deemed acceptable, and I thought perhaps it was the place to find myself. In finding myself sexually, perhaps I could find myself in other ways, as an artist, or not as an artist, whatever lay in store for me, just like waking up from a coma, memory blank, living another life, a second chance. The more I thought about it, the more excited I became. Soon now! Very soon! I would be tangled in the wild limbs of countless women, brainlessly fucking, slithering like a pile of snakes, evolving into a superior sexual being, fracturing the rudimentary definition of self, and writing a new one, an improved one, a true one.

3

Now was as good a time as any to break it off with Max. I walked to her place with a confidence, because I knew that she would make it easy on me. I would tell her flat out that I did not want her anymore and she would accept it. She would take it from me like a rotten gift that you couldn't return in fear of hurting the other person's feelings. She'd harbor resentment towards me, sure, but she wouldn't show me any of that when I told her it was the end. For that I was relieved. I hated breaking it off with people, no matter how you did it, no matter how much the other person felt the same way, it was always a drag. Hearts, buried deep within the chest somehow had a way of channeling themselves to the face, and I'd watch them break in their eyes. I could hate the woman, I could wish her ill health, I could wish her a dose of the clap, but I'd never want to see her face when I told her time was up, that we were no longer we, that I was now I again and she was she, that I was cashing in my chips and pulling out of this strange, cycloptic hybrid that we had become. That's my main gripe with relationships. People transformed themselves into these hideous variations for each other and in doing so they morph together to create a lumbering, dependent, emotionally stunted beast with an abnormal heart rhythm, that sounds like the irregular beats of an Indian drum. Leaches people were, always looking for shelter from the constant rain, looking to take refuge in other people. It was sickening

to watch, especially watching yourself do it, like feeding yourself feet first into a wood chipper. I wanted to be a man and have them be a woman and together we could be male and female, a duo, sexually fiendish juggernauts working together, rather than sacrificing the last shred of individuality you have left from losing most of it through families, through schools and through churches. By the time you reached adulthood you were barely a human being. You had been stripped of yourself before you knew who you were, sacrificed for the good of tradition, and filed away under subservient.

I decided to stop and buy Max some flowers. She would suspect something was up immediately. I never bought flowers unless I was breaking bad news. I rang the bell and she came to the door looking stunningly stoic, as usual. I had planned on making it quick and easy, in and out, but her spell came over me as soon as the door opened. She was bewildering to look at. Beautiful didn't seem to be the right word. She wasn't beautiful, she was too simple for that, her looks seemed as though someone had thrown her features at her face willy-nilly from a bag and they landed perfectly by mistake. Her eyes were so evenly spaced that it made you question otherwise. There were no obvious flaws, in other words, and it made you look for them even harder. Any trace of my dishevelment had vanished I'm sure, for her grace made me straighten up as well. My frantic hairline was hidden beneath a white straw skimmer, which I wore winter through spring.

"Homer, come in." she said, while falling away from the door the way a fallen angle would the pearly gates. I entered without saying a word. The tension was building already. I placed the flowers on the kitchen table. Max returned to her stool in front of her easel. She was painting a wonderful nude, although the woman depicted shared the same stagnant eyes that Max herself wore. Seeing her sitting there, back towards me, back towards the entire world, I couldn't remember what I saw in Max to being with. I remember being overtaken by that same spell I had just experienced moments before at the door, and feeling an insatiable desire to take her and consummate the relationship as soon as possible. Once I saw her there was no way she wouldn't be mine in some way, shape or form. Even if it was only a kiss, it had to be something. I remember pushing her hard into a phone booth and forcing my lips on her. We struggled for a minute, trying to find each other's rhythm. Finally, our lips found their place and we locked into a powerful, lustful kiss. Our tongues like two jellyfish in the stomach of a blue whale, zapping each other with little flicks and then twisting around each other. I broke away and we were in love. I didn't question it then, of course. No one in love ever questions anything, and as time went by we learned more about each other, chipping away at each other's icy exterior, until the bare self shine through, and what I saw now, I did not like. She was cold, she was bewitching, she was prude, she was dead. It may as well been a skeleton painting that nude, because nothing from her could be alive anymore. She had sunk down into a furrow of life and that was that. There was no rope long enough, or ladder tall enough to save her now. She was an unfortunate

casualty of life. I then became my subhuman self; I emptied as if my blood ran from me and onto the floor.

“Max...” I said, “It’s over. I’m going to Italy and I’m going without you.” There was a moment of silence and then Max slowly turned around to face me. What happened next couldn’t have been predicted by Nostradamus himself. She began to cry. I had never seen her cry before and it was ugly watching it now. Her face puckered up, her eyes became like black olives flooded with bitter vermouth. Her mouth hung agape like a gorilla’s and she began making the sounds of being stabbed with a dagger. I was stunned to witness such unabashed emotion from her, and despite my discomfort, my fluids were restored and I felt for the poor woman. As it turned out she was alone. I hadn’t ever really noticed. I was her anchor, as she put it, and without me she would just dry up and die like an old leaf. She even resorted to throwing herself on the floor and clinging to my pant leg, begging me to reconsider, looking up at me with that disfigured face, so bizarre looking. To be honest I was overwhelmed by her emotion. So much of it at once after so long without any got to me and I sunk down to the floor and embraced her. I finally got her to catch her breath and stop blubbering. She lay in my arms like wet newspaper, her tears the running ink.

“Take me to bed, Homer. Won’t you take me to bed?” she asked pathetically.

“It won’t change anything.” I said, immediately thinking it was too harsh. She sobbed again, sucked some phlegm up into her nostril.

“Okay, but I must leave afterward.” I said.

We got to the bedroom and undressed. So far it was mechanical; we were performing our duties as two people about to carry out the physical act of love and nothing more. We got under the covers and she inched toward me, shy, like it was her first time. I’ll admit the strangeness of the situation aroused me. I took her hard, harder than I ever would normally. I knew it was my duty to liberate her imprisoned soul. This was my chance to break the leash and release all her sexual frustrations in one fatal swoop. I had to make it tender and coarse all at once. She had to live, die and live again. As I entered her she moaned softly. It was a belly moan, one that came from way down within, maybe all the way from the anus. She was becoming lost. I could see her go. Then, without warning, I was no longer inside her, but I *was* her. My body was rolling so in tune with hers it was as if we were one body, one soul, fiercely thrashing as hard as I could while taking precaution not to cause pain. It had to be one-hundred percent pleasure or she may never recover. I held her sexual future in my hands, and part of me knew this was our last fuck and I wanted to get out of it all I could. She was fragile and strong. I was afraid of baring all my weight down on her in fear of her smashing into one million pieces, yet it was like we were reenacting a car collision. She was becoming vocal, shrieking loudly, almost operatic. Now we were dancing, gliding across a dance floor, an orchestra performing a rendition of Debussy, working toward rhapsody. She was almost there, I could feel her clamp down on me, tightening up, squeezing me

until finally, in one big heave, releasing beyond all measure of human bliss. We exploded together, my cock a stick of dynamite, her body a manmade canyon...

4

I left Max feeling renewed, refreshed, revitalized. I was walking lighter, with a bit of a skip in my step. The sorrow and pity I felt for her quickly vanished the moment I stepped into the hall. Things had turned out better than I would have thought. After the fuck she took the news of my leaving almost cheerfully. There wasn't much a good fuck couldn't do. We put ourselves together afterward, and I could hear Max softly humming, buzzing around the room like a little bee, putting her hair up in pins. I washed my privates in her bathroom sink while she ran a warm bath. Not paying attention, she filled the tub too high and the water ran over the porcelain sides like a scuzzy waterfall. She giggled, almost drunk on silliness. Our roll had really loosened her up. I think it was the first time she felt the power of sex, what a healing factor it had. She seemed to be filled with something even I wasn't familiar with. As I watched her I thought perhaps it was a joy only a person so shackled could experience, that to feel it you must first do without it. She slipped around in the tub, wiggling her ass, splashing more water onto the floor, moaning and cooing, inebriated with pleasure. I couldn't help but feel a sense of pride, like I had been her capture and her liberator, that because of my perfect touch she would never be the same, and with some luck she would now go off and experience the underworld with open, wide arms, running toward the uncertainty, rather than cowering away from it. Watching her in the tub, flailing her arms like a defective wind-up toy, I felt like a puppeteer who had noticed that one of his puppets could move without his assistance and despite his financial dependence on the puppet, cut the strings and parted the curtain, freeing it.

Max was smiling, smiling so lovely that it filled me with happiness. Smiles can be just as, if not more, infectious as yawns, so I soon found myself smiling and then laughing. Max and I were laughing together without knowing why. The laughter cleaned out my system, got the left over residue from all my madness earlier in the evening and cleansed my soul. Cool tears gathered at my crow's feet as I laughed, even having to clasp my hand on my stomach to try and stop myself, but it was no use. We were hysterical, but neither of us could say as to why. Finally our laughter fizzled out, only seconded by a singular chuckle here and there, then a moment of silence. I didn't want to lose the positive atmosphere and give her time to remember the grim next chapter of our visit. It was time for me to go. I wanted to tell Max all I thought of her, how truly impressed I was with her, but I knew it would make it hard to get out of there. I didn't want to make her cry again, because then I'd have to plop in the tub with her and have another go. No, she was too content, it was now or never. I stood up and she knew what it meant. She looked up at me very sweetly. She was radiant. She got out of the tub, wrapped her sudsy body with a little kimono and saw me to the door. I gave her a kiss goodbye. She accepted it graciously, breathing

in deeply as my lips touched hers, and then I turned away.

Outside in front of Max's place I had the option of going left, toward home, or right, toward Phin's place. Phin, short for Phineas, was a dear friend of mine. We had hit it off because of our names, both allusions to Greek mythology. I had been named Homer because it took ten years for my mother to become pregnant with me. My father had been labeled infertile and my mother barren, until one very special evening when my father's jism mustered up some extra courage and sprang into my mother's womb like a family of jackrabbits. Only one out of a million made it to the champion Easter egg and nine months later I came screaming into the world unaware of how cruel it was. Phin became Phineas out of his parent's idea of a cruel joke, but he rather liked the title now, and it suited him. When you looked at him you couldn't imagine he'd be called anything else. It would be good to see him and I should inform him of my plans of Italy and my split with Max. I wasn't sure which he'd be shocked by, if any, for he was the one I confided my secret desires of escape and my problems with Max. I had chewed his ears up thousands of times and he came back for more, the sign of a true friend. I turned right, like I said, almost skipping, whistling and rolling a nickel between my fingers, something I picked up and was always amused by. My head was clear for the first time that night, but I quickly filled it back up with thoughts of love. Where had my love for Max gone? I didn't remember a definitive moment when I fell out of love with her. I don't think there are moments like that. Falling in love is a moment, one particular time when the planets align and the heavens open and the sun comes out from behind a cloud, shining its rays down on the lovebirds in question, but falling out of love was a slow, gradual process, made up of thousands of insignificant moments that didn't mean much when they first happened. Now being able to look back on the relationship from a distance, a short distance, be that as it may, I was able to see glimpses of her capacity for kindness, but I mostly saw all the horrible things we had done to each other, mostly passively, like putting a clump of dirt from the flower pot in her coffee and then gleefully watching her drink it down. I wanted to make sense of our relationship in my head, but I knew it was impossible. A good analogy for Max and I's life together was a man finding a wounded sparrow in a park. The man takes the sparrow home and tends to its injuries, mending its broken wing and then teaching it fly again. I was almost with Max as long as I was out of pity, in other words. I had found her, she was broken, and I pieced her back together, only I did a cockamamie job. That's the bare-bones, god-awful truth of it. It was like the Florence Nightingale effect, I fell in love with the project, with the challenge of the woman, but not the woman herself. I knew all the reasons she was bad for me long before I broke it off, but I stayed with it because it was easier to self-destruct than to demolish someone else. Love was funny that way, once the romance was over, a new love sprang up, one made solely of compassion and pity, for they weren't evil human beings, they were good, fine and often times decent people, but the wick had burned through and there was nothing you could do about it. You just had to move on, because while you tend to the

wounds of others, your own heart begins to die, it grows fingers reaching out to someone else, someone new, or perhaps someone old. The fingernails then grow long and witchlike, and they rest upon your weakening heart pruned with regret. In some cases love was doomed from the beginning. People protected their love so much that they suffocated it, kept it from growing, blossoming into something wholly greater, reaching beyond the simple confines of love and experiencing a splendor indefinable, as though they were carrying an egg in both palms, holding it so carefully, so securely that they ended up crushing it.

I decided to hail a taxi for my feet began to hurt and Phin's place wasn't for another sixteen blocks. During the ride I fell asleep and it was as if I had become unstuck in time. Before I dozed off my timepiece read 8:15 pm. What happened next didn't seem like a dream, but like I had been sucked through a wormhole, as though a noose had been cast around my ankle and was now dragging me through space. I was afraid to breathe, I couldn't breathe. The earth began to look like a small blue marble in the corner of a dusty coat closet. Where was this noose taking me? Who or what was pulling the other end? What purpose did I have all the way out in the far reaches of space? And I hated to ask it, because there was nothing more despicable, nothing more lousy and pathetic, but I thought to myself...*why me?* Had God finally had enough of my indifference and was arranging a meeting? Did some higher intelligence catch wind of my escape to Italy and know something I did not, as if by going I could alter the course of reality? I wasn't sure of anything, except that I was a pawn in a much bigger game. I remember thinking that the earth looked so pleasant from that height. I couldn't make out any of the screaming, any of the crying, any explosion from an artillery man's grenade was microscopic, any words spoken in hatred were inaudible. Mother Earth was just hanging on what appeared to be a string, like a child's science project. It hung in the bleak void, completely friendless, alone and happy. I wondered why everyone that lived within Her couldn't grasp that same philosophy. Everyone was alone and miserable, not understanding that being alone was one of the few treasures of existence, to have the time to fully understand one's self, to embrace it and explore it, for you cannot know anyone, until you truly know yourself...

I awoke from the taxi driver angrily shouting at me to get out. I gave him a few dollars and rolled out of the taxi, somehow making it to my feet. My head was floating like a stray feather. I looked at my timepiece. It read 8:20. Couldn't be, I thought. I had been gone for hours at least, maybe days, maybe centuries. How could it be that only five minutes had passed? I then thought perhaps I had passed through a time warp, thus breaking away from the continuous timeline which I identified as reality, and strayed off onto an alternate time tangent where minutes for earth were possibly multiple millennia for wherever I had been moments ago. That would explain everything. The experience I had in the time warp, which I was now calling it, had changed me, how certain stressful scenarios could change people forever, leaving an interior thumb print on their soul. I had seen the universe as most have seen a thumbtack; I had seen the

entire canvas of an extraordinary painting when others had only seen a fraction. How could I continue living my life the way I have lived it before? Wasn't there some sort of responsibility that came with such knowledge? But then I became frightened. I took a seat on the stairway of a brownstone and began thinking of all the repercussions of such an experience. If word got out that I had been chosen for this *mission* of sorts, people would expect answers from me, answers to questions I had no idea about, and when I couldn't answer them they would call me a fraud, a phony, and I would be cast down with all the other hoax fortune tellers and their cheap parlor tricks. Religious groups would proclaim me a false idol; scientists would call me a mockery. The truth was I did not know what had happened to me, I hadn't the slightest clue. One minute I was riding along to Phin's place and then next thing I knew I was passing through the great black nightmare, spinning wildly though zero-gravity, somersaulting through the great unknown, going further than any man had ever hoped or dreamed. Had this to do with my realization that I had to be free? Had I freed my spirit to roam lawlessly among the galaxy, literally bound by nothing? I didn't remember returning to earth. Had I ever left? Had just my spirit left, leaving only a useless, empty shell of a body behind in that taxi? Had my spirit returned? Was I still a useless, empty shell of body without a spirit? All these questions ran through my mind like rapids of water, crashing into every thought before their completion and replacing them with an even more absurd thought. On the stairway of that brownstone I found myself once more asking the terrible question...*why me?*

5

Phin didn't answer the door at first. I could hear the music coming through the walls and then the scratch of the needle against the vinyl when he tried to pretend he wasn't home.

"Phin! It's Homer! Open the goddamn door!" I shouted.

I then heard a grumble and footsteps walking toward me, then the door opened and there stood Phin, looking handsome as always, but rather rundown.

"Jesus. What's happened to you?" I asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing." he retorted.

That's right! I hadn't even thought about that. What does a man look like when he is dragged through the universe? I brushed Phin aside, rushed into his bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror. To my surprise I looked well. I looked like a man who had just gotten his jollies off and then dozed off in the back of a taxi. I looked deep into my eyes, widening them artificially with my fingers, stretching my face every which way. I took off my white straw skimmer and looked at my scalp, not a hair out of place. I began to relax. Maybe it all had been a dream. I walked out into the small living space of Phin's apartment and took a seat in an armchair.

"What had you noticed about me?" I asked.

"What do you mean?" he said.

“I mean, what you said about how I looked. How did I look?”

“Like something that had scared the shit out of you.” he said.

Indeed. Phin had a superb way of sizing up a situation perfectly without sugar coating any of the details. That was part of the reason I liked him. To the untrained eye Phin would appear uncouth, uncultured, even unsophisticated, but this wasn't the truth. Phin chose purposely to solemnly exercise his sophistication, for he thought it a trite attempt at assimilating into the humdrum assembly line of the most desired lot in life, the *respected*. In Phin's view the majority of the respected members of society were the people most undeserving of that title, for most of them lied, cheated and stole to become so respected. It was an immaculately weaved web of bullshit that Phin gracefully bowed out of. The terrible irony of it is that by not participating at all, he would have no effect on them. The respected would continue lying, cheating and stealing their way into the world, fixing it with a giant, diabolical lever that they could pull anytime they liked, flushing away every last moral until the world was a barren wasteland full of crooked politicians, rapists, murders and junkies using it as their opium den.

I didn't all together disagree with Phin, but I didn't let it get to me as much as he let it get to him. The knowledge of how miserable things really were soured him. I had learned to examine the joys of life like small specks of dirt under your fingernail, enjoying the dusty smells and the pungent, earthy tastes. He also didn't believe in the possibilities of the universe opening up and selecting one man to enlighten, and he told me so almost violently when I explained to him my experience in the taxi on my way to his place.

“You're out of your goddamn mind.” he said, “You've really lost it this time.”

Perhaps I had. Losing my mind wasn't completely out of the question. Listening to myself retell the story, it did seem a bit farfetched. Perhaps I had let my brain soften and simmer too long. Maybe resisting responsibility as long as I had warped my psyche and made it accessible to realistic hallucinations. Maybe I had created a detailed construct in my mind, though totally real to me, was actually a defense mechanism for dealing with a childhood trauma of some sort, and I was actually a vegetable in some hospital somewhere. That was all totally possible, but then something calmed me and it came over me like a smooth drink of wine coats the throat, I had just slept with Max, I had connected with another human being through intercourse, and there is no way you can fake that connection. That's what would chain me to reality, my ability to fuck, yes, that was my reminder that I was alive and this life was mine to champion. It often took something as primal as fucking to remind you that you are alive; sometimes people can forget when they go sexless or joyless. It is actually easy to forget, easy to become confused and misdirected. Really, it is a curse of the overactive mind. I doubt most mechanics have the burden of pondering if they are truly living or dead. No, in many ways they are the most alive, for they do not question, but then again they are also dead in many ways for the same reason. The one who questions reality is in for the long, dangerous journey with no certain outcome. Once the

first question is asked, getting lost becomes easier, even likely. You can only ask an answerless question so many times before you come unstuck permanently. There is a certain ignorance you must embrace if you are to make it through. There is a point when logic will fail, when you must close your eyes and fall back into the unknown. Faith is a poor attempt at explaining the unexplainable. Rather, you must not seek an answer at all, but be content with not knowing.

One of the glues that kept Phin and I so closely bound was our mutual love for French female singers. We both had a soft spot for them, as if they held every ounce of romance either of us had ever known in their beautiful, velvety voices. Their voices seemed to speak to us all the truths of the world, although we didn't understand a word they were saying, but that didn't seem to matter. Their voices transcended normal language and entered us on a subconscious level, like they were singing directly to our hearts, and the language of the heart was universal. Two young, uncultured men as we were sat in a small apartment room in total silence letting out soft, fat tears. Two robust, animalistic men! Crying! It seemed hilarious, but we could not help it, somehow the music tapped into all the emotion we hid from our friends, our family, our judges, our enemies and ourselves, and we wept there together. When the record would conclude one of us would simply begin it again. This would go on for hours, until the late evening. The moon would shine down through the window and reflect off the record, and we'd let it see itself, sharing in the moment of pure bliss. Sometimes the moon appeared to come down to the window and gently rock to the music. Our tears became a secret between the three of us; Phin, me and the moon.

After the moon had climbed back up into the sky I figured it was time to break the news to Phin of my leaving Max and this country of ours. We had begun drinking red wine and the news could have broken in one of two ways, either Phin would warmly approve, opening up his rough exterior and letting out the true, warm, loving Phin, or he would be an asshole about it and clash around the room telling me what a demented lunatic I was. I told him about Max and he shrugged, I believe almost relieved that he wouldn't have to hear about her anymore, but also because the poison she fed to me could finally run its course in my blood system and be banned from me forever. I told him of the events which had transpired at her apartment earlier in the evening. How I had risen from mere mortal and become a sexual god, spreading my wings and showing Max, in a sense of divinity, that I was *her* god, and now that I had touched her she must go off and do my work, spread the word of sexual awakening, do on to others as I had done to her. I described the events as if they were a murder scene and I was a detective revealing a brilliant killer's master stroke. I recounted everything with such interesting detail and colorful adjectives it was as if I were writing a story about it, as if I were a writer and it were my masterpiece. The words flowed from me as if I had been uncorked and they sprang out of me like the first eruption of a champagne bottle, playfully, bubbling at my lips. I was always talented when it came to wordplay; I was always the great orator of my friends, standing up on the booth

at the pub and toasting the rain for falling, the sun for shining and the alcohol for spilling into our bellies. I loved to captivate an audience and I could talk about almost any subject, though I didn't like to spout off about things unknown to me. I hated it when some drunk felt the need to unravel the secrets of the universe at our little bar, shouting at the top of his lungs, slurring his words, making a complete fool of himself. There was nothing more repulsive than that. But now, I was regurgitating pure velvet drapery, I was unraveling a lush red carpet, I was sticking out my pink muscle a mile and half and wielding it like a masterfully crafted weapon. Phin hung onto my words, listening to them with a glaze over his eyes, which could have been from my story or the wine, I'm not sure, but there he was, a fellow human, a companion whose ears perked up at the exciting parts of my life, and whose eyes moistened at the sad ones, whose mouth would crackle and sputter at the ridiculous parts and whose brain would scramble at the inexplicable luck or doom that I often times found myself in.

Lucky and unlucky, the angel and devil on your shoulders, the only two laws of human existence. Where some people awarded fate for their good fortune, I honored luck. My problem with fate boiled down to a question of logic and illogic, as most things did for me. Despite it being unlikely that there was a way to things, a map, which plotted out all your points, a pathway that when followed would turn out the exact same if you had to walk it again, the thing that bothered me most about fate is that you had to fear it, respect it, treat it as if it was a hummingbird always over your shoulder, watching you, being sure not to defy it. People thanked their fate, they look up to it as their guardian angel...but luck, that was just pure luck, it didn't need thanks, it didn't need reminded that it was powerful, it was just the fall of the dice, how the cards panned out, how the building toppled. There was no grand mystery to it, you just got lucky, or unlucky, it was your turn or it wasn't. People tended to make too much of their coincidences, they tended to blow them up into things of holy intervention as if God had taken time out of his very busy schedule to make sure you caught that bus, or you made that sale. They especially took it personally when something bad happened to them. God forbid they were unlucky, where was God then? Why had he left you in the dust? But they always settled on the comforting fact that it was all a part of His plan. They stubbed their toe, they got cancer, it wasn't bad luck, it was God's way of telling them something. I suppose I was just always under the impression that if there was a God, he wouldn't waste his time playing Russian roulette with his creatures. He wouldn't pick some to torture and some to pamper, and if he did, why would the pampered want to continue worshiping a God that also tortured?

Telling Phin about Italy didn't go as smoothly as telling him about Max. He didn't exactly say why he didn't like the idea of me going, but I think deep down the truth was he didn't want me to go and leave him all alone to be filled up with hatred for humanity. I knew that was the truth and he knew that I knew, but he'd never say. Instead he tried to rationalize all my urges to leave, all of which I knew were completely irrational.

“They’re just people over there, Homer. Just like here. They’re not going to be anymore loving or good or enlightened. Look out that window!” he pointed his thick finger toward the window, “That’s where you belong. Not Italy.”

“It won’t just be Italy.” I said. “I plan on seeing all of Europe. Maybe Asia too.”

“Asia now!” he almost shouted. Then there was a pause, he exhaled and walked to the window, slouching his shoulders, placing his hands on the windowpane. After an uncomfortable moment of silence he finally said, “What about me?”

“What about you?” I asked.

“What am I going to do?”

“Why don’t you come along?”

“You know I can’t do that, Homer.”

“Why not? It would do you some good to get out, see the world, experience a few things.”

“I just can’t leave this place. I’ve been here too long.”

“Nonsense.” I said, waving my hand as if to dispel any notions of legitimacy in his argument.

“It isn’t as easy for everyone as it is for you! Not everyone can pick up and leave everything they’ve ever known.”

I sensed a drunken rant coming on...

“You’ve got a gift, Homer! You are able to detach yourself, you are able to hang your ghosts in a closet and turn your back on them. That’s a gift, Homer and you don’t see it. Every night people are awoken from nightmares about their ghosts, and yet you never seem to have any. You simply don’t concern yourself with them, or you have them but you choose to ignore them and you do it better than anyone I have ever seen. Tonight you broke the heart of a woman and you don’t even seem to care. You come in here hollering about space travel and your responsibly to the human race, how about the responsibly to just the people you know personally? How about the responsibly to yourself? I’ve sat back and watched you squander and welsh every talent you’ve been blessed with. You haven’t done a goddamn thing, you’ve read a few books, filled your mind with the words of dead men! How about your words? You could write circles around those crackpots. I know that you could be big, bigger than anyone the likes of me. That’s no secret. There is something beautiful inside of you, your mind works differently than everyone else’s, you are able to think of things no one else would think of and see things no one else would see, and yet you refuse these gifts. You let them die like a wilted sunflower and it makes me feel like puking. I have never seen such open defiance to beauty! There is truth out there to be told and if there was someone out there that could tell it, it would be you, but you’re too chicken shit for that. You rather float along, day after day and wait for something to happen to you, but things don’t happen to you, Homer. You must make them happen. You must go out

and seek the truth. I believe in you. I always have. Some people win in this life and some people lose, I don't know why but you have naturally been put on the winning team, so why don't you get into the game?"

