



AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title:

This America: An Original Fiction Manuscript and Examination of the Failure of  
the Cornucopian Vision in Assimilative Immigrant Fiction

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The thesis, “This America: An Original Fiction Manuscript and Analysis of the Failure of the Cornucopian Vision in Assimilative Immigrant Fiction” is a manuscript of original short fiction foreworded by a critical preface. The critical preface contextualizes the struggles of Eastern European immigrants in their efforts to assimilate to a new country. In support of this contextualization, the preface addresses the failure of the cornucopian vision of America: the unsustainable image of abundance that has flattened, if not obliterated, the relationship between a people and their land. The result of such an investigation has been the rendering of our inherited metaphors for assimilation insufficient. The collection of stories that follows the critical preface draws upon fictional storytelling techniques and personal narrative to reshape those metaphors, to give voice to the experience of a group of first, second and third generation Jewish families located in a fictional Northside neighborhood of Chicago. The collection also confronts the personal trauma of military service and relates it to the rivalry between tribal and national loyalties, a rivalry that in many ways defines the immigrant experience.

Keywords: Immigration, Assimilation, Jewish-American Literature, the American Dream, Cornucopian Outlook, Holocaust, Chicago, Melting Pot, Yiddish, Cancer, Hunger

THIS AMERICA:

An Original Fiction Manuscript and Analysis of the Failure of the Cornucopian Vision in

Assimilative Immigrant Fiction

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## HORN OF EMPTY: THE FAILURE OF THE CORNUCOPIAN VISION IN ASSIMILATIVE IMMIGRANT FICTION

More than providing a valuable index of the growth of our nation at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the narratives of assimilative immigrant fiction reveal dangerous fault lines that stretch out between the promise of The American Dream and the hard realities that dream obscures. By focusing on these moments of ideological disjuncture, the authors of assimilative immigrant fiction not only challenge our faith in the validity of a top-down, unicultural, vision of America, but reveal that any such vision can be little more than a construct, particularly our current vision which has aligned itself more closely with the cornucopian outlook of Libertarianism than anything we are likely to be familiar with from the past.

Before proceeding, it might be helpful to define the terms this paper will work with. By assimilative immigrant fiction, I mean prose work that deals with the challenges of first and second generation immigrants who came to The United States searching for a better way of life. Because of my cultural background and previous scholarly interests, I will focus on Jewish assimilative immigrant experience and the literature this experience produced. In terms of the earliest and deepest exploration of the second wave of American immigration (1880 – 1910), I believe Jewish stories provide the most beneficial examples. I would go so far as to claim that Jewish immigrant stories provide something of a template for the rest. This paper will also explore the assimilative immigrant fiction of more canonical American writers who confront the same cornucopian assumptions of The American Dream as their foreign cousins.



Given the weighty subjects of race and ethnicity, it would be insensitive not to re-emphasize the voluntary nature of this paper's definition of immigration. The experience of African American slaves, indentured servants, and women subjected to criminal deportation were anything but voluntary and fall beyond the admittedly narrow scope of this essay. These stories constitute a unique and valuable literature that deserves study in its own right. It is not the author's intention to slight any group by suggesting that the experience of one ethnicity can be substituted for another. The goal of this paper is simply to draw out the larger patterns created by the immigrants' first encounter with The American Dream and show how the aftershocks of that first contact are still shaping our experience today.

As for the term cornucopian, and the vision referenced in the title of this paper, I am referring to the definition put forth by Greg Garrard in his book *Ecocriticism*. In this book, Garrard defines the cornucopian vision as an understanding among scientists that, "the dynamism of capitalist economies will generate solutions to environmental problems as they arise, and that increases in populations eventually produce the wealth needed to pay for environmental improvements" (19). I extend Garrard's definition beyond the idea of Environmentalism to include what I feel is the deeper underpinnings of The American Dream, the cornucopian idea of abundance and how those expectations condition the immigrant's encounter with The New World.

As for my use of The American Dream, my intention is to use concepts advanced by Antonio Gramsci and Jacques Baudrillard to establish the ideological basis of this term, to show how The American Dream, with its cornucopian suggestion of abundance, creates a simulacra of American life that obscures the cost of producing that abundance, a

cost that depletes both the land and its citizens in its quest for ever greater sources of wealth. This paper will argue that by repeatedly engineering moments where characters must confront the simulacrum of The American Dream the authors of assimilative immigrant fiction force readers to rethink their relationship to the country and its guiding national vision.

In order to understand the obfuscation the authors of assimilative immigrant fiction confront in The American Dream, we must quickly restate what that dream is. Generally speaking, The American Dream is the conviction that any individual can arrive on the shores of The United States and, through hard work and grim determination, charge up the ladder of success. Such a naive understanding of America, and American economics, came under attack immediately after it appeared, particularly by writers of assimilative immigrant fiction who by the beginning of the twentieth century were highly conversant in the topic, many of them having just arrived in America not ten years before.

Surprisingly, there were other authors not typically associated with what were then considered “ethnic” topics who were just as eager to confront the hypocrisies of The American Dream. In his novel *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald dramatizes the futility of this mythos, the idea that hard work and self-improvement are the keys to success in America. At his son’s funeral, Gatsby’s father produces a notebook where his son has compiled a detailed account of his daily work. Included in this notebook is a list of resolutions to be strictly followed, resolutions designed to strengthen the boy’s character and improve his social prospects. Among these resolutions the younger Gatsby listed: no smoking, regular bathing, and strict financial husbandry. Of his son’s

determination, Mr. Gatz remarked, “Jimmy was bound to get ahead. He always had some resolves like this or something. Do you notice what he's got about improving his mind? He was always great for that. He wanted to be a great man.” (177). Of course the circumstances surrounding Gatsby's violent death undermines such grandiose ideas. In the America of 1922, no amount of pluck or self-invention could open the doors of power to an outsider like Gatsby. The minute Gatsby's money ran out, so did his friends. Like all immigrants, the corridors of power remained firmly off limits regardless of how earnestly he desired entrance.

In a work that echoes many themes from *The Great Gatsby*, Philip Roth's novella “Goodbye Columbus” also confronts the myth of self-improvement as a way to garner success in America. In the second part of the story, Roth presents a series of scenes between the two main characters, Neil and Brenda. Like Nick Caraway, Neil finds himself living temporarily above his station. In the rarified air of Short Hills, New Jersey, Neil marvels at his host's fancy home, an oasis of palatial greenery replete with spigots that twirl water on themselves and rooftops crowded with wayward shuttlecocks. Desperate to assimilate to this new lifestyle—and endear himself to the robust Patimkin family—Neil commits to a schedule of daily exercise. Each morning during his two week-long visit he runs laps at the local high school while Brenda dutifully records his times in a green notebook. Roth reports how Neil would run until his, “lungs burned and his eyes watered . . . It was an act of sadism” (60). And yet the sprawling landscape of Short Hills, combined with the sexual allure of Brenda, tempts Neil into enduring that pain, believing it will somehow bring him closer to the forbidden treasures of Short Hills. Naturally, these treasures are never fully available to Neil, and Roth skillfully uses these

moments of self-delusion to undermine the promise of The American Dream, a dream that Roth suggests functions more like a stick than a carrot in America. The moments of self-delusion in “Goodbye Columbus” are most powerfully realized when life at the Patimkin house is juxtaposed against images of Neil’s Aunt and Uncle back in New Jersey. As Neil frolics in the cool suburban air, Roth reminds readers of “old Max and Gladys” who were most likely “enjoying a Mounds bar in the cindery heat of a Newark summer . . . clinging to each breeze that whistled through the buildings like the promise of an afterlife” (62). These juxtapositions are not merely comical. They suggest that the tropes of upward mobility inherent in The American Dream obscure the reality that success in The United States is not a matter of hard work alone, that factors beyond the control of the individual are constantly working against them. For every Horatio Alger with his plucky bootstraps, there is a Jay Gatsby or a Neil Klugman, characters who wind up bootless and disillusioned for having ignored the tribal wisdom of their ancestors.

Like Neil in “Goodbye Columbus,” Jay Gatsby is an immigrant too; not just geographically, but in terms of his thinking. Both characters are guilty of believing in the tenants of The American Dream, that a steady diet of hard work and self-improvement guarantees access to the corridors of power. The authors of both novels use their characters to prove this idea false. Roth grants this epiphany to Neil outside the Radcliffe College library. Neil sees the wall of glass between himself and the interior of the building as a permeable divider, one that separates his assimilating self from his immigrant self. Recognizing this division, Neil wishes he could get around that glass divide and rearrange all the heavy volumes inside. It is no accident that Roth grants this realization to Neil on the cusp of the Jewish New Year, a time when old sins are forgiven

and new dreams are ready to be inscribed in the book of life.

Fitzgerald takes this realization a step further. Behind the desire for self-improvement Fitzgerald reveals a naked covetousness in his characters, a hunger to purchase love and power at any cost. In pointing this out, Fitzgerald exposes the larger illusion at the center of The American Dream, the idea that regardless of origin we are all immigrants, each of us hammering away at the doors of privilege that allow access to only a select few. No one, not even the blue blooded Tom Buchanan, has access to the privileged hallways of the Eastern establishment. Because, as Nick Caraway drunkenly points out while gazing across the harbor, “We [are] all creatures of the West” (124).

While Roth and Fitzgerald approach the same topic from different angles, they both drive at the same conclusion: regardless of the strides one takes towards achieving The American Dream that dream will never materialize. As badly as Neil wants to evaporate into the rarified air of Short Hills and Cambridge, the pull of his Talmudic past returns him to the world of books (the Radcliffe Library) and the realization that the Patimkin family lawn is a poor substitute for the binding roots of his Jewish ancestry. Nick Caraway comes to a similar understanding. Other than himself, only two men are present at Gatsby’s funeral: Gatsby’s rube father, and Meyer Wolfsheim, a man in whose frightful name is conjured all the predatory anti-Semitic tropes the novel (and the age) failed to work against. The two men are ridiculous in their cultural exaggerations, aping the evolutionary tropes operative in The American Dream, its unspoken fear of animalistic regression and the anthropocentric ordering of the world such animalization implies. In this way the men are more caricature than character; hideous ghosts from the past literally following Gatsby to his grave. Fitzgerald thus offers the same lesson as

Roth: regardless of the promise of the future, one can never escape one's past; and only something deeply pernicious would suggest that one should.

In his poem *The Wasteland*, T.S. Eliot famously asked readers, "What are the roots that clutch" (12)? Eliot imagined a singular vision of history pulled down through the ages. Only singularity preserved cultural strength, Eliot suggested. Plurality diffused it. Eliot's historical vision is similar to our inherited understanding of The American Dream. In both cases what is received turns out to be an obscuring falsehood. In the case of Eliot's vision of history, the obfuscation is clear. A singular, celestially ordained telling of our past obscures the randomness of events and man's unmistakable hand in shaping those events. In the case of The American Dream, the obfuscation is harder to see, mainly because each citizen is more complicit in the illusion. Immigrants buy into the myth of The American Dream because circumstances have allowed them to achieve a certain amount of success in pursuing it. But what The American Dream ultimately obscures is the unfair way many citizens have earned that success, upon the shoulders of unseen labor enforced by a brutal system of sexual, racial, religious and financial discrimination.

One of the defining moments of assimilative immigrant fiction is the moment when that illusion is laid bare. Recall Biff Loman begging his father to "Let that old dream die" (90) or Langston Hughes and later Lorraine Hansberry reminding audiences what happens when that dream is endlessly deferred. What the best assimilative immigrant fiction does, from *Death of a Salesman* to *A Raisin in the Sun*, is pull back the curtains on the myth of The American Dream and reveal the hard realities underneath: that America is not a meritocracy based on hard work and self-improvement, a place

where talented individuals—like cream in milk—rise sweetly to the top. Rather, in spite of our noblest efforts, the country remains a land of white male privilege, where the tropes of industry and equality have been used to rob citizens of their labor and ultimately their culture. Underneath the mythos of The American Dream lies an unsustainable vision of American abundance. This cornucopian outlook flattens the relationship between a people and the land. Moreover, it provides the objective footing from which the language of economics, with its antiseptic vocabulary, can wash away the gritty kitchen-sink realities that form the unheard poetry of American life. Most cruelly, The American Dream and its cornucopian outlook try to substitute a unifying sense of American-ness for the individual culture it seeks to destroy. Assimilative immigrant fiction works against these efforts, providing a necessary counter narrative and a cultural safety valve that can subvert the influence of such a powerful unchecked ideology.

As an idea based on dislocation and personal reinvention, The American Dream comes with a steep price. The cost typically involves the fragmenting of family timelines and the shattering of tribal continuity. But the debt incurred by this process is not due all at once. The payments are spread out like a mortgage over successive generations. I have observed that the immigrant encounter with The American Dream breaks down into three distinct stages, each of which corresponds to a successive generation: The first generation deals with separation from the mother country and the use of negative reproductive tropes to characterize the depletion of the land; Europe as Anti-Eden. The second generation confronts the challenges of assimilation, and the questions of identity that challenge raises. And finally, the third generation experiences a turn away from the values of the new country and a return to, or a romanticization of, the values of the old one. The third

generation thus offers something of a synthesis to the assimilative dialectic unfolding on the American mainland.