Phin's words cut through me like a blade through wet mortar. I had sat through many a drunken tirade, but never one so poignant and overflowing with pent up thought, that obviously had been boiling for some time. At first arrogance rushed through me. I thought why were Phin and Graham telling me to use my full potential so invasively, why were they pleading with me emotionally like two heartbroken girls? Phin was almost filling up with tears, all hot and out of breath from his regurgitation. He said he felt like puking and he had, all over me with truths perhaps I wasn't ready to hear. These were realizations I was working toward gradually, but Phin had had enough, he put them right out on the table and stuck my face in it, forcing me to look at them, hear them, smell them, taste them and feel them. I delved into my fears with every sense, and once the idea that they were simply jealous of me, that they were taking out their frustrations and envies for my lifestyle had gone, and I realized that they saw something in me truthfully that I did not see I began to feel a great emotion of gratitude toward them, Phin especially. His word was paramount, and like I said they had seared right through me, leaving me in ribbons on the floor.

Phin's speech had only reaffirmed my desire to go to Italy. My reasons he'd never understand, so I didn't bother trying to explain them to him. I would go and I would find the awakening I was looking for, but now I was looking for something else as well, I was looking for a reason to evoke my abilities. I didn't know what it would be yet, but I was destined to find it and I would not stop until I had, until I was working toward something, creating or destroying, but on my terms, shaping my small corner of the world, wherever in the world it was. For some backwards reason I had been suppressing a part of myself, I had been ridiculing others for their lack of life when I myself had never made a true choice, the most important dynamic of living. Choice is what separated us from the apes. Without choice a man cannot be a man, and choice without man is arbitrary. It was a partnership forged; one could not live without the other. The only thing I wasn't sure of was my own strength, which is something oxymoronic to my quest. It is easy to write about how heroic I was, how truly impenetrable I felt, but it is hard to realize you are filled with doubt when you know a single doubt can cripple you. Somewhere beneath all the confidence and all the bravado was a frightened little boy holding a match that was about to blow out. I tried to pinpoint my fear, get a handle on it and beat it out of myself, but I couldn't think of one. There was no one thing I was particularly frightened of; it was just a general fear of *something*. I knew that one day I would find myself in the situation that called upon my fear to rise up out of me and say hello, and I'm sure it would be in the worst situation possible, that's how it always seemed to work out. I would live in the shadow of that distant day, like the shadow of a willow tree against the backdrop of a sinister mansion, but in the meantime I would be

excited about my adventure, for the other half of me; the half not drowning in fear *was* truly incendiary. Part of me really did believe that inside of all of us was the ability for greatness, that we were all artists, lovers, architects, champions, sultans, emperors, conquerors, masters of our own worlds and others, that we all came equipped with enough manure to grow a flower of any size and color, that inside of us were the necessary ingredients for beauty, the confidence to defy the odds, the aptitude for altering the world for the better. It only took the courage to find it within ourselves, to ask ourselves the frank questions never dared to be asked, and to answer them honestly, shining like a trillion suns onto an otherwise dark horizon...

5 ½

(1) (...stumbling out of stagnant nightmares...evil hawk canary cry...what is love besides fleeting...death seems to lurk looking for a place to roost...broods like lowly housewives...stifled pigeons on telephone wires...limping jezebels with golden slits licked down the middle...southern lawmen notching their initials into nigger foreheads...women like folded pieces of paper...black tar paving over the tulips of love...wilted sunflowers turning their faces away from the sun in shame...jackrabbits in prone position...all the things that have died...the tops of grass blades...a mother during birth...forgotten perhaps but very much alive through death...standing at threshold...sprang forward...the flags blow in dark wind...deader than Christmas cards...deader than Christ...dust gathers on the family crest...respectable children doing what their father's ask of them...the artists that hang around the parlors looking for snatch...the undertaker working nightshift at the graveyard...secret operatives lingering through city streets looking for a fink...queer lovers wishing for passage home...the matador's corpse red with blood drives the bull mad... death row inmates writing letters to their loved ones...the guilty never ask for repentance it seems...the subconscious broken away...fragmented thoughts soaring through dead space...somewhere these thoughts must meet and copulate...slimy thoughts shouldering through the loins of bleak daydreams...interlocking becoming unanimous thought...people in the same restaurant...the same theater...living where the day and night overlap...torn between today yesterday and tomorrow...piano trios fingers fumbling over the keys hearts racing ears perking up at bends of violin strings...children mutilated at the whim of a psychotic postman...how does the world keep spinning...when is the cataclysmic halt coming... when will the landscape be tattered with fiery cyclones...buildings toppling forming mounds not unlike anthills where the survivors will scurry like vermin...dreams kept as pets...conditioned to bleed...manufactured to be forgotten...when will freedom mean being free...)

6

By the time I left Phin's place the sun was rising. I was still fairly drunk, mostly from Phin's earthquake speech, but also from the wine. I knew I would have nightmares when I fell asleep, whenever that would be, for I always had nightmares when I went to bed drunk on wine. There was a danger to wine. You felt superb while drinking it, as if you could defeat Mars in an arm wrestling match, as if you could leap up into the air and dash all the rain filled clouds, but four to six hours later you felt as if an anvil had replaced your skull and after beating Mars in the arm wrestling match it had met you in the parking lot and crashed its entire evil red self on top of you, flattening you like a flapjack. Deceitful, wine was, and the cheaper the wine the worse the nightmares. I once dreamed that my head was removed from my body, but I retained movement of my limbs and consciousness of my head. I could see this being done to me, but I could not stop it, or join in for that matter. I was completely powerless. That is the true nature of fright in nightmares, the loss of control, the mental capacity to witness a terrible event but being rendered powerless to affect the outcome. That was also the nature of fright in real life as well. Power was the thing to have, yet it was also shameful in a way. Too much power usually meant greed and there was an awful stigma that followed along with that, a stigma no one openly admitted to, despite having it in spades. Anyway, the dream continued on, my head being passed around from body to body, being placed on the neck, twisted on like a corkscrew and then being forced to parade around with this new, foreign body. Some were male bodies, some female, some a third alien gender. It was odd having a woman's body, have those curves, those breasts, that hole. I made sure to feel them up, taking it in as much as I could, trying to learn something I could use when I was finally placed back on my own body, but before I could get down to the areas that counted, off with my head once more and onto another strange vessel. Afterward I couldn't find my own body, it had vanished in the sort of sense only dreams used, practically none at all, and my head was left bodiless, suspended in thin air, reckless and stupid. In the dream I became very sad, not entirely by the dilemma I found myself in, but certain particulars I'd no longer be able to participate in, like simply walking down a pretty street in autumn or slipping my feet into a brand new pair of shoes. Surprisingly, I missed my fingers the most. I would have never thought that the fingers were the part of my body that I would miss, but the thought of never touching something again, of never reaching out and running my fingers over something, caressing the bottom of a woman, letting the tips of my fingers find her crack, awakening all the nerves in my flesh. It made me realize how important my fingers were to me. The soft, satin-like tickle when you rubbed the index finger together with the thumb, how you could use them delicately or roughly, sternly then weakly, making them a good representation of the mind, for if I had to pick any body part that most mirrored the brain it would have to be the fingers, the body part with most dexterity, the most control. The delicate dances they were capable of, over the keys of a typewriter or the body of that woman. How many things wouldn't exist if it weren't for the fingers? Paintings, the command you would need to run a thin bristled paint brush along the

upper lip of the Mona Lisa. Handwritten documents, the precision John Hancock must have exuded when blissfully signing his name on the Declaration of Independence. Not having something makes you realize how much you depended on them, and when I awoke from that dream I vowed never again to take such advantage over my fingers, to cherish them, to not be so careless with them, but I soon fell back into old habits, pulling them out of pockets and thrusting them into the sweaty grip of a stranger's hand, chewing the fingernails, cutting them on envelopes, slamming them into corners of bedside tables. Dreams had a way of staying with you for a whole day. A melancholy dream could depress you, but when bedtime came again, whatever lesson you had learned the night before was gone, replaced with new dreams and new thoughts. We were too lazy and too comfortable to do anything about them. I felt dreams were a way of teaching you certain things about yourself, but we never listened, disregarding them as ridiculous misfires of the subconscious, imaginary worlds that had no correlation with our own...

Now I sat watching the sunrise, feeling in perfect health, not wanting for a thing, except to feel the unruly wind of foreign sea water pass through my hair, to taste the salt in the corner of my mouth. I had been up close to twenty-four hours, if not more, yet I did not feel like going to sleep. I was too jovial, too aware of something great happening that I didn't want to run the chance of missing anything because of sleep. No, I had been up so long now that I was running on pure adrenaline, this could last me up to thirty, maybe even forty hours. Once you pass the threshold of any normal sleep schedule, there is no telling how far you can take it. The after effects usually all come down on you at once, you began to lose motor functions, then sight becomes blurry, then no matter where you were, you surrendered fully, without struggle, collapsing lifelessly, falling into deep, peaceful slumber that could last anywhere from sixteen to thirty-seven hours. I sat trying to think of what I could do; who was awake, and then I remembered Dr. Chin. Dr. Chin was a natural health and herbal remedies doctor, originally from the Orient and who had now migrated to the States. He was Chinese as his name had clearly given away, and he was small, almost half my size. His eyes could pass for closed and he walked with a slight hunch in his back, which he covered with traditional Chinese garments. He arose every morning at 5 am. I knew this because he had told me when we had met through our mutual friend Graham. Graham knew him, in my opinion, for no other reason than to have a Chinese man in his repertoire of people he knew, that way whenever anyone spoke of something having to do with China he could drop Dr. Chin's name and sound educated on the subject. I knew that Dr. Chin's loft was only a few blocks over so I decided to walk it. Once I arrived, I knocked as politely as I could given the circumstances and he answered obligingly, not sure who I was.

"Doctor Chin, it's Homer Miller, a friend of Graham's." I said loudly, for he was almost entirely deaf. He smiled as if he remembered, but I had a sneaking suspicion that he still didn't know who I was, or maybe who even Graham was. This was a minor detail seeing that I was drunk and I barged into the room, bringing all my American lifestyle into his quaint, oriental

apartment. There was a small manmade waterfall that trickled soothingly, three cages in which he kept his crickets, and a small, thin pad that he used for sleeping. He offered me something to drink, using his broken English, but somehow I understood him better now than I ever could before, sober as a priest. I refused the drink. If I ever were to sleep again I had to let the wine settle in my stomach and soon enough I would hit the uncomfortable wooden floors of Dr. Chin's humble home.

I saw that Dr. Chin had a bookshelf. It was large and I was impressed immediately by its size. I walked over to it to examine the books, though I found most of the titles were in Chinese, a language I would never understand. But resting on the bookshelf were what appeared to be pornographic images printed on six by nine cardboard stock papers, covered in a glossy laminate. One of them depicted a woman with one head coming out of her neck, as usual, but another coming out of her loins, both with the same expression, coy, sexual, and knowing. Another card showed a woman entwined with an octopus, her legs and arms falling between four of the octopus's eight tentacles, a few of them making their way inside her. The last card depicted a woman inserting a snake, tail first into her plum, a look of absolute pleasure sprawled all across her face. I had never seen such things in my entire life and they actually startled me at first. I felt that at any moment Dr. Chin was going to come over and slap my hand and curse me for indulging in such filth, but then I remembered where I was and how I had found them and I knew that if these were not commonplace in China, they were at least more acceptable. They weren't hidden within the pages of an obscure book; they were on the mantle, clear as day, waiting to be found, waiting to disassemble my concept of sex. They even carried with them a sense of art and craftsmanship. This wasn't your run of the mill smut, no, this was art, this was a foul beauty, made beautiful solely through truth. Right then it was decided that I would add Asia to my travels. I had toyed with the idea, but now I was certain. I wanted to engage in cultures so obscured from my own, that not even a trace of my old self would be left behind when I had finished. I wanted to dunk myself in the grand scale waterfalls; I wanted to feel and taste yellow flesh, listen to the Chinese girl's giggles as west met east, peacefully, lovingly, passionately for the first time. I wanted to be taught the customs of the Chinks, I wanted to dine on their food, which so often only made itself known to me through reeking smells from trash bins, I wanted to be so far on the other side of the world that getting lost was not only likely, but it was definite. I wanted to stretch out on a raft and careen down the muddy waters of a river in China, blowing kisses to all the girls as I floated by...

Dr. Chin had made tea. He slowly hobbled over to the table where he poured me a cup and the steam escaped the pot's lid like a secret from a lover's mouth. Looking at Dr. Chin I imagined him being three or four-hundred years old. He certainly carried himself in a wise, knowledgeable way, making it easy to believe anything he said, though he wasn't talkative. With so few truths in this world, the ones who crowded you with absurdity, making the truth

indistinguishable where imperative to the deconstruction of what we call intelligent thought. Luckily they were easy to spot. Everyone was talking, all the time, always verbalizing their mundane, half-baked thoughts, filling the room with malarkey, and then there were people like Dr. Chin who cut through the madness of the world with a stiletto and only opened their mouths when there was something of importance to say. I admired people like that, I wasn't one of them, but I strived to be, and I think that's better than being totally oblivious. The tea sobered me up, it was like gasoline. Dr. Chin drank it down with such ease that it embarrassed me and he even grinned at my discomfort. I could feel the hot liquid make its way past my throat, down into my stomach and through my arms and legs. My insides began to tingle, like a blanket of fuzz insulated them, vibrating, as though I ate a handful of spearmint leaf. I inhaled icy mist and exhaled magma. As I was sitting at Dr. Chin's table, convulsing like an idiot, it dawned on me that Dr. Chin had known I was drunk and purposely gave me something to sober me up. He was flat-out chuckling now, snorting a bit.

"You bastard! What did you do to me?"

Dr. Chin composed himself; I could see tears like baby oil filling the yellow cracks in his face.

"Nothing that will hurt you." he said.

"I feel like I've been poisoned!" I shrieked. The feeling inside my body started to take an ugly turn. My stomach was churning inside out. Any trace of inebriation had long vanished. I could have sung you the *Star Spangled Banner* if I weren't writhing in such pain.

"You must be worse off than I thought." Dr. Chin said, looking on me with eyes of puzzlement, which frightened me even more.

"What did you give me, you chink bastard!" I yelled.

Dr. Chin got up from the table, walked into his kitchenette, grabbed a little clay bowl from an undisclosed location and brought it back to the table. The clay bowl also had a clay hammer, which was used to ground up various ingredients into powders for snorting, or in my case for mixing into liquids. Dr. Chin licked his pinky finger and ran it around the rim of the bowl. The powder clung to his finger as he brought it to his mouth and tasted it.

"Burdock, mixed with my own special ingredient." he said with a big grin, holding his saliva ridden pinky in the air. *His own special ingredient*, I thought. That could possibly be anything, and the way he said it got me thinking, what if I had willingly drank to my own death? What if I had smiled and saluted, clanking our cups together, only to be killed here, now in cold blood? What if Dr. Chin held a sort of grudge towards me because of all the horrible things the white people had done? Maybe he looked upon my murder as a greater good for the sake of humanity, maybe he wanted to use me as the example, the first domino in a string of murders that would change the tide and take the power away from the white man, or maybe he had done it because I had disturbed him at such an early hour. These thoughts weren't as developed as they are here; they were more like a train wreck, each car bent and folded like an un-shuffled deck of

cards, and much more savage, crashing around my cranium with razor sharp teeth, sinking themselves into my mind. My heart was pumping, falling out of synch, beating maybe thirty times per second; it was going to give in at any moment. Maybe his secret ingredient was pure adrenaline, that would make a man's heart explode fifty times over, and maybe he had fed me enough to kill a full grown, male elephant. For all I knew he was the sadistic type and only fed me enough to drive my insides wild while keeping my brain functioning, allowing me to experience the dilapidating pain for as long as I could. My life began to flash before my eyes. I saw, clearly, as if through brand new prescription bifocals, like a film reel endlessly projecting, myself as a child, lying among the lilac bushes, feeling the warm grass on my neck. I saw my father and his grotesque smile as he sat at the dinner table. I saw my mother and the moment I realized she wasn't angelic. I saw my brother poking the insides of a cat with a twig. I saw myself as a teenager and how unconscious I was. I saw the first girl I ever kissed, and it was as if I could feel her lips on mine, as if I had never taken them off. I saw the boardwalk and the carnival rides, the Ferris wheel where I had dropped my father's pocket watch into the surf. I saw all the prostitutes that lined the streets of my block and their demurred linens that showed their knees, so provocative. I saw my first encounter with Max and the phone booth in which we made history. I saw Phineas crying on his sofa. I saw the earth and a long, slim piece of string coming from the top of it, like a fuse. I saw myself light a match. And then, just as my film was about to end, about to reach the bloody climax, someone snapped their fingers and brought me out of the trance. My heart slowed and the pain ceased. Dr. Chin smiled at me, sticking his tongue through one of the holes in his missing teeth. He must have seen the relief in my face, for he placed his hand on my shoulder and said, "Good stuff, yes?"

I explained to Dr. Chin that no, it was not good stuff. That in fact I wanted to kill him. He only giggled at this, probably still laughing at how weak I had appeared.

"I call it *The Angel of Death*," he said, "Makes you see whole life."

He went into further detail about how this drug somehow replicated the experience only seen right before death, a detailed collage of images from your life, hence its title. It had done this, though I was too dazed to fully understand it. It had shown me pieces of my life which I had forgotten, but it also had made me realize how uneventful my life had been, which depressed me in a way that made my heart heavy, similar to the way the bad dream weighs you down, painful yet distant, unable to put your finger on it, but knowing that something was amiss. Surprisingly, Dr. Chin's *Angel of Death* had awoken me. I felt like I had just slept thirteen hours. It must have got me so worked up that the sleepiness just evaporated, and as much as I wanted to strangle Dr. Chin I couldn't help but be overwhelmed with joy that I was not dying. Life was still mine! How I wouldn't waste it! I kept thinking that this evening had been a test of my strengths, to see if I was ready for my journey, that if I could get through tonight I could get through anything. I had to come close to death in order to defeat it when the time came. I had to claim the heart of

another and eat it like an artichoke, so my own heart would be unbreakable. I had to turn my back on a best friend, for there were no friends on the road to self discovery. I realized that Dr. Chin was a profit of sorts, that in order to fulfill a prophecy, I must first go through a series of challenges administered by horsemen. They would be tests of the heart, the mind and the flesh. I still wasn't sure of what to make about my experience in the taxi. That seemed to supersede my mere planetary mission, but then again I still wasn't sure if it was a dream. To say the least I was utterly confused, baffled and worn out. Max had completely emptied me of my semen; I was low on life force. I needed to be replenished, and if I was going to make it through the rest of this day, I was going to need more Angel of Death...

7

Dr. Chin gave me some of his Angel of Death in a small plastic bag that I bound with a rubber band and put it in my jacket pocket. He informed me that I would soon become immune to its power, that the experience would be less intense the more I did it, and not to do too much, for it had the potential to be extremely dangerous. I heeded his advice and planned on using it responsibly. I knew I was dealing with absolutely evil stuff, there was no question about that, but I wanted to try more. I attributed the majority of my terror, my near death experience to the fact that I did not know he had given it to me, and I assumed that the bulk of my pain was my own mind sending out shockwaves to the rest of my body to make sure they were still connected. But the real reason I wanted more, the true reason I was willing to brush feathers with the Angel of Death once again was because I wanted to be able to drop in on my life like going to the cinema, watching from above, now laughing at all the tragedies that I thought were to end me at their first happening. It had shown me things about myself that I must have blocked out and it filled me up with a strange nostalgia, the human emotion most abundant with duality. There is nothing more endearing *and* depressing than nostalgia, it was the feeling that caused birthdays to pass solemnly and why Christmases never seemed to live up to the ones you had known as a child, and I was bursting with it, mixed with fond memories and melancholy, joy and disappointment. Hopefully with the adventure awaiting me the plot of my life would thicken. As it stood right now, it was boring as hell. If I had been watching anyone else's life, I would have been bored stiff. I would have tossed tomatoes at the screen and demanded my money back. But beyond everything else I noticed about my life, I realized that I had never done anything important with my time. I relished in the idea of no responsibility, but when seeing it first hand, watching yourself, aware of every minute, every second, it makes you feel like a lout, as if by some impossible miracle, taking this drug and witnessing my past I would be able to reenter my memories and alter them, to maybe disappoint fewer people, to cause more good and perhaps hurt less.

Something was stirring in my pants again. What a relentless organ, I thought. Any other

animal would be fast asleep for hours after what I had been through, but leave it to the animal with conscious thought to be getting erections at random, sending off a signal like a watchtower to any willing, or in some cases unwilling organism. I had realized that sex almost had nothing to do with the sexual organs themselves. They only carried out what the mind had instituted in the first place, like delegating commands from a faceless employer. Standing in front of Dr. Chin's loft, the streets barren and silent, I looked down at my crotch. A small lump was visible through my trousers and I could feel the penis thumping in pain, and yet I took a slight pleasure from the tenderness. That was the mind working its dirty tricks on me. The pain was traveling from the penis, through the body and into the brain, which sent it back out as arousal. My insides worked like a giant infinity symbol, interconnected and sending mixed signals throughout my body continuously, forever. The penis at that point might as well been a numb finger, a rubber hose, I might as well have been sticking in a big toe or rubbing against it with an armpit, it was the mind that coaxed out the orgasm, that brought that lifeless, foul peninsula to its fullest expression. As close as I could figure, it was 7 am, a reasonable hour for normal, functioning people. The erection wasn't in its complete form, but rather just swollen and thick around the base. Any sudden movement or the slightest touch would send it into stratosphere. I tried to think of something despicable or at least something grotesque, but then I heard my stomach gurgle and I suddenly became aware of a feeling of immense hunger. An empty stomach was the quick and painless death of an untimely erection. The ball of energy that gathered at the base of my cock disintegrated and a pale, dry feeling at the back of my throat leading all the way to my spacious stomach began. Like I said, it was 7 am, businesses would be opening up and I could get myself a good meal. Steak and eggs! Protein was what was needed. I would be able to climb mountains after some steak and eggs. I thought about getting my eggs over-easy and using them as dip for wheat toast, but those carbohydrates would weigh me down, make me a handsome buoy to bob up and down in the water. No, I needed to be lean. The idea had come about more than once of giving up the consumption of meat, but it was ultimately decided that it tasted too goddamn good. There was a great guilt about eating it, almost as if I resumed in my Catholic upbringing once the steak came to the table, but obviously the guilt was trumped by the sizzling fat and the blood red middle that looked at me invitingly like a plasma filled eye, begging me to take part in its fleshy goodness, its milk fed tenderness. Of course, steaks were rare in my life. I only dined on them for special occasions, occasions which I deemed special like when news broke that John Dillinger had robbed another bank.

I wasn't alone in my fascination with outlaws. It seemed to be an enchantment that spread across America like a rash. Heroes were mundane, childish even; villains were the heroes for adults. I suppose it was because we identified more with the villains in our own hearts. Most of us were cowardly, secretive, and dishonorable and to see someone being successful with such rotten traits made it seem more likely that we could do the same. This was something that

appeared to be uniquely American, stemming all the way back to our foundations. It's hard to believe that the uncivilized American West lasted as long as it did, gun slingers maiming and killing openly and unpunished, leaving a bloody thumbprint on our anything but prestigious past. It is a surprise we recovered from it at all, to speak honestly. Looking back on that time period now it only seems natural for America to fall inward on itself, to end as quickly as it began, no fuss, just long, soaring landscapes and mountain ranges, forever silenced, meadows full of dead horses, dead and baking in the morning sun. It seemed logical, even right. Now, don't get me wrong, America and Americans in particular are capable of great things, a kindness and intelligence, but there is no doubt that it is made up of warriors, warriors who fought their way in and were going to fight their out, for there was no hope more outlandish, more impossible than peace.

I found a little restaurant that was just opening up. The owner let me wait inside until he finished wiping down the bar and setting up the chairs. I could tell by looking at him that he wasn't a conversationalist, which was alright with me. I didn't feel like talking. I was so frazzled from the night's events that I just wanted to sit in my dark booth and eat in complete silence, only then could I sort out my thoughts.

"Take a seat anywhere you like." said the owner, pointing at an empty seat like I was foolish for not taking the initiative to seat myself. I just smiled at him and took a seat near the window. I would enjoy watching the passerby, people fully unknown to me, living their own lives, each going to a different place. How many of them were on their way to visit a mistress? How many of them had a terrible secret? All of them, I assumed. It was amazing to me how much someone could hide within themselves, when it was so completely impossible to hide your exterior. A body isn't an easy thing to get rid of, but a secret, now that was like a ghost. I would become lost in watching them, somehow stepping out of life and becoming an observer and the restaurant owner couldn't say a thing to me, for I was a paying customer. I could sit there until closing, watching the people pass by, guessing their innermost secret, and I may have just done so. At this point the owner could have physically accosted me and I would have taken it with a dumb grin on my face. I was a rubbery shell of a human, close a door on me and I could slide beneath it, lock me in jail and I could slip through the bars, nothing could bother me, I was glorious, immune to the frailties of common interactions with bullies, which you thought ended in grade school, but continued on for all time. Contrary to popular belief, bullies did not get what they had coming to them, instead they become family men, successful artists, big business heads, politicians, the President of the United States, store managers and restaurant owners... While I was waiting, a woman came into the restaurant, walking through the doors and directly into the kitchen. She must be a waitress, I thought to myself as my stomach was screaming in revolt. I was absolutely famished by now, as though my gut was filled with hollow, empty rocks. I felt like I had crossed a desert, falling face first and open mouthed into a sand dune, ingesting some

it, filling my lungs with golden grains of sand, sucking out every ounce of water and coating my throat in the thick, white saliva that had the adhesiveness of glue. I wanted to eat and drink until my waistline busted, until I had to vomit in order to make more room. I could have devoured a thanksgiving dinner all by myself... in fact that's what I began to crave, juicy turkey, eating legs and breasts with the same fervor I would a woman's, allowing the tryptophan to fill my veins and heavy my eyelids. Sweet potatoes covered in gooey marshmallow topping, cranberry jelly smothered on warm crescent rolls, maybe eating a half dozen of those, and white wine! Bottles and bottles of white wine until my bladder spun out of control, splashing and sputtering. I'd take stuffing in handfuls and devour them, being careful not to lick the flesh from around my bones. Ah, I was salivating, the drool pouring out of my mouth and onto my chin. I must have looked psychopathic by the time the waitress finally emerged from the kitchen. She walked over to the table with a shrillness that was intended to let me know she did not care. What she didn't care about, I'm not sure, but maybe it was about serving me, or her job in general, or everything for that matter. Whatever it was, her swagger told me I was out of her league. I didn't believe in leagues when it came to women, I could have anyone I desired, but not without a fight, and this woman seemed to be prepared to fight me till the bitter, cold end. She had the beauty and prestige of a raven. Her long black hair shined so intensely that I was almost able to see my reflection in her locks. The juxtaposition of her hair to her pale white skin, that seemed to be doused in fresh cow's milk, was the perfect personification of her personality, so starkly black and white. Charming and lovely to her friends, I'm sure, but then evil, cruel, almost transparent to the costumer, whom I'm assuming did nothing but try and get into her panties. I thought about her panties, I thought about them in my mouth as I walked toward her like a monster, arms outstretched, fingers bent, pointing downward like Count Dracula himself, ready to suck her blood, suck every last drop, for it couldn't have made her skin any paler...