A fourth stage might involve a retreat from all values, a plunge into radical doubt. But this nihilism runs counter to the assimilative immigrant narrative. At the moment an assimilative immigrant story is hurled into the abyss of uncertainty, that story loses its immigrant identity. Avoiding those questions is thus a matter of self-preservation. Moreover, such a move is a luxury afforded primarily by the cornucopian outlook. Only when one's needs are fully met can they envision a life without order or structure. As a rule, immigrant writers avoid this type of speculation, aiming their pens' squarely at the assumptions lying underneath.

The first stage of the immigrant encounter with The American Dream involves the immigrant's separation from the mother country. The initial separation begins when families are forced to vacate their ancestral homeland after enduring a series of collective or individual traumas. Such traumatic events typically involve war, famine, pestilence, racial oppression, or religious persecution. More often than not the choice to leave the mother country is sparked by a threat to physical safety. The first stage engages heavily with utopian tropes and its biblical origins. It envisions America as The Promised Land, a glittering paradise of milk and honey that in its flowering abundance can heal old wounds.

Bernard Malamud's novel *The Assistant* and Isaac Beshevis Singer's collection *Gimple the Fool* focus on such stories. Particularly Singer's tales about life in the pale of Russian Settlement at the turn of the last century. The stories in Singer's collection are about tribal cruelty; Eastern European gothics that anatomize a people who were



compelled to turn their frustrations inward, and through this inverted anger created the rotting, mildewed creatures Singer describes in his book; people like the shrew Taniata who marries Gimple and bares him two illegitimate children, a woman who Singer claims “had a face like a wild mushroom, shriveled and creased . . . having been left too long in the mud” (80). In his use of gardening imagery Singer overturns the biblical utopianism associated with The American Dream. The land is not regenerative. Unlike the flowering paradise of Eden, Singer shows a land incapable of reproduction. Soil that should be rich and fertile is simply “mud” and whatever is left inside too long is left to shrivel like a wild mushroom. If America is a land of plenty, then Europe represents its depleted counterpart, a place whose reproductive energies have been completely exhausted.

The struggles of the first encounter with The American Dream are not only dramatized in works concerning first generation immigrants. In his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, Edward Albee also confronts the tropes of reproduction present at this stage. Albee is perhaps more subtle than Singer in dealing with these ideas, but no less direct. Albee advances his thoughts on two fronts. First, along the axis of character, particularly in his choice of names. And second, by way of the structure of the overall play, the establishment of its governing themes. I will begin by discussing the names. Each of the combating couples are given highly suggestive monikers. The younger couple is called Nick and Honey, names that when joined together share a disturbing resonance with the biblical idea of milk and honey, the paradise awaiting the righteous in The Promised Land. The older couple is named George and Martha, names borrowed from our country's founding couple, the Washingtons. In sharing this name, the older couple become a stand-in for the typical American couple.

Names are crucial for Albee in that they manage to suggest the utopian ideal of The American Dream while at the same time rejecting it. Nick and Honey are hardly the image of sweetness and purity suggested by their forenames. They quarrel, drink, and adulterize throughout the play. More importantly, George and Martha turn out to be childless just like Washingtons. Where the cornucopian promise of The New World has always been one of endless regeneration, Albee suggests that the reproductive prowess of America and The American Dream is just an illusion; that the land is as barren as the four characters who inhabit his play.

The second way Albee attacks the illusive reproductive promise of The American Dream is by making reproduction the main focus of the play. Because George and Martha cannot have children, they decide to invent one, massage it into life with wild fantasies that blur the line between truth and illusion. The remainder of the dramatic action is dedicated to figuring out the damage created by perpetuating such a myth. Here Albee holds the mirror up to the mythology of America and asks its citizens to take a deep look. Names figure here as well. Particularly the name of the fictional college town where the drama takes place. In the name New Carthage, Albee gives his most powerful suggestion concerning the barrenness of The American Dream. Carthage, we may recall, was home to the great general Hannibal. So terrified were the Romans of a resurgent Carthage (and another Hannibal) that legend claims they salted the fields along the coast so that nothing could grow again. For Albee then, America is the *New Carthage*, with its barren people and unproductive mythology.

In the case of Albee and Singer, the present reality of their characters is so unbearable they are compelled to imagine new ones. Traumas both physical and spiritual

lie at the center of the first stage of the immigrant encounter with The American Dream. The failure of one dream prompts the creation of another. A dream of new life (the creation of a fictitious child) in the case of Albee and his barren couples. And the dream of escape, or deliverance, to a promised utopia for Singer. The haunted characters of Singer's stories yearn to be rescued from their oppression. The dangerous allure of messianic prophecy is a powerful subtext in many of Singer's stories. For unlike the people of the bible, Singer knew the people of Europe had to rescue themselves.

Singer's contemporary, Isaac Babel, captures the failed utopianism of The American Dream in his collection *Red Cavalry*. While attending the funeral of mobster Benya Kirk, the unnamed narrator of the story "How We Do it in Odessa" makes the following observation: "America, how the name hung in the air . . . as if the sound alone had the power to transport you across oceans, inflate leaden balloons" (101). America, like the fabled name of God, could summon great power by the mere act of enunciation. Before the first cattle boat had left Russia then, the land had been endowed with mythic qualities, in other words America was a fiction to begin with, a geographical act of wish-fulfillment. But this wish dies hard. As the same narrator explains later in the story, "I came to America thinking the roads were paved with gold. Not only were they not paved with gold, they were not paved at all . . . and I had to pave them" (114). In this way, one could argue that the Jewish immigrant was always an American creation.

The second stage of the immigrant encounter with The American Dream involves the challenges immigrant families faced once they reached America, namely the dangers of assimilation. Henry Roth's novel *Call it Sleep* and the movie *The Jazz Singer* tell these stories with great insight, dramatizing the intersections where old and new worlds collide.

Language is the primary battle front in these stories. The mother tongue clashes against the unfamiliar ear of the host country. The issue at stake concerns which language will dominate. Samson Raphaelson's short story "Day of Atonement," later immortalized as the motion picture *The Jazz Singer*, maps out the important conflict between language and culture. The movie *The Jazz Singer* tells the story of a cantor's son who renounces his Judaism in order to become a performer of the new American musical style, Jazz. Naturally, this decision devastates his parents. They want their son to become a cantor, a Jewish prayer leader. The son's refusal to obey his parents' wishes thus constitutes a biblical transgression, but one with greater, more immediate, consequences. The parents realize that the transgression is not merely against God and his commandments, but against the whole of Jewish tradition. The parents intuitively understand that as the language separates, so do the people. And as their son slips deeper into American thought and speech patterns, he will slip further out of their grasp, and the larger hold of the Jewish faith.

The assimilative pull of American culture, with its melting pot metaphor, is complicated in *The Jazz Singer* by a hard irony. The religious divisions that marked difference in the Old World were replaced by racial divisions in the new one. Rather than empathize with the oppressed people of color, the hero of our movie engages in unforgivable acts of racial exploitation. He does this not only to purge the passions of his repressed Judaism—passions repressed in the pursuit of The American Dream—but to become a success in the new medium of Jazz. In reaching for this success, the main character finds himself donning black face in order to safely belt out his signature tunes. Good Jewish boys simply did not sing that awful "jungle music" (20), the father in

Raphelson's story repeatedly exclaimed. Hence the need for a suitable disguise.

As absurd as it sounds, a Jewish man dressed in black face belting out Dixieland standards comes close to distilling all the concepts of the second stage of the immigrant encounter with The American Dream. The encounter boils down to a contest between vying cultures, old and new, while engendering a new form of racial competitiveness at the same time, one that boosted the assimilative process. The comedian Lenny Bruce pinpointed this uniquely American assimilative force when he recalled the attitudes of the Jewish neighborhood where he grew up. "We may have been poor and Jewish," he recalled jokingly. "But at least we weren't black." Difference was the key to assimilation in America. For young Jews, used to being the marginalized other by which national identity was granted, having this gateway to citizenship (that of *not* being black) combined with the allure of The American Dream was a force too strong to ignore, and many Jews slipped quietly into the hinterlands of WASP America, turning their backs on the soulful songs their ancestors. The second stage thus dramatizes the immigrant struggle with the hegemonic forces that shape identity in America. More importantly, it signals an unease about the unfair circumstances surrounding that choice, a choice succeeding generations would have to deal with.

In the third stage of the immigrant encounter with The American Dream, when complete cultural absorption is a looming possibility, the question under consideration is: what has been lost? The stories in Phillip Roth's novella *Goodbye Columbus* ask these questions in a series of provocative scenes, such as the moment where the protagonist Neil imagines himself and a young "colored boy" standing on the Jersey shore waving goodbye to Christopher Columbus as he sails back to Europe. The question raised by this

image is not only what has been lost, but what was expected; how the mythos hoped to stack up against the growing perceptions of reality. In many ways the third stage confronts the insufficiency of the cornucopian myth of America and asks how does one proceed in its absence? It is a question storytellers are still grappling with today.

It is important to note that these stages are not unique to the Jewish immigrant experience, though Jewish literature is replete with many examples. Jumpha Lahhri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* engages with these assimilative stages as well, as do Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston in their respective memoirs. In each case, the author presents a series of broken-hearted tradition-bound parents who fall into conflict with their assimilated offspring. As with the characters of Jewish American fiction, these characters are also reimagined as contemporary questers in search of something undefinable in their past to tether them more fully to the present. In all of these stories however, a workable synthesis between old and new world is never spelled out. As such, these tales of immigration and assimilation suggest a future that can only be accessed through the past. What all these narratives have in common is a failure of the underlying mythos, the cornucopian outlook, to adequately describe what is being experienced. Even when foreign tongues combine with contemporary American idioms, the richness such linguistic hybridity is expected to provide by virtue of the addition of new words, proves insufficient to explain the resulting emptiness many characters feel.

This emptiness helps explain the pervasiveness of digestive imagery in immigrant assimilative fiction, particularly in Jewish-American fiction. Emptiness is key, because assimilation is a vanishing act, a process of cultural evaporation that occurs without providing any nourishing new traditions in its place. It is akin to a kind of cultural

bulimia: food passed in and out of the body without depositing the ingredients necessary for life. Roth gets to this idea in the following passage from his novella “Goodbye Columbus” The narrator Neil Klugman rushes off to the bathroom to take a phone call from his girlfriend Brenda. Aunt Gladys shouts at him from the kitchen. Neil observes of his Aunt, “It would kill her for me to leave the kitchen table so abruptly, especially for the bathroom . . . That one of her carefully cooked meals had has passed through her nephews’ gullet without the hint of absorption, only to flushed heedlessly into the Newark River, was too much for her to bear” (12).

We recall this kind of nameless hunger from Saul Bellow’s work. In *Henderson the Rain King* the titular hero is driven by a deep abdominal voice that incessantly cries out “I want, I want, I want.” This hunger is related to an earlier character of Bellow’s, Augie March who claims to be “hipped on superabundance” (11), the supermarket milk and honey of the burgeoning American suburbs, only to remain desirous and acquisitive amidst all the superfluity. The hunger of immigrant assimilative fiction is not a uniquely physical drive. From Augie March to Neil Klugman the idea of hunger has been divorced from food. Physical needs have been met, but spiritual ones remain unsated.

This has not always been the case. Physical hunger figures heavily in the assimilative immigrant narrative. Consider Ellie Weisel stuffing his pockets with breadcrumbs to keep himself alive during his final days in Auschwitz. Or Kafka’s surrealistic inversion of the experience in “The Hunger Artist.” Richard Wright’s sequel to his memoir *Black Boy, American Hunger*, fits into this category as well. Wright uses hunger to express the larger yearnings associated with tribal and geographical dislocation, the diasporic yearning for a homeland familiar to most American immigrants.

The relationship between physical hunger and spiritual longing have deep European roots. In Swedish writer Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, for example, the main character systematically divests himself of every belief system in order to achieve a state of "nothingness," by which he hopes to become a more honest and spiritually attuned writer.

In his 1970 essay, "The Hunger Artist," Paul Auster conducts readers through a comparison of Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger* and Franz Kafka's short story "The Hunger Artist." The comparisons are skillfully arranged in order to illustrate how both stories use the metaphor of starvation to get at the larger existential crisis brewing at the heart of European life at the turn of the 20th century. In both stories, Auster argues that the hunger evoked is as much spiritual as physical. It is interesting how Auster plays with the idea of fasting and explores how it is tied in with religious rituals, specifically Jewish rituals. As in the prohibitions against eating during the holy days. The characters in Auster's novel *The New York Trilogy* engage in their own bouts of fasting, constructing barren, monk-like existences for themselves in their search for definitive answers. The choice of starvation typically results in disaster. The only reward for starvation, it seems, is hunger. And eventually death. The question is what to do with the hunger.