The steak sizzling on the grill seemed to be some sort of voodoo doll, for I could feel my kidney sizzling as well, and my eyes turned to eggs, cooking in my skull as they cooked in a frying pan, spitting grease like snake's venom. I thought that by the time they brought the food out to me I would have already eaten the table cloth, the silverware, the candle, the napkin, the table leg, but luckily for them the food arrived and was placed in front me. It was a surreal moment looking down at my food, like a mirage. I was afraid to touch it, for it might disappear. I closed my eyes and timidly poked at the steak with my fork. Real! Dear lord it was real! I plunged into the plate, eating the steak in what now seems like one large bite. The eggs wiggled under the weight of my fork, splitting in two with a fleshy ease, the yellow yolk spilling onto the plate like a knife wound. I lapped it up, throwing politeness to the wind, picking up my plate and licking it clean. I'm not here to be polite! I thought. I was here to stop myself from dying! This was the last act of a desperate man! What are you looking at waitress! Haven't you ever seen an animal eat his prey! Well, let me educate you! This is what Mother Nature looks like! I was a

tornado passing through a graveyard. I had come, I had seen and I had conquered. My stomach overfloweth with tranquility and delight. I sat hunched, slouched in my booth, my eyes at half-mast, like a lazy sunrise. If I were to fall asleep here, they would naturally assume that I had died and call an ambulance. I would wake up in a body bag in a morgue somewhere, a tag on my toe. I was almost completely content with this idea when a thought struck me like an ice pick sticking into my spine, sending lightning bolts to my brain, making me come alive almost comically, but not comically at all- where was my copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*? I had taken it with me to Max's place, and I remembered that I remembered to grab it before our farewell kiss, but now it was gone. A blanket of panic washed over me. The tiny hairs on my body all stood as attentive as guard dogs, radiating fright and dread. I tried to retrace my steps, but my mind wasn't functioning clearly. The Angel of Death had put me in an inescapable fog. Each thought had to squeeze through a rigmarole of obstacles, creating a modicum of difficulty for even the most modest of thoughts. All I knew was I now felt naked without that book. It was more important to me than clothing and all my joy, all my pleasure ceased like a medical flat line, one minute being filled with life and the next becoming still, becoming nothing more than mulch, food for the maggots and earthworms...

I paid my bill and haphazardly ran out of there. Exiting the doors was like being pushed out of solitary confinement, the morning's light blinded me, like walking straight into the arms of a welcoming god. I could actually hear the light and the insides of my eyelids had turned a soft tangerine color. I could slightly make out the red tree branch veins in the lid and the weird translucent interjections of blue that appeared and reappeared under the closed eye. I couldn't help but imagine that the state of panic I was in compared to that of a mother losing a child. I know it sounds silly, seeing that is just a book, one I could buy in any bookstore in the world, but there was an unspoken bond I developed with my books. Once I had read them and ran my fingers along their cover they were mine, and each time I returned to the book and flipped through its pages it was as if we were rehashing an old romance. Saying to me I could just buy a new copy was like saying that you could just have a new child. You would love *that* child, you would even die for *that* child, but it wouldn't replace the first child, it wouldn't feel or be or act the same and as evil as it made you feel, you'd hold that child in some sort of contempt. If I were to lose my copy of Karamazov forever, I don't think I would replace it, I would just remember from it as much as I could until it all was forgotten. There was a romantic notion in there somewhere, a heroic quality, an unrealistic quality, and that much I liked. I enjoyed finding reasons for being romantic, for suspending disbelief for just a moment and becoming unreal. Realism forces itself on you like a drunken lover. It is in your face, breathing its awful breath on you until your surrender your body and your will. There were only a few moments when you could pretend that you were a knight in shining armor and the only elements to your choice were moral and immoral, good and bad, right and wrong. I had come to discover that there was no true

good or true bad, that there was always shades of one another in each. Graham would say, “The only good is in goodbye.” A cynic he was. I wasn’t so far gone, though I noticed that the majority of the time bad overtook good in a vicious way. Personally, I lived on a moral high ground; I tried to stay practical when discussing ethical matters. Friends and I would get into conversation after conversation about if I believed in the killing of a murderer, and conversation after conversation I told them I did not. I believed killing a murderer only brought us down to their level, that we must always remain above them, always conduct ourselves morally. But when they’d ask me if I would kill a man who had murdered my family, a grey emerged from the black and white world in which I was being objective. From inside that bar where these ludicrous questions were being asked, the answer would still be no, but I haven’t the slightest idea of how I would react if I came home to find my family bloodied, cut, slashed, raped and dead. I do not know what kind of beast lives within me, what kind of rage I’m capable of, so I sat safely behind my camouflaged sense of moral superiority, and spoke in ideals, for a rule can be broken, laws amended, but an ideal must never falter. An ideal is our only passage to purity; it was what separates us from mindless beasts. If we lose grasp of our ideals, the rest would be soon to follow...

8

After thinking as far back as I could, I remembered last having my Brothers Karamazov in the back of the taxi where I had been transported through the galaxy. Shit, I thought. Had I taken it with me into space and dropped it somewhere in the cosmos? I’d never find it if that were the case. It would float forever among the stars. More likely was I had left it in the back of the taxi due to my extreme intoxication and brain compression brought on by space travel, and that the taxi driver had found it during his usual morning sweep of lose change, soiled condoms, and classic Russian literary works. More than likely he had thrown it out in the nearest trashcan, but there was chance that he had turned it in at the main hub. That was my only chance. I entered the nearest phone booth and used the directory to find the number for the transport hub. The address was all the way uptown. I had already spent whatever extra money I had on my steak and eggs, so taking a taxi was out the question. I decided to pay a few dollars for a trolley ticket. It would take almost the entire morning to get there, but it would deliver me into the hub itself, for the transportation hub was the nucleus of almost every city-run mode of travel.

I sat leisurely on the back of the crowded trolley car, rocking sometimes violently side to side. I removed my white straw skimmer and wiped the sweat from my brow. The morning heat was hell-like, so stagnant and unrelenting. The hot air was almost tangible for it waved in volatile misery right in front of your face, but then out of the north a cooling gust of wind had descended upon the car, whipping through the windows and the open-ended posterior. What a wonderful time to be alive! My worry for my book’s state of affairs eased for a moment and I

just enjoyed that second of existence. I believed, wholeheartedly, that if you did not stop to smell the roses every now and then, all the flowers of the world would die and your nostrils would seal up forever. There were no second chances. When a day was over, it was over, only to be followed by a new day, and you'd never be able to live that day again. You had twenty-four hours to change the world. It was ridiculous, of course, but it helped you to prioritize, I did not fret over some mundane, insignificant problem that presented itself; I did not give it the time of day, for there was living to be done, joy to be savored. That is a philosophy of mine that has continued to ring true. I've abandoned so many avenues of thought, but that was one of the few that didn't alter with time, circumstance or age. To take life day by day means knowing that death lurks like hungry vultures, keeping an eye on your calendar and to be at peace with that fact. There is a liberty to submitting yourself to death, for there's no point in fighting it. It is a fight you will not win. Living in fear is worse than not living in all, so while you still have air in your lungs, you must grab hold to the mane of life and ride it as far as you can. Fuck and love, that's all you need, open yourself totally to everything, including death, because then you can begin living.

I once dreamt that I awoke in my bed and looked across the room, seeing Death, the Grim Reaper that is, sitting on my toilet. I remember being confused, but even more puzzling was I distinctly remember not being afraid. I just looked at him as if I were looking at anything. Then suddenly, without a jerk or improper gesture; Death raised his head and looked back at me. Again, I was not afraid. In fact a sense of calm came over me and I fell back to sleep. It was as though he had put me to sleep with his absent eyes. If I had to guess what face he was making, I would guess he was smiling. I imagine Death smiled a lot. And when I awoke the next morning I was disturbed to find out that my next-door-neighbor had died during the night. This news sent me into a vortex of terrible, jagged thought. Mortified, cut loose from all coherent deliberation, I was certain that my number would be up soon. Death had visited me to let me know that the time had come, not right this second, but soon, any day now, when I was least expecting it... Why would Death do such a cruel thing, why would he let a man know how much time he had left... boredom? Immortality must become boring, I thought. Was this a practical joke, maybe? Was I a cog in some vast scheme? I got the odd feeling that a cosmic bet had been placed, as though God and the Devil had made a wager on me. In the Catholic faith, in which I was raised, suicide was the first class ticket to Hell (Hell being where the wicked were punished by the fallen Angel Lucifer after he had challenged God for his thrown and the rule of all Heaven). It appeared to me that both helms, Heaven and Hell could get rather lonely after infinite millennia. There was only so much love you can give; only so much hate you can muster, so it made sense that they would find ways to amuse themselves. I imagined that The Devil and God had bet that by having The Angel of Death appear before a man previous to his natural date of demise, the man, now with this morbid knowledge, would instead take his own life rather than live with impending doom. God's money was on the man putting his faith in him, finding solace and accepting his fate; the

Devil bet on the only sure thing in the universe, the man's aptitude for fear. Well, I thought, I would not submit to such a childish game, especially for two beings I did not believe in. I would not cower in fear and watch the clock's hands tick by until my unnatural end. No, I would choose to ignore my experience, I'd cast it down with my most unpleasant nightmares and my most sinful acts. I would neither kill myself, nor would I rest my trust in anyone's arms but my own. Death would have to try harder if he was going to corral me, though I now knew I was a marked man, that my name was now on a watch list. My soul was stained. So be it!

Back on the trolley, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out Dr. Chin's Angel of Death. A sense of irony became known to me, for how strange was it that I was reminded of my run-in with Death while carrying with me the most refined version of Him in my pocket? I began speculating that Dr. Chin's secret ingredient had something to do with the Angel himself, for it was completely in the realm of possibility that Dr. Chin and the Angel of Death were friends, perhaps even one in the same. Perhaps Dr. Chin's secret ingredient was shavings from Death's bones or the ash of a burned feather from his wings... I licked my pinky and dipped it into the bag. The particles clung to my finger as if they were magnetized. I brought my finger to my mouth and licked it clean. The drug itself didn't have a flavor, just a peculiar aftertaste, a mixture between dandelion and what I'd imagine male semen to taste like. I dipped my finger in again and made a small pyramid on my finger. I brought it to my nostril, and as secretly as I could, snorted. The feeling could only be compared to snorting razorblades. My head cocked, my mouth flung open and made an ugly, bodily noise. I drew stares from the other passengers on the trolley, but I didn't seem to notice for I was in a euphoric trance, being reminded of all my wasted years, turning my blood into cotton. I feared that I would transform into some raving lunatic right in front of these people, that I would wear all my shame like a fine suit for them to see. I felt the guilt from every miserable deed I had enacted or help enact, and it poured out of me. I was afraid I would confess something I wouldn't ordinarily confess, that I would shout it at the top of my lungs and when I returned to reality, I would have to sit with them for the rest our ride, all of them knowing my deepest secret. It seemed as though I couldn't escape irony, for I spent my meal watching people, mocking their secrets and now here I was about to reveal mine to an audience that did not want to hear them. It was the psychedelic equivalent to going to school without any clothes. Why did I put myself though this *again*? Was I punishing myself for some subconscious crime I wasn't aware of committing? Was I a glutton for punishment? Did I derive some sort of sick sexual pleasure from pain and public embarrassment? I couldn't know. The same mundane images from my life played again as though on loop. Nothing changed, what's done was done. That petrified me. I thought surely *something* would be different, but no, every lousy detail remained the same. It made me question how I had arrived at this point, how had I become the man I became. Where was this curious nature coming from? What made me want to experience, what altered my course of existence? I had lived a completely normal life, a quiet,

suburban life. My father operated a grain elevator and my mother was a housewife, both of them never dreaming of leaving their small worlds, never wishing to create anything simply for the sake of creation. I believe even my brother and I was solely a means of perpetuating the family name, for they were the kind of people who took pride in such things. I, myself was subdued as a child, even absent you could say. I was content with not being heard, which was a saying plastered around my house as though it were a political slogan. My father would say, "Children are meant to be seen and not heard." I didn't want to be seen *or* heard. I wanted to evaporate, I wanted to sink into my bed and never return. I wanted to disappear like an unexplained blimp on radar. This shyness continued through grade school and then high school, and I wouldn't have been surprised if not a single one of my classmates were to remember my name. What had changed or how was unknown to me, but thankfully it had. Sometimes metamorphosis occurred under one's nose; sometimes it took a lack of trying. In fact, I had discovered that most good things happened when one didn't try for them, but allowed them to happen naturally. Nature, so violent and wise often changed and mutated from something outright revolting into something beautiful, it only needed the time to do so.

When the Angel of Death wore off it was afternoon and I was the only one left on the trolley. Everyone else had dispersed somewhere along the way, I'm sure partially because of my odd behavior. The trolley also was arriving upon the transportation hub. Thank Christ, I thought to myself. My entire stint of consciousness was falling back and forth between nightmare and daydream and it felt good to be accomplishing something, arriving at a destination. I could only imagine these were the small goals a junkie would be proud of accomplishing. I contemplated tossing the rest of Dr. Chin's Angel of Death, but something made me stuff it into my pocket once more. I exited the trolley, setting my feet on solid ground. My head was clear and my eyes wide. There was a vague hope that my book would be waiting for me, but deep down I knew that it wasn't. I approached the taxi station's main office, where an obese woman working dispatched was my only source of help. She looked at if she had been planted there hundreds of years ago like an old tree, and her roots were just too deep to unearth. Moles littered her face, her lips slimly and pinched, her eyes seemed to be skinned grapes.

"Excuse me..." I said.

"What do you want?!" she retorted without looking in my direction.

"I was curious to know if any of your drivers had turned in a book."

"No books came in!"

She was like a character in a story, no humanly qualities whatsoever. She only spoke in short shrieks. Her voice was like dried magma mixed with black sand.

"Are you sure?" I asked again. This aggravated her, I could tell by the semi large breath she took before responding.

"Yes! No books came in!"

She even slightly glanced at me to let me know I was truly becoming a nuisance. Good! Damn her to the lowest level of Hell! I thought perhaps she was a witch, like from children's fairytales, and in all likelihood she was a witch. Hopefully she had been tossed aside, thrown down to work in that vile excuse of a workplace to suffer and slave for all eternity. That is what I wished for her. I even wished one of the taxis to lose control and come crashing into her, finally uprooting her fat, despicable ass... There was a temper that stirred inside of me, as you can probably tell, but never when it wasn't deserved. I tried my keenest to be kind to people, only to be dejected like bubble gum wrappers almost every time. This woman's indifference to my predicament enraged me. I had half a mind to choke her to death if my hands could fit around such a thick neck. I didn't say any more, I accepted the fact that the book now float in limbo, just the hollow chance that someone else would pick it up and experience something even half as spectacular as I had while reading it. I was almost completely at peace about everything, all except that woman, how terrible she was, how miserable, how inhuman. The term *ladylike* must have been so foreign to that wench that it might as well been spoken in an otherworldly tongue. Couldn't she tell I was mourning? My copy of the Brothers Karamazov was lost forever, sent to the place where lost things go. The bitch! The only thing that classified her as a woman was a set of foul tits. I wouldn't fuck her if I was paid a million dollars. I bet her snatch had closed up, now just a boil invested driveway of putrid flesh lay between those Greek pillars she called legs. Herm! That was doing a disservice to Greek pillars! What that *woman* didn't know was I had lost a book, but I had gained a lifetime of love the likes of which she could only imagine, if she was capable of imagining...

9

After seeing ugliness incarnate, I needed to see something beautiful. I needed to be reminded that not all women were emotional tyrants, and I knew of just the woman. Penelope and I had been lovers since I became aware of love making. She was a constant in an otherwise uncertain sexual oblivion. Her touch was the touch most associated with home, for returning to her bed was like returning home after a long journey, to fall between her legs was to reprise my role as a good man. With her I was completely myself, all my madness and pain, all my joy and humor, all my good habits along with my bad ones. She took them with a mother's love, forgiving me anything. We had hurt each other carelessly, foolishly acting without considering the other's feelings, and yet we always found our way back to one another, no matter how much time had intervened. I could not speak to her for years, but when we came together it was as if I had never left, we could pick up right where we had left off, which is a rare quality. It was a very odd relationship, a literary relationship, one that would fare well in a novel. She fed my soul with her

complete way of understanding me, but there was a great tragedy about us as well. We had never worked as a couple. We could not completely give ourselves to one another, mostly because it became a tug-of-war, two hard-headed, stubborn pigs fighting over a piece of mud. A love grew vastly and misshapen within us, and I knew one day it would no longer settle for sitting in the dark, and would rise up swiftly and majestically, taking both of us by the hand and showing us something perhaps we were too afraid to see. There would be a time when the earth opened up and made room for both our souls to entangle and make love, the veins of our hearts reaching out like branches and snarling in an unmanageable cornucopia that would fossilize, becoming organic, becoming so natural that it could pass for oxygen and it would course through our lungs as such. What I marveled at the most was how Penelope fit all of her compassion and all of her understanding into such a small body. She was half the size of any woman, but without any of the strange side effects of a dwarf, as though she was a prototype, built to withstand all the splendor of a statuesque beauty. Her fingers were not portly, but long and delicate. Her torso was not cramped and squashed, but rested atop her like a chiseled sculpture. Her breasts were small, like mosquito bites, but a mouthful, running over my lips like warm beer, the nipples like golden pacifiers for me to nibble and chew. That drove her mad. She would try and keep my head from sliding downward, for once I took her nipples into my mouth the tension became too great and she needed me inside of her. Due to her miniature size it took some working to enter her, her cunt was like a fish's mouth or the just budding head of a tulip, but once within it became the maw of a volcano and I became a giant, filling her to the very limits, planting my own bean stock on her uterus and climbing it into the clouds of ecstasy.

I emerged out of the crumbling city and found myself at Penelope's apartment. I don't remember how long it took me or by what means I had arrived, but I had arrived and that's what mattered. It felt as though I had fallen into a warm hole at one end of the city and had been deposited at the other end. I was no longer asking questions about these odd occurrences, but rather accepting them. There wasn't much else I could do. I knew some of the lapses in my memory had to do with my usage of Dr. Chin's Angel of Death, and that during these spells I reverted to pure instinctual navigation. Lucky for me I knew that city like the back of my hand. I was essentially in a state of chronic sleepwalking like a reanimated corpse, falling in and out of sluggish consciousness, ending up in different locations upon each awakening. This time I had made it to my old love Penelope's and dear lord was I thankful. A familiar face, one of absolutely no judgment, just a warm, smiling face could revitalize a man, it could save him from anything, including himself. So many crimes had been committed; so many murders carried out because of the wrong look given to a man nearing his breaking point, a snide snarl, an innocent glance, a poorly timed grimace could launch a man into blurry hellfire. Now, a face of understanding and love could disarm a man, rendering him useless, willing to be molded, becoming malleable in lover's hands, forming into almost any shape or object because love gave a man something

nothing else could give him: an opportunity to be a dog. Men at their innermost heart were dogs; loyal, protective, loving, savage, vicious, destructive. We looked for reasons to roll over and give women our bellies to scratch, but one false move and we'd rip out your throat. Don't ask me why, millions of years of evolution, I suppose. Women often mistook men for dogs because they weren't loyal; cheating on them with another woman, or maybe ten women, but this was untrue as a whole. There were men that didn't respect the bonds of a relationship, the idea of monogamy, myself being one of them, but men as a sum were not disloyal creatures. I'd bet a thousand dollars that if you gave a man a home, a job and a truly loving woman, that he wouldn't budge from that comfortable life no matter how much twat was thrown at him. This is not to say women were the cause of infidelity, on the contrary, it became abundantly clear to me that it was no one's fault, that some people were incapable of being loyal, it was just a sad truth. Sad truths are plentiful, there is a sad truth on every corner, and I grew tired of discovering them. I longed to find a happy truth, one that would shine some light on the dismal crevices of what I called day-to-day.

The staircase to Penelope's lair, which truly was a lair, a place I wasn't sure how she afforded on her meager salary, was long and almost absurdly tall. I felt as though I was walking through a modern painting, a feeling of light-headedness plaguing me as I tripped over each awkward step, too afraid to look behind me at the endless drop. At one point I felt as though I was walking horizontally, that gravity had once again abandoned me. When I got to her door I had to wipe the sweat from my face with a hanky before knocking. I wanted to look desirable, I wanted her to answer the door and leap into my arms shouting *take me! Take me! Take me!* I knew she wasn't the kind of woman to do so, even though she was very sexual. She enjoyed pacing herself, walking around the room in a sultry way, making me sweat, making my cock perch itself, sitting on its hind legs like a little puppy dog in my trousers, panting and whining, begging for a treat. Her sexiness was chaotic, spastic, there one minute, gone the next, but you always knew when it was there. Sometimes she'd stretch the charade so long that it would become the wee hours of the morning and she'd fall asleep, leaving me to pour cold water on myself. That was fulfilling to her, the ambiance of sex, our brainwaves fishtailing through the air and penetrating each other. As far as I was concerned she was a sexual messiah, the living, breathing manifestation of the idea known as sexuality. When it was there, it intoxicated you, making your hearts into planets that sought the security of each other's atmospheres. And then at times she mutated into a primitive sexual junkie, when the teasing no longer could or would suffice, when she just needed penetration. She had expressed to me that she suffered from uncontrollable urges to masturbate, as if her vagina opened up and bequeathed a male voice and the only way to shut him up was to reach down and shove her fingers into his mouth. I liked the crassness in which she spoke, she didn't use any pretense, she just told me what was on her mind, like a driving force. Other women were ashamed of their sexuality, so much so that they

hid it beneath mounds of dreary clothes, clamping their thighs together like a bear trap. No, Penelope flung her thighs open like the broken latch of a door. Not to say she was a whore, she was just comfortable with her body, she felt her pussy deserved some praise, which it most definitely did, and of course always in the right company.

I can remember being a very young man and already having the serrated, pessimistic view that all women were whores. I believe this was founded upon my first experience with love, which always ends in a miserable, violent way. My first love was a buxom beauty, all ass and tits, her brassieres teeming with wholesome white flesh. She must have broken more necks than all the gallows used in all the hangings during the crusades, for you could not help but whip your head around to watch her heavenly ass wiggly and gyrate. How I dreamed of falling between those dimply buttocks, sticking my face in those cold humps, warming them. My penis would fill with blood like a syringe pulling from a vein at the simple thought of her. She was a little older than I was. That was something that always aroused me, age. Age on a woman fired me up like shoveling coal into the inferno engine of a train. I couldn't help it; there was something about the class they seemed to naturally seep, no matter how downtrodden or filthy the act they were committing; they did it with a touch of elegance that only came with age. It would be corny to compare a woman's age to wine, but it was not dissimilar. As wine aged it become richer, fuller, the same went for a woman. So many young girls can only fill about a hangnail when it came to depth and natural interest in the arts, science, history, world affairs, and sexuality. An older woman had passed through some fire; they were more inclined to wield an understanding during sex that a younger woman couldn't begin to fathom or hope to achieve. Usually, they fucked like depraved dogs. The feeling of inadequacy due to age sent them into overdrive, trying to keep up with youth, but ending up surpassing it. It was a beautiful moment as old taught young, when young allowed old to have a moment of youth back again, as if these women were sucking some of your youth from the cock and harnessing it within their bellies, fucking so hard that wrinkles straightened, stretch-marks erased, and hopes restored...

It is a wonderful thing to give a woman her sexuality back and I became addicted to it. I made it a priority to sleep with as many older women as I possibly could, giving them second chances, letting them know that they were still sexy, that their sexiness carried with it a truth, which they spoke to you in many ways. Also, something drew me toward them that was perhaps shallow, but important none the less, and that was their physical beauty. Their faces told you their heartbreaks, their misfortunes, and yet their lips remained plump, their noses remained prominent and their eyes sparkled knowingly, telling me of their mysticism, of how they were the true rulers of humanity, as though I could cut into their legs that were like tree trunks and see how many rings they had accumulated over the centuries. I would count them, becoming more aroused the higher the number. They would be like my own private Redwood tree, towering over me, purple and blue veins running along their chubby areas, wide, experienced loins, thunderous

legs like roots, blemished skin that I would suck till black and blue.

All this immense adoration for older woman stemmed from Edith, my first love. She was the explosion of creation that began the universe, always expanding, engulfing everything in her way, stiffening even the deadest blade of grass. I was fourteen at the time, an inverted youngster, a ruffian waiting to be born. She was perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties, already experienced in the ways of love and sex. It was totally beyond my comprehension that she was a whore. No, she was perfect, wonderful, wholesome. This was the case in my eyes, but it was common knowledge around the neighborhood that she was in fact a whore and a heartbreaker. She took man after man into her bed, experienced love for all it was worth, and then passed it like gas out of her system, looking for the next man, looking for the next eternal flame of love that so suddenly ceased. She was just an addict, that's all. How some people were addicted to other drugs, Edith was addicted to love. Love was her drug. She constantly needed to feel loved. It was a sickness now that I can look back on it and I suppose that's what made it easy for me to have the experience I did with her. I wasn't even aware that my existence was known to Edith until one day at the corner sundry store when I strategically placed myself behind her in line and planned on bumping into her when she turned to leave. I wanted to make physical contact with her, no matter how minute. To feel her bottom brush against me would send me into a tornado of pleasure and fulfillment, I'd have more than enough material to self-induce multiple orgasms, maybe indefinitely. When she turned to leave, I quickly stepped in front of her. I got lucky, it wasn't her ass that brushed me, it was her breasts, right in my face. She dropped her items. They fell to the floor. Before she realized what had happened I was on the ground picking them up and begging for her forgiveness. She smiled devilishly and said, "It's alright, Homer."...*Homer? She knew my name?* I stopped moving suddenly, hit like a bullet at the fact that she knew me, let alone that she knew my god-awful name. I raised myself slowly in front of her and for the first time looked her in the eyes. There was an ocean of lust behind them, and they twinkled as though two dying stars. My love for her in that moment was completely pure, I did not want to sleep with her, instead I wanted to make her my wife. I wanted to have children with her, lie in bed together, take baths together, and whisper secrets I had never told anyone before. She turned away from me, still smiling. I thought about confessing my love to her, screaming after her all the romantic notions in which I had just created, but before I could she said,

"Homer, I could use your help carrying these groceries home. Would you mind?"

How I found the strength to speak is still a mystery to me, but I put my lips together and said,

"No, Miss. I wouldn't mind at all."

"Call me Edith." she said.

"Okay, Edith." I said...

I looked hilarious fumbling with her items as she walked a few steps ahead of me, swaying her hips back and forth like the sails of a ship. I would be in her home, I thought. I would see her

bed, where it all happened, what, I wasn't sure, but everything I had imagined and probably much more. I would see her closet and her costumes hanging hollowly on hangers, waiting for her perfect, plump, curvy body to slip into them. Maybe she'd offer me a cigarette and we could smoke together. I'd love to watch the smoke dance out of her mouth, spiraling into the muggy sky. Maybe I'd find enough courage to strip nude and throw myself at her, take it or leave it like. All of this was completely preposterous, of course. I would place her groceries neatly on the kitchen floor and then I would leave. I would come close to the thing I wanted more than anything, and then I would brush past it like wind at the ankles of a busy Manhattan sidewalk. But what I thought about mainly was how someone could be so effortlessly sexy, when I hadn't even begun to understand the meaning of the word. Walking in front of me she resembled a flower blowing in the breeze, she was the reason my young heart beat, why I got out of bed in the morning, for never had my heart before or since pump with such vigor, with such absolute love, it made my mind uncoil and my brain aloof with foreign feelings. I remember being ready to die for Edith, willing to lie down on a train track and welcome the locomotive with a big grin on my lips. After so many years passing I now knew it is foolish to willingly sacrifice yourself for someone else, but part of me still wished to be able to feel so powerfully for another, to still have the capability for mindless love. That is an innocence lost that never returns, for once you become jaded it is difficult to be anything else.

Edith showed me to her apartment and opened the door. It was odd finally putting a place to the person. I quickly thought about her skipping around naked, letting everything giggle like gelatin, sitting her bare toosh on her finely upholstered chairs, keeping the window open as to let the cool air come in. I put her groceries on the kitchenette floor, as I had planned, I then awkwardly opened my mouth, which was further than I ever thought possible.

"There you are, Edith. Sorry again about bumping into you."

"You don't have to rush off so quickly now do you, Homer?" she said. The way she said my name after every sentence, *right this way, Homer. Watch your step, Homer. Just a little further, Homer*, was so deviant, so piercing, so erotic.

"No, I can stay a bit." I said, the fear coming through my voice in volumes.

"Would you like a drink?" she asked.

"A drink?"

"You won't tell anyone, will you? We can keep it our little secret."

Everything she spoke seemed to peel off the page of a trite romance novel, yet she resonated with seductiveness. She could have fed me the most ridiculous lines imaginable and I would have eaten them with a spoon.

"I won't tell anyone." I said.

She smiled and gliding across the room went into the kitchenette and opened a cupboard. She was a fairly tall woman but she had to stand on her tip-toes in order to reach the back of the

cupboard where she revealed a bottle of liquor wrapped in a rag. I had only seen my father with a liquor bottle a handful of times when I was very young, before they outlawed it. Ordinarily it would be just a bottle, but now it carried with it a forbidden quality and I gasped at the sight of it. Oh, Edith was a minx, sly as the Devil himself. She uncorked the small bottle and took a swig. She then walked over, taking the seat beside me, and handed me the bottle to drink from.

“Go ahead.” she said.

I brought the bottle to my lips and took a long drag, as if it wasn't my first time. The alcohol crept its way into my throat, launching me into fiery disarray. It burned so terribly that it made my inner-ears smolder. My eyes spun around and blew out of my skull as if they were spring-loaded. I couldn't help but imagine the liquid I was drinking was some sort of metallic fishy excretion, a concocted poison, but I swallowed it anyway, every last drop, anything for Edith. I suppose my discomfort was written all over my face for she asked if I was alright, frowning with her eyes as she asked it, treating me now like a mere child, finding my difficulty adorable. I feared that if I did not act like a man she wouldn't be able to stop seeing me as a boy. I quickly smiled back and told her I was more than alright, that I was feeling stronger than ever! I could tell she wasn't buying it, and I felt like killing myself, like leaping from her second story window, ending it all quickly and painlessly...well, at least less painfully than continuing to sit there with Edith, a red-faced little boy with no tolerance for drink. It was flat-out torture. But then she did something I never expected; she reached over and put her hand on my knee. Her touch sent vibrations all through my body and I almost climaxed then and there. It felt like there was an ocean of lava in my stomach that was kicking up as though in a storm, waves peaking and then crashing, rolling back. My intestines were twisted, formulating a noose so I could reach inside myself and use them for the suicide which was imminent if I were to ejaculate now.

“I've heard rumors.” she said.

“What kind of rumors?” I asked, feeding right into her sexual game without knowing it.

“That you've developed quite the crush on me.” she said. She was speaking these words so clearly, so openly. I couldn't imagine such a thing. How could she be so confident, when I had only known cowardice? I didn't know how to respond. I sat quietly and waited for her to speak again.

“Your mother informed me.” she said, letting out the slightest laugh.

Jesus Christ. That mortified me. Any hope of sleeping with Edith was now tarnished. My mother had birthed me *and* had killed me, the stinking bitch, I thought. My mother had made it a habit of sticking her bulbous nose into my business, and now it had reached the pinnacle, she had gone beyond her limits in every sense, she had ruined my life with the same ease a conductor commanded when concluding a concerto. I would kill her, I thought, she had ruined my chances with Edith. From now on Edith would not be able to look at me as anything but a boy. My mother had squealed her little boy's crush and now Edith would use it to fondle and blow kisses

at, put up on a ledge and never again consider robust, sexual or manly. My heart sank down into my chest like a ripening prune, but then Edith took destiny into her own hands and leaned over and kissed me. The feeling of her lips on mine refilled my heart like a deflating balloon played in reverse. Hope was still alive! It was more than alive, it was certain, Edith had kissed me. Her tongue slithered into my mouth like a belly-dancer, licking the backs of my teeth. My penis became schizophrenic, splitting into two different modes of thought, half-hardening at the pure sexual tension which had just made itself known, and softening at the sober quality that my deep, deep love for Edith had. I was realizing all my dreams, knowing that sex was not the end, but the very beginning, how I would claim her as my own, planting a flag into her anus! How we would ride off together on a white horse with flowers braided into its mane, how we would gallop wildly and freely, knowing what it meant to fly, leaping up, up, up into the sky. An erection seemed almost silly now, seeing that we had all that in store for us. An erection seemed arbitrary, almost absurd. Edith rose from her chair and turned around. Her buttocks seemed to swell ten times its normal size; it was all I could see.

“Help a girl unbutton.” she said, looking over her shoulder at me. I loved how she still referred to herself as a girl. She was young at heart, maybe that’s why she saw something in me. If our bodies were not compatible, our hearts were, young and full of life. Nothing could break her away; she was a girl and a woman, her body the vehicle for two passengers. She had all the playful daring for adventure as a young girl had, but the sophistication of a woman, all the complexities, all the maturity. She undressed. She did not tease, she did not play with me as a girl would, she did not leave her panties on, allowing me to imagine, no, she came right out with it, no smoke, no mirrors, her pubic hairs a dirty blonde. Her breasts dangled with such perkiness that just the nipples shook as she walked toward me. My body was still clinched, all the muscles constricting, my veins about to snap like the over-stretched cords of a guitar.

“Relax, Homer.” she said, “I’ll take care of everything.”

She sunk down to the floor, resting on her knees in front of me like some Egyptian slave. She placed her arms on my legs and ran her fingers up to my waist. Her fingers found my fly and she unbuttoned it with ease, as if she had done it a million times. My cock was still in a state of rigor mortis. Edith reached in and wrapped her hand around it. It seemed to be piece of chalk in a teacher’s hand, but by her touch it sprang to life, it rippled over her grasp like a waterfall.

“Oh, Homer.” she said, shocked by my sudden awakening.

Again I felt like telling her everything, spilling my guts, confessing my love and telling her how long I had waited for this moment, how she was the queen of queens, the woman to end all women, but I kept my mouth shut. I didn’t want to run the chance of ruining this moment, of saying the wrong thing. She took me in her mouth, each taste bud like individual tongues scaling me, reaching the head and swirling it around in whiplash fashion, her engorged lips reaching all the way to the base. I was too in shock to cum. I may never have cum; my brain had eliminated

that function, all my thoughts dedicated to withholding my juice.

“Are you ready?” Edith asked, standing up, backing away one or two steps, widening her legs in horse stance, splitting her plum. I was about to scream *yes!* when I noticed something between Edith’s legs, running down her inner thighs...

“Edith! ...You’re bleeding!” I cried.

Edith let out a little laugh.

“I’m menstruating.” she said. A blank look came across my face.

“Don’t tell me you’re afraid of little blood.” she continued. “You won’t find sweeter nectar than this honey pot.” I slightly nodded my head, truthfully unaware of any objection to her menstruation. I had only known blood in other ways, such as bloody noses, skinned knees etc. and now the place in which I had originated and forever wanted to return was covered in it. A deep, torpid stench filled the room.

“Shall we continue?” she said, almost annoyed.

“Yes.” I said.

She walked over and mounted me, the sheer size of her ass crushing my legs, bouncing up and down on me, and that’s how it went, my first time; hard, vicious, fast and bloody. She pretended for my sake, making all the right noises, whipping her head back and forth in staged ecstasy, and as Bogart once said, I let her pretend.

From that point on I tried to say hello to Edith on the street, but she refused to acknowledge me, as if I were a phantom screaming to deaf ears. She had had her way with me and now she was done. She had taken my life force, leaving me swollen and full of jism, implanting me with the hypnotic sexual yearning, plaguing me the rest of my days, and most horribly, she did not return the love I had for her. What all the people in all the towns had said was true: she was a whore. This was a terrible revelation. What had my love meant? Nothing as far as I could tell. I had not yet realized that my love had enough merit on its own to be cherished, that the simple act of loving, even without a return, was magnificent and worthy of my pride. I felt ashamed for loving Edith, like a fool. It did not occur to me that she had evoked the emotion of love from me and that was something to behold, that I had opened up for the first time, allowing my heart to hang from my chest and beat in the cold air, steam rising from it. I was opened and I’d never be able to be closed again, thanks to Edith. She had opened me up and spit into my pulsing innards, but that meant that she allowed me the opportunity for another bird to fly down and land on my heart, pecking at it with its beak and loving it. Chances were the next bird would peck at my lungs and defecate on my heart as well, but that was the chance you had to take to be alive. Love hurt, that was part of the rules, and to defy the rules was to not play the game, to close yourself up like a cage, your own bird closed within it, chirping, begging for air, begging to fly, but instead letting it die.

As much as I hated Edith I could not help but love her. In my young mind I thought this

meant it was true love, but I came to understand that I had just gotten comfortable with the idea of loving her, that I had loved her for so long, it just felt natural to keep on doing so despite the reality. Now that the façade was over, wiped away like running your fingers through a reflection in a pond, distorted, misshaped, yet still there in part, still somehow visible, I was looking for reasons to hold onto that grotesque love. Eventually my hate for Edith trumped my love and I became embroiled in a bizarre depression that inundated my remaining young years. It wasn't until I was an adult that I started dissecting the possibility that a sexual woman and a whore were not one in the same. It was not until I met Penelope that I found a sexual woman who also lived by a mandated set of scruples, that did not carry herself like a streetwalker, but was a confident, intelligent, sexually empowered woman. I found out that sex was something to be done by adults, people ready for the mental strain it caused, and it caused mental strain, probably more so than physical. I was not one of those quacks that advocated abstinence or thought sex was solely for procreation, far from it. I felt sex was the cornerstone of any human expression, that the pleasure derived from it should be exploited and pushed to the limit. What separated me from the common whore? I wasn't sure, perhaps it was the idea that I didn't sever the tie between sex and emotion, that for every cheap lay I experienced I allowed the smallest piece of my soul to enter them as well, not giving myself as I had done with Edith, but marking them, planting myself inside them, burying something deep within them that could one day bloom if it chose to. Sex was not empty, even vile sex, it was an expression of two people, two or three or ten, but it was a way of speaking, a language that would never die out or get lost, it was creating art without paintbrushes or pens, it was telling the truth to one another, even in the smallest of ways. What you'll find with a whore is a lie, one wrapped so convincingly in a truth that you won't notice at first. It won't be until the walk home or the taxi ride, but there will be a cold pit in the bottom of your stomach, for you will have given a piece of your soul, but not received one in return...

9 1/2

(7) (...woof...woof...howl...yelp...woof...woof...howl...howl...woof...woof...yelp...)

10

Penelope was pleased to see me and we embraced warmly. Her head found its way perfectly into my chest, and her stature made it seem like I was hugging a niece or a daughter, but then she pulled away and I could see her face, which lit the room. I was disturbed at the slight arousal I felt when imagining embracing a niece, and I shook my head to rid myself of the thought. I attributed this thought to my extreme sleep deprivation. There was a thin line between sexual deviant and criminal, and I was determined to stay on the right side of that line. What I knew about perversion was that it was a slippery slope, that once you crossed a line, there was no

going back, for a thought could not be un-thought; once the seed was in the soil, a plant would grow, as was nature and there was no use in fighting nature, so the best route was to know the boundaries of the mind and to never dip your toes into such deep waters. Part of me worried that Penelope's childish size was an element of my attraction to her, but I tried not to think about it, because ultimately I already knew the answer and I was too afraid to embrace it. I downright hated myself for it. What scum I was, I thought. What kind of twisted mind would find such a thing attractive? An utterly depraved maniac... What contempt a man holds himself in, what bondage, for every man has perversions that were truly unspeakable, absolutely evil in fact, and sadly they were ultimately out of our control. What we found attractive during a bout of arousal often sickened us the moment orgasm was reached. And we punished ourselves in silence, hiding these terrible truths away for entire lifetimes, never confessing them even to our dearest loved ones. That was an indisputable truth: everyone, your best friend, your mailman, your priest, your father, your accountant, they all did despicable things in the shadows. It took some doing to even admit them to ourselves. I pushed my polluted thoughts toward Penelope to the deepest, dankest corner of my psyche, locking them in a proverbial cellar to hopefully starve to death. However, despite my trying they always seemed to loom like disaster over me, and popped up uninvited like during my hug with Penelope.

She welcomed me in and offered me a drink, which I declined because of the hour. It was still early afternoon. Penelope was always a bit of a lush. She'd pound away at any goddamn hour. She poured herself a drink and sat herself in a big comfortable chair in the corner of the room next to the only window. The afternoon sun came through the window and soaked over her. She was already looking at me with yearning eyes. Her chin was lowered to her chest and her mouth slightly agape. I had seen that look on her one hundred times before and one hundred out of one hundred times I knew what it meant. Sometimes it stilled shocked me how forward she was. I still wasn't quite used to it.

"Will you hold on one goddamn minute?" I said.

"Didn't you come here to fuck me?" she said.

"Jesus Christ, I don't know. Maybe."

She took offence to this.

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"Can't we talk a bit first? I'm tired as hell."

"This isn't a hotel, Homer." she said.

"It isn't a goddamn brothel either, so hold your horses, will ya, baby?"

"Fine." she said and walked over to me, sitting on my lap, taking off my skimmer and flipping it between her hands.

"When are you going to get a new goddamn hat?" she continued.

"When this one wears out." I said.

We had this superb way of speaking to one another, always rudely. I sometimes I felt that Penelope didn't want to act *too* nice, for then she wouldn't be able to shut it off and we'd be stuck in an awkward, caring relationship both of us knew would never work. That's just how we loved each other. If I didn't speak to her like a bitch she would have thought something was wrong. If she didn't speak to me like a sailor I would suspect trouble. Penelope threw her arms around my neck and looked me in the eyes.

"Hazel." she said.

"They change from brown to green." I said.

"They are more grey than anything right now."

"I hope one day they will be blue."

"No." she said, "Blue is plain. Hazel is unique, not many people have hazel eyes."

I then felt a slight tug at on my trousers. I looked down to see Samuel, Penelope's terrier. Samuel was a terror and I never left Penelope's without my shoes coated in slobber or the hems of my pants chewed. Penelope had not taken the time to train him; it was just something that hadn't occurred to her. She got the dog, let him piss and defecate wherever he liked and that was that, she was a dog owner.

"Samuel is biting my heel." I said.

"Sammy! Knock that off!" she screamed at the little dog. Samuel refused to let go at first and growled defiantly at us, my trousers still locked in his jaws.

"Sammy!" Penelope shouted again, slapping at Samuel's snout. The little terrier finally released his grip and walked over to urinate on the leg of a chair.

"You look like you've been to hell and back." Penelope said.

"Almost." I said.

"How is it that trouble always seems to find you?"

As she said this she began brushing a few stray hairs off my forehead. She kissed me softly, high on my cheek, near the eye. She then pulled away and fixed a look on me that told me she understood and that if I didn't feel like talking about what had happened to me it was all right. That was the tenderness that unequivocally broke through Penelope, she couldn't hide it, it existed in her the way the sun exists, magically, but so common that any special quality was forgotten and just generally accepted. I made a strong effort never to take for granted Penelope's warmth, I always dog-eared the moments that she opened her heart to me, especially now for I knew I would not see her again for a long time.

I was about to delve into my tale of woe, my plans for desertion, and my experiences with The Angel of Death when there was a knock at the door. A look of confusion came over Penelope's face.

"Who could that be?" she said almost rhetorically as if in a contrived stage play, vocalizing for the audience. She walked over to the door, stopped in front of it, buttoned her

blouse, ran a hand over her hair and composed herself. Behind the door was an old mutual friend of ours who went by the name of Xavier, and only Xavier as if he thought he was Stendhal or something. Xavier had always been a bit jealous of Penelope and I's relationship and he coveted Penelope for himself. Penelope and I would often laugh about it, seeing that she didn't find him the least bit attractive, and I was ill-equipped to feel the human emotion known as jealousy. Truthfully, I didn't have anything to be jealous about. Penelope was not mine, she was a free woman. She could have taken Xavier into her bed and I couldn't have said a thing to stop it, although I did enjoy the fact that Penelope preferred me over him, for he was always a bit of snob, a real ass at times because he fancied himself an artist, and it was just human nature to feel good about being well liked. Xavier burst into the room, looking sheepish as always.

"Mr. Miller." he said.

"Mr. Miller is my father's name. Homer will do just fine." I said.

"Homer, it's been a time."

"Too long." I said, sarcasm leaking from every pore.

"Can I offer you a drink, Xavier?" Penelope asked.

"Yes. My usual, please." he responded, while never taking his eyes off me.

"You writers are such goddamn drunkards." I said. "It's two in the afternoon."

"I don't drink because I write." he said as though it was a touchy subject.

"Sure you do." I said, "You're just like any of 'em. Drink, drink, drink, maybe a little writing, then drink, drink, drink some more. Face it; you spend more time drinking than you do actually writing!"

That got his goat. He was becoming red.

"I don't question how you create, do I...oh, wait..." he smiled, "you don't create, do you Homer? You just ridicule other people. Well, at least I've attempted something!"

"If I *was* a writer I would write circles around your ass! I'd have the advantage because I wouldn't be drunk all the time!"

"You son of a bitch!" he shouted, raising his fist in the air, never intending to strike me.

"Boys!" Penelope interjected, "Easy now. Xavier here's your drink. Homer..." she looked at me with irksome eyes instead of reprimanding me, but then she let out the tiniest smile to let me know she enjoyed the show. Xavier returned to his seat and sipped at his drink. He stared at me with a hatred only duplicated by the family gazing upon the murderer who killed their loved one from the courtroom benches. Finally his face changed from one of anger to one of pain trying to be masked by cheerfulness. He wanted to show Penelope that I had hurt his feelings, that despite his tough exterior, he was just a sensitive man, a man capable of giving her a love far beyond what I could give. In all fairness, that was probably true, but thankfully Penelope was immune to his tricks and had trained herself to not feel a touch of remorse for him. Xavier was like a child, the more attention you showed him the more he would carry on. I had

seen this first hand. I had even watched as he broke down into hot tears, becoming abstract in his laments, blaming the world for continuing to spin, blaming his mother for not breast feeding him, blaming God for bestowing the burden of the arts on him, it went on and on, for hours until I had to leave. Every now and again there would be a newcomer that was sucked into his madness and would take pity on him, maybe a woman opening herself up to him, maybe a pal giving him a few bucks for the taxi ride home. It was all a well orchestrated scam. Xavier was the kind of man that loved wallowing in his own self sacrifice; he would have died to become a martyr. I honestly believe he was more concerned with the image of being an artist than actually being one. He was the kind of bastard that discouraged me from getting into the game in the first place. I couldn't imagine rubbing shoulders with the likes of Xavier for the rest of my life, putting on a persona as if it were a jacket, wearing it to all the important parties with all the important people. It seemed so superficial. I was struggling to break free, to overcome a falsified version of myself as it were, let alone get myself mixed up with the most counterfeit group of them all, the artists. I admired the greats, Van Gogh, but something told me that he would have cut off his other ear if he were alive to hear the ramblings of every slob that picked up a paintbrush and played the role of an artist. The artists were just a group, not unlike any other group, and to be within that group you had to fit a criterion. Art was suppose to supersede this criteria, it was suppose to break loose every boundary and advocate a new kind of freedom, which was vast enough for anyone to reach in and take a piece, to hoard and hold dear, but instead, human beings shuffled into single file lines, the only way in which they were comfortable, and compromised it, beating the originality out of the idea, turning it into some hideous version of itself, where one person wouldn't be allowed in because of their social class or because of their appearance. It was impossible for a well-to-do businessman to come home and compose a piece of music so beautiful it made the curtains ache and the banisters weep. That music was only left up to the *artist*, the man or woman downtrodden enough to call themselves starving, when they were anything but, only starving for attention, only starving because they refused the food that came to them bountifully, afraid to listen to their heart because their heart often times chose what was popular or conventional. They strived to be different, but in doing so they ended up being the same, becoming a grey color, unidentifiable, unoriginal, average...

Penelope considered herself a bit of a writer as well, but she was shy about it. She didn't like admitting to it in the company of someone like Xavier who would molest her with his eyes, quietly judging her, filling her with doubt. As far as I could tell doubt was the writer's worst enemy, besides the obvious unexpected erection, which didn't pose much of a problem for Penelope. The chances of becoming a published writer, let alone a successful one, were slim and you had to live in a doubtless world to even attempt it. That much I admired about Xavier, he was able to shield himself from the impossibilities of his dreams and forge them anyway, although, Xavier was still unpublished, something he considered a minor setback, seeing that it

was inevitable. He carried himself as if he were published already and took it upon himself to mock Penelope's juvenile aspirations, for she wasn't a *serious* writer, she was an *unserious* writer, or some such nonsense. I don't know what made you serious or what made you silly, but Xavier seemed to know. He'd say things like: *writing isn't a profession, it is a life style*, and he'd say them directed toward Penelope insinuating she wasn't fully committed. Of course, what he said was the truth, no one made it as a writer because they desired steady income, they had to live it, eat it, breath it, bathe in it, make love to it, but coming from him somehow cheapened the truth, made it into a lie, made it seem pretentious. You had to be very careful when taking advice, because the people you're taking it from were just as important as the wisdom itself. If there was a golden rule to existence it would act as a chameleon, transforming differently from each pair of lips in which it escaped, and this was true with Xavier, he was not the man to get writing advice from. He believed with all his miserable, shriveled heart that art was to be experienced, interpreted rather than created, that the intellectual dissection triumphed over the raw, passionate conception. He once told me that passion had no place in art, that everything should be broken down mathematically, refined to its most formulaic. I couldn't disagree with him more. Passion was the foundation of art, the individual love that flowed instinctually out of the artist, making their personal struggle relatable and understandable to the appreciator, even though the appreciator was arbitrary. There was always an invisible audience which studied you as you created, the true artist would ignore them, while the hoaxer would pander to them, writing each word to their intrusive applause. Xavier thought that the invisible audience existed before the art, waiting to analyze, waiting to make sense of every brush stroke, or indistinguishable rant, that the intellectual conversation which the art piece evoked was the true reward, that everything made perfect sense once rationalized, that everything had rhyme and reason, that every artist's madness had form and structure and could be bargained down to tiny molecules of intent and purpose. Yet again, while I found what he said to be technically true, I could never bring myself to accept it. I was content in being wrong, it had never felt so right. When I looked at a painting or read a crisp, poignant line of poetry, it was always my heart that reacted over my brain. To me, there was no better work than one that could first attack your heart and then bleed into the mind, nesting and growing into intangible philosophies. To Xavier this was ludicrous and a waste of time. Gut reactions? Primitive! The cold, hard reality that looked all of us in the face was the only means of interpretation! It raised the question of why bother to hope or dream? Life came to a sudden and permanent end; that was the only known thing about our existence, so why not commit suicide the moment conscious thought was achieved? Why bother doing anything? If art could be broken down, everything could, everything was consumed by endless details and decimals of fractions of numbers, and it was this time that I took a great pity on Xavier. He had been tricked into believing the truth. He wanted so desperately to be right that he forgot the pleasure of being wrong. He forgot that art was an expression of one's self, not an excuse to call

yourself an intellectual. Hell, what is that word, *intellectual*? Sounds made-up to me, sounds like a word used to impress the neighbors, used to cock your feathers and fill yourself with a false hope that you hadn't been cheated; that you knew the game was rigged so you wouldn't look foolish on doomsday. The life Xavier lived was an empty hollow room, filled with nothing but blunt facts. Life was more than that, it was about obtaining a happiness that, perhaps yes, walked hand in hand with ignorance, but that was nothing to be ashamed of, it should be celebrated because if you were able to reach it, you had gone beyond the mere earthly margins and had reached a personal heaven, populated by loves and passions and dreams...

What Xavier didn't seem to understand was I didn't have anything against enlightenment, that I strived for it myself, but there were just a few rabbit holes better left unexplored, a few ugly realities that served no purpose. To question the laws of nature was to answer an equation that was already solved. Oh, every artist had intent, and we are able to analyze that intent into microcosms, resulting in a fruitless exploration of an ultimately dull experiment? And? Your point being? I suppose my argument was you couldn't go anywhere with the truth. The truth was boring, but a miscalculated emotional reaction? Now that had some potential, you could reach above the stars while speculating, making each interpretation personal, candid and honest in its own way. I was a believer of always suspecting the facts of foul play, that one day instead of all the questions being answered, the answers would be questioned, for there was a cosmic question no one knew the answer to, and to pretend to be able to nullify a riddle as complex as art itself took an arrogance strong enough to make me what to vomit. Xavier was not three-dimensional, he was flat. He was like Max in that he was already dead. You know there is something terribly wrong when you are asked to think of three things to describe a person and all you can come up with is *artistic*. Penelope and I crept into bed together after Xavier had finally gone and we had made love, and we burst into fits of laughter when we realized we couldn't think of a single thing to describe him. I suggested *asshole*, but she slapped me with her back of her hand. Artistic, that was it, that's all Xavier had to lay claim to, and what a hill of beans *artistic* amounted to in the grand scheme of things. After the kind of name Xavier gave to such a trade, I felt remorse for the truly great artists, the ones that did not do what was unpopular because it was popular to do so. Honestly, dissecting the artistic mindset gave me a headache. It was a chaotic, incestuous catastrophe; one that had been reproduced so many times that no one knew what the hell was happening anymore. Was it popular or unpopular? Was it popular to do the unpopular thing, or was it unpopular to do the popular thing, or was it unpopular to do the unpopular thing because the popular thing had become the unpopular? Jesus, it could scramble your mind like eggs. The only compass you should follow is your heart, for even when you found yourself in the wrong direction...at least you had arrived there by your own free will. And sometimes the most popular thing was...most popular because it was right. There was nothing more pathetic than rebelling for the sake of rebelling, you were left impish and childish in the wake of your mistake, in the gross

misjudgment you had made out of some misplaced desire to be different, to break the mold, to rebel. The only way to be a true rebel was to listen to your heart; it was the thing the least amount of people were doing...