In his essay "The Fall of David Levinsky," a critique of Abraham Cahan's seminal work of Jewish-immigrant fiction, *The Rise of David Levinsky*, Isaac Rosenfield names the central identifying feature of the Jewish hero as hunger. Rosenfield explains how the physical, emotional and sexual deprivation Levinsky experienced in his youth made hunger an integral part of his character. This hunger, Rosenfield asserts, "expresses itself



in [Levinsky's] adulthood as a yearning for fulfillment, and later as an organic habit, as a result of which no satisfaction is possible" (62). Because the hunger is strong, Rosenfield argues, "the hero must strive to relieve it, and yet because it is strong, it must also be preserved" (63).

Rosenfield explains this paradox by stating, "Hunger is not only the state of tension out of which desires spring; precisely because the desires are formed under its sign, they become assimilated to it, and convert it to the prime source of all value, so that the man seeks to return to his yearning" (64). In other words, hunger is the energy that drives these characters. This kind of hunger is central to Auster's work. In *The Invention of Solitude* Auster writes, "The closer I come to the end of what I am to say, the more reluctant I am to say anything. I want to postpone the moment of ending and in this way delude myself into thinking that I have only just begun, that the better part of my story still lies ahead" (65). In postponing the ending of his story, the moment of closure and fulfillment, Auster is choosing to live in hunger. Auster confronts the idea of hunger more directly in *City of Glass*, observing the futility of using food as a means to gain satisfaction, "A meal was no more than a fragile defense against the next meal. Food could never answer the question of food; it only delayed the moment when the question would have to be asked in earnest" (112).

Seeing how hunger figures in Auster's work the question becomes in what way is it a specifically Jewish trait? Rosenfield argues that "the whole history of the Jews is marked with hunger"(67). One only has to look at the Jewish calendar with its feasting days, fasting days and other dietary laws to see how Jewish daily life is conspicuously centered around issues of food. The deeper significance of this hunger Rosenfield claims,

"lies in the fact that it is not confined to a single literary character, but repeated on a much larger scale in Jewish history and literature"(68). Indeed we see this hunger on display in the novels of Philip Roth, Bernard Malamud and Saul Bellow. Consider the central character of Philip Roth's novella *Goodbye Columbus* who returns time and again to his lover's lavish home in the hills of New Jersey, even when the abundance of their lifestyle fills him with jealousy and disgust; and he can only bring himself to eat at their sumptuous dinner table, "like a bird" (16).

Dislocation breeds this kind of hunger. Assimilation offers only partial fulfillment, satisfying want on a superficial level, never awakening those deeper mythic desires. I suspect these new hungers arise not just because language is lost in the act of assimilation, but because entire systems of thinking and storytelling that have evolved over centuries are lost. Those who have more fully assimilated into the dominant culture are left with little more than the shadows of their traditions, the outline of impulses and anxieties that no longer possess the inherited mythology to explain them.

The question becomes what is the role of assimilative immigrant fiction in dealing with the kind of gnawing spiritual hunger that arises when the dreams of entering a new culture are finally met? Does it exist as externalized cultural memory? Is it a new bible? Does it need to preserve a way of life, prescribe it? Is it an ethical testament? And what is the role of the responsible literary citizen in dealing with these issues? The pressure of the so-called social novel to change the world has always been enough to doom it. But the hard shadows of realist fiction did have its moment in the sun. Zola's *Germinal* changed things in France as did Dreiser, Wright and Baldwin in America. Unlike Philip Roth and Thomas Wolfe who cry out against the passing of the social novel, it's

usurpation by an all-pervasive media culture, I agree with Johnathan Franzen who has come to reject the role of the social novelist and contents himself as a writer with the simple pleasures of plot, character and setting. “If there is anything to be said about the larger world, you will discoverer it by entering the minutest aspects of your character’s lives,” Franzen explains, “not by reaching over their heads.” Franzen is thus a quantum storyteller, a pointillist of the modern suburban experience, particularly in his novel *The Corrections*. And yet this novel, and many of Frnazen’s other novels, levels a biting critique against contemporary consumerism.

From the Exodus to the Holocaust, Jewish liturgical rights have been obsessed by the idea of witness and remembrance. The Jewish Passover Seder is a highly ritualized dinner where participants are obliged to engage in the dining experience as if, “they had personally gone out of the land of Egypt.” While it is nice to know that Jews for millennia have enjoyed the same traditional meals, the Seder does nothing to keep the experience of the Exodus alive and untouched. It could be argued that the opposite in fact occurs, a deadening effect that comes with overuse, the mirror of experience shattering into a thousand reflections. This shattering effect is more troubling when it comes to honoring the martyrs of the The Shoah (The Jewish Holocaust). Survivors of the death camps repeat the mantra “We shall never forget” but like the Passover Seder, and like life itself, the fragile construct of our language, of our memory, is destined to sweep even this monumental tragedy under the historical rug. Right now from Rwanda to Bosnia, Ukraine to Palestine, history is repeating itself. Genocide is an unmistakable part of our daily lives. So how do we keep the memory alive? Is such a thing possible or are we doomed to repeat history enduring genocide until the end of recorded time?

We may find a clue in the Seder ritual. During the Passover dinner, diners are commanded to eat a slice of bitter herbs along with the rest of their meal. The bitterness is designed to remind Jews of their days of enslavement. What the organizers of this ritual must have realized is that in a fragmented world, where the texture of existence itself gets washed away in the flux of time and language, pain is the only reliable index of reality we have. If something hurt, it must have been real. This leads to a very troubling irony. Trauma writing, which I believe many of my stories engage with, must keep alive some of the trauma the psyche wants so desperately to forget.

Does a tribal mythos need to be extreme, that is to say summon demons and purge ghosts in order to reconcile past traumas? I would argue that it must. Though some believe, and rightly so, that the novel is a place where the mind can stretch out and access subtler thoughts, in a media-saturated world I believe we need Art that not only stakes out an ethical position but evinces a sense of outrage as well. Outrage and indignation may seem outdated and ineffectual modes of communication, but in a fragmented world, I fear only the loudest voices will be heard. This, I suspect, explains something about our current fascination with extremes: political candidates, for example, who move further and further away from the center. In a fragmented world, Aristotle's golden mean is no longer tenable. Who is to say what is average, what is mean? Both terms are mathematical concepts we've imported into the messy world of human behavior. In other words, Yeats is correct in his assertion that the center cannot hold. The beast that rises from the depths, slouching towards Bethlehem, may be our own fragmented selves, a disco ball of whirling identities hungering for the prism of a singular light. Or it could be that great hypothesis God himself, the personified void given shape and dimension by the

sheer volume of all our repressed pain. Whatever it is, it needs definition. It needs to be circumferenced by the boundaries of language and traced by healing words, so it can be let lose across the pages of a new literature that seeks to supplant what it wills so earnestly to control.

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## BOOT CAMP GRADUATION PHOTO

He is a warrior. He is a fanatic.

He is me.

And somehow I am him.

Was him.

I mostly recall the forgetting: feeling for the rolls of fat I used to stuff inside my jeans each morning only to find them shrunk like a sheet of plastic wrap under the heat of an unseen fire. In their place, a wall of Spartan steel had risen up, washboard strong and diamond tough. I began to linger in the shower after the platoon returned to their bunks to inventory the features of this new hardness: the masonic taper of the abdominal wall, the iron veins that surged into the groin, and the groin itself, tossing restlessly between my legs.

"*This* is the face you make," Aunt Cookie asked, dropping the camera from her cheek.

"What's the matter, Eisenhower," Uncle Max mocked, "too good to smile for your family?"

But I couldn't force an ounce of happiness across my lips.

My father, a man crippled by grief, had pulled out a bottle of Manashevitz the night I enlisted and began gulping it down like seltzer. "You were right, Sissy," he wept to the bleary wedding photograph hanging above the sofa. "Our little boy wants to be a soldier."

But the old man was a soldier too, back to back with Uncle Max in the snowy

mountains of Korea. With Chinese infantry massing in the valley below, they shot their overheated machine guns until they had to urinate on the glowing barrels to keep the bullets firing straight. I would ask to play with their medals whenever I found them hiding at the bottom of an old shoebox or buried in the contents of a forgotten drawer. The men were unnerved by even the most innocent displays of worship.

“Medals are for circus clowns,” Uncle Max would dismiss whenever the subject came up.

“Can medals raise the tumors off your mother’s corpse?” my father would add.

But the effortless masculinity the two men shared, the scratchy-faced love they lavished on each other, made me feel a puny thing in comparison.

“You can't smile?” Aunt Cookie asked, hoping for another picture.

“Get a load of this one,” Max grunted. “He can go off to liberate the Gulf of Arabia, but he can't smile for his Aunt?”

“*Kuwait*, Max,” Cookie groaned. “He’s going to liberate Kuwait. There is no Gulf of Arabia”

“Fine, so he’s going to liberate Kuwait. How is that going to make for a better picture?”

“Not one teensy-weensy smile?” Aunt Cookie pleaded. “Not even for your father, who wanted to be here, but . . .”

But there was no smile left in my cheeks, only hunger. A hunger to experience something heroic, something mythic, something unavailable in the empty shopping centers of my hometown, beyond the reach of my mother’s corpse and whatever old shoebox she buried what remained of my father.



## CREATURES OF APPITITE

I don't know why they called him Drunk Jimmy Funk. He didn't drink any more than the typical kid from Cahokia, Illinois, nor was he in any way exceptionally funky. Perhaps it had something to do with the musical quality of the language in that part of the country, expressions like "fine as frog hair" or "slim as a sapling" that confirmed every notion a Chicagoan like myself typically held about the people who lived down around the dirty ankles of the state; notions of bad teeth, cheap liquor, and a trailer park full of freshly spiked mullets.

But Jimmy was more than just a collection of white trash stereotypes. He was a fixture at Gateway College where aspiring writers from across the Midwest came to take their first stabs at literary stardom. Though he wasn't a student, Jimmy made it to all the most popular classes, appearing wide-eyed at the back of the lecture hall ready to soak up all the information that blew by the rest of us. He was hard to miss in those days, buttoned into his denim jacket and propped against the back wall. There was usually a trucker hat slanted across his forehead keeping the unruly strands of auburn hair from falling into his eyes. He would kick one of his Nikes against the acoustic panels behind him and stroke the scruff on his chin as if pondering some great thought, a thought that probably extended no further than his next can of Mountain Dew. Still with time that scruff may have blossomed into a fine loam of collegiate fur. He might have been my classmate then instead of my drug supplier. Maybe even a friend. There was a time before the Army when I had those.

After work, Jimmy would circle through the parties that sparked up near campus and hawk the fragrant party sticks he assembled so carefully throughout the day. But you shouldn't let the term "party stick" throw you. It wasn't the typical dime bag blunt that Jimmy carried around campus; the kind hustled in front of the neighborhood truck stop by slack jawed farm boys in stretched out t-shirts. Jimmy had a brew-master's sense of blending when it came to his merchandise, a vintner's eye for quality: moist buds harvested from the plains, selected for their high THC content and earthy bouquet. Such attention to the particulars of his craft helped Jimmy produce the kind of rich, mellow smoke that could settle even the most restless spirit into long hours of slow deep thought. I can say this because at twenty-nine I was one of those restless spirits.

From the top floor of the Wasserman Student Center at Gateway College you can see the burial mounds of Cahokia bend along the banks of the Mississippi River. 1800 years ago the native Mississippi Indians rolled balls of earth together to form makeshift temples. They later combined those temples into massive mounds where the local shaman came to bury the dead. Looking out from the higher elevations of campus, those mounds could still be seen dotting the horizon, dragging a curious eye across the river to the buildings of St. Louis and the Great Plains beyond.

I nurtured a secret passion for skylines ever since my father showed me the lights of the Sears Tower flashing through the trees outside my bedroom window. Something about those hot circles beaming across the prairie made me feel watched over and safe. I suspect Jimmy had a similar fascination with the mounds. We would search them out together through the heavy brown glass of the student center hoping to catch a glimpse of something more inspiring than our own dead-eyed reflections staring back in

disbelief.

It was November when that dead-eyed reflection finally convinced me I was finished with Gateway College and the Liberal Arts they put so much faith in. Everything was a battle for the kids at Gateway; egos perpetually jousting over the interpretation of some archaic text or the pernicious love of some beat down professor who hadn't published so much as a pamphlet since the heady days of Vietnam. After ten years with the Armored Cavalry I was hoping to be finished with war. Instead I wound up paying \$40,000 a year for it. Rather than subjecting myself to another afternoon of literary combat, I grabbed my messenger bag and headed down to the river, peddling my rusty Diamondback along the Chippewa Trail to the distant mounds. I discovered Jimmy sitting atop the highest peak when I arrived, his legs akimbo and arms aflutter.

"You're just in time," he hollered as I nosed my bike over the crest, "the sun is about to crash into the Arch."