11

It was about 5:30 by the time I left Penelope's. The law firm, in which I worked as a notary had long since been closed, though I knew my faithful second and good friend Baybrooke would still be there, slaving over the day's paperwork. I had become a notary in an absurd way, for traditionally an education was required for such a job, but thanks to the despicable truth that it's not what you know, it's who you know, Baybrooke's Uncle, who owned the firm, equipped me with the proper licensing in an *off the books* sort of way, and assigned me the task of being the witness to any documents that needed to be signed. If there was any question of authenticity about my position I would defer to Baybrooke who despite the legal knowhow was quite inept when it came to representing the firm in an astute, affable manner. Baybrooke's Uncle wanted a smiling face, someone to put his clients at ease, a mascot of sorts. It wasn't quite as regrettable as I was letting on, but I was on my way there to hand in my resignation. Truth be told, I was rather pleased about quitting, though the job had provided me my desired lack of responsibility, I hated working in general and it would feel good to cease my laughable pay. It could have been any job, really. I just wasn't a good worker. I didn't take orders well. I wasn't able to do simple tasks when they were requested of me. You'd think I was a mindless mongoloid if you were to judge me purely off my work performance, even I agreed that it was lousy. As I walked toward the firm the sidewalk became quicksand and I began sinking into it, so much so that I had to take refuge on a stoop close by. My legs simply were giving out. I still hadn't slept and I had lost complete count of the hours I was awake, everything was blending into each other. Things I had done weeks before seemed to have happened only moments ago. The latest encounter with the Angel of Death was wearing off, and the full brunt of my exhaustion was surfacing. I had done some with Penelope before we made love, and another fingernail full upon orgasm. Because of the mixture of the drug and my own euphoric process I reached a culmination that could only be described as miraculous. My penis did not orgasm, but my entire body, fingers, toes, arms, legs; they all received the sensation, only a thousand times more intense. The competing thoughts, sexual in nature and the fragmented memories collided into a twister of mental and physical detonation, releasing all into Penelope save for my inner skeleton.

Once Xavier left I took the Angel of Death from my pocket.

"What's that?" Penelope asked.

"Miserable stuff. Don't ask to try it." I said.

"If you can do it, I can do it." she said.

I was expecting more resistance from her when pulling out a mysterious powder like that.

Penelope didn't even partake in reefer, as I had done only from time to time.

"What is it, Homer?" she asked again.

"It's called the Angel of Death. I got it from an herbal medicines doctor."

"What does it do?"

"It makes you see your entire life. Do you have any coffee?" I asked.

"I can make some." she said, and got up to do so.

She sensed the gravity and power of my statement; *it makes you see your entire life*, she didn't even respond to it, but knew I meant it in the most literal sense. Penelope brought me a cup of coffee and one for herself. I poured the Angel of Death into both our cups mixed them with my finger, bringing it afterward to Penelope's mouth to lick clean. My finger moved about her lips like an earthworm, wiggling as if without a bone. Penelope sipped her coffee, gulping suspiciously.

"I don't feel anything." she said.

"Give it a moment." I said.

And then it was as if I saw her leave her body and retreat to into her own mind. Her eyes became vacant. Her face didn't show any trace of pain, which I experienced on my first trip, but of complete emotional detachment. It almost pained me see her that way, it made me feel terrible for giving someone a substance that could rob them of their feelings. I felt like the lowest kind of thief, my mark not a simple diamond or money, but human beings' emotions, memories, thoughts, and dreams. Tears gathered at her eyes, eventually silently streaming down her face. She was in a deep state of flashback. She must be witnessing an ugliness in her life, I thought. I began drinking my coffee. I braced myself for the jolt delving into the subconscious provided, but it never came. I was only left with a skewed view of things, each item in Penelope's apartment growing a pastel tail and smudging like the traces of freshly erased chalk. I must have started becoming immune to the drug. Dr. Chin had said this would happen, but I still felt the panic, the jittery awakening, sucking my drowsiness away like a raindrop against a dehydrated desert, nothing but a soft sizzle to show it had been there at all. I now experienced a crippling fear; for I had no idea how long these journeys lasted. Would I be in a state of paroxysmal awareness while Penelope was virtually dead to the world for thirty or forty minutes, an hour, maybe two? How long would I be able to compose myself and not try to sake her awake, severing all the nerve endings in her spine like the snapping of some petrified twig? They said an undertaker had to spend the night with a corpse in order to be hired to a mortuary. Was this a similar test? Did I have to survive in vivid realization while Penelope explored within herself? For some reason these thoughts terrified me. It didn't occur to me that I could always leave, or that the experience would be over with soon enough. Paranoia spread quicker than a fire on dead leaves when you were under the influence of a mind altering drug. Everything seemed life threatening. I began thinking that Penelope had expired right under my nose. I watched her chest

to see if she was breathing. It didn't move for what seemed like an eternity, and just when I was about to pound on her chest with clinched fists, I'd see her breasts rise the most unnoticeable amount. And then I'd start to question if I had actually seen them rise, or if I had imagined them rising. The terror was enough to rip me in half. The next thirty minutes were spent in this surreal suspense, suspended like some helpless puppet, when finally Penelope emerged out of the trance like a swimmer breaking the surface of the water, with one big breath. I rushed over to her, taking her in my arms.

"I saw such terrible things." was the first thing she said.

"It's all right. They weren't real." I said.

"Yes, they were." she said, with a calm in her voice.

No woman is that comfortable with herself without battling a few demons in her past and now I knew this was true about Penelope. I fixed a look on her that told her if she didn't want to tell me what she had seen it was all right. That was the kindness I was capable of.

"Shall I run you a bath?" I asked. She nodded. I helped her to her feet and sat her down in the chair. Samuel came from underneath the bed and jumped on her lap. I walked into the bathroom and ran the water. As the water was becoming hot, Penelope came from behind and stood in the doorway. I looked over my shoulder at her.

"Feeling better?" I asked. Penelope then moved as if in slow motion toward me. I stood as our bodies made contact. She kissed me long and passionately.

"What was that for?" I said once our lips parted.

"For your sweetness. I know how much it takes for you to show that part of yourself."

The Angel of Death must have knocked something loose within her, or maybe she had just seen our relationship at great detail and saw how silly we treated one another, I don't know, but I knew that Penelope and I were about to engage in a level of intercourse that neither of us had ever fathomed for each other.

"Bathe with me." she said.

"If you wish." I said. Penelope slipped out of her clothes almost paradoxically, as though they were never on her, but hovered over her moist flesh waiting to be brushed aside at a moment's notice. It took me a little more doing to remove my clothes. I fumbled around, lumbering like an inarticulate beast, hanging my worn suit on a pole in the corner of the room. I caught the quick whiff of Max's juices on my cock. I had washed him with water, but you needed to soap him up in order to rid yourself of that smell. It clung to you and stank worse the longer you left it. Penelope and I slipped into the tub, my toes dug into her ass, her feet on my chest. I gripped the bar of soap, but let it slip out of my hand, disappearing into the muggy water. I went after it, using it as an excuse to fondle Penelope. Something told me that she had been aroused by the pure deviance of her past, that not only did The Angel of Death make her realize her folly, but also worked as a stimulant, reminding her why she submitted to such folly in the first place.

It only took the smallest twinge of a perversion to unleash it, the tiniest tickle of the clitoris launched a full scale offensive on the body, like a virus, it could evolve to remedies and invade you again, warping your brain worse than syphilis. These were things humans didn't ordinarily confess to. If they committed what they considered to be a sin, they would renounce it, pay their penance and speak ill of it, but deep down, whatever they had done still sparked their curiosity. I'm sure whatever Penelope had done wasn't bad at all, but she had been convinced it was by a strict family or church or society. The majority of people walked around with a ball and chain shackled to their ankles, hating themselves because they had done things that were judged to be vile, but who was judging them? Vile people, that's who, far viler than the common schmuck, who dressed in woman's panties under his trousers or masturbated to pictures of farm animals. Granted, these things weren't *normal*, but they were far away from *evil*, in my opinion. Time and again you read about the so-called civilized people of church and state molesting altar boys and secretarial aids or having affairs on their, prude, pinched, smothered wives. Time and again the heart of darkness lay within the chests of the people who appointed themselves our leaders. If people would just submit to their perversions rather than burying them in the lightless corners of their minds, I think there would a lot fewer scandals and a lot less corruption, love would become paramount, overruling the madness exuded through our courts. As far as I could see, hate filled the streets, constantly wrapping itself like long fingers around a baseball, forcing people to reject themselves for the strange, abnormal beings they were. There was an odd desire to be *normal*, but I don't think it had anything to do with human nature, I believed it to be a strictly societal fixation. Some prude somewhere had laid down laws of decency and the rest was history, once again the human race followed unquestioningly as though drugged. Someone somewhere decided we should cover our fleshy parts. I sometimes struggled to think of how they came to that conclusion. In the beginning, we were primates; stupid, nude creatures. We were absolutely naked, and yet evolution continued forth, we were able to walk upright, comprehend our thoughts, design and operate automobiles, express ourselves artistically, and most importantly feel love for one another. We were doing just fine when we were completely unabashed, reckless, and truthful. It wasn't until restrictions were put in place that we began to lie, that we became unimpressed with ourselves, and the dastardly irony of it all was, it wasn't until we put these limitations in place that perversion took a giant leap forward, for once something was forbidden it became all the more desired, all the more coveted. Feelings were multiplied when there was a sense of wrong-doing involved, when a taste of danger became known. When things were accessible, they often became dull; they had to constantly be exciting, new, and fresh if they had any hope of surviving among the human race.

Penelope had become downright villainess in posture. Her shoulders were pinned back, her neck forward, a look of carnal desire written across her face. She pounced like a puma, appearing atop me in such a way that I could not describe to you how she did it. One moment our

eyes were meeting in a sultry tango, and the next she had mounted me, her legs wrapped around me like a queen spider wraps her sprawling legs around her prey. Her miniature size allowed her such athleticism. My penis was not even fully erect when it penetrated Penelope's walls, but sluggish and cheerless. I had the small, quiet flame of horniness burning in my stomach like a stove struggling to ignite; I just needed to douse some gasoline on it.

"Tell me everything you want!" I moaned. I don't know where it came from, but suddenly I wanted to *hear* everything, all the things she wanted to be done to her, every act verbalized in great detail, as if by hearing it, it would cement our filthiness, maybe by acknowledging it, by taking a bizarre sort of pride in it. There was a moment of hesitation on her part and then,

"I want you to fuck me! I want to feel you deep inside of me!" she shouted. Eureka! The lad was alive! My cock sprang to fullest rigidity as though it were a bent spring that had been released. She had admitted it, out in the open, for all the world to hear, she wanted sex, not love, not romance, but sex! Now the miracle could begin. I grabbed her by the cheeks and hoisted her up with me, dirty water dripping off of us, sounding like a raindrop symphony as they splashed back into the tub. I carried her, still attached to me, into the bedroom and plopped her down on the mattress. I went to her like a jackhammer, my prick a starving woodpecker. I don't know where I found this extra strength; it must have been saved in a secret reservoir deep within. I tossed all the caution I had used with Max aside and gave Penelope the fully, uncensored Homer, one that gave more than he received. It was the first time I had made love and wasn't aware of my surroundings. I wasn't making sure I stayed to the form and technique which I had developed, as meager as it was. No, it was a blind fit, our privates like magnets, the intense, invisible pulling sensation throughout our pelvic bones. Penelope's juices poured out of her in such a way as to embarrass her, as though I was fucking an orchid caught in the violent stream of the Mississippi. Her body spun madly and out of control before me. I felt like a famous painter looking at a blank canvas and imagining the masterpiece I was about to produce. It was wonderfully empowering to watch a woman convulse like a lunatic because of your throbbing member. What was so often average and troublesome emerged into a great dictator of love and made you feel as though perhaps you were more than just a simple penis that was used out of convenience, but instead you were something *desired*. It made me feel as though I held the ribbon taut, with my simple yank I could unwrap a gift to these women, a gift that had been withheld from them. I didn't want to become too full of myself, I wasn't even that good of a lay, but anything seemed possible while in the throws with a woman, you felt superhuman, mega-evolved, like a god looking down on the truly odd physique of the human female and watching it becoming something more than human and at the same time something less, overpowering all the human weaknesses, but never even attempting to obtain them in the first place, remaining a pure core of pleasure and sexuality, always. The thought then crossed my mind that maybe super-

humanity could be obtained, that if you only fucked hard enough, with enough passion and verve, you could actually levitate, floating above the bed, your energies combining, reaching a higher sense of awareness and fulfillment, seeing that two was always better than one; hearts pumping together, lungs filling together, loins exploding together, all in a unified blending of self, being within someone else and looking out, looking at yourself and seeing the flaws, the problems, but also seeing the reality, stripped of any false self-gratification. Maybe by entering someone else so forcefully you could for the first time be yourself once you separated. It was such a profound realization that happened completely subconsciously, for my brain had been liquefied, and my body had taken control. Just as I was about to flap my white sheets in the wind, pouring my milk into Penelope's carafe, filling her up, I took my finger and dug it into the bag of Angel of Death on the bedside table, brought a pyramid to my nose and inhaled.

When my brain resurfaced as something resembling a solid material, Penelope and I enjoyed hand-rolled cigarettes in bed, my arm wedged beneath my head against the backboard, and I looked up at the ceiling, letting my eyes adjust to the dimly lit room. The evening sun was upon us, but was completely smothered by the curtains, which Penelope had stitched herself.

"This is going to be the last time I see you for a while." I said, tactlessly.

"Why? Where are you going?" she asked, a note of sadness in her voice.

"Europe and probably Asia."

"What's there?"

I had never really thought about it that way. *What's there?* That was a good question.

"I'm not sure," I said, "but a man needs to get to know his planet either way."

"How will you get there?" she inquired.

"Graham gave me some money. An investment, he called it."

"Knowing Graham that money won't be free and clear. There's fine print somewhere."

"I can't say you're wrong. I don't know what he'll ask of me, but I'm ready to oblige him."

"Maybe he'll ask you to sleep with him. He's always had a sneaker for you." she said, grinning at the thought of Graham and I entangled in a similar position that we had just been in moments before.

"I don't care what it is." I said. "But he knows I'm not queer."

"That never stopped Graham before. He likes them straight, feels like he's corrupting them."

"Maybe that's why he doesn't try anything with me, I'm far too corrupted already."

"That you are." she said, leaning over and kissing me on the forehead, then spitting on her fingers and extinguishing her cigarette.

"I'm in a bad way, though." I said. She didn't respond, just waited for me to say what was bothering me. Penelope didn't like giving me the satisfaction of letting me know she cared. She

was the kind of person that wouldn't answer hypothetical questions, because she knew she was only being asked so she would ask in return.

"I left my copy of the Brothers Karamazov in the back of a taxi."

"Maybe that's a good thing," she said.

"How?" I asked, a little annoyed.

"Well, you are about to embark on a journey, you don't need a dirty old book. You've finished reading about other's lives and you've begun living your own. A journey like this doesn't call for materialism, you've got to be prepared to let go of your junk."

"I'm not materialistic," I said.

"Yes, you are," she said, "We all are."

Her words upset me at first, but then I looked around the room and noticed her radio and her mirror decorated with lights so she could doll up her face with makeup, and I realized she was right. I thought again about my ideal place, floating in a negative zone, and my hypocrisy. How could I desire such a place when I was holding on so dearly to earthly possessions? What Penelope said was a truth that cut to the bone. I had to let go of all my books, all my records, or I wouldn't be able to dedicate myself fully to the experience ahead. I'd be stuck longing for things back in my small apartment rather and replacing them with strange, exotic flowers of the Asian jungles or the mad love of some European woman. I then decided that before I left on my journey, I would donate all my belongings. I thought about burning them, because I didn't want to continue on the worship of these ultimately meaningless things, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I couldn't burn literature; I couldn't watch those words melt. They were too important; they needed to exist, to be picked up and read again, I just hoped they wouldn't enslave the reader as they had me, that the bindings and the ink didn't imprison the person, as I was certain that was never the intent of the writer. It had gotten so bad that the books themselves, the paper, the glue, the leather, became more important to me than the words within them, more important than the stories and the characters. I enjoyed the sick satisfaction I received from being able to name an obscure book or author from off the top of my head in a literary conversation with some pompous windbag that got a kick from belittling the lesser read. What had I become? Thinking about all this, I was now glad that my Brothers Karamazov was gone, one less thing to shackle me to the consumerism that was instilled in us from birth. Buy, buy, buy, eat, eat, eat, fuck, fuck, fuck, that was the American experience. Well, I no longer subscribed to such a faction; once again I would break loose of the stranglehold that the business world placed on me. I would no longer buy things to make myself feel complete, I would no longer eat when I wasn't hungry, and I would no longer engage in the physical act of love if it required the transaction of funds. I had been with a few prostitutes in my day, paying an arm and a leg for a pussy. No longer! Love was my only currency, freedom my only line of credit. I would plunder all the natural, ravishing beauty this world had to offer. I would bend down and eat grass like the cows; I would drink

from the river like the elephants and I would remain a free man, without allegiance to any government or business born plan. It was impossible to escape the shadow of their thumb, to refrain from becoming a statistic, but you could try like hell, kicking and screaming the whole way, becoming a loose sphere in a giant, enclosed pinball machine, a controlled disaster, collateral damage, a foreshadowed nightmare...

12

Laying there, dying on that stoop, crisping in the sun, I pulled myself to my feet. There was no time for rest. I still had to visit Baybrooke at the firm, see my big brother, stop by the folks' house, which I was not looking forward to, and then I wanted to board that plane to Italy. It was a long flight across the Atlantic; I could sleep on the plane. With any luck I would wake up on the runway arriving in sovereignty, breathing in the Italian air, breaking in the Italian pavement... But that seemed so far away. I first had to move my left foot forward, followed by my right foot and so on and so forth. I knew that if I did not continue moving I would fall asleep. I had to be as the shark, always in motion, always swimming. I couldn't risk taking another taxi. I'd be out before the meter clicked on. No, I had to drag myself through the streets, and the setting sun only added to my misery, it now becoming a red, blaring eye over the hills, secretly making accusations toward me, whispering to the moon and the stars all the terrible things it had seen me do. The moon would snicker at the utter tameness of the sun's stories and then unravel all the things he'd seen me do in the dark. I was entering that state of exhaustion where a feeling of nausea was always present, and I felt as though my head was filled with hot air, that if I undid my necktie, my cranium would just float away like some homesick balloon. If I could pull this off, I thought, I would be a legend; up two or three days, marathon sex with two sexy women, surviving an all night wine bender, multiple trips on the Angel of Death, and then jet setting around the world to the axis of style and class. Phin would have to sculpt a likeness of my head when it was all said and done.

I arrived at the firm, finding the door locked as I had suspected. I looked through the glass, cupping my hands around my eyes. There was no movement inside. I began to worry that Baybrooke had finally grown a backbone and had left that dungeon to pursue a life for himself. On any other day I would have been elated for him, but today I wanted him hunched over his desk, completely sacrificed by life and all the opportunities he had missed. I knocked. Nothing. I knocked harder and then I saw a mouse stirring. It was Baybrooke. He had fallen asleep amongst the never ending papers.

"Homer, where were you today?" he asked, adjusting his bifocals and removing the key from the door.

“I had errands.” I said. Answers like that were sufficient for Baybrooke. He was my second, and my personality greatly outweighed his, so in a way he looked up to me and I could get away with being a bit of a bully.

“I was sure you’d be here to pick up my slack.” I continued.

“Well, yes...” he said, defeated.

Baybrooke was nineteen-years-old, completely uneducated about almost everything, except paperwork. Some people were better at things than others, and Baybrooke had the market cornered on paperwork. The boy was just good. It would provide him with a comfortable life, a sedentary, lackluster life, but comfortable and for some people comfort was enough. I liked imagining Baybrooke as an old man, sitting in his chair, watching his grandchildren fumble about the yard, and he will have no regrets, because he will have not taken any chances. They said ignorance is bliss, well, if that were the case, Baybrooke had a built-in pleasure center, for he refused any information on world affairs and whenever I tried to tell him my dirty stories from the previous night he would become a shade of fuchsia.

“I have some regrettable news, Baybrooke.” I said.

“Wha...what is it?” he stuttered.

I almost didn’t want to tell him. I had spilled my story of retreat so many times already that it started to becoming a hassle to tell, and to tell Baybrooke, who put so much stock in me, it would be like deliberately knocking over a vase, he’d shatter into a million pieces. I was only a few years his senior, but I couldn’t remember ever being that weak, that sensitive. He might even cry. He’d do his best to hold them back, but once one little salty tear escaped, all bets were off, and he could very well go on blubbering for the remainder of the night and then my plans of riding through the Italian country, and dining on the Italian Riviera would be shot to shit. So, I did what any selfish person would do, I lied.

“I’m quitting the firm.” I said. His mouth opened in shock and horror.

“Now before you get crazy on me, let me explain, Baybrooke.” I continued. “It’s time for me to move on, do greater things. You know I was never cut out for the firm, sitting around here all day, up to my eyeballs in paperwork, that’s for you to do. You’re the wiz with the papers. No, God designed me for a greater purpose, something charitable, something honorable, something that will allow me to do some good.”

“What will you do?” he asked, afraid I would say something like travel around the world.

“Nothing extravagant, my sweet Baybrooke, I’ll be right down the street, in my apartment like always. You can count on that, and you can stop by any time you like, how does that sound?”

He let out a smile from the corner of his mouth.

“All right, Homer.” he said.

Ah, the flood of tears would be saved for another day. I felt rotten about lying to the boy, but it

couldn't be helped. A liar is a coward, a smart coward, but a coward none the less. I knew one day my elaborate web of lies would catch fire, and all the truths that were meant to be spoken would squeal and writhe out of the flames.

Baybrooke agreed to inform his uncle of my departure, after I told him that I didn't want to deal with the begging and pleading his uncle was sure to do in order to keep me. I was as vital to that firm as a heart in the human body, but alas, I no longer felt like beating. I had arteries to unclog, veins to wash out. Hopefully I would fill them up again with rich cheeses and freshly baked bread.

"Are you hungry?" Baybrooke asked.

Truth be told, I was rather famished and the steak and eggs from earlier that morning weren't sitting well. I figured I could grab a quick bite with Baybrooke. It was still early evening; I'd have plenty of time to finish everything that needed to be done. Worst case scenario I'd leave first thing in the morning. The only problem with that was staying awake an additional nine hours. Nine hours was inconceivable at the moment. I didn't even consider it in the realm of possibility. I would just keep trudging on, putting one foot in front of the other and see if everything didn't turn into a dream the further I went along. How long was it before you began to hallucinate? The dark corners of my mind didn't want to know.

"Starving my boy!" I said, rambunctiously, rubbing my belly with my hand, grinning fiendishly to Baybrooke.

"Would you like to join me for coffee?" he asked.

"Join you for coffee? How old are you?" I asked, rhetorically. I stopped him before he could answer. "You're an old man in a young man's body." I said. "It's a shame. It's a waste of youth." I continued. I looked over at him and he seemed crushed by my words, his head hanging loosely down, bobbing side to side. I'm not sure if he totally grasped what I meant, but he didn't like disappointing me, so I patted him on the back and said,

"Sure, I'll get some coffee with you."

That cheered him up. Seeing Baybrooke walking slightly in front of me, dopey and placated, I felt almost fatherly toward him, as distorted an image that was and as much as I tried I couldn't help but feel the least bit responsible for him. He took my words as gospel, which of course was foolish, for even I couldn't distinguish what was truth and what was complete horseshit... So, I embellished every now and again, but nothing that wasn't based in truth. No one knew of what fantastic yarns I could spin, but they filled me up with guilt anyway. As good a liar as I was, I was lousy at dealing with the injustice, with the outright deceit of the lie. But I took comfort in my good intentions. I believed that motive had a lot to do with the severity of the crime. A death was ruled as manslaughter without intent, but spend a moment planning and you entered the world of murder, a cold, friendless world made of cells and bars. A lie for a lie's sake was much worse than one used to uncover a greater truth. This was true in art, hell it was one of its

founding principles. There was a deception to art as much as there was a truth, so I classified my little fibs as *untruths* more than I did outright lies. Either way, I could have been speaking divine accounts or hellish fables, Baybrooke would lead his life by them. What he saw in me I'd never know, but when you were aware of someone being impressionable towards you, a certain responsibility wedged itself in for their well-being. There are few things harder to shake than the instincts to do the right thing. I figured I would take this opportunity, sitting down together, sharing a meal, to talk to him, perhaps impart some wisdom, wisdom I did not lay claim to, but was gifted enough linguistically to regurgitate to Baybrooke in ways he could understand.

We ended up going to a café, which I had frequented many times before with Phineas and Graham, and Max. After carousing about the town until the late hours of night, we'd all go top ourselves off at the delightful café located downtown, smack-dab in the middle of where everyone lived. It was only a ten minute walk for each person, down in a gully, and it was beautiful walking toward the summits, either seeing the sunrise or feeling its warm glow on your heels. Those were the days! They seemed so long ago, now that everything had changed and Max was gone from my life. It amazed me how people were so quickly banished from your existence, how a woman that could love me, or pretended to love me, or thought she loved me was erased with a few simple words. Human beings, with all their stupidity had an abundance of style when they needed it. They had an amazing way of putting an end to things, smoothly... relatively speaking, of course. Compared to all the explosions in the universe, an argument which silenced a love seemed pale in comparison. Our loves were blinks of a centipede's eye compared to the loves expelled among the stars. We were ant shit, little, microscopic nothings on a plane, which had no end. I loved that, the universe being endless, that is. It made me feel so small and I just wanted to lay back and disappear into one of the folds. But what I enjoyed most was something I'm sure no one I knew even considered in their miserable little lives, especially not Baybrooke, and that was being able to comprehend that there were things that existed in this universe (or the multiple universes) that I could not comprehend. For example, it is said that the universe is expanding, but expanding into what? Nothing is what we're told, but how could it be expanding into nothing? What is nothing? The simpleminded human would imagine a vast, epic coat of black, but black is *something*. Human beings cannot wrap their minds around the idea of nothing, and that fascinated me. We were able to understand misunderstanding at its most basic, and that was an ignorance that united us. No man or woman was smarter or wiser than any other man or woman when it came to the far reaches of space or what was beyond the outer limits. Where that barrier of the universe ended was where our minds ended as well. That *nothing* out there, the nothing that this flimsy string of galaxies hung upon was where I desired to be. That's what I imagined my negative space being, always one step ahead of creation, just on the outskirts of *something*, becoming one with nothing. Like I said, these were subjects I could never breach with Baybrooke. He had never thought about the sky above let alone the limits of the human

mind. He would think I was pulling his leg, trying to confuse him to get a laugh. He never pondered the human fabric, what made us so unique and sometimes worthy of the rule over this planet. To him space was way out there and he was way down here and it had no purpose in his life. He couldn't alter space, he couldn't travel through it, he couldn't even breath in it, so why waste time asking these questions which had no answers. He didn't care to know that space was not as distant as he thought, but that he was in space at any given moment, that we were all Martians living on someone else's globe, which probably spun in front of a crackling fireplace on a wooden desk where the blueprints for this existence were made.

It was good to return to the café. I was lost in thought about the expanding universe as we sat down and Baybrooke asked if I was alright. I snapped back to reality and explained that I hadn't slept in ages and that I would be falling in and out of coherence during our visit. The employees of the café welcomed me as usual, by name. It made you feel a bit like a celebrity when you were welcomed with friendly faces, calling out to you, remembering your favorite table and your usual drink order. This didn't help humanizing me to Baybrooke at all, for he seemed to marvel wide-eyed at my warm greeting.

"Come off of it, Baby Baybrooke." I said, calling him a little pet name I had given him. "It's not unusual for them to know their regular customers." Again he seemed to have his feelings hurt.

"Will you stop being so goddamn sensitive all the time?" I said. He looked up at me with eyes that said, *just tell me how to act and I will do so.*

"See! Right there! You're doing it now!" I continued.

"Doing what?" he asked.

"You're looking at me with those pathetic eyes." I paused for a moment. If I was going to break him of this morbid fascination he had for me then I was going to have to be harsh. I needed to bust him up and then rebuild him. Someone had to shatter his dismal world, and there wasn't a better man for the job. This is what I meant by being fatherly. Wasn't it some other bastard's job to teach this kid? I was in his shoes not long before and no one told me a damn thing about the world. The world itself had a funny way of teaching you things that you wouldn't soon forget. The world's lessons were never misunderstood or unclear, they were perfect in conception and execution, for the world usually was the last-ditch-effort for enlightenment. Before the world tossed you into its jowls you had been warned of the same lessons by family, friends, literature, radio and cinema, but none of them prepared you for the real thing; nothing even came close to the sense of pain or joy that the world would imprint on you. Everyone bore scars from the world's lashings; it was one of the things that united us as people.

"What the hell is it you see in me, anyhow?" I asked, sincerely curious.

"I don't know. You seem to have things figured out and you're my friend." he said.

"But I've treated you so badly."

He laughed at this, just one noisy smirk.

“That’s just your way.” he said.

In that moment I felt as though I had underestimated Baybrooke. He had figured out something, which I still wasn’t sure I had grasped completely, and that was you could not change people, you had to accept them for who they were. It sounded so rotten and phony, but it was true.

People were set in their ways, how a dog was set in his, and there was no changing unless the change came from within. Women especially were oblivious to this fact; most of them felt the need to rehabilitate their lovers, take men into their bed with the ridiculous hope of licking their wounds and repairing them, as though innocence was the trait most abundant in a man.

Baybrooke accepted the fact that I was a cretin, but he was able to champion me anyway, because he had seen the good within me. That is a talent that unfortunately comes naturally; you cannot practice good-heartedness, you either had it or you didn’t, and despite all of Baybrooke’s inexperience, he seemed to have a good handle on who was trustworthy and who wasn’t. He probably knew I was lying about just leaving the firm, he probably knew that I planned on traveling abroad, maybe never seeing him again, but the lie had come from a better place, somehow rationalizing it for Baybrooke, making it digestible or maybe he just let me get away with more because I was his friend... I looked at Baybrooke and felt a true affection for him; I had never felt a kinship, even with Phineas, like the one that was now transpiring between Baybrooke and me. His earthy, rugged quality that set him apart from the others I had known, with their stuffy, intellectual mumbo-jumbo, provided a connection that was much more emotional than anything else. I wished I could have taken him with me, for I’d spend most of the time seeing the famous sights in the reflections of his eyes, as they would be peeled fully, sucking up every detail of a world completely unknown to him. The truth was... I loved the boy. I loved him, and I was just now noticing it. He was a presence in my life that I took for granted; a face I saw every day out of routine, not out of choice, and that sometimes concealed a love until it was gone, until it was unexpectedly changed. The strange sensation to cry then came about me as though it was a cat nuzzling my leg; how ironic it was that I be the one to cry, and to Baybrooke of all people. I swallowed as hard as I could, holding back the tears, literally trying to retain the moisture by focusing intently on the coat rack just right of Baybrooke’s head. I felt the mucus slip down the back of my throat and my cheeks flush. I had to speak; I had to sever my thoughts of leaving Baybrooke behind to fulfill his prophecy of an average life in an average town, maybe knowing an above average contentment with things. I did not know why I was afraid to cry; perhaps it was that I hadn’t cried in so long, that if I let a single tear out I would never stop. Crying with Phineas to the French records where empty tears, tears without meaning, just crying at the simple beauty of the music, but trying to hold back tears as powerful as the ones I was experiencing with Baybrooke, the kind built from irrational emotion was like trying to fit a large item into a small box, a box that contained everything you hoped would be, but knew

somehow couldn't be. I wanted to apologize to Baybrooke, I wanted to say I was sorry and I wanted his forgiveness. I felt as if the only way I could leave on this trip was if Baybrooke forgave me. What miserable guilt I felt now for all the things I had done to him, what quiet qualities about him I had overlooked.

"I'm sorry I've been so rotten to you in the past." I said.

"It's okay, Homer." he said.

12 ½

(9) (...orphans genuflect to faceless fathers...given bloody noses...tree houses built out of driftwood...reviled...defunct...lonesomeness plagues childhood like a moth...confessions scribbled into schoolbook margins...prayers from lips to God's ears...still believing in things...having faith...hope for no other reason than hope...being unaffected...sleeping beneath stars...grass blades tickling necklines...the replenishing power of dreams...horrors bequeathed through contemporary housewives...midnight clouds illuminated by moon rays...blurred horizon lines...old men looking down avenues...careless...waiting for death like an old friend...smiling faces and tear-flooded weather-beaten frowns...lost among mazes made of bone...fingers bleeding into one another...friends reach out arms...returned disfigured...advice like lottery tickets...decreasing values of meaningful nightmares...freedom meaning being free...running down cracked asphalt streets on the 4th of July...skinned knees bleeding lava pits...gumption...dog-eared thoughts wrapped in blankets of laughter...paperwork stacked in piles resembling skyscrapers...bricklayer's blistered fingernails... (1) sacrificing joy for love...single file lines stretching as far as the eye can see...bats in the belfry...crimson bluffs blowing weeds cobblestone paths made of flashbacks...outright and unpunished murder communicated through radio waves...brain waves copulating...multiplying...cheating on the mistress with the spouse...digging at least five dog graves in a lifetime...bedtime stories...roles reversed...stranded on an island of hopeless dreams...left to rot...battlefields littered with the broken hearts of mothers...life after the bomb...the American dream fornicated...abortion siren tornado alert...friends depart leaving white fences to smolder...)

13

Night again! I truly was a creature of the night. The sun was completely down and I was alive once more! Baybrooke and I parted ways, and he walked off into the glorious night, becoming smaller and smaller until disappearing altogether. Our goodbye was short and sweet; Baybrooke's a little more flippant than my own, probably because I invited him over for drinks

later that week. My compulsive lying sickened me. But he was gone and all the sappy feelings that were gushing from me were dry as a bone. Out of sight, out of mind, that's how it was for me. Very rarely did I dwell on people. I dwelled on *things*, that was certain, but a person was much easier to forget. I think it was because once a person was gone; you could pick and choose what you wanted to remember about them. Most of my memories for people were reduced to love or hate and it usually had to do with our last encounter together. In Baybrooke's case, I would always remember him fondly, in Edith's case, for example, she would always be a lowdown whore. She probably had found herself; married, settled down, got respectable, but to me she was just a whore. It is difficult to erase your memory of a person, for once you stop seeing them your memory becomes lousy and just little fragments of things they did or said could be remembered, or the feelings you had for them lingered all funky and stagnant in your heart, popping up at random times when something reminded you of them, like a song or a certain smell of a perfume. It took all your senses together to fully remember a person, how they sounded, how they smelled, the texture of their skin... I think I had said some things to Baybrooke that would stick inside his mind and work on him over time. I had no interest in filling him full of horseshit, about life and love and independence, they were things he'd stumble upon. No, I more or less told him that emulation was not the destination point, that aspiring to be like me, or to be like anyone was the mutilation of self, that an idol was a springboard, a divot cut into a wall, a starting point. I told him that heroes were to be bested and crushed into sawdust, because otherwise you limited yourself and tarnished any hope of originality.

There were few occasions where I was able to express legitimate observations that didn't stem out selfishness and I felt that I had done that with Baybrooke. I walked off, along my old stomping grounds with a sense of pride that I had desired but never did enough to obtain, I had selflessly acted on the behalf of another person. I was getting into the human mix, which was something I believed in, but never had the courage to do. I felt estranged from the human race at times, like an oddity that could never be understood. It was a copout, essentially, and I knew this. I was a part of *them*, that couldn't be helped, I had two arms and two legs, a face, a body, my reproductive organs, nothing really set me apart from them, I just enjoyed feeling *special*, taking pity on myself for being such a misunderstood genius, but it was all of my own creation. There were people out there worthy of making a connection with, there were millions who weren't, but you should never damn the bushel for a few rotten apples. What it boiled down to was I didn't have many options when it came to making a connection with another living being. If animals ruled the world I would make an effort to intercede with them, gain an animal knowledge, if a flower or a tree could speak, I would talk with them, but alas humans were all there was to attempt such a connection, to speak with, the help, the make love to. If the ground were to open up and provide me a moist orifice, perhaps I would kneel down and commit coitus with the earth, and I would ejaculate into it, planting a human seed that could grow into a flesh tree, and human

hearts would sprout from the branches. As much as I desire a woman's flesh against my own, as much as their vaginas were gateways to spiritual awakenings, I sometimes felt flustered that they were my only chance at love. There were two genders on this planet, and one was obsolete purely because of genetics. I could not fuck a man. I did not know why, there never was a clear reason, they just didn't fill my guts with gasoline the way a woman did, their bodies never excited me as a woman's could, charging me with pure electricity. I felt underdeveloped, devolved in a way, for there were people out there that didn't have a sexual preference. They could have fucked men or women; they could have traveled to a distant solar system and fucked the natives, not thinking twice about it, but welcoming sex as an old faithful friend. I was confined, against my will, to be attracted to one gender, and I felt cheated, when those people existed, who were entirely free to find love in anyone. I didn't like the idea of not having a choice in the matter, the idea that I wasn't in control of my own brain, my own heart, my own cock. I thought about the ancient Greeks and how the men had wives for bearing their children, and then boys to fondle and molest. Where were their sexual preferences? Where were their genetics? And if there weren't any, when did they become prevalent to society? Had I unknowingly allowed my sexuality to be curbed by society, was I attracted to women because that's what was engineered for me? To the Greeks, who gave us philosophy and poetry and architecture, sexuality was ambiguous, an orgy in a pitch black room, a pile of arms all grappling for the same heart. What had happened between then and now that so much hatred and confusion clouded itself around sex, like the early morning smog that so deceptively shielded the sun? Wasn't love supposed to be boundless? Why were some people worthy of it and some people not? Who made these rules and why did we continue to enforce them? I felt as though I had conformed to my own sexuality, unwittingly obeyed a subliminal voice... Once again, I found myself drifting through the city in a daze and just when I was about to become infuriated by the thought that I was helpless in the great human pleasure, a woman caught my eye, who sashayed past me as though curtsying at the end of a stage, or dancing in a ballet, a redhead, straight from hell, a vixen. Her hair fell to the middle of her back like acid rain. Her appearance there seemed to be fate, for all doubts of my sexuality disintegrated, and my prick came bursting through my trousers, raw and chewed and shellacked in the dried juices of Penelope and Max. I settled on the comforting fact that at least I had women, and thankfully they populated half the earth. It was out of my control, but the passion they filled me with was so intense that I couldn't imagine another quasi-sexuality to be any stronger.

I was on my way to visit my older brother, older merely out of the coincidence that he happened to be born before me. People loved to make a to-do about someone's age, as if I couldn't be interested in events that transpired before my accidental birth. That really burned me up. I was part of this world, like it or not. My brother, older by six years, had recently finished residency and had just opened his own practice as a medical doctor. He was a natural born

genius, where I had to work at it, his capacity to obtain and store knowledge was truly remarkable, and despite several accusations from family members that I was jealous of his success, it was quite the opposite and we were very close. Of course we had our knockdown drag-out fights as children, but nothing lasting. We were simply too different from one another to have any sense of competition. It worked to our advantage that I didn't have a stitch of interest in the medical field. Don't get me wrong, I marveled at anyone with the fortitude to do such a job, but it was all too bloody for me, too much tragedy involved. Death loomed around hospitals, and wherever death loomed, I wouldn't be found. I had living to do. My brother, Thaddeus, would argue the exact opposite, he'd say his job was to prevent death, that the entire institution of medicine was put in place to ward off the eternal sleep, but I suppose that's what made us able to endure all these years, our different ways of looking at things. I guess it was true that we were quite extraordinary seeing that Thaddeus had been adopted, which I've heard causes wedges to emerge between siblings. As I've stated, my parents were unable to have children and at their most desperate they decided to adopt, so it made sense that he had all the brains, because it wasn't our parent's brains that we were dividing.

Thaddeus had a great way of understanding, if not condoning, my desire to be a subtle blimp on the plane of existence. He knew from the very beginning that I was a drifter, a fact my parents were never able to swallow. They believed in a path, a path that had to be taken without recourse. Thaddeus pleased them, because his journey was riddled with difficulty, but if he stayed the course he would eventually turn out all right. His plan had a guarantee, when I didn't even have a plan. I could see how such a thing could worry a parent, but I truthfully never felt any remorse about my decision making. I didn't see the logic in altering something in your life for someone else, no matter who it was. It drove my mother and father up the wall, but I never budged. I had willpower, a trait parents don't acknowledge when it is contrary to their wishes. Parents had a funny way of instilling morals in you simply so you would follow their command, it wasn't to enlighten you, it wasn't to prepare you, it was to feed their egos, the joy they got from controlling a person weaker than them. This was proven by the fact that parents were just flawed human beings like their children. They didn't have any answers, so they tried to coast through parenthood, pacify the child into obedience and use them as representation for themselves. They honestly believed that their child was an extension of them, a reflection. Nothing could be more incorrect. You were a person, no matter what age. I sometimes hated that I was made up of someone else's DNA. I wished I could have been grown naturally, that I didn't have to be a mixed pool of jism flung haphazardly into a womb. How could I be original if even my blood belonged to someone else? The thought of it made me uncomfortable in my skin. I wanted to peel it off and lounge around in my bones.

The search for individuality was over even before it began. It ended at conception, when the mixing of juices resulted in a tadpole. That's why I harped on the idea of an awakening rather

than a search for individuality. That was a lost cause, but now that I was alive I needed to be woken up. I thought it was wise to see my big brother, have him check me over, make sure I was in tip-top condition, that I wouldn't breakdown in a foreign land when communication was aloof. I had been revitalized by the feeling of accomplishment I got from my visit with Baybrooke. I thought it would be safe to take a taxi. I hailed one at the next corner and we went whizzing off like two madmen. As far as I could tell the taxi driver was like all taxi drivers, reckless and disillusioned with life. He turned corners as though in a race with the adjacent cars, smashing me into the door with all my weight close behind. If one latch was loose I would be out on the street, scraping my skin against the pavement like a grater against cheese. I felt as though I had been duped into getting into the chariot of death, and I was actually tunneling through different dimensions on my way to hell. I had found myself again in a doomed taxi ride. What was it about me and taxis that brought on these paranormal coincidences? What was it that made me feel doomed? I felt as if I was constantly in the shadow of some larger, bestial thing, waiting for it to descend upon me. Nonsense, I thought. These were figments of my own imagination, I was being a pessimist. Maybe it was deep down I felt a little anxious about my trip, and these doubts were manifesting themselves as paranoia. I would be totally alone, thousands of miles away from any familiar face. That was a bit frightening. I looked out the window, as to think about something else. The passing lights of the storefronts calmed me. I knew we were getting close to my brother's house, for I started to see places that held many memories for me, a water fountain we had drank from as children, a tree in the park in which we played. It reminded me that I hadn't seen Thaddeus for some time, how much time I couldn't say, but it saddened me, for we used to see each other regularly. Why had we stopped? He would look older than the last time I saw him. He was at that point where age became noticeable, subtly, almost invisible to the estranged, but I would be able to notice the slightest wrinkle or the smallest grey hair. I was craving the Angel of Death, but now was no time to get twisted, in the care of some lunatic taxi driver, driving at high speeds in residential neighborhoods. He'd think I was dying and toss me into some lousy stream. Plus I needed to be clearheaded for Thaddeus, he'd know something was amiss the moment I walked through the door. I reached in my pocket and felt how much was left with my fingers. There wasn't much. I had used the bulk of it with Penelope, spilling some as a result of the sloppiness of lovemaking. I fantasized about Samuel licking up the residue off the floor and spiraling into an incomprehensible doggy nightmare, replaying all of his flaccid canine thoughts. It made me laugh and I chuckled aloud, drawing strange stares from the driver. He looked to be from overseas and I had also noticed his thick accent when he asked me for the destination. He became annoyed with me when I couldn't remember Thaddeus' address at first, and probably thought that I was some morphine-head cut loose from a mental hospital to knife him when payment came due. I didn't blame him of course, he picked up every miscreant, scoundrel and junkie this town had to offer, dropping them god knows where. He had seen some

strange things I'd be willing to bet. Taxi drivers were reliable sources when it came to mischief. They knew all the back alley spots, all the hidden fixtures of this town that were so heavily guarded. Most of the speakeasies had been renovated after the re-legalization of liquor and turned into gentlemen's clubs, hot little joints where filthy men could get filthy and a working class girl could make a buck. Most people looked down on prostitutes or erotic dancers, but I thought of it as an honorable profession just as any other. Some girls were born with brains and some were born with body. That was the way of things. I didn't see any harm in a girl using her natural gifts to earn a living. There was nothing more lucrative than sexuality and the person who could squeeze the most from it deserved my respect.

Like I said, I had been with prostitutes before, the world's oldest profession they called it, but thanks to humankind rising to the lowest bar of decency, the girls were made to be sour, unloving and empty. They were subjected to the scourge of humanity, beaten, raped, drugged up, sometimes murdered. Glamour was a word much forgotten to these women, being thought of as just empty vessels to be used and reused, recycled when finished with, all their worth, all their individualism extinguished like the wet, burned out butt of a cigarette. I didn't blame them for their coldness, and I pitied them because not only was making a real connection with someone impossible, the simple *desire* to make that connection had been driven out of them. They no longer believed it was possible. Love was a dead man that lived centuries ago, becoming nothing more than myth. They read about love, they knew love subsisted at some point in history, which only made it worse. If only they were born to a different set of parents, if only they had met the right person, they too could experience that love, but instead they were sentenced to the streets, forced to let their minds degenerate into just one more orifice to maul and penetrate.

I had been with a prostitute a week prior. Max was menstruating, which meant that we weren't having intercourse. I told her time and again the blood didn't bother me, but she refused. Masturbation was glum, it depressed me when I had a woman that I should be sleeping with, but a man needed to ejaculate, that was the natural order of things. I had gone long stretches of time without a woman, making myself come up with new and thrilling ways of milking myself. I'd lay flat on my back and strum the knob for hours until it appeared like I was having a spasm. The orgasm sent my body into short, stupid jerks, and odd blubbering sounds came from my mouth, as if I was the subject of an exorcism. Afterward I wondered if women spent their time inventing different masturbatory techniques, but I doubted it very much, where as a man's organ was simple in nature, a woman's body was an elaborate safe that had a very specific way of being cracked. I felt they had less wiggle room when it came to climaxing themselves. I could have stuck my prick out an open window and sooner or later I would arrive at orgasm. A woman on the other hand took to her vagina like a musician consulting an instrument or a gambler hiding his hand, a strategic series of gestures, grazing the right places, zeroing in on the clitoris as if it were a treasure map and X marked the spot. But what puzzled me the most was, it seemed that

women could go years without sexual gratification. If men waited too long he could very well drown in his own semen, and then he became this primordial thing where every gust of wind gave him a hard-on, as if the jism filled up your entire body and then somehow made it into your skull, disrupting the brain's commands, sending all and every function to below the waist.

Woman could remain poised in the face of arousal, which made it all the harder on the man to read them and provide the proper foreplay. Now that was the key, foreplay. The physical act of love wasn't enough for the woman, they needed to be romanced, put in the proper mood, coaxed into a mindset of bliss. It was very much a state of mind for them. This is why I believed men and women could never synchronize themselves on a sexual level. Of course the mind played a significant role for the male as well, but nowhere near as important as it was for the female. They needed an atmosphere, an entire scenario, as though the reality was too harsh for them, as if they needed to somehow create another persona for themselves. I liked to imagine a woman created a sexual thought in her head, maybe it was of her father; she then closed her eyes and concentrated on nothing else. She would then add onto it, slowly, remembering things from her past, fantasies she had not yet lived, and all the while her arousal was growing, deepening, widening, and finally when the fantasy became too big to hold together, when there were too many facets, I would enter her, adding reality to an already seamless fantasy, and the feeling of me inside of her would disassemble her carefully crafted collage of sexual vision, propelling her into the orgasmic stratosphere, her body releasing liquid, spraying it from her loins like a fountain, the streams reaching up, up into the air until being suspending for a brief moment, and then falling down.

What saddened me about sex with a prostitute was it was joyless; it was dead sex, if there could be such a thing. It was a business transaction, nothing more. There was no foreplay, there was no sexual fantasy being fulfilled, it was just brainless fucking for the male's sake, to save himself from going mad for another day. I tried to converse with them before the deed, I wanted to let them know that I wasn't one of the treacherous pigs that looked down on them, that they were still complete women to me, not just certain parts of a woman. The most recent one was named Gwendolyn and she had an unusual scar beneath her right eye. I assumed she had gotten it from a previous client, when he decided that he wanted to cut her up for an extra kick. You could tell that the ugliness she had seen weighed on her, her eyes told me so; they were low and moist, almost drowsy. Gwendolyn and I went to a motel room. It smelled of ripe semen and the foggy aftermath of stale cigarette smoke. I sat down on the bed, immediately making me feel unclean. She began to undress.

"Wait a moment." I said, "I thought we could talk first."

"Talk about what?" she said, most definitely annoyed. She had seen this before I'm sure. I wasn't the first pity case. She didn't need or want anyone's pity, and she became more defensive toward me than if I had told her to get down on all fours.

"I'm not here to save you." I said, "I just thought it'd be nice to get to know each other

first. I'll pay for the time." That seemed to relax her. She took a seat at the small table in the corner of the room. I joined her, sitting on the opposite side. She brought a cigarette to her lips. I struck a match and lit it for her. My curious nature led me to pry. I wanted to hear some of her horror stories out of some sick fascination. Why was it that I was drawn to such places with such people? Why was it that I wasn't at Max's apartment, snuggling with her, making real love, sweet love? I think Gwendolyn enjoyed unburdening herself, because as soon as we started talking, her icy exterior melted away. They were just regular people, after all. We made jokes and told stories. She gave me some insight on the kind of lives I only read about in books. She told me of the perversions she had encountered, the bizarre tasks she had been asked to carry out. She told me of girls who had been so brutalized in their anuses that they took to wearing diapers, for they could not control the flow of their excrement.

"And men still paid for them?" I asked.

"They paid extra." she said, clam, desensitized, for while these stories were extreme and monstrous to me, that was her life, her custom and I marveled at how each day for me was a completely different day for someone else, with different norms and different irregularities. When Gwendolyn and I had sex, it was as though I wasn't her customer, as if we were two normal people entwined in the indefinable joy of human connection, even if it was for the briefest of moments...

I arrived in front of Thaddeus' home at ten to eight in the evening. All hope of leaving the country that night was gone. I'd have to make it through the rest of the night and leave in the morning. I felt my breast pocket to make sure I hadn't dropped my passport somewhere along the way, or maybe Max had cleverly slipped it out of my pocket when I wasn't looking and that's why she was glowingly so brightly when I left, for she knew she had got me, that I would arrive at the airport and be totally and completely fucked. No, it was there, my ticket to heaven. The driver suspiciously took his money and was thankful to have me out of his taxi. Good riddance! I thought. He drove off to terrorize another costumer. I considered taking down his license number and reporting him, but that was such a despicable thing to do and I didn't want to run the chance of speaking to the wench down at the hub again. If I were to hear her gravely, gurgling, moribund voice I would never be able to stop vomiting... So, I had made it to my brother's, and I became immediately aware of a sense of peace, a peace only home could bring. When my parents became elderly and Thaddeus' wife Mildred squirted out a couple of children, Thaddeus moved old mother and father to a loft uptown and took over the homestead for himself. It was a giant place, difficult for two people crippled by arthritis and gout to keep up and maintain. Thaddeus had never once lived anywhere else, which was a tragedy to me, but fine for him, he like it. I suppose he couldn't part with that peace I just spoke of. After a while your childhood home becomes a security blanket, and the smells, the furnishings, the sound of the bell, the sound of air escaping the sofa when you plopped down onto it, all became part of an arrangement, they

became part of a form that if changed could be devastating. I was bad that way, growing attached to really unimportant, insignificant things. It began as a child, always picking the strangest things to hold dear. I remember once coming home from school to find my father's old chair replaced with a new one. Where had the chair gone, I asked my mother and she informed me that the cushioning was worn out and infested with mites, so her and my father bought a new one earlier that day. For some reason, one I'm still not aware of, I went into my room and wept. It was just an ugly, old chair and yet I missed it, crying like a buffoon, muffling my sorrows into a pillow. My father had bought the chair while he was in the army before I was born, and he was rarely seen anywhere else. I had crawled around it as a baby, sat on my father's lap as a child, I had yanked on the lever, which released the footrest and cracked the top of the knob off as an adolescent, and then, one day, just like that, it was gone, without warning or a chance to say goodbye. It was a good lesson in life, things coming and going, mostly going, and eventually the unexpected departing of things became a little easier for me, though every once in a great while, whenever I returned to my parent's home, I looked for the chair. There had been four or five chairs since, but I still looked for it and upon discovering its absence, I always felt disappointed, lost. People were creatures of habit by nature, some more than others, but even the most traveled person wouldn't sleep as well as they did in their old room back home.

I knocked and Mildred answered.

"Hello, Homer. This is unexpected." she said.

"Yeah, I'm sorry to drop in on you like this, but is Thad around?"

"Sure. Why don't you come on in? I'll get him for you."

"Thanks Mil." I said.