I was too winded to care about Jimmy's hyperbole. If the sun was going to crash into the St. Louis Arch, then let it. Let it fall into the goddamned river for all I cared and the rest of the city along with it. I dropped into the cold earth alongside Jimmy's backpack, hardly noticing the blades of frosted grass that crunched beneath my jeans.

"We can expect contact sometime around five o'clock," Jimmy continued as he aimed a pocketknife at the *Garcia Vega* resting on his lap. I nodded mindlessly as my heart continued to defibrillate in loud squeezing thumps inside my chest.

"Do you think there's a force more powerful than gravity at work in the universe?" Jimmy asked, plunging the knife into the belly of the cigar.

I gulped down a lungful of air. "I don't know, Mr. Questions. Why don't you roll

that flipping weed already and maybe the answer will come to you?" I wasn't usually so cranky, but the question had struck a nervous chord. Not long ago, atop one of these mounds, I surmised my own theory of cosmic resistance. There was a magnetism in the mud of Cahokia that only the locals knew. It rooted you to the stagnant clay, sucked the ambition from your joints, and made you content with the filth. It was part of why I was giving up on Gateway College, I suspected. And part of why I couldn't keep any of the promises I made before finishing my final months in the Army, promises about a new leaf, clean and focused, that I kept trampling into the mud.

The mud must have pulled harder on Jimmy. From his family's apartment outside Cahokia he watched the world rise and fall for nearly twenty years. Lord knows he wasn't shy about sharing his stories. His mom's diets, his uncle's sobriety, even his sister's chastity all began in a blaze of promise each morning only to die out one by one amid the oppressive swirl of twilight. The crunch of an empty beer can and the Pavlovian ding of the microwave oven, these sounds along with the staccato thumping of a worn out headboard were the noises that guided Jimmy's understanding of the world, lead him like so many others to the top of these ancient mounds to search out some distant meaning in the sky.

As he flattened the hollowed leaf of the *Garcia Vega* against his pant-leg, Jimmy asked what I thought would happen once the sun finally crashed into the metal cover of the Arch. "Will it be an explosion of color," he wondered, "or will it pass unremarkably, another of life's disappointments?"

"What am I, an astrophysicist?" I barked back. And then I got personal. "You're always talking, Jimmy, like a goddamned chihuahua. Just roll that fucking blunt already

and we'll talk later." Jimmy's face froze as the words flew past. I immediately felt guilty. "Sorry," I mumbled. "I'm not myself today."

"Yes you are," he answered flatly. In the awkwardness that followed we shifted our attention to the ground and soldiered on through the heavy silence. Jimmy returned to his work. After smoothing two pinches of marijuana into the gutted cigar, he sealed off the ends and lifted the creation to his mouth. He let the newly minted party stick hang there for a moment, assessing its weight and symmetry, before finally testing the draw. Once pleased with the flow of air through the leafy cylinder, he struck a match and pulled a cloud of smoke deep into his lungs. As he struggled to hold the chemicals in his chest, he began shifting his bony hips from side to side, trying to carve a comfortable pit in the hardening ground below him.

"I like to get as close to the earth as possible when I come up here," Jimmy once told me. If the dope was strong enough, and the sun as warm, Jimmy claimed he could feel the spirits of the mounds enter his bloodstream. Two puffs and he imagined himself a shirtless brave sprinting across the plains. Two more puffs and Jimmy's shirtless brave transformed into a revered medicine man gathering sacred rocks off the buffalo-trampled meadow. A final puff and Jimmy's medicine man became a powerful chief, one who was returning to the village after a triumphant hunt, ready to slip into the fertility tent and chose a partner for the evening.

Jimmy didn't even mind letting the brutal initiation rites he learned about in Dr. Comstock's anthropology class invade the fantasy. Dr. Comstock of the repeated viewings of the Richard Harris movie *A Man Called Horse*. No matter what ordeals the tribal elders conjured to test his resolve, Jimmy felt it would be worth it to throw off the

shackles of the daily retail grind.

As it stood then, two uniforms regulated the passing of his week. The blue vest of Wal-Mart looped through Mondays and Wednesdays while the black apron of the Panera Bread Company tied off the rest. "Sure it was better than high school," Jimmy would laugh, "at least I get to smoke here." But a weariness in his eye convinced me that Jimmy knew it was a lifeless life he had chosen, a degradation that colored him black and blue every week at the rate of \$7.25 an hour.

So Drunk Jimmy Funk kept hitting his blunts, but even with the region's finest dope pumping through his body he couldn't sustain his pipe dreams for long, dreams of a world that didn't go ticking away with the punch-clock. Below us, the evening construction crews exploded into life. Jackhammers pounded, air horns honked, the world drove brutally on. Nothing natural blossomed over the gangly oak trees and wild buckthorn that spread along the banks of the old highway.

As the sun continued to slump in the sky, I watched Jimmy become increasingly restless. He shifted his body deeper into the earth hoping to reconnect to the temperamental spirits of the mound. It didn't seem to do much good. A group of schoolchildren ran screaming to their bus, a loud speaker announced the park's imminent closing, and a white Ford Taurus with government plates pulled into a nearby lot.

Staff Sergeant Lee Manley pulled his dress cap tightly around his ears as he stepped out of the white sedan.

"Look," Jimmy said, seeing the sergeant approach the mound, "here comes the Buzzard of Cahokia ready to pick the rest of my bones. Hey Manley," he called out to the advancing sergeant, "you missed the group of unwed mothers by the ticket booth. What

the hell, guy. We got a war to win.”

“I’ll catch them on the way out,” the sergeant winked as he assaulted the sloping face of the mound.

“Maybe you can sign up their children too,” Jimmy laughed, pulling deeply on his party stick.

“And their grandparents later.” Manley smiled.

“He only thinks he’s kidding.” Jimmy winked to me as he watched the sergeant pull up before us.

Manley lifted his nose into the air to help identify the aroma. “Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, I thought you were going to stop wasting those good cigars.”

“You want a puff?” Jimmy asked.

“I don’t even want to smell it,” the sergeant replied, waving a hand across his face.

“Then what are you doing up here?”

“I was thinking about you the other day, James. I understand you’re not ready to serve your country. But we’ve shared some good conversations and I was trying to think about what I could wish for you by way of a parting gesture, something more meaningful than the usual “good luck” or “best wishes.” But I couldn’t. In all our talks you never said what it is you want from this world. A man is what he wants, son. We are creatures of appetite. So tell me what you want. Tell me what you hunger for when the lights go out, and I’ll feel a whole lot better about leaving you on these mounds.”

I punched Jimmy on the shoulder. “Let’s bounce,” I said. “This guy’s making me sick.” But Jimmy turned to the sergeant.

“All right, Manley. I guess I do owe you an answer. But not because you stalked me all week like a serial killer, but because—as sad as this sounds—you’re the only person who ever asked me a question.” I was too stoned, or maybe too self-absorbed, to feel stung by the remark.

Jimmy turned his head to the Arch. I followed his eyes to the empty space between the spans. He let out a deep breath before he began to speak. “Some days I get so hungry I’d do almost anything to feel full again. I guess you’d say that makes me a pussy, a macho army dude like yourself. But check this out. In a film I saw in some Psychology class these scientists decide to raise a little monkey in an empty room. Naturally, days go by and the poor little guy just falls apart. One day they open the door and throw in an oily blanket. At first the monkey is terrified. He wants nothing to do with it. But soon he warms up to it. He starts to eat with it and then play with it. One day he runs over and clutches it to his chest. He clings to that little scrap of fabric like it’s his very own mother. And so the monkey comes back to life a little, but just enough not to die. Later, they introduce a metal pipe, a ball of steel wool, and a box of nails; all of which the monkey clings to like a family.”

“Are you trying to say that I’m made of steel, Jimmy?” the sergeant asked, smugly.

“I’m trying to say that I’m fed up with scraps,” Jimmy replied. “I think of all the things I hold to my body and call life: sex, food, drugs; and yet here I am still hungry enough to talk to some recruiting sergeant just so I don’t have to feel alone.”

“Thanks a lot asshole,” I thought as I snatched the party stick out of Jimmy’s hand.



“I don't like the sound of that,” the sergeant replied. “I thought we had a real connection, something that merited a final wish for your future.”

“You want to know what you can wish for me, Manley? You want to know what I hunger for when the lights go out? I'd like to know what it feels like to be full. Not oily rag full like that horrible monkey, but honest to goodness full. You find the person that can do that for me . . .” Jimmy's voice trailed off after that.

Manley's face could hardly contain the smile that broke across it. He fumbled for the brochures he kept in his organizer. “How would you like to feel full for a lifetime?” he finally said. But Jimmy's attention returned to the Arch by then.

The sergeant began his pitch slowly, stealthily, speaking to Jimmy about honor, loyalty and discipline. As he built up momentum, he started telling Jimmy he was smarter than most of the kids he talked to at the mall, that he deserved more than Cahokia had to offer.

"Enough already," I broke in. "Are you trying to recruit the kid or marry him?"

"Uh-oh, James." the sergeant laughed, "I think your boyfriend is getting jealous."

"Tell me something, sergeant, do those brochures you hand out ever mention the look in a chieftain's eye when you conduct an armed sweep of his village; do they talk about the cry of the nurses when you blow apart half an operating room with a wayward tank round; and what about the concussion from a roadside bomb that knocks the jelly out of your eye sockets and drips the blood from your ears. How is that painted over in your funny little pamphlets?"

The sergeant folded his arms. "So you're prior service. Why didn't you stay in?"

"I didn't want to end up like you."

"Like me?" the sergeant spat. "I'm a decorated civil servant with a well-paying job. What are you?"

"I'm a little lamb lost in the woods." It was my intention to communicate something about the predatory nature of the Army to Jimmy. But the sergeant, with his wolfish scowl, spoke before the boy could unwrinkle his brow.

"You're another victim." Manley glared, his face dripping with disgust. "Don't blame the Army for what you couldn't handle."

"And you're a child molester," I shot back. I turned to Jimmy. "This hunger of yours, it's not some existential crisis, it's not the birth pangs of a brand new consciousness, it's the munchies. Okay? So can we get out of here already? I'll buy you a bag of nachos."

But the boy didn't move. And before I could figure out what was happening, Jimmy reached up for the sergeant's hand.

"Are you serious?" I shouted. And then, too flustered to form an original thought, I called out the first thing that entered my mind. "What about your future?"

Jimmy's lips parted into a thin smile. "I don't like nachos," he said.

Instinct took over. I reached for Jimmy's jacket. But my legs were two lumps of dead rubber by then. They crumpled beneath my hips and drove me backwards into the mud.

"Stay down, little lamb," the sergeant warned as I struggled to regain my footing.

Jimmy scrutinized my floundering attempts to climb out of the mud. "Why do you even care?" He asked.

The question pierced my bravado like a well-aimed bullet. All at once the air shot from my lungs. It wasn't long before my entire body followed suit, surrendering to the heavy pull of the mounds. "Because I made the same decision ten years ago." I finally admitted. "I know where this ends."

The sergeant unfolded his arms and turned towards Jimmy. "Only the weak obsess over the past, son." He glanced down briefly at his note cards before adding the following punchline. "Let your tomorrow begin today."

"I think Manley's right," Jimmy said after a hard silence. "You can't change your past by trying to control my future."

"Alright." I exhaled. "I surrender."

Jimmy's face softened in the approaching dusklight. Once the balance of power had shifted between us he didn't feel the need to be hurtful or sarcastic like I did. "Don't fret," he said, tossing me his backpack. "There are definite advantages to a life without direction. Just promise me you won't smoke all those alone. "

I was too stunned to reply. I wanted to shout: "He's a drug dealer. He'll never piss clean." But my mouth was welded shut by an unbreakable wad of fear and cotton. So I held the backpack in my arms and began caressing the wispy nylon stitches, noticing how fragile they were beneath my clumsy hands as the two men disappeared down the hill.

I was still on the mound twenty minutes later when the setting sun crossed the southern span of the St. Louis Arch. The resulting light broke across the prairie in a burst of color, creeping silo by silo over the plains until it looked like somebody had cracked open the universe and poured it's molten contents into the river. The same light managed

to hit the Cahokia recruiting station where Drunk Jimmy Funk stood awkwardly for an unofficial enlistment picture, ready to sign away the next four years of his life.

Eight months later the local newspapers were full of stories from Iraq. It was part of what came to be known as The Surge, an infusion of fresh troops designed to break the stalemate developing around Baghdad and the Northern provinces. The articles were thoroughly investigated and punishingly descriptive. Here's what I learned. Not long after the first units arrived for this new strategy, a militiaman snuck up on the convoy of Specialist James Frankowski. It took me a while to bridge the gap between James Frankowski and Drunk Jummy Funk, but when I read the words "Cahokia native" my stomach twisted into a bitter knot.