Mildred and I were always on good terms. She was a prude, but good at heart, kind, sensitive, treated Thaddeus with respect. I liked her. I believe she liked me as well, or at least she put up with my unexpected visits very politely. She acted peculiar compared to the other women in my life, she always left Thaddeus and I to speak alone in the den, behaving subservient, withdrawn. In fact, I couldn't remember a single time where she expressed an opinion of her own. Penelope was so outspoken, which I suppose was unique for the time, but it still made Mildred seem all the more inhibited. Thaddeus would never discuss his sexual relations with Mildred, I believe out of respect for her, but he would listen to me drone on and on about whatever sexual extravaganza I had happened to get myself caught up in. We could speak openly about such things. I felt comfortable confiding in him, and I truly believed he enjoyed our conversations. I knew there was a sexual deviant bottling up inside of him, for one time, when he was under the influence of brandy, he expressed to me the pleasure he experienced while sleeping with Mildred during her third trimester of pregnancy. He spoke fervently about it, going into great detail, for the first and only time, describing the alabaster belly, and ripe, full breasts bursting with milk, how he drank from her, her nipples lactating out of control, overflowing like, the milk literary erupting from

her like an oil well, accumulating on the nipple as though cloudy tears.

“How did it taste?” I greedily wanted to know, getting a little erection at the thought of it.

“Sour.” he said, “Not like regular milk.”

It reminded me of what animals we were. Women produced milk like cows and goats. The original intent of the female breast was to feed offsprings. How non-sexual nature was. If nature had its way, pleasure would have nothing to do with sex, it would strictly be a means of reproduction, like a massive assembly line. Thankfully humankind had taken it the other way, embraced the animalistic side to it, and didn't turn it into a horrific, dystopian baby making mechanism, women's feet done up in holsters, their legs spread apart, contraptions and gadgets hooked up to them, feeding them mind numbing drugs, and men in long lines circling around the earth, waiting their turn to procreate, waiting to step up and efficiently perpetuate the human race. That terrible idea was in reach. If the act of being fiendish didn't feel so damn good, maybe I would be in a line now, awaiting my turn. Maybe sex would be as monotonous as paperwork and people like Baybrooke would be at the helm, the very breaking point of masculinity... What simple action in the course of human history had brought me to this point, standing in Thaddeus' den, mind reeling, heart pounding? Any number of things could have happened to bring us into that nightmare future. Joy was so easily commandeered that I was shocked it hadn't been hijacked already! My train of thought was broken by Thaddeus' great Danes, Prometheus and Copernicus, sticking their prizewinning noses deep into my crotch. It must have smelled like a fish market by now, the emulsion of everyone's nectars making it beyond putrid. I reached down and scratched them behind the ears, their tongues hanging out of their mouths like lobotomy patients. They were such beautiful creatures, lean, strong, flawless. Their smooth coats made them sleek, almost no wind resistance on their run. Thaddeus would race them from time to time and I'd go the track, place a few bets. I didn't want to make a habit out of it, for I had known men who went broke from gambling on dogs. You'd read the forums, you'd see the statistics, but there was just no way of knowing. I went solely with Thaddeus and I always bet on Prometheus. He was the champion. Copernicus was faster than goose shit, but Prometheus had prestige, he had presence, a gun-metal coat, and was all cock. Truth be told, I had never seen such a member on a dog. What a waste, I thought to myself, all that cock and no means of using it for anything of purpose; the curse of the dog, as it were.

Shortly after my welcome from the dogs, Thaddeus finally emerged.

“Homer, I'm sorry to keep you waiting. I was on an important call.”

“The life of a doctor.” I said, humoring him a bit.

“It's good to see you, old man.” he said.

“You as well. Surprisingly, it does me good to be home.”

“Home's home, no matter what happened inside it.”

“No truer words have ever been spoken, big brother.”

“So...” he seemed almost ashamed for asking, “what is the meaning of your visit?”

“I want you to look me over.”

“Are you feeling ill?” he asked, a shrewdness taking over his voice.

“No, no. Nothing like that.” I said. “I’m going on a trip and I want to make sure I’m in good health.”

“Where are you going?”

“Italy.”

“Oh, my.” he widened his eyes. “Have you told mother?”

“No. I planned on visiting them after I leave here.”

“She will be pleased you are finally taking an interest in the family heritage.”

“That’s not why I’m going.”

“Oh? Then why are you going?”

I couldn’t answer him. The reason for my journey was more of a feeling than it was something I could put into words. Something within me told me to stray, to abandon everything I knew, how do you tell someone that? It almost seemed foolish and childish when you examined it, only I knew of its seriousness, and maybe it was childish, only important to me. It honestly didn’t seem to matter. I didn’t have to answer. He would take my silence as proof of my uncertainty, of my brash, thoughtless decision to act, but little did he know about my conviction. He wasn’t aware that the decision *was* brash and it *was* thoughtless, and in a way, that was the point.

“Because I want to.” I said, a bit snide, reverting back into a child.

“That’s as good a reason as any, I suppose.” he said.

And then we changed the subject. Old Thaddeus was good in that sense, he didn’t harp on things, he didn’t bash your skull into the ground with his opinions. He usually made his thoughts known through cleverly asked questions, without ever actually stating his disapproval. He trusted you to pick up on it; in a way complimenting you while completely insulting you, but if you showed that you weren’t just blabbering, that you really cared about whatever you were saying, he’d back down once he had said his piece.

“Now down to the business at hand!” he said, slapping his hands together and rubbing them, as though greedy to get me on the doctor’s table. “Will you join me upstairs?” he said. I laughed and removed my jacket and my skimmer, giving them to him to hang up in the hall closet. Thaddeus had had my old bedroom converted into an in-home doctor’s office, complete with the frigid metal table, and all the usual amenities you’d find in a doctor’s office; stethoscope, thermometer etc.

“Say Thad.” I began, “Would you mind if I took a quick bath. I am just in god-awful standings with hygiene at the moment. My privates reek of burning automobile tires.”

“At it again, are you? Burning the candle at both ends?”

“You know me.” I said.

“All too well.” he said. “You know where we keep the extra towels. Help yourself.” I smiled and turned.

“Oh and...” he continued, “don’t take your usual hour and a half bath. I have a family and I’d like to spend time with them.”

“Righteo!” I said, with a salute.

I walked into the bathroom and it made me smile to see the pale lime green tile that had not been replaced since my childhood. In fact most things in the house had been untouched since its construction in 1887, save for the addition of modernized plumbing, and because of this I fell right back into the groove I had created as a child, reenacting my preparatory bathing rituals. I undressed and turned the shower knobs to as hot as they would go. I wanted to burn the filth right off me. For some reason, I had a very high tolerance for heat. I could never get the water hot enough, and sometimes I would get out of the tub with red blotches all over my body, looking like a fresh little piglet awaiting the abattoir. And Thaddeus was right when warning me about my usual long baths, for I did enjoy the peace and the solitude that came with bathing, being in my natural birth state, nude and without an erection, just my pecker like a shrimp dangling between my legs, harmless and desolate. I’d usually take two hours or more in the bath, simply relaxing, scratching all the hard to reach places of my mind. Most discoveries I had made in my life had been made in that tub, or on that toilet. Don’t ask me why, but almost every idea I have ever come up with has began on the commode. Perhaps it was the idea of something escaping me, therefore there needed to be something to refill me, but however you looked at it, the toilet was a source of inspiration for me, a wellspring of creation and cerebral development. It had been on that toilet that I lost my faith in God. It was while reading the theories of Thomas Aquinas. He wrote what is commonly called the ‘watch theory’ or theories on Intellectual Design. I had gotten my hands on this book from my school library, whose librarian was a crazy old coot that could talk your ear off about any and every subject, for hours, chewing the lobes, tonguing the canals. Aquinas looked upon our universe as a watch, and simply put, if there was a watch, there must be a watchmaker. This struck me profoundly. It made complete sense, and my heart leapt with joy, for I had finally found something that made the existence to God understandable for me. Prior to this, it had been no questions, all prayers. Questions were looked upon as treason in my household, how dare I question the word of God! And in my mother’s and father’s house no less! And yet... there I was, reading on the toilet, my parents downstairs locked in the smashed gears of life, discovering the ways of the world, hidden in the furthest place from it. The peace I found in Thomas Aquinas only lasted for about ten to twelve minutes, for then the question arose, who created the watchmaker? A human or a being of any sort surely was a watch in its own way. Who had created the watchmaker who had created the watch, which told all of us the time? The watch theory to me seemed to be nothing more than a rationalization, as the ancient Greeks had done and the Indians who conquered this American land before it was stolen

from them by means of trickery and violence had done. The Greeks had no way of understanding lightening, so they created a character who threw bolts at his enemies, and lived on a mountain, in which they could not see the peak, and he fraternized with all the other personifications of explanations for their incomprehensible world. The Indians could not comprehend the idea of a sun, a ball of fire floating off in space, so they made it a God. What was stopping generations from now studying our interpretations of God in some lousy history book, chuckling to themselves at our primitive concepts? As you could well imagine, I felt very alone once I made this discovery, like the God I had been crying out to all this time was an inert creation of my mind. I had been offering up my struggles to an invisible, impossible being, when I should have found the strength within myself to overcome them, and a bit of that lonesomeness found its way to me once again, being in that bathroom where it first sprouted, making me look toward the ceiling and then simply and quietly forgetting.

I let the water run for a full five or six minutes, and while it was fogging up the room I picked and prodded at the blemishes on my face. I removed the crusted mucus from my nostrils, which was one of the few true human pleasures. I rolled the snot into little balls and then flicked them off somewhere into the room. I studied my eyes, taking into consideration each bulging red vein, I noticed the iris and the immaculate detail within it, I mused about how close I was to death, how much longer I would have if I were to keep up this lifestyle of no sleep. Sleep deprivation was a form of torture, and here I was, torturing myself, acting as my own dominatrix, pushing myself to the absolute limits. I started to feel a deep regret about taking Dr. Chin's Angel of Death. It had altered my sense of reality, causing me to want more, to have an unquenchable thirst for a silly powder, and I knew something was corrupted about my desire, because the trip it caused wasn't all that fantastic, in fact it was agonizing. Why would anyone put themselves through it again and again unless they were hooked? I had let myself become slave to something and I felt small and callow for it. I never wanted to be shackled by anything, and yet I was unable to think of anything else, my brain in a cage, panting like a goddamn junkie. I decided to toss the rest of the Angel of Death in the gutter the moment I left Thaddeus'. I wanted to become pure and in order to do so I needed to be dependent on nothing. Addiction to a drug was the same as an addiction to love, and I knew first hand that an addiction to love had left Edith a soiled, decrepit version of herself. Besides, I had started to look thin. I had been on the stuff for two days and already it was eating away at my face, hollowing out the eyes. I looked like an adult skeleton with a thin layer of child sized flesh stretched over me. I finally submerged myself in the tub, an iceberg, ninety percent of my body below the water. The bath would do me good; give me a chance to rest my bones. Beforehand I picked up my undershorts and was compelled to sniff the crotch. Rancid, just as I had suspected. I rolled them into a ball and tossed them in the wastebasket. It looked as though I'd have to go free for the rest of the evening, flip-flopping around as I walked. So many passerbies would have no idea that just a thin layer of material

stood between them and my vicious cobra. Women from all walks of life would narrowly escape the Homer Miller sexual experience. This thought made me snicker, causing the water to ripple, and I caught a glimpse of myself distorted and wobbling as though a white whale in the midst of a storm. My head felt like Captain Ahab looking down upon his Moby Dick, almost filled up with as much contempt.

The bathroom resumed in perfect quiet as I sunk into the tub and felt the ache of my body. I always held myself in some kind of hold, an odd tension and I had to consciously tell myself to let myself go. Whenever I finally released from this grip, all my nook and crannies would ache like hell. I was quickly on my way to blackout, but then there was a knock on the door. It was Thaddeus.

“Are you finished in there yet? It’s going on ten o’clock.”

“Just finishing up now.” I said, which was ironically the same response I’d give to my father when I was masturbating inside the same bathroom. My father was oblivious to this, and thought that I was just taking extraordinarily long bowl movements, which I also did, and he’d tell me that I’d better stop or my asshole would dry out. My father was full of these kinds of goodies, wisdoms that no doubt he earned from experience. He would reprimand me for spending all my time in the bathroom, and it was the truth, I spent most of my day in the toilet, either reading forbidden books, or cutting ingrown hairs out of my legs, or taking my long baths, or discovering my juvenile sexuality. I didn’t have much use for the rest of my house. Someone was always yelling and screaming, parading around the house like a prima donna, and my parents didn’t think much of me, always looking for reasons to bust my chops. A day didn’t pass that I wasn’t reminded of some failure, in which I committed. They were petty things, things I didn’t and still don’t regret doing. To disappoint a parent at first is like torture, oh my goodness, the grief is inconsolable, but as time carries on, and the disappointments becoming larger and more frequent, the grief lessens. You realize there is no point in trying to satisfy every parental task that crops up in their minds. Sooner or later they become more than arbitrary tasks, they become life altering choices that define you as an individual. Carrying out an order no longer is a matter lacking desire; it becomes a matter of suppressing your own beliefs. It’s amazing the people who challenge you the most are the ones closest to you, primarily because they are the only ones that *expect* things from you. My mother and father created me, which made them feel owed, entitled, as though I was paying overdue rent fees for my mother’s womb, and they demanded respect, a respect that was not earned, but was simply and utterly demanded. The only reason I could surmise for this desired respect was the financial strain having a child causes, otherwise it is just a bloated self-entitlement that is the most well masked kind selfishness known to humankind. Respect for the sake of respect was a school of thought I must have been truant in, because respect can never be commanded, it must only be given willingly, if it was truthfully deserved.

I left myself a bit wet, because I liked the feeling of my moist parts getting a cheap chill when a gust of wind went by. I got dressed and met Thaddeus in the hall. When I opened the bathroom door, he stood inches away holding a bound bag in his hand.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Where did you find that?” I said.

“It fell out of your jacket pocket when I was hanging it in the closet.”

“You didn’t try any did you?” I asked him, worried.

“No! My wife is in the other room for Christ’s sake.”

“Oh, Jesus, Thad, you scared me. Put that in your pocket!”

I stuffed the evil powder in Thaddeus’ pocket.

“We’ll talk about it in your office.”

We both scurried to his office as if we were boys again, excited to tell each other a terrible secret. We entered his office, my old room, and closed the door.

“Alright, we’re in my office, now what is this stuff.” Thad said, almost upset that I would bring drugs into his house.

“Thaddeus, you’re holding the key to the past.” I said, trying to church it up a bit.

“What are you talking about?”

“I got that stuff from a Chinese herbal remedies doctor. He calls it ‘The Angel of Death.’ It shows you your whole life as if you were about to die.”

“It’s just a hallucinogen, Homer.” he then shook the bag. “And it looks like it’s almost gone.” he looked at me with questioning eyes.

“I haven’t tried any. There wasn’t much to begin with and I spilled most of it on a trolley ride earlier today.”

“Why’d you take it in the first place?”

“He owed me, so he gave me a little. He said it was really rare, valuable.”

Thaddeus put the bag to his nose and sniffed it.

“Young brother,” he said, “I believe you got swindled.”

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no such thing as a drug that can show you your entire life. It probably just makes you hallucinate.”

Of course, he had no idea what he was talking about, he had no idea of what power that substance could wield, what kind of craving I was feeling for it at that moment.

“You’re probably right.” I said. “Just toss it. I’ve been meaning to all day.”

Thaddeus closed up the bag and threw it in his wastebasket. It was like watching a bucket of paint spill on a one-of-a-kind painting. A weird, body lunge tried to take place, to dive for the wastebasket and sniff the rest of the Angel of Death in one, giant, brain melting sniff, but I contained myself. Jesus, I was like a dog on a leash. I disgusted myself. I wanted to confess all

my wrongdoing to Thaddeus, but after lying to his face like that, he'd never forgive me. I had to commit to the lie; I had to get out of there before my face melted with guilt.

"So, how about I give you that exam?" Thad asked.

"Oh right, the exam."

"Strip down and I'll take a look at you."

I hesitated, perhaps for the first time about taking off my clothes.

"What's the matter, Homer?" Thad asked.

"I'm afraid I'll catch a chill." I said.

"Nonsense." he said.

I unbuttoned my shirt. He pressed the cold head of the stethoscope to my heart. I held my breath.

"Breathe." he said. I breathed.

He then sent me through the ringer, do this, do that, on and on...

"Well, you check out. You seem to be in good health, although I'll be truthful, you don't look it." he said.

"I haven't slept in a while." I responded.

"How long?"

"Two or three days. I'm really not quite sure."

"Fuck Homer." he said. I was taken aback by that, he didn't curse often.

"I know, I know."

"Why do you do such things to yourself?"

"I was trying to stay up in order to catch the flight to Italy. One thing led to another, I met with Phin, we drank red wine. Things just needed to be done."

He then must have clicked off doctor mode, for his eyes softened and he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Come on, little brother, let's have some brandy together."

Thaddeus and I adjourned to the downstairs den once more. He went over to the miniature bar in the corner of the room, then took a delicious diamond cork off the brandy and poured two glasses. He poured a little more for himself. I was examining the bookshelf while he was fixing the drinks and I came upon a very old copy of *Don Quixote*. I took it from the shelf and opened the pages. They were yellowed from age, frail as I turned them delicately. I didn't even have to stick my nose into the crease to smell the dusty paper stench of its pages.

"I didn't know you had *Don Quixote*." I said.

"That was father's." Thaddeus said, placing my drink on the desk and sipping from his own.

"It was?" I asked.

"Yes. I believe it was his favorite book."

...And it was the first time in years, if ever, that I learned something surprising about my father.

My mouth was opening. I was struggling to continue speaking. There was a magic to learning something about someone you thought was incapable of even surprising themselves. My father had given up long ago, I believe before I was even born. He had thrown in his towel and waited patiently to die, thinking it lucky if he could go quietly, in his bed, without a fuss. He had submitted to death, and I think that's where all our problems began, for I still believed in life, and to now find out that we shared something, a love for a book, made it seem possible that I wouldn't have to continue through that life fatherless. I hadn't considered our relationship anything of substance in over ten years. It was a broken toy that had too much sentimental value to throw away, so we placed it on a shelf to be forgotten. Knowing that he enjoyed Don Quixote was the simple spark I needed to begin a conversation. I wasn't looking for a complete transformation from the man, but I would like hearing his thoughts on one of the most important works of literature, a fact I'm sure he wasn't even aware of. I knew he had read the book by chance, probably during the war, and perhaps when there was still an ember of life in him, his mind got wrapped up in the fantastic tales of chivalry and adventure, and maybe that fascination turned into appreciation in his older years, when he was the Don himself, broken, beaten, mad, chasing after windmills, chasing after a life he had let slip through his fingers.

I put the book back in its spot on the shelf to be found by someone else on another day, and enjoyed my brandy with Thaddeus. We hardly spoke, just enjoyed each other's company, for again, I would be leaving him for a long time. He had checked me out and I was healthy. My body would make it through this journey, my mind, that was still to be determined, but now I was ready as I was ever going to be. I looked over at my brother and speculated that somehow we were related by blood, because we were so similar in a lot of indefinable ways. Even our faces were alike. I speculated that perhaps my mother had slept with another man, a man whose semen had some gumption, and that Thaddeus and I were half brothers. How splendid would that have been? We were both wits, our humor bonded us. We were both blessed with wicked tongues, but to talk then would have been vulgar. It is most definitely odd that in moments like that, silence did the most talking. All my adoration for my big brother was transferred silently, almost as if it were done telepathically. Relationships could be tested by the ability or the inability of have a silent conversation. If you can sit and enjoy a glass of fine brandy with your brother without uttering a single word, you knew a bond had grown and rooted itself deep enough to withstand any tornado that decided to roll through, and all the drama and all the agony that came with family would pass. If you could look at your woman in the eyes and just by staring long enough express every love she had made possible inside of you, then you had something lasting. Some said that time existed on a line, that everything happens at once, past, present, future, which would mean that I am immortal, and yet never born, but look inside a woman's eyes and you'll find a timeline of its own. You can see your entire relationship in their eyes, the beginning, the middle, the end, the past, the present, and the future. You may not realize

it, but you always know when a woman is temporary. You deny it because you don't want to sabotage yourself, but somewhere you know, and it's because you looked into their eyes, and you saw it end, but human beings are ignorant in the best way, they refuse to give up without a fight, and they'll fight to the end to justify it, to rectify it. As of that point I was coasting in uncharted waters, afloat on a sea, waiting for the tide to finally come in, comforted by the fact that the waves would always crash, would always roll up to the toes of a different woman. I can remember taking Max to the beach and thinking how ironic it was to see her in the water, for there was nothing more lasting than the ocean, and nothing more fleeting than love...

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It was going on midnight by the time I left Thaddeus' and to tell the truth, the mixture of brandy and exhaustion made me lightheaded. I had planned on visiting my mother and father, but they would have been asleep for hours, and besides the little discovery I had made about my father and Don Quixote was enough to pacify me. The image I had of my family at that moment was fond and there was no need to go ruining that by seeing them. The night had become almost cold, and my still moist genitals were like two little ice cubes, clanking together as I walked, as though held by the loose wrist of an inebriated socialite. I had absolutely no money left for cab fare; I was down to only the two-hundred and fifty that Graham had given me. Thaddeus had offered me some money, but I refused it. I really can't say why, for I had taken his money every other time he had offered it, and I wasn't even in dire need of it then, and now here I was on the cusp of plunging myself into a bottomless pit and I refused him. I also was many miles away from my apartment. It looked as though I would be walking, but I wouldn't walk, I would stroll, as though I was in park, or stepping out for a breather. The streets were still, and perfect for a stroll. As I walked past many a darkened window I realized that for a lot of people, their night was ending, while mine was just beginning. I had about seven hours to undergo, for the first flight out departed at 7:30 am. I was close now, I could feel it. I had no more stops to make, no more ends in need of being tied, the only thing left to do was sail through the clouds thanks to the inventions of man! And with any luck we wouldn't plummet into the drink. That was my only wish, to not die between then and the 7:30 flight, and it made me realized how rationed my wishes had become, I did not wish for anything materialistic, my usual record or book, I simply hoped that I would not die. This showed me that I was taking steps in the right direction to achieving true enlightenment. I then began fantasizing about all the ways I could meet my end. I could simply die from exhaustion, right there on the bloody sidewalk, or a vehicle driven by a drunk could veer off and strike me, a woman committing suicide by leaping out of her seventh story window could land on me, saving her own life in exchange for mine, I could stop at a

twenty-four hour café and be shot during a robbery, my face falling into my omelet, or I could simply trip over a crack in the sidewalk and bang the wrong part of my head, like pouring a bucket of water on a campfire, an entire life ended in the blink of an elephant's eye. Those were all the ways of death I could think of, some of them more likely than others. It was a morbid thought, my death, but it was a morbid curiosity more than it was a fixation. In all my talk about living, living, living, there were times that I would stop and contemplate death, the idea that one day I would no longer exist, and how from the world's point-of-view, it really wouldn't matter. Ideally, I would like to go while in the midst of sex. How wonderful it would be, locked in the arms of a sensual, tender lover, feeling content with dying, and then doing so, expiring like an old can of beans. I wanted to die just as I reached climax, shooting not only my jism into the girl, but my soul, blowing my last breath into her mouth as we kissed. To die in the vagina only seemed proper, for I was birthed from one, and so I shall die in one, is how I saw it, plus there was no greater moment of joy, of total mind cleansing, than parting the fleshy, pink walls as Moses had the Red Seas. I didn't want to wait to die, thinking about it every moment, I wanted to go out on a high note; I didn't want to end up alone in a cold room, I wanted to die fucking, and I wanted to be old as well, crotchety even. There was some fascination with young people about kicking the bucket early, living rapidly, and snuffing out before all the partial blindness, and the bad backs, and the immobile donges. Well, not me, I wanted to stretch the experience of life as long as it could go, get all my money's worth, accumulate as much debt as I could and then stick life with the bill. Take that you swine! Cum as I was going! Hop aboard the Angel of Death and ride him into the sun, continue to love like an unstoppable train into the giant, dark abyss, my body, the penis to the intergalactic vagina known as the afterlife, returning to the only true mother any of us have ever known.

Then out of habit I reached into my pocket for the Angel of Death, but in its place was something else, a small manila envelope containing three hundred dollars and a note from Thaddeus. The note wished me well on my journey and that he did not demand payback, that the money was a gift to be spent wisely or unwisely, a choice for me to make while I was overseas. The bastard must have slipped it into my pocket when he was hanging up my jacket and that's how he found the Angel of Death. That entire time I thought I was being noble, and here to find out he had already given me three-hundred big ones. What if I had accepted his money at the door, when he offered it to me outright? I guess he was prepared to give me four-hundred, maybe even five-hundred. That kind of bread was chump-change for doctors, even with the state of affairs our country was in. Here there were people living in cardboard shacks and Thad was willing to dish out five-hundred big ones. There was part of me that wished for that monetary success, but most of me would have been pleased with a mud hut in the wilderness. I could envision myself, lying among the earthworms and beetles. Perhaps after I made my millions... once I figured out how to do so, I would pack up everything and simply fall off the grid, walk

into the deserts of Mexico like Ambrose Bierce, and never be seen again. Ambrose Bierce was a writer, laying claim to stories such as *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, and one day he vanished, like smoke thinning or water seeping into the ground. He was gone and never heard from again. I would like to end up that way, only a story left behind, for a mere man could never rise above the details of the life he had lead, but a story of a man could be mystical, fantastical, larger than life, broadening the realities of any situation, as though an artist threw away his pen altogether and just imagined their art piece, without limitation or end. I suppose it was the only way of becoming immortal, creating a story of yourself that would live on after you, being retold and added to, expanded and exaggerated. If any story was around long enough people would start to believe it and it would appear as though I lived a much better life than I had.

As I strolled down the road I began to hear a loud grunting, as though a chubby gal was getting the ol' once over, like two wildebeests were having a go in a pile of wet cement. I continued to walk, but the grunting became louder. I followed the sound and when I turned the corner and I saw a Mexican man wrestling a potbellied pig the size of blimp, hanging loosely on the beast's back, trying to get a blade under its throat. He was going to slaughter that freak of nature right in the street.

"Hey, you bastard!" I cried, "Get off that pig!" It was the only thing I could think to say. The words seemed to be pulled out of my mouth by an invisible hand. I couldn't bear the thought of that pig being killed right in front of me, to see the red blood sprayed across that pink flesh like some perverse valentine. I was a carnivore, but I had to fight the image out of my mind of the animal's carcasses hanging upside down, cut from snout to loin, and now the terrible image was going to burn itself into my eyes forever if I did not do something. I ran over to the man and pulled him off the pig by the legs. It was even larger up close, a goddamn building it was, a massive pink Clydesdale. The man hit the ground, cracking his chin on the pavement. The pig ran off, down an alley, and I could hear it snorting and clanking through the cobblestone streets of Little Italy. Free! I had set the pig free! Run pig, I thought, run as far away as you can, find a moor and a heap of shit, roll it in it and be happy! The man, disheveled, made it to his feet.

"What the hell did you do that for, asshole?" he asked.

I had no logical reason for doing what I had just done.

"I don't know. I'm sorry." I said.

"That was a two-hundred dollar pig!" he shouted.