Taking position behind the ruins of an old mosque, the young militiaman took Jimmy's Humvee into the sights of his grenade launcher. With a wild shout, the militiaman proceeded to depress the trigger and blow Jimmy's stomach into a nearby field. The platoon immediately returned fire, dropping the militiaman and his empty launcher into the dirt

There is a phenomenon researchers discovered among infantrymen during World War II. After enduring a fatal injury they often crawled out to an open patch of earth and rolled belly up like a fish, turning their faces one last time to the sky. With his last breaths Jimmy Funk crawled out of his burning vehicle, found a place in the sun, and promptly turned his face into the mud. When I saw the photograph I nearly puked.

For exceeding his yearly recruitment goal, Staff Sergeant Lee Manley was promoted to Sergeant First Class and awarded the Meritorious Service Medal. This honor was bestowed on him for actions that, in the words of the article, "were in keeping with

the highest traditions of the Army.”

Along with the promotion came a desk in a brand new office. Manley now sits in the front window of the Cahokia recruiting station only a few blocks from the forest preserve where local truants, slackers and other assorted misfits come to smoke their first cigarettes and bounce little bean bags across their feet. I only passed the building once. I hopped off my Diamondback and pressed my nose to the glass for a better look.

Above the medal which the Sergeant keeps framed behind his desk, a wall of Polaroid photographs rises to the bottom of the fluorescent lighting. In a way, the arrangement of the photographs suggest the monuments at Arlington cemetery, except these images are cheap and disposable, like the cameras that took them and the soldiers into whom they eventually developed. Five rows up and three from the left sits the picture of Drunk Jimmy Funk taken not twenty minutes after he left the mounds. The brilliant light he waited for can be seen breaking behind his shoulder. Perhaps caught on a better camera it would appear like a halo, but here the brightness only distorts him like a ghost.

*“The only thing half so melancholy as a battle lost  
Is a battle won.”  
The Duke of Wellington (1815)*

*“War, what is it good for? Absolutely nothing.”  
Edwin Starr (1969)*

## THE SMOKER

It was another Sunday morning in Lincoln, Illinois where even the birds seemed hung over. Baggo boards, tipsy from the night's abuse, struggled to hold their slant atop the soggy lawns of Astor Court. Along Williams Street, where the porches opened broadly to the grass, a skyline of empty beer bottles made music out of each hollow breeze that whistled through. In the gutter below the Sigma house, a red brassiere rode a river of warm pilsner towards the sewer. The fabric bubbled in the dark liquid before finally being gulped into the underworld with a great belching swallow of air. That's how the weekends ended at Central Illinois University, Peyton Colby thought as he laced up his running shoes: in a great belching swallow.

With a push at the screen door, Peyton was out of his apartment and racing toward campus. He made it a point to crush each beer can that passed below his feet, stomping through the piles of discarded aluminum like a one man trash compactor. If he slowed at all it was merely to glower at the dreary dormitories and the sleepy residents inside who snored away the weekend's vice on a bed full of pillows taken from home.

Earning two Combat Infantry Badges should have merited a more engaged class of coed, Peyton thought as he pounded past the row of yellowing apartments rising on his left: a group of artists, a pack of dissidents, maybe even a protester or two. Somebody to spit on him as he stepped into the housing office with his ribbons gleaming and his

fingertips stained with the memory of foreign blood. Resentment had always been the true mark of a hero, he reckoned. But nobody even blew their nose that day. The VA advisor merely put his hand on Peyton's shoulder and suggested he didn't have to wear his uniform anymore. As it happened, Peyton wanted to wear his uniform. He wanted to say "yes sir" to his elders and hold the door open for young ladies, become a chivalrous example of some idealized past coughed up into the imperfect present, a present that found his contemporaries bouncing ping pong balls into plastic beer cups while glitter-chested girls named Breanna or Caitlyn cheered them drunkenly on.

Peyton worked out his disappointment with his peers along the paths that circled through campus. Each new mile returned him to the promise of his enlistment, that billboard soldier who paraded through his mind while his puzzled high school teachers continued to hand back assignments ringing with those alarming red question marks. No, Peyton was not a Nazi. He wasn't even a skinhead. He was merely pointing out that Hitler, while clearly a nut, was a highly regarded speaker in his day, endowed with what the classic orators called presence. Ms. Gould turned the essays over to Dr. Wetzel who immediately scheduled a district-wide in-service for the following afternoon. Peyton spent the next two days locked in a conference room with Essie Bauman, re-living her six months in Treblinka one over-rehearsed memory after another. By the time the ordeal was over, Peyton had come to wish he'd been packed into the ovens along with the rest of the Bauman family. Only then would he be safe from Essie's droning jeremiads.

His people, The Colbys, didn't indulge in such behavior. Who had time for mindless chatter when you're out in the field all day busting the hard Illinois soil or hustling up another batch of tomatoes for the farmer's market? True to their laconic

nature, The Colbys usually passed away sometime during their mid-40s, carried off by a series of aneurysms, seizures and stopped up arteries. Betty Colby succumb one Sunday in the middle of her pew, slipping quietly into the afterlife while Pastor Eric sermoned on about the healing power of silence. Daniel Colby went down a few months later, collapsing near the sixteenth hole of the public golf course, his wobbly Titleist unable to complete the birdie that would have brought him back to par. Only Uncle Barry, Daniel's brother, survived past middle age, channeling all his anxieties into the running of his flower shop, saving as much affection as he could for the orphaned nephew he took in like a wounded lily. It was a difficult moment when Peyton left for recruit training three months later. "You don't have to go," Uncle Barry said, his partner Lance wilting by his side. "You're already special, at least to us." But Peyton wasn't interested in being Uncle Barry's kind of special. A bowl of pudding that called itself a man was in no way special. And neither was the guy who licked his spoon.

Memories continued to sequence themselves into loose scenarios as Peyton raced through campus, each new thought taking cues from the surrounding landscape. The apartments of The Thomson Residence Complex with their arched Moroccan doorways and dusty Fez-like crowns invariably returned Peyton to the walls of The Al Jaffa Mosque in April, 2008.

The Al Jaffa Mosque stood on a small, sandy hill outside the town of Mosul. It shimmered cheaply against the Mesopotamian sky. Minarets standing out like cardboard party horns, tapestries worn thinner than bath towels. From inside its impoverished walls a squad of Fedayeen militiamen launched a series of attacks against Peyton's convoy, an anemic column of two Humvees, one duce and a half truck, and a pair of Bradley fighting



vehicles. The column was tasked with running the gauntlet from Tikrit to Mosul so the officers at CENTCOM could claim that Route 10 was open for commerce. Peyton was operating the .50 caliber machine gun mounted to the crossbar of the lead Humvee, a weapon so devastating the Geneva Convention restricted its use to armored targets only.

The initial exchange of gunfire proved anticlimactic. Bottles of energy drink crashed to the floor with greater intensity than belts of spent ammunition. Bullets streaked harmlessly overhead, bright as fireflies. It was only when a pajama-clad Fedayeen leapt out of the mosque—brandishing an AK 47 in one hand and a copy of the Koran in the other—that things achieved the heightened level of reality Peyton had come to expect from all his marathon Call of Duty sessions at the Lincoln Mall.

Peyton swung the barrel of his machine gun towards the fanatic and let loose with a series of shaky, five-round bursts. The bullets, hot and green, pocked the sandy walls of the ancient building, outlining the charging enemy in wispy puffs of shattered brick. When the final slug reached the advancing soldier it literally blew the man apart, his legs running off towards the highway while his torso spun blindly into the weeds. Peyton kept firing until the ammo case was empty. As for the Geneva Convention, Peyton delivered what amounted to a linguist's defense later that night to his laughing CO. "The man was a.) armed and b.) moving," Peyton reasoned. "Therefore he was an armored target."

But the dying man hadn't armed himself with much beyond his faith that evening. And the holy book he brandished offered scant protection against the impact of those lethal rounds. What remained of that slim prayer volume, and the beautiful poems inside, rained down on the martyr's entrails like so much wet confetti, the heavy-handed symbolism of the moment lost on the frenzied men of Alpha Troop and their equally

distracted foe.

Only Peyton took a moment to marvel at the power that rested at the end of his fingertips; the heart-stopping beauty of a life in full flower that could be chopped down simply by depressing a four inch metal hinge-spring the weapons manual called a butterfly. A fire lit the back of Peyton's eyes as he gripped the smoking wings of that butterfly. He could imagine himself conducting this same convoy through the crowded streets of his hometown, Lincoln. There were Mosques there now too. As well as the old high school.

It took the death of Private Matthew Doberman to return Peyton's wandering thoughts to the action outside Mosul. Private Doberman had taken a slug between the ribs during the closing seconds of the battle. The impact knocked the boy off the top of his truck and left him convulsing in the road beside a stalled Bradley. First Sergeant Wentz immediately scooped the soldier into his arms and began administering aid. As Doberman lay in the First Sergeant's arms, the young private craned his neck into the gathering twilight and parted his lips into the following question, "Why?"

The First Sergeant's arms slackened as the question flew past. His sun-dried face lost most of its color. With a squinch of his brow, Wentz lowered the Okleys resting on his forehead down to his nose, then peered through mirrored lenses to get a better look at the wounded private. The boy's face was doughy and flat, the cheeks washed out and bloated like a pair of yeasty lumps smeared across a floured baking tray. Only the blue tint of his lips gave the image any color. And blue was not a color you wanted to see on the lips of a gunshot victim. Blue meant shock. And shock meant that all the blood that once colored your body had leaked into the sand. "You can't just leave us with 'why,'

Doberman,” Wentz said, dragging a smile across his face. “You’re our baptism of fire, our first casualty. You’ve got to give it all meaning.” The First Sergeant forced that smile into a broad laugh, hoping to cover the grim sincerity of his thoughts.

Peyton agreed with the First Sergeant. In the nineteen years that Matt Doberman wandered the Earth, tipping cows in the fourth pasture, chasing fat girls with swinish makeup through the empty corridors of the Lincoln Mall, couldn’t he have found something more inspiring to whisper than that horrible, movie-house cliché? No one was expecting the Gettysburg address from the boy, not even a rousing pep rally cheer, but a small thought or gesture to help organize the accidents of history that delivered each soldier to this particular moment would not have gone unappreciated. That clearly wasn’t going to happen. The platoon drifted slowly back to their vehicles, heads slouched and weapons dragging in the dirt. The ash tray sky above them crushed out what remained of the sun before the first engine could fire up. The column took the next ten kilometers in the pixilated darkness, scanning the empty landscape through starlight lenses as the digital horizon burned with the ghostly flicker of flaming oil wells and dying sunlight.

It never occurred to the men of Alpha Troop that there could be something meaningful in the childlike whimper of Private Doberman's question, a recognition that death isn't some profound moment to be blindly sanctified but rather, and quite simply, the end of life, as stupendously ordinary as the bubbles of cheese that oozed from the dying boy's MRE. Or the five pounds of feces he voided into his shorts seconds after they zipped him into a vinyl bag. Or even the lines of smoke that rose off his body where the bullet broke the skin, a smoldering transfiguration that lit up the evening sky before the clouds of burning motor oil could hasten it black.

The smokestacks of the approaching energy plant seemed to belch out a series of steamy question marks as Peyton made the turn onto Williams Street. It seemed to press Private Doberman's question with renewed vigor. Peyton didn't know how to answer the insistent clouds, or even the lingering remarks of the First Sergeant. "Why" seemed an ample enough gesture for a dying boy. The oldest, most repeated question in the universe was valediction enough for any man. But maybe it was too much reality for the buzzed up soldiers of Alpha Troop. Maybe, no matter what the smoke insisted, there was no combination of words up to the challenge. Perhaps life, at its most intense, is a sub-lingual experience; beyond the ordering impulse of the omniscient over soul. The best the men of Alpha troop could hope for by way of an answer during their initial deployment was the guttural moans of First Sergeant Wentz, who—not four days after the firefight outside Mosul—took the brunt of an IED to the chest, sputtered five paces towards the Euphrates and cried out, "Because fuck you, Doberman, that's why."

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Some days the layer of warm beer that covered Lincoln, Illinois was visible to the naked eye. It hovered in an amber mist above the broken cobblestone dissolving somewhere near the bird-filled power lines where the sun would roast it into atoms too small to be observed. Asa Wagner liked the campus best this way, the sounds were deeper and the smells were brighter, as if everything had been pressed closer to its origin under the lid of a humid dome. From his wheelchair in the town square, Asa was able to take in all these sensory experiences like the pages of a novel. Every local found a place in the growing story; and Asa was happy to acknowledge each character who passed by. The coffee-sipped grumblings of the cafeteria ladies on their way to campus always

earned a wheezy, knowing smile. So too the cry of young lovers achieving their first climax up against the panes of the freshman dormitory, the bells of Sherman Hall consecrating the moment with their hourly rendering of the Halleluiah Chorus. Without the regular use of his legs, Asa was forced to let the world to come to him. In this sense, neuropathy was a blessing.