"I can believe it. Did you see the size of that thing?"

"Well, where am I going to get the two hundred dollars *you* just cost me?"

He was trying to strong-arm me, use intimidation to make me cower down and pay for the pig.

"You better try your ass, because you're not getting a single cent from me."

And then, as if lightening had stuck, I was on the ground from the man's right hand. He was built like a brick shithouse, his hands made of rolled buffalo nickels; my entire face was on the verge

of crumbling in on itself like cigarette ash. I just stayed on the ground, my jaw like a broken door hinge. I now knew what it meant to be knocked silly, for all I could do was laugh. This, of course, only angered him more. I had never been much of a fighter, I didn't believe in it, in theory, but now I was face-to-face with a reckless, violent, slaughterhouse employee. He couldn't have the pig's blood so he'd have mine... I didn't see the blade come out as much as I sensed it. I knew there was a sharp instrument of death now unsheathed; I could hear the slight ring of its unflinching metal.

"Mister, I don't want to have to kill you, so you just go ahead and pay me what you owe me and I'll leave you be."

Unbelievable, never once faced with death until the evening that I ask to live. The irony was so thick I had to brush it away from my eyes. Perhaps the wager between the Devil and God had reached double or nothing and my life now hung in the balance for a petty game between two imaginary lords. I did just receive an extra three-hundred dollars from Thad, but the thought of giving it to this greasy lout made me sick. What was I to do? I reached for Thad's envelope, but before my quivering fingers could make it to the pocket I heard a voice. It wasn't the voice of my murderer; it was a female voice, a soft, floating voice. It said:

"What are you doing over there?" and then, "Leave that man alone!"

I then heard her high heels begin to click over toward me. The Mexican man looked over at her silhouette and then back at me. He turned and scampered off, probably after his pig. The woman fell to her knees beside me, propping me up with her arms.

"Sir, are you all right?" she asked, frantic.

"Fine. Fine." I said, "No worse for the wear I suppose."

"Come on, let's get you up."

She helped me to my feet. She was quite a striking beauty, milky skin, with red cheeks from the cold, a small bonnet over her hair, which I would guess was brown, chiseled features, just how I liked them, and long eyelashes that seemed to be Japanese fans batting as she blinked.

"What happened?" she wanted to know. I told her about the pig and she couldn't help but let out a small laugh.

"You must be a very brave man." she said. I could already tell she was attracted to me. It was a pure pity case, but that worked for me.

"Only as brave as they come." I said, sarcastically.

"Would you like to come upstairs with me? I only live over there." she pointed to the duplex on the other side of the street.

"I can give you some ice for your lip."

I licked my lip and tasted the blood.

"That will be fine." I said...

I knew if I played my cards right, I could get this woman into bed. Her name was

Blossom and she lived alone in the second story of a duplex. Her room was rather plain, just a table and chairs, a bed, and the usual devices you'd find in the kitchenette.

"Blossom," I said, "if you don't mind me asking, what you doing outside at this hour?"

"I was on my way home from a walk." she said.

"That's a bit unusual." I said.

"I'm a night owl, and sometimes I just get so cooped up in here all by myself at night."

"Where is your family?" I asked.

"My mother lived with me until her passing one year ago."

"I'm sorry to hear." I said.

"Thank you." she said, bringing a few ice cubes wrapped in a dishcloth over to me.

"Now, put that on your lip." she continued, taking the tone of a school nurse.

I did so, and it hurt like hell. My lip was completely obliterated and if it weren't for Blossom, I'd be a cold corpse in a pig farm at that very moment, being devoured by those disgusting creatures. How would be the irony in that? The carnivore becoming the pig food! Ha!

"Thank you, Blossom." I said, a bit muffled from the dishcloth. "If it wasn't for you, I'd be pig food right now." She became bashful, her eyes searching for any place but mine.

"Don't be silly." she said.

I stood up, lowered the dishcloth. She looked at me, mesmerized. I walked toward her slowly, grabbed her by both arms and laid a kiss on her. My lip against hers caused an inordinate amount of pain, but pleasure overcame it, and it was a wonderful kiss. When I broke away, she finally made eye contact with me.

"I'll make some tea." she said, and turned toward the stove.

I don't know where this unusual amount of courage came from to kiss her. I suppose I knew either way she wouldn't be able to stop me and her personality was so meek and mild that even if she refused me I could simply laugh it off, sit back down and continue as if nothing had happened. From the look of Blossom she had never lived a life for herself. I surmised that her father probably abandoned the family when she was very young, leaving her to take care of her mother through lonesomeness, illness and eventually through death. Blossom had probably only slipped away in the dead of night to get her jollies with a man under some magnificent oak tree. She had probably just been returning from such an event, her hormones still pulsating, her skin still sensitive to another's touch, and there I was about to be smudged out from existence in front of her, and the sight of a moderately handsome man in distress probably gave her cunt a tickle, like a mouse had crawled inside and its long naked tail rubbed against her, sending quivers all through her midriff. That was my observation. I could have been wrong, but I didn't think so. A volcano of sexual tension was building between us. We were both like that teapot, boiling beneath metal lids, about to whistle and squeal, steam escaping from our ears and noses. Our eyes did all the talking. She would periodically glance at me over her shoulder, giving me the

tiniest smile, and I would make gestures with my eyebrows, keeping my eyes piercing, constant. Blossom had a very big ass; I got to make out every detail while sitting at eye level, and she would unconsciously wiggle it from time to time. It seemed to jet out at a ninety degree angle from her thigh, plump and supple, an Everest of the female form. Her anus would be the lightest shade of pink, for the rest of her skin was white as though a seventeenth century countess, just a stitch darker than a corpse... The tea was finished and she poured me a cup.

“There’s nothing in this, is there?” I asked, flashing back to Dr. Chin’s.

“What do you mean?” she asked, puzzled.

“Never mind.” I said, sipping the tea slowly, letting it wash over my gums and seep into my wound.

“How is it?” she asked.

“Absolutely delicious.” I said.

“And how’s your lip?” she asked.

“On the mend. You are a life saver, Blossom, and I mean in that in the most literal sense.”

“Please,” she said, “I’m not a heroine. I just happened by.”

“Well, I’m glad you did.”

She became bashful at this. She walked across the room, near the bed. I stood up and followed her.

“I wish you’d let me repay you.” I said, thinking something *other* than monetary compensation.

“Don’t be silly.” she said.

I moved closer to her, entering her personal space, continuing to walk as she stumbled backward, intoxicating her, suffocating her with my desire. I wanted to take her right then and there on the bed, softly, delicately, none of the harshness I was used to, but like two flowers brushing against each other on a windy day. I wanted her to taste my pollen, as though a bee, reenacting the dance of life. Finally, she had nowhere to go and fell on the bed. I fell after her, each of us now crawling toward the headboard. I unraveled the dishcloth full of ice, took a cube and ran it along her chest and up to her neck, leaving behind a translucent trail. I began to lick the icy trail, penetrating the divot in her neck with my tongue. She moaned quietly. I kissed her again, although this time I stuck my pink muscle into her mouth and our tongues began a minuet, prancing around each other as though two men in the midst of a fencing match. I ran my hand down her side and caressed her breast, grabbing it from underneath and squeezing firmly, making out the width of the nipple through her flimsy blouse. I then slipped my hand downward, running it over her stomach and then crowning over her hips. I only neared her plum; I did not touch it, as to tease her. Her midsection was heavenly. I called it the divine intersection, for beginning at the belly, no matter where you went, right, left, up, down; you would find yourself at a destination of absolute satisfaction. I reached for my fly, but before I could expose myself, Blossom confessed

in a hesitant, forced voice, “I’ve never done this.”

I stopped dead in my tracks, as though someone disconnected my spinal cord, frozen, my fingers stiffly still in the air.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I’m a virgin.” she said, softly.

I exhaled, my mouth turning into a grin. I backed off of her slowly and stood up. I took my skimmer from a candle holder, in which I had placed it, and fixed it on my head.

“Thank you for the tea, Blossom.” I said.

“I’m so sorry, Homer.” she said, beginning to pout.

“Sorry for what?” I asked.

“For not...for not...knowing what to do...” she said.

“Hey, hey, you cut that out right now.” I didn’t even know this person, we were perfect strangers, but that inclined me all the more to impart some wisdom on her. It refilled my ego to use my devilish tongue for good. I straightened up my voice and looked upon her softly.

“Don’t be ashamed of your virginity. That’s a gift, Blossom. You have something most girls just give away. They trade it for bupkis, hand it over to the first bastard that will take it. They end up with a void of where it once was, and forever after try to fill it with sex and more sex, becoming nothing but a common tramp. No, Blossom, you hold onto that as long as you can, and give it to a man who’s worthy.”

She looked at me; her whole face seemed to be made up of two egg-shaped, watery eyes. I smiled at her, tipped my hat and said,

“So long, Blossom.”

I walked to the door, thinking she would remain speechless, but she called after me.

“Will I ever see you again?” she cried.

“Not likely.” I said, “I’m leaving to Europe tomorrow and I don’t know when I’ll be back... Thank you for saving my life... maybe here, now, I was able to repay you a modicum of what you deserved. Goodbye, Blossom.” and then I left, closing the door behind me. What a cool customer I was! She would always remember Homer C. Miller, the sly preserver of virginity! I for the first time stretched my wings as an actor and what an award I deserved for that ridiculous scene which had just transpired. I had always wanted to say a dashing line whilst in a doorway, then close that door forever, leaving the person on the other side completely in awe. Blossom was my co-star in the film adaptation of my life, how I owed her everything!

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Virginity was a prize that should be won by the person most applicable. I wanted to engage in intercourse with Blossom more than anything, but I couldn’t mark her in such a way, I couldn’t steal her wholesomeness like that. She deserved to be deflowered by someone she

loved, or at least by someone she thought she loved. It was a sham worth propagating. Some men got an extra twist from having a virgin, not me. I was cursed with perversion, and although I accepted that part of myself, I felt no need in injecting it in others. There was no way of knowing if I would have turned out the same way if Edith were to love me in return, or if Max was able to spark an emotion in me that blurred all else. I had been serrated by the cruelty of others, but that didn't mean that I had to become a sexual fascist, forever corrupting Blossom's views on sex and love. It was unfair of me to make that decision for her. I could tell that she was bursting with sexuality, it oozed from her fingertips, and she excreted it in the way she wiggled her behind, but I was not the one to unleash it. Perhaps one day I would return, when she was experienced and I had seen strange and troublesome things, and we could both settle at the midway point, resurrecting some kind of normal sexual life together. We were just too far on the opposite side of the spectrum, I had seen too much and she had seen too little.

I came out of the doorway and into the night. I was guessing it was about 1:30 am. Five and half hours left and I had survived one near death experience. I was finally beginning to feel normal again, as well. The Angel of Death was working its way out of my system, the perspiration from the attempted knifing, and the boiling tea from Blossom helped quite a bit. I had a slight erection, and walking became difficult with my exposed head rubbing against the fabric of my trousers. Soon I would be leaving the suburbs and getting into the city. The nightlife wouldn't be much improved, but there would be something to pass the time, perhaps a burlesque show, those usually ran until three or four in the morning. Honestly, at that point it didn't matter. If there was nothing to fill the hours, I would simply sit at the base of a tree and wait, or perhaps I would go lay in the park, stretch out and count the stars until I began to see the faint blue of sunrise. While thinking about all this, I became suddenly aware that I had to urinate, that my bladder was on the verge of bursting. I stopped off at a tree, very much like the one I imagined sitting near, and pissed. It was long, record-setting; this had been the first time I urinated in over forty-eight hours. It was a combination of a morning urination, a post-climax urination (twice over I might add), two glasses of brandy, a bottle of red wine, and god knows how many cups of coffee and tea. I had been holding it as long as I could remember, but that was something I did. I held my urination and defecation until it was either, I found a toilet or I shit myself, there was no grey area. I have no idea why I did this; perhaps it was the great satisfaction I received from building up the pressure within my body and then finally releasing it. I felt empty, almost numb afterward, as if I was ninety pounds lighter, and if I didn't hold onto something I could float off into the sky like a murder of crows. Of course, I wouldn't call this satisfaction sexual in any way; it was just delving into the commonalties of the human body. Urinating, defecating, these were things most people took for granted, but I was amazed at how our bodies, like some brilliantly designed machine, could take food and drink and extract from them the nutrients the body needed while discarding the rest to holes deliberately made for that purpose, truly remarkable. If

there was one flaw within that system, the entire body would break down, holes and all, and all your blood, and all your muscles, and all your bones wouldn't mean a damn thing. It could even be argued that eating and shitting were the two most important functions of the human body, for a man could go without laughter, without love, without sex, without clothes, but if the man did not eat and if the man did not shit, he would cease doing any of those other things. How do you take something so serious for granted? It is like brushing off the subject of air, or ridiculing the sun. The reason you didn't hear much about urination and defecation was because they weren't attractive subjects. The idea of air was almost abstract, breathing something you couldn't see, and yet was all around you every moment, almost having a spiritual quality. The sun was beautiful; no one was arguing that; more of a paintbrush than it was just a burning ball of fire a billion kilometers away, for the pinks it could spray across the sky were befuddling in their beauty, the oranges that bent around the edges of clouds made you stand in awe. Urination and defecation on the other hand were just two more things society had deemed ungentlemanly, or taboo. The way they made it sound, you'd think no one did it, that everyone emitted their excrement through osmosis, leaving a perfume odor behind. Time and again we stifled the miracles that human beings were born with, because somewhere along the way someone decided that it was dirty, that something as universal as defecating was shameful and should be hidden, flushed away to a secret shit river beneath the city, far away from anyone it could offend. It gave my other interests, the sexual inquiries, a shadow of a chance to be accepted, to be welcomed. I'm sure I would end up in that mud hut of mine, but not by choice, by excommunication from the civilized world. I would be thought of as a freak, an outcast, and I would never even get the opportunity to raise the question of if being a freak or an outcast was all that terrible to begin with. My chances of shedding some light on the dark corners of this world were more hollow and transparent than a ghost; they were the memory of a ghost, held behind a decomposed tongue in a haunted and abandoned house.

I was walking with my head down, watching my legs move back and forth, when I heard my name being called. I looked up to see Ulysses. If you could count all your real friends on one hand, Ulysses would be the birth defect, the sixth, misshapen, boney finger growing out of the side of your wrist. He was a person that I didn't particularly care for, but he was so damned kind to me that I couldn't tell him to get lost. I really believe that he would have jumped in front of train for me if I asked him to do so, just a person so backwards in mentality that you couldn't figure out how you became friends in the first place... I was shocked to see him there, pouring with misguided southern hospitality, slightly limping from an injury he had sustained as a boy.

"Homer, what in tarnation are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" he asked. He used words like *tarnations*.

"I'd ask you the same question, if I didn't know there was some sort of insane story behind it."

“Well, you know me.” he said.

“And you know me.” I said.

He laughed, a bit out of breath from rushing over to me.

“I’m sure you were slaying some mistress of the night.” he said, once he caught his breath.

“Making the rounds.” I said.

“Say, why don’t you come along with me? I’m on my way to the dance hall.”

“The dance hall?” I repeated.

“There are always some fine pieces of tail in there.” He smiled, a wide, open-mouthed smile, raising his eyebrows like Charlie Chaplin. He always knew how to convince me. I suppose my reputation preceded me. I thought about going to the dance hall with Ulysses, for what he said was true, that place was dripping with women, making it so hot that the wallpaper peeled right off the walls, but I would surely be there all evening, stuck with Ulysses, listening to his moronic tales of southern woe. Once you were with him, it was impossible to slip away. He’d wrap his big arm around your neck and pull you to his bosom, his jacket damp with sweat, holding you there, laughing like a hyena, and sometimes sobbing like a busted old mama’s boy... I figured what the hell; I had a few more hours to kill, and then freedom, subversion, rebellion, watching through the plane window America getting smaller and smaller until getting swallowed up by that big blue ocean... There was a theory that once you left a place you had no definitive way of proving its existence, that the moment you couldn’t physically see it, it wasn’t there, engulfed by negative space. I enjoyed that thought, the idea that when I was in a villa in Italy, or the top of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, America and everyone I knew in it would vanish as though beneath a Magician’s cloak, as if I were leave nothing behind at all, having nothing to miss, no mother or father, no Thaddeus, no Phineas, no Penelope, no Max or Graham, no Baybrooke, no Ulysses, no city, no state, nothing, just the then and the now to cherish and rob. I was becoming so excited when thinking about my journey that I wanted jump out of my skin, I wanted to shiver like a child awaiting admittance to a carnival.

“Sure, I’ll come along!” I said to Ulysses.

“Grand!” he replied, and we were off, down the patch of road and into the unforgiving night.

The dance hall was filled with vultures and the rotting corpses of beautiful woman. Men outnumbered the ladies ten to one, although you’d never notice; the women were being so affable and friendly, making each man feel welcome, doted on and attractive. What suckers, I thought to myself. Some of the girls were on payroll, given a few bucks to get the men drunk, show them a good time, but whatever happened beyond that was solely up to the women, although it didn’t always work out that way. The dance hall was essentially a house of ill repute for more sophisticated whores.

“Only problem with this join is it ain’t restricted.” Ulysses said to me. I didn’t respond.

“They’ll let anybody in here, niggers, fags, Jews, anything. What’s the world coming to when we’re allowed to go fishing from the same pond as a nigger?”

Ulysses was a southern loyalist, a believer in the Union South, and that Negroes were living on borrowed time, eating our food, drinking our booze, sleeping with our women. I truthfully felt that is where most of his horror stemmed from, the fact that it was common knowledge that Negroes had bigger pricks than white boys and old Ulysses couldn’t stand the thought of his girl getting hooked on the black meat. Personally I didn’t give a fig if you were Negro, or if you were multicolored, or how big your pecker was. It was all insignificant to me. Truthfully I admired Negroes, for the majority of the culture I basked in came from them, the music of the time, especially. Europe had Mozart, Beethoven; we had Scott Joplin and Buddy Bolden, ragtime, blues, jazz. Their culture sprang up and self-sustained, bleeding out from the ghettos and taking over America, exemplifying the angst felt by a slave, something of which I could never understand, yet still be affected by, profoundly and deeply. Racism was one of the main ingredients to our world, a misunderstanding because of a refusal to understand, a superiority felt because of varying degrees of melanin in one’s skin. It was preposterous, and yet again it rationed down the odds of finding a connection, discovering a love in another person. First we are instilled to be attracted to the opposite sex, granted that is out of our control, but then we are taught to hate people for the color of their skin, and then we are told that obesity is grotesque. Eventually there will only be so many people left, spread out across an entire world, making it almost impossible to find them. Perhaps love was so fleeting, because we described it to ourselves in such detail, that it became rare, sought after but never found... As for myself, if it had a pulse, I would give it a chance. I even took a fancy to some of the pretty black girls I had seen and I always secretly wanted to take them to bed, a pepper and salt shaker fornicating, like mixing two colors of paint and watching them swirl. I could imagine the pinkness of their cunts, so dark next to their mocha flesh, like the innards of a grapefruit. Negro girls also moved with a rhythm, gliding almost, and I could only imagine the grace they commanded in the bedroom, riding incessantly, grinding and humping. Perhaps their juices would taste different; perhaps their pubic hair would grow unusually, perhaps these questions were silly, but how was I to know? I then decided, in that moment, that I wanted a Negro girl before I left in the morning. Why wait until I was overseas to begin my adventure? Life was happening that moment, seize it! The opportunities were all around me. Surely there would be a Negro girl that would agree to be my mentor, to show me her body and allow me to fondle it. A woman was a woman, the mechanics weren’t different. I’d take her nipples in my mouth as I would any other, her skin wouldn’t be repellent of my touch, she’d open just the same. I began looking for a raven among doves, surveying the dance floor; looking for my dark princess. It didn’t take long; there was one dancing with a young Negro man at the opposite side of the room. I made my approach, sly, like

a wolf. Time could not be wasted. If there was one thing I would regret, it would be not taking the time to seduce her properly. I might even have to pay for her services, something I promised myself I would never do again. Already I was breaking oaths...

The band ended their song; it was my chance to strike. The young Negro man pulled away from her and I introduced myself. She looked frightened at first. I'm sure many men, looking just like me had said revolting things to her, insane things, things that would make a white woman forever seal up her dignity.

"My name is Homer Miller. Would you like to dance?"

The words took a moment to process. I was having holes drilled through me by the eyes of the young Negro man and his cronies, all huddled together, the whites of their eyeballs the only thing for me to distinguish them from a giant, black mass.

"Sure." she said with a lovely voice that had been masked by contempt for me.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Nina." she said.

"It's nice to meet you, Nina."

She walked toward me, the music began again and we embraced, my hand comfortably moving around her waist. We danced for a moment, and then I realized there was no clean way of going about it. An erection was growing in my pants; the head surely poking her in the thigh, letting her know all my intentions before I even opened my mouth. I whispered into her ear,

"What do you say we get out of here when this song's over with?"

She retracted slightly to look at me in the eyes. Her face had no clear emotion to read. I took my hand from around her waist and reached into my pocket, taking out the miniature manila envelope containing Thaddeus' money. I showed her the wad, and thumbed through it like a flip book.

"I have money." I said, in such a slimy, despicable way, as if money was the only known aphrodisiac. Nina just nodded her head and then placed it back on my shoulder for the remainder of the dance. I couldn't help but sniff her hair, a hair much coarser. She was coated in a summer scent, but it mixed well with her own natural pheromones, which carried with them a hint of passion fruit. She was quite beautiful truth be told, and I felt lucky to be so naturally attracted to my first Negro girl. I'd say the ratio of my attraction toward Negro women was about the same as white women, some aroused me and some didn't, but there was a slight perversion involved when it came to a Negro, which I suppose, could be called racist in its own way. The darkness of their skin was different, not the norm, and that simple idea of uniqueness aroused me, and perhaps it was their heritage, being from Africa, conducting voodoo rituals, some of them still practicing such things, making them mystical, foreign, as though they weren't women at all, but sex goddesses of a different species. And of course, I knew also that the rejection of mixed breeding from society fueled my passion, as well. It was unthinkable for a white man to sleep

with a Negro, making me want it all the more, making me crave the black flesh.

The song ended and I took her by the hand.

“Follow me a moment. I just have to say goodnight to a friend.”

We walked over to the table where Ulysses was sitting.

“Well, old buddy, I’m ducking out early.”

Ulysses looked at me and then looked behind me at Nina.

“What’s that, Homer?” he asked.

“What’s what?” I said.

“The nigger on your arm.”

I felt Nina let go of my hand.

“Easy Ulysses.” I said.

“Homer, are you nuts? Don’t you know they’re diseased? She’ll turn your pecker black and it will fall clean off.”

“I know what I’m doing.”

“Jesus, my own friend, my own pal taking a nigger home with him.” he then cocked his head toward Nina, “How much is he paying you sweetheart?”

“Shut your goddamn mouth, Ulysses.”

Ulysses pulled on his trousers and stood up. I never quite noticed what a towering stature he had until that moment.

“I’m going to do you a favor, Homer. I’m going to get you out of this.”

He brushed me aside as though I were a loose feather falling before his face. He stood, pointing a finger down at Nina.

“Now listen, sweetheart, why don’t you run along, back to your nigger buddies over there. There’s been a mistake. No friend of mine is going fuck a Nigger, not as long as Big U as anything to do about it.”

Nina still remained emotionless. She just stood and took it all from him, every last drop of hatred.

“Ulysses,” I said. He turned around and looked at me, the big, dumb giant. “Enough of this. I’m finished with listening to your hillbilly ass. I’m going home with Nina and that’s the end of it.”

Ulysses looked surprised, then furious, and then uninterested.

“Fine. Have it your way.” he said, and backed down. He took his seat and finished his drink, letting some of it dribble down his chin. I saw that he had ordered a drink for me. I picked it up off the table and sucked it down in one gulp. The whiskey almost caused me to spit up fire, but I swallowed hard, grabbed Nina by the hand and walked toward the door.

We were in the alley outside of the dance hall. There were clouds in the sky, but they somehow left the moon alone to shine down and make the night have an odd glow, as if

everything was coated in wax. I hadn't spoken to Nina about what had happened inside yet, I didn't have the courage, but I knew something needed to be said.

"I'm sorry about Ulysses." was the first thing to come out of my mouth.

"It's all right. I'm accustomed to it by now." she said, deflated.

"What do you mean?"

"Something like that happens almost every night. A white boy wants to try slumming, get a taste of a Negro, and all his buddies try to talk him out of it, saying worse things than your friend."

"I'm sorry." I said, and truly meant it.

"Don't be." she said, "It's the way of things."

"I suppose." I said. We both felt powerless, facing a completely indifferent world.

I paused and looked toward the sky. I wished I was as far away as the furthest star. I thought about my curious experience on the way to Phin's, when I soared through space and time. I still had no idea what it meant, but I used it as a bookmark, for I never imagined two days prior, that I would now be accompanying a Negro girl to her home, nor did I know she would be the last human contact I'd have before leaving on my expedition. Life was so spastic and out of control, full of bizarre twists that were impossible to foresee. I had visited everyone dear to me, but it was the stranger that I ended up with, and it made me realize that one connection could not fulfill the human spirit, it had to be many, for a once lively, fresh connection would rot and eventually die. Life was a constant search for new connections, a tightrope walk between caring about everything passionately and simultaneously carrying about nothing, investing yourself fully to your loves while detaching yourself from pain, suffering, depression, anguish, confusion, prejudice and hatred. Those were the only things that could crush the human spirit, and all of them were perpetrated by the human, all a means of suicide. You had to open your heart to love and enlightenment, that was the only way to survive, to love by the moment, and then discard the past. The past was as useful to you as a history book, full of the information preparing you for the battle, but once the fighting began, completely useless, an empty rifle with a smoking barrel... Adaptation! The only tool worth carrying, because there was no guarantee, nothing was certain. You knew a good life existed somewhere out there, but it came with no map or compass, you just had to dig it up with your hands, search for it, because often times the chase was more rewarding than the catch. Personally, there was not one thing in my life that I was sure of, except myself, my ability to adapt to anything. I was just mad enough to be completely convinced, and if you are at peace with yourself, then it will not matter who you are with or where you are, what dangers you've rub shoulders with, or what horrors you've encountered, for they all were part of the same experience. This is what I needed to know before leaving, because I would be in place full of nothing but strangers, surely to die, if I were a stranger to myself.

"That's a lot of money you carry around with you." she said, "Dangerous. A lot of folks

are desperate. They'd do almost anything for a wad like that."

I didn't think anything of Nina's statement; I just shrugged and continued to walk. Up ahead was the young Negro from inside. He was standing around with his pals again, and they were all smoking cigarettes, which looked like tiny torches, burning against pitch blackness.

As we got closer, they all stopped and looked at us, as though ravens on a telephone wire. I remember hearing Nina say, "I'm sorry, Homer" before seeing the pipe. It came over my head, a knife-like sound as though a skull cracking and then deep, black, peaceful darkness- that negative space I tried so desperately to reach... Hello, old friend!