Because it was Sunday, Asa would be waiting in town for Peyton Colby to finish his run. Asa liked to tempt his opinionated young friend with a swig of Southern Comfort from his flask. But Asa knew the boy would never take the drink. Drinking was a sign of weakness, and Asa understood that men like Peyton refused to be weak. Sometimes, however, the boy would surprise Asa by accepting the cigarette he offered along with the flask. Asa figured the cigarette helped Peyton to differentiate himself from the wispy tribe of vegans that had recently invaded Lincoln, bean pole men with eyes and lips run through with shanks of tribal steel and wild women sprouting rebellious armpits who polluted the air with their hookah talk and ill-formed opinions about local farming.

After a triumphal gallop around the village square, Peyton pulled up before Asa at the café. The grizzled vet turned his diabetic face up to meet Peyton. "Did you win?" he asked, mocking the boy's effort.

"Nope," Peyton answered. "I'm still in Lincoln."

What started as a laugh ended up a dark line of sputum worming its way towards the curb. Once the coughing subsided, Asa reached into his jacket to retrieve his cigarette case.

Peyton bit his lip as the old veteran withdrew the silver plated box.

"I don't need your pity," Asa said, reading the boy's face. "I've made my choices."

Asa was a pugilistic smoker, the kind that wasn't content to fry his lungs on just any cigarette. Once a month he'd enlist some agile young vet to drive him to the tobacconist in Moline where the trucks rolled in straight from the marshy lowlands of Virginia. Lately this agile young vet was Peyton who was captivated by Asa's stories about the Ia Drang Valley, and spent many afternoons silently comparing them to his own experiences in Iraq, as well as the experience of coming home. In both cases the differences outweighed the similarities.

Asa was captivated by those differences even more than Peyton was. He had camped out at the airport to greet Peyton's battalion when they returned from their first deployment in 2009. He was dressed up in all his regalia that day: American flag stickers, POW-MIA shirt, and a red bandanna tied around his forehead in the fashion of hippie. Even with glucose-blurry eyes, Asa was struck by the contrast he observed, not just between the soldiers from each war, but in the country as a whole. The America Asa returned to in 1967 was a carnival of miniskirts, marijuana, and LSD. At least that's what it looked like through the eyes of a twenty-two-year-old farm boy launched into Southeast Asia from the crew cut heartland of 1964 America. But America was more than just a thin frosting of psychedelic yearning that fateful summer-of-love year. 1967 found a public growing increasingly sympathetic to Asa's unheroic war experiences, ready to listen to his tales of battlefield trauma, bureaucratic incompetence, and military injustice.

And what did the men of Peyton's battalion come home to? A brood of pregnant, slack-jawed mallrats, highways full of dyspeptic dollar menus, and sleeve after sleeve of mindless tattoos, not to mention the second rate jobs that were waiting for them at the

chicken plant or the third rate colleges the GI Bill kept funneling them into, all of this accompanied by the weepy evangelical praise heaped on them each oily-headed Sunday morning. Warriors of Christ, the preachers had christened the men of the 32nd Illinois Armored Cavalry Squadron (Reserve). That's quite a distinction. And while Peyton at first didn't believe himself worthy of such a title, somewhere inside the earnest thrum of all that swooning guitar music, below the tabernacle of waving hands that humbly sought the healing touch of God, he began to feel that he might indeed be something special, specifically ordained to spread a uniquely Pentecostal brand of Christian love and democracy throughout the world.

It took three pulls before Asa could finally pry open the top of his lighter. This was followed by a series of thumb-bruising drags on the flint wheel before he was able to achieve a sustainable spark. When at last he managed to get the end of his cigarette into the fire his first puff barely drew in the edge of the flame. Smoke came pouring out of the old man's face nevertheless.

"And you," Asa asked, lifting the case to Peyton's lips.

Peyton pulled a slim white cigarette out of the pack and held it under his nose, drawing the heavy scent of tobacco in through his nostrils. The level of detail the boy sought was astounding. Like a fine sommelier, Peyton reached deep into the experience of the cigarette, trying to get a sense of the barn the tobacco was dried in and the hay that filled its lofts. He squished the cotton filter between his fingers, testing its resiliency, before planting the cylinder firmly between his lips. Smoking was one of the few luxuries allowed while patrolling the long road from Tikrit to Mosul. It wasn't like the men of Alpha Troop could blend into the countryside like Asa's platoon humping the Ia Drang

Valley. There was no concern for hearts and minds in Peyton's war. The age of Hershey Bar diplomacy was over. The men of Alpha Troop knew they were invaders. Their war required more audacity than chocolate.

Asa handed Peyton his brass GI lighter. Peyton cracked it open against his thigh with a downward swoop of his arm then spun the flint wheel into a flame on the return trip north. When he brought the lighter up to his face a hearty flame was already dancing on the wick. Peyton damn near sucked the fire off the metal with his first inhale. He promptly snapped the lighter shut and returned it to Asa.

"I like watching you smoke," Asa said. "It's like watching a hungry man eat."

"I like your patch." Peyton replied, waving his cigarette at the 1st Cavalry Division logo stitched into Asa's jacket. "I'd be proud to wear that on my shoulder."

"Go ahead, kid, a lot of good it's done me." Asa allowed a small pause before attempting to change the topic. "So how's that girlfriend of yours? The young thing you brought by the café last week? I have to say it's refreshing to see an emotion on that ugly face of yours besides arrogance."

"They're called friends with benefits now," Peyton said.

Asa considered the phrase. "Friends with benefits. That sounds like an insurance plan. In my day we had free love. It's the same thing, I guess, only less contractual."

Peyton nodded distractedly. "Free love, that sounds like a welfare program."

Asa laughed, "It was, believe me. And I got plenty of handouts."

Peyton looked back towards the cupola of Sherman Hall. A question seemed to be forming in his mind. "Have you ever killed a man?" he asked.

Asa's cheeks blanched. "Excuse me?"



“Not fired blindly into the bush, or hurled hand grenades into shadows, but seen the line of a bullet smash through bone and shatter the bricks of a building behind it?”

Asa was taken aback. “I thought we were going to talk about your girlfriend, the one with the halter top and the short shorts.”

“I’m talking about the .50 caliber, Asa; the M2, the ma duce. Blood does amazing things. It can spray like a fire hose or spurt like an oil well. The experience is so . . . real. Not the cottony white puffs that issue from the end of a tommy gun in one of those old gangster movies, or the ‘guszg guszg guszg’ of a set of *Star Wars* lasers, but the violent eye-piercing sting of a muzzle flash, the arc of red golf balls converging on some unfortunate vanishing point. Maybe a man, maybe a machine. I’m talking about the .50 caliber, Asa. You fire the weapon. Pop, pop, pop, the stinging collision of metal on metal echoes in the distance. Pop, pop, pop, the snap and sizzle of a cracked engine block, then maybe more pops before all at once BOOM the night opens up like gasoline sunrise.”

Asa was horrified by the beatnik poetry of it all. “Nah, man,” the old trooper said shrinking into his wheelchair. “I didn’t fire no ma duce.” He leaned forward and offered what amounted to a confession. “When I fired at all, chief, my eyes were shut. By my sixth week in country I had enough. I was like that old injun in the movies.” Asa rolled up his sleeve to reveal the faded tattoo of Chief Joseph on his forearm. “You know, ready to fight no more forever.”

“Bullshit,” Peyton cried out. He lowered his eyes to the line of service ribbons Asa wore above his denim pocket. “You don’t earn the bronze star by closing your eyes in combat, trooper.”

“I ain’t no hero, man. I just kept my mouth shut and tried to get home.”

“You didn’t run away to Canada, did you?”

Asa’s voice cracked. “Hell, I wasn’t that brave.”

Peyton took a deep drag off his cigarette before returning his eyes to the cupola of Sherman Hall. “I did two tours, one in 09 and one in 11, and I never blinked once. The first guy I killed actually split in half. Can you believe that? I had to shoot the son of a bitch twice. By my second kill, I didn’t care anymore. I filled the guy with so many holes he fell to the ground smoking, his body so hot it ignited his ammunition belt. I must have smoked twenty guys from Tikrit to Mosul.” Peyton rolled his eyes to Asa and narrowed them into a skeptical glare. “Are you sure you didn’t smoke no gooks in ‘nam?”

“Na chief,” Asa said, returning his cigarette case to his pocket. “I’m the only smoker I know.”

Peyton continued searching the horizon beyond Sherman Hall. “Still, things were better in your day.”

Asa refused the flattery. “Don’t romanticize the past, kid. I was there. It was just like the present only with cheaper gas and better music.”

“Please. Things were much different. Your father’s generation joined the army because they were attacked, Pearl Harbor. You joined because you were drafted, no choice. My generation signed up because we wanted to go to college, to fucking college. And what do they teach you at college, that everything you fought for, or believed in, is wrong. That you’re somehow inherently evil just because you’re white. Screw that. I’m tired of feeling shitty. I spilled blood for this country and I shouldn’t have to come home and feel bad about it.”

Asa’s heart sank. He reached out and touched Peyton’s arm. “You’re not going to

off yourself, are you man?"

Asa noticed something sharp and cruel take hold of the boy's face. It was a look more callous than anything Asa had experienced before. He immediately withdrew his hand and reached for his flask, knowing he would need a touch of Southern Comfort before the young man in front of him was finished speaking.

"I'm not going to off myself," Peyton smirked. "Suicide is for your generation. We won our war."

Asa's eyes reddened. "No one wins a war, chief."

"Go tell that to the Vietcong, chief."

Asa felt a lump building in his throat. He lowered his flask to his side. "You sure you're okay, man? There are people you can talk to."

"I've already talked to people, Asa. Trust me, I'm not going to be a victim of self-harm. I'm like the claymore mine. You remember the claymore, Asa?"

Asa was growing weary. "Yeah, what about it?"

"It's the only mine that can be aimed." Peyton thumped his chest. "My explosions go out, not in." He drew a rectangle across his forehead. "This side towards the enemy," he said.

The bells of Sherman Hall began booming their halleluiahs off in the distance. As they did, Asa felt a deep sadness invade his body, thickening his blood and warming the fatty deposits of his liver. He took a hit of Southern Comfort before finding the courage to reply. "You ever heard of the back blast, kid? The claymore, it blows both ways. That's why it comes with a remote detonator."

Peyton blinked twice. "So?"

“So it doesn’t really matter where you aim it. The trick is to make sure it never goes off in the first place, you dig?”

But Peyton could not be reached, he was lost in a fantasy hovering somewhere between the incessant halleluiahs of Sherman Hall and the faded tattoo of Chief Joseph resting on Asa’s forearm. It wasn’t long before the words came to him.

“There are times I imagine my battalion driving through campus on convoy duty the way we drove through Iraq, firing on the humanities building, rocketing the library, and running over the Starbucks, this whole fucked up place and the people around it strung up from the telephone wires like bloody rags.” He turned his head towards Asa. “It’s not an instinct, you know, killing. It’s a reflex. It has to be taught. And you can’t just turn it off the way you turned it on.”

Asa's eyes seemed as if they were about to bubble out of their sockets with an unspeakable grief.

“I’m really sorry man. But there are people you can talk to.”

It wasn’t the kind of sympathy Peyton was looking for. “Are you sure you didn’t smoke no gooks in ‘nam?”

Asa flicked his cigarette into the street. He just wanted to go home. “Nah, chief, I told you, I only smoked myself.” He erupted into a long coughing fit as the sentence ended.

Peyton lifted his head towards the bells going off in the distance. “You got that right. Listen to you, man. You’re the real smoker. Just like all those sand niggers I left in Iraq. Dead on arrival.”

Asa leaned forward, “Yeah, well you’re a smoker too, kid. You just don’t know it

yet.”

Peyton’s eyes flooded with rage. He cocked what remained of his cigarette between his thumb and index finger and fired it violently at Asa’s chest. The smoldering ash exploded all over the old trooper’s lap, burning his hands and wrists. Peyton roared with laughter as Asa struggled to tamp it out.

“Are you crazy?” Asa hollered. “Help me get this out.”

“Don’t piss yourself, grandpa. It aint napalm.”

“Seriously,” Asa pleaded. “I think it’s burning through my jeans”

But the ash was mostly subdued by then, so Peyton continued laughing. “Who’s the smoker now?” He asked.

For the first time since he returned from Vietnam, Asa felt the needles of mortal terror racing up his spine. He was quick to throw his metaphorical paws in the air and play the submissive male. He had come too far to die by the pressure of another man’s hand. “Fine, I’m a smoker. I killed men. But what about you, hero? What are you?”

“Oh, I’m a smoker too. But there’s a difference.”

“And what’s that? That you’re a hard ass and you don’t give a shit?”

“No. The difference, I think, is generational.” Peyton leaned forward and grabbed the handles of Asa’s wheel chair, the slant of his hard shadow darkening the old man’s face. “You’ll keep smoking until you fizzle out, just f . . . f . . . fade away, as the song says.”

Asa swallowed hard. “And you?”

Peyton picked a dying ember of tobacco off Asa’s lap and blew on it until it glowed hot and red between them. “And me? I’m going to keep smoking until I burst into flames.”

## LEAR AND FOAMING IN EMPORIA, KANSAS

I was on the corner of Twelfth and Commercial when the drugs kicked in, though medication might be a more appropriate term: 500 mg. of Metformin to stimulate my diabetic pancreas, two generic Xanax (one for the PTSD and one just for the hell of it), and finally the residual tingle of half a Cialis, the majority of which was spent between the legs of a barista cum graduate student (let's call her Corky) who in the absence of any precise descriptors applied the term love to something I insisted was merely horsing around. My story begins, and possibly ends, within the battle ground that stretches out between the idea of horseplay and falling in love. For my story is not a story of action or ideas, but a story of words.

It is 1975 and Ms. Lipsky, the twenty-four-year-old coordinator of the Devonshire Pre-School afternoon program, wants to give me a hug. She bends at the knees, the hip holding waistline of her polyester bell bottoms sliding a little down her back as she does. She is on my level now, making eye contact in an open and friendly way. "Why don't you want to hug me, Andrew?" Ms. Lipsky asks. "Don't you like me?" Everybody likes Ms. Lipsky. From the Hermes scarf she knots along the side of her neck to the scattering of freckles she wears atop the crown of her perpetually smiling cheeks, it is impossible not to like her. And yet she has a peculiar smell this day, a scent vaguely redolent of lavender soap and Aqua Velva, which happens to be my father's brand of after shave. Below the Aqua Velva sits an even deeper smell. A smell that stings my eyes and shreds the pink lining of my stomach. It is a smell I will later come to identify as sex, the dried

residue of a man's culminating effluence. And with each word Ms. Lipsky speaks that afternoon, she puffs it directly into my face.

"I'd really like to give you a hug," she says earnestly. "I have a feeling we'll be spending a lot of time together." At this point I notice my father's cufflinks resting on a gold chain around her neck. It has only been a year since my mother's death. I turn my head towards the magnetized alphabet strewn across the refrigerator door and begin searching for the appropriate letter combinations to harness my outrage. But those letter combinations don't exist. Nothing exists in this moment except for doe-eyed Ms. Lipsky, down on her polyester knees, begging from my five-year-old self the blessing I can never give her. She seizes my shoulders and shakes them. "I need you to say something, Andrew," she pleads. "You can't leave me in the silence." But we belong in the silence, I realize, stewing in all the absurdity and pain. "I'm in love with your father," she finally blurts out. As the sentence flies from her lips, my eyes explode into a river of hot tears. The tears are a poor substitute for the words I want to fire back, but they are the only weapon I have. I break from Ms. Lipsky's freckled hand and hurl my body under the jungle gym, taking cover beneath the metal bars.

Safe below the metal, I determine never to be caught unarmed again. I take action the minute I get home. Having been an English professor before entering the world of janitorial sales, my father keeps an old collegiate dictionary in his office, the cinder block variety that used to buckle old pedestals in municipal libraries. I climb up a nearby chair and begin pouring through the wafer-thin pages hoping to discover the Merriam-Webster drawing of my father and Ms. Lipsky next to the entry that will bring order to all the confusion I am feeling. I thumb through dozens of pages that afternoon and for some

reason keep coming back to the word ‘mediate’. I circle the word with a blue pen and make some rudimentary notes. I discover those notes shortly after my father’s death. Apparently, I thought the word meant medicate. I scratched the words “makes pain go away” beside the blue circle.

The battlefield of Iraq is where the next part of the story takes place. It is 1991, zero hour plus two as elements of the First Infantry Division approach Phase Line Orange. I am in the loader’s seat of an M1 tank ready to pump high explosive shells into the open breach of the main gun. Friendly green tracers fly overhead with few red ones flying back. The Colonel (let’s call him Patton) orders our tank to lower the attached plow and advance towards the line of resistance, a defensive berm where a dug in company of Iraqi infantry shivers in the damp earth after weeks of merciless bombardment. The driver of our tank (let’s call him Bartleby) refuses the order. “We can go around them, sir.” he calls over the intercom. “They’re hardly shooting back.”

“That’s not my problem,” Patton cries out. “Now lower that plow and let’s bury those fuckers in the sand they love.”

Bartleby remains silent. The veins on the Colonel’s neck begin to bulge out. He’s been waiting for this moment—his first taste of combat—since he missed the opportunity to deploy to Grenada because of a ruptured appendix. He bites off a hunk of Red Man and lowers his eyes to the driver’s hatch below him where Bartleby remains motionless. The Colonel’s eyebrows narrow.

“Son, if you don’t grab that T-bar, I’m going to throw you out of this tank and let you take your chances with the land mines and nerve gas. Now, are you going to obey my orders?”



The internal communication system crackles to life with Bartleby's reply.

"I'd rather not, sir."

The Colonel's face goes asymmetrical with rage. He withdraws the Beretta from his side holster and aims it at the crown of Bartleby's helmet. "Then get out of my fucking tank!"

Within seconds, Bartleby shimmies out of the driver's cage and launches himself into the chaos of battle, happily risking his own extinction to prevent the extinction of another. The Colonel looks at me with his cartoon eyes, one of them as large as a search light, the other smaller than a keyhole.

"Men-del-SHON," he cries out, his Beretta cutting wildly through the air. "Get in that hole and lower my plow." Fifteen years of pouring through dictionaries has not prepared me for this moment.

A new look at the classic Milgram study reveals that while individuals still blindly obey the orders of people in authority, they do so not out of fear or weakness. They obey primarily because they lack the vocabulary to enact resistance. The new study goes on to claim that this is a correctable deficiency. The language of resistance can, and should, be taught. But it rarely is. This is unfortunate because without that language humanity is forced to rely on exceptions like Bartleby. And history has proven there are few people as exceptional as Bartleby.

I am definitely not one of them. Without the right words to enact resistance, I crawl slug-like into the dark hole and fire up the sleeping engine. Rolling the T-bar forward, I get the tank in motion and go barreling across the line of resistance. I repeat this maneuver until half a kilometer of Iraqi trench line is collapsed under the weight of

my plow. For this action I receive the Army Commendation Medal with Valor device indicating meritorious action in combat. The Colonel receives the Silver Star. The battalion newsletter called our actions 'heroic.' When they dug up the sixty one soldiers who died that day, they discovered only half of them were wearing shoes.

I was on the corner of Twelfth and Commercial when I realized that I am going to die. Not today, not next year, perhaps not for many decades. But my body will begin to decay, and that decomposition will become the primary focus of my life. Somewhere in my apartment sweet little Corky has proclaimed her love for me. She is lying naked on the crumpled comforter taking deep sniffs of one of my sleeveless workout shirts because she claims she will miss me while I am out taking my walk. But what was there to miss about me: my flabby stomach, my hairless head, or my sagging breasts and the soft pink nipples that sit upon them, nipples that now leak testosterone the way they once oozed pheromones? And love, for goodness sakes. How did she get to love? Because somehow through the miracle of vasodilators I was able to maintain a rail-splitting erection a heroic ninety seven minutes and bare down on the deep edges of her resistance, plowing through all her neurosis and repression until, at the moment when I thought my spine would crack, she gushed forth in a tidal wave of pent up tears and ejaculate, and began sniffing my shirts?

At the Radius Brewing Company where my walk ends, the ink-chested bartender draws me a beer. Like most free beers it comes with a hidden cost. This time it's conversation. "The trick to a perfect pour," she says, easing back the tap, "is knowing when to stop." She slides the glass across the bar and our eyes lock above the foamless rim. "Did you know that?" Her eyes are sharp, but docile. Green irises flecked with silver

tinsel.

“No I did not,” I answer flatly. “Someone once told me it was in the wrist.”

“No it is not,” she responds, mimicking the flatness of my delivery. “It’s not a physical thing, it’s intuitive.”

“Spiritual,” I ask.

She considers it for a moment. “Intuitive,” she responds.

The rest of her body is as striking as her eyes: purple dreadlocks, blue finger nails, and a pink baby wasted t-shirt that prominently displays the bumpy outline of a pair of barbell nipple piercings. This is a woman who punched her way into her thirties feeling no regret about her choices. I decide to up the ante of our conversation.

“Alright, missus smart guy. Tell me this. How do you know *when* to stop?”

“It’s simple,” she says. “You just ease up before the glass is half full.”

“Half full,” I snort. I elbow the guy next to me. “Can you believe this? The girl with the pierced nipples is an *optimist*?”

She raises a cynical eyebrow. “Have you ever tried stopping something when it’s half empty?”

“You mean like stopping a pour or like stopping an alcoholic like myself?”

“Whatever needs stopping most,” she suggests.

I drain my beer and release a sloppy belch towards the mirror behind the bar.

“Shit, most days I don’t know whether I’m half full or half crazy.”

The bartender takes the glass. “Then maybe you should stop.”

On the ready rack behind her, I spot an old Penguin copy of *King Lear*. I draw the bartender’s attention to it with my eyes. She fills the empty glass with more beer.

“Yours?” I ask, nodding towards the book.

She slides the beer across the bar, cocking her right hip to the side as she does.

“What, bartenders can’t read?”

“Of course they can. They just don’t usually read Shakespeare.” Her hip uncocks.

“My boyfriend is directing a production up in Omaha.”

“City or beach?”

“City, you weirdo.”

“Of *King Lear*?”

She nods.

“In Omaha?”

She nods again.

My eyes grow wide. “Well fuck almighty, Shakespeare in Omaha. I’m pretty sure they just got indoor toilets in Omaha.”

She snatches the mug from my hand and drags it back to the tap. “Your mouth is an indoor toilet,” she says.

“Hey, that mug’s only half empty.” I call out.

She tops off my drink and slides it back. Free beer always makes me bold. I continue our conversation.

“So, tell me, does actor-boyfriend up in Omaha leave you half empty or half full?”

Her hip flies out again. “Now you should *definitely* stop.”

All right. All right. I grab a handful of peanuts from the basket beside me and spread them on the counter. “You think I’m being an asshole, don’t you.”

She pops a nut into her mouth and bites down. “No, I think you’re trying to flirt.”

Sadly, she’s right. I decide to flex some of my newly acquired graduate school muscles to help save the situation. “You know what Lear’s tragic flaw was?”

The bartender flings an empty shell at my greying beard. “He got old?”

“No.” I laugh. “He stopped.”

She’s intrigued. “Stopped what?”

“Stopped everything. Stopped being king, I guess.”

“Maybe he stopped because he was half full.”

I laugh again. “No, Lear was definitely half empty. A real pessimist. And when he gave away his kingdom he was completely empty.

At this moment I reach into my pocket and withdraw the other half of Cialis. I slap it on the counter in the middle of the pile of peanuts and push it towards the bartender. “Do you know what this is?”

“Is it Molly,” she asks excitedly.

I am confused. “Who the hell is Molly?”

She slaps her head. “Molly isn’t a who, weirdo. It’s a what.”

My eyes narrow. “That doesn’t help me. I’m old, remember?”

She grabs another peanut and begins searching for words. “Shit, I don’t know. It’s like . . . its like this drug that makes you smell sunshine, taste colors, and want to grind up on Puerto Ricans with glow sticks.”

“Side effects may include bursts of racism, I see.”

“Don’t be an ass.” She frowns.

“And *that’s* Molly?”

“As best as I can describe it.”

“Then no. This is way better than Molly. You see, there’s a beautiful twenty three year old girl in my apartment right now, a girl who is actually sniffing my workout shirts and wearing my jogging cap because she misses me. Let me tell you something, sister, nobody misses me. I’m the fucking devil. Inside my chest there’s nothing but darkness, self-loathing and beer farts. I might be the single most unlovable creature on the planet. But this pill somehow makes me lovable in the eyes of beautiful, if somewhat confused, young ladies. And I was about to run away from all that. I was going to sit here and drink until she got the brutal hint. Because I’ve been told a thousand times that a relationship of such radical age inequality can never work. And that somebody’s going to get hurt.” I angle my thumbs into my chest before delivering the obligatory punch line. “Probably me.”

“Please, you’re only fifty,” the bartender says. “That’s young. Besides, age is just a number.”

And yet that number bothers me. “Actually, I’m only forty six.”

She tilts her head to the side and begins scrutinizing my face. I can feel the red beam of her eyes scanning my aging features: the flakes of dry skin under the beard, the crow’s feet around the eyes, and the facial pores blasted open like sewer pipes from years of trying to expel all the garbage I’ve dumped down my throat in an effort to numb the pain. “Well, you look fifty, my friend.”

I lower my voice. “That’s because whenever I see you I’m feeling sixty nine.”

When the bartender refuses to give me the smile I’m after, I launch into the story that’s been running around my head all day.

“Once, as a kid, when I was riding my bicycle, I discovered a massive ant colony spread out across the sidewalk. I tried to avoid it, I didn’t want to run over any of those delicate creatures, but they were everywhere, an unbroken line from the sidewalk to the curb. So, in order to avoid a massacre, I turned my bike into the street and got clobbered by an oncoming Dodge. I broke three ribs, both thumbs and my collarbone that day. That’s more damage than I suffered in Iraq. I’m sorry, sister, but I can’t save the world anymore. I only have so many bones. Sometimes, a few ants have to die.”

The bartender brushes the peanut crumbs from her shirt. “So let me get this straight, you’re the kid on the bike in this scenario, right?”

“That’s correct.”

“And that poor girl is the ant?”

“One of many, I’m afraid.”

The bartender leans forward, her voice now soft and smoky as our noses touch above the circle of peanuts. “You know what, soldier. You might not be ready to hear this, but I think you’re the Dodge.” Before I could process the remark, she swipes the Cialis off the counter and pops it in her mouth. She washes it down with a swig of my beer then summons a powerful belch that she mercifully aims six inches above my head.

I’m impressed. For a while I don’t know what to say. “Look at you jumping on the grenade like that,” I finally offer. “We ought to put you in for the Medal of Honor. Or maybe sainthood.” I nudge the guy next to me. “Hey, did you meet boner pill Jesus over here? She’s ready to die for your girlfriend’s vagina.”

“So what happens now,” the bartender asks, looking nervously down at her jeans. “Am I going to grow a penis?”

I laugh a little too loudly. “Well, I know I won’t.” I decide to fill the anxious moments that follows with a joke. “Hey, did you hear about the guy who got a Viagra stuck in his throat?”

“No, what happened?”

“He had to walk around the next four hours with a stiff neck.”

I finally get the smile I’ve been after. I reach for the bartender’s hand and hold it between my sweaty palms. She is shocked, but doesn’t pull away. Her hand is soft and pale, delicately bending at the wrist, sweetly pontificate. My face flushes with heat.

“Why did you do that?” I ask.

“Eat your pill?”

“Yeah.”

She runs her free hand through my beard. When she finds the skin underneath she strokes it gently. “I did it because you’ve had enough, soldier.” she elbows the mug of beer on the bar a bit closer to my chest. “Your cup, as they say, runneth over.”

Something about the phrase unsettles me. I nudge the guy to my left. I’m surprised the guy hasn’t leaped up and punched me yet with all the nudging. “My cup runneth over, she says. Can you believe this? Our bartender reads Shakespeare *and* the bible. So much for my manic pixie dream queen. We got ourselves a real scholar here.”

The bartender has had enough of my teasing. Her face hardens. “I think maybe it’s time for you to leave, pal.”

I hop off the bar stool, my manners stiffening as my boots hit the floor. “You are correct, Madame. It’s definitely time to go. My cup, as they say, runneth over.” The phrase continues to upset me. My subconscious scrambles to make sense of it.



The author David Hackworth once compared a man's capacity to endure combat to the range of glasses available at a saloon. Some infantrymen can boast of a forty ounce beer mug, he said, while others can only claim a shot glass. Regardless of the size, however, once that vessel is full, it's finished. There are no last calls in combat.

I continue repeating the bartender's phrase, each time a little louder and with a heavier British accent, careful to trill the "r's" and punch the "o's" with every enunciation. "My cup runneth over! My cup runneth over!"

"Your mouth runneth over," the bartender says, eyeing the graveyard of peanuts scattered across the bar.

But I can't stop repeating the phrase. Something ugly and bilious has begun rising up inside of me. I've heard people call this process healing, the draining of an old wound. But that word, like most words, doesn't seem accurate, so I continue to babble mindlessly. The last words I recall vomiting across my lips were something along the lines of, "Yeah, well, better my cup runneth over than my bicycle."

"Better your bicycle than another poor girl," the bartender replies without missing a beat. "Let the delicate creatures sleep easy for a change." Her words punch a hole in my drunken veneer. I am wounded. I want to fire back something equally damning and cruel, something that will shatter the kabuki mask of indifference she paints across her emo cheeks each morning. But no words materialize. So I decide to leave the bar, abandoning the field to fight another day. As I pass beneath the flickering neon "it" of the broken exit sign above the door, the words finally come to me. I turn abruptly and with a drunken stammer cry out, "I used to be one of the delicate creatures too!"

It is only after I take my first wobbly steps towards campus that I realize I have shouted that phrase into the trunk of an abandoned Jeep Wrangler.

*“Whatever you do when you’re in Chicago,  
never put ketchup on a hot dog.”  
Bill Clinton (1996)*

## A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME

Like most parents in Roosevelt Park, Mortie Swinefarb did not believe in the traditional benchmarks of childhood development. He brought his kids to the original Weiner Hut on Beecher Avenue to measure their progress. At the Weiner Hut, what you ordered on your hot dog was thought to provide a more accurate forecast of your future than the most elaborate spread of tea leaves.

Eric, a born people-pleaser, took his hot dog with everything on it. It was bold choice for an eleven-year-old boy as everything included mustard, relish and hot peppers. The Hungarian cooks behind the counter smiled as Eric choked down his sandwich, his eleven-year-old cheeks pinched together by the sour fumes. Here was a child unafraid to experience the less sugary side of life. Surely every success the world could offer would be his.

Amy was pickier about her hot dog. After initial hesitation, she ran her eyes across the condiment rack then proceeded to order her red hot with mustard and lettuce only. A grumble of displeasure rippled through the line of Hungarians behind the counter. At ten years old the feeling was she should be more adventurous with her choice, more like the city that sired her, its broad shoulders open to all flavors. Still, Mel Wexler (owner and proprietor) smiled as Amy devoured her hot dog, not just because she ordered it without ketchup, but because he could tell by the yellow ring running around her lips that she loved every drop of the spicy mustard he heaped atop the bun. Everyone was pleased, especially the Hungarians. That the salt of the old world still lived inside this

young girl's taste bud made them grunt with pride.

Alex, still the baby at four, was used to eating his hot dogs cut up on a plate with a jar of strained peas and a cup of warm milk. That his life would come down to this particular moment was not a challenge he could appreciate. Mortie lifted his son above the counter to greet the faces of Uncle Mel and his Hungarian cohorts. The air around them was onioned with the biting aroma of sour cabbage and raw beets. In their splattered aprons they looked like butchers, or maybe surgeons, people who were not afraid to pull living things apart.

"What do you want on your hot dog, darling?" Mel asked, tickling the little boy under his chin.

Alex turned his face away from Mel's finger and buried it in his father's shoulder. "Not hungry," he said.

"Come on bubsy boy," Mortie encouraged, "what do you want on your hot dog?"

"Not hungry," Alex repeated.

Mortie felt his cheeks burn as the customers behind him began to talk. "But you like Uncle Mel's hot dogs, pal. We all do."

"Come on, Alex." Eric offered, lifting his hot dog to the back of Alex's head.

"Have a bite of mine."

"Its really good," Amy mouthed through a face of spicy mustard

Alex sunk his face deeper into his father's shoulder.

"Please, Alex," Mortie pleaded, "have an itsy bitsy bite for daddy."

"That's alright." Mel insisted. "If the boy's not hungry, he's not hungry." A chorus of disapproving grunts fluttered through aprons gathered around the meat grinder. Clearly this child would be a disappointment.

Mel reached into a jar below the cash register and pulled out a lollipop. "You want this maybe, something sweet?"

Alex lifted his head from his father's shoulder and turned to meet the old man's eyes. "Not hungry!" he shouted.

"Alex!" Mortie hollered.

"NOT HUNGRY!" Alex hollered back.

Mortie released a sharp smack across his child's bottom. The blow echoed off the walls. Alex began to cry. It wasn't the loud piercing yelps of a finicky toddler that came shooting out of his mouth, rather the soft, deep sobs of a much older man, a person intimately acquainted with grief.

"I'm sorry Mel." Mortie began to apologize. "Ever since Sissy died, he's been . . . " Mortie didn't want to say "emotional" because he was certain that Hungarians didn't believe in emotions. " . . . well, he's been moody"

"Of course." Mel interrupted. "Not to worry. You come back any time you want. And bring the kids."

"Thank you, Mel. Thank you. Come on kids, thank Uncle Mel." It was an honorary term, nothing bound by blood.

"THANK YOU UNCLE MEL" Eric and Amy sang out in unison.

Mortie wrangled his children out the door and ushered them into the Maverick. He buckled Alex into the front seat beside him and fired the ignition. "At least he didn't take the lollipop." Mortie smiled as he shifted the car into drive. Mortie didn't think Hungarians believed in desert either.

## KISSY MAN AND THE THREE TUSHIES

He could strike at any moment. His bald head would rise up from behind the sofa or crane slowly around the side of a door. A devilish smile would then split his lips before the two chunks of coal that burned in his eyes ignited into a pair of diamonds. “Here comes Kissy Man,” his voice would boom out.

An exhilarated squeal would race up my four-year-old throat. I would turn to see where the voice was coming from only to find those two diamonds flashing hungrily in my direction.

And then they would disappear.

“Kissy Man?” I would cry into the empty room. But he was gone. For Kissy Man knew his power lay mostly in anticipation, the teasing drizzle of wetness that heralds the ensuing downpour. I would return to what I was doing, either pushing a yellow dump truck across the carpet or stabbing plastic soldiers with a red pen. The ink made the same enticing splatters I saw on the television that towered above me, broadcasting the final helicopter-tipping moments of the Vietnam War. Before I could return to all that jungle blood, the countdown would begin.

As if he were conducting one of the trains that raced up Chicago’s north shore, Kissy Man would reappear in the playroom and begin calling out every station that ran from the downtown Loop to our new home in suburban Willowstone. Being the consummate performer, he would only call out the stations one by one, vanishing between announcements to heighten suspense. Or maybe grab another beer.

“I’m at Roosevelt Park,” he’d cry out with a teasing smile. “Next stop, Lincoln

Village.” I would spin to the sound of his voice only to catch a glimpse of his shiny forehead disappearing behind the fridge. Other times, upset at having turned too late to see his body, I would grab the red pen and drive it through the guts of some unfortunate soldier, leaving a carcass between my legs similar to the ones on the evening news.

I suspect Kissy Man would return to his recliner between announcements and whatever ballgame was blaring over the radio. It never bothered me that I was merely a diversion between innings for him, something to ease the shaky downshift from Old Style to Orange Crush. The random nature of his appearance only made me crave that appearance more. For I knew once the ballgame had run its course he would burst into the playroom shouting “end of the line” then pin me to the carpet and thrust his fingers under my armpits and wiggle them until a convulsion of laughter ripped through my body and threatened the integrity of my tenuous bladder.

“Have I loved my son today?” Kissy Man would ask. He would roll the stump of his cigar across the bottom of his jaw while he considered the question. “I don’t think I have. I guess I’ll have to give him a big wetsy right now.”

“Nooooo,” I would laugh, clawing at the stubble on his face. “Go give Eric or Amy a wetsy.”

“But the bill says two wetsys for little Alex Swinefarb. Are you little Alex Swinefarb?”

“What bill?” I would ask. Even then I was a skeptic.

“The one in my pocket.”

“Let me see.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Those documents are for Kissy Man’s eyes only or those

associated with Kissy Man Enterprises. You wouldn't happen to be a shareholder, would you?"

I'd wrinkle my nose. "I don't know what that is."

"Well I can't give you a lecture on corporate finance right now, sir. Are you going to sign for these wetsys or am I going to have to come back later?"

It had only been a year since my mother's death and I couldn't take the idea of losing him too. I would grab the top of Kissy Man's cheeks and pull down until his fat lips were slobbering all over my face. In the ecstasy of his smooching, the soggy brown leaf of one of his *Monte Cristos* often wound up wallpapered across my forehead. Other times, the chili stains from his t-shirt rubbed off on the exposed crescent of my belly. Loving Kissy Man was a dirty business.

But you knew that.

Each Sunday morning throughout the Spring of 1975 the Swinefarb children were roused from their slumber by the rhythmic thwacking of Kissy Man's headboard; your passion so vocal beneath him. You knew what it was like to feel his hot breath blowing on your neck, to have his wet lips puckering above your chin. You understood what it was like to love something beyond reason; something soaring, gorgeous, and hopelessly flawed.

So why did you kill him?

\* \* \*

"Once upon a time there were three Tushies," Mortie began. The Three Tushies was a bedtime classic, but Amy was in no mood.

"I remember when there were only two Tushies," she said, squeezing her freckles

into a bitter frown and aiming that frown squarely at the center of my existence, me being the third Tushy and all.

Eric patted me on the head before turning to Amy. "It's been four years, sister. We can't give him back to the stork now." He then produced a cookie from the top pocket of his pajamas. "Besides, he does tricks." He looked me in the eye. "Paw?" He asked. I immediately lifted my hand and started panting. "Good boy," Eric said as he pushed the cookie into my mouth.

Mortie didn't know whether to laugh or holler. "Eric, please. Your brother is not a dog."

Amy lowered her eyes to the yellow crust decorating my undershorts. "Yeah, a dog knows to pee outside."

"Can I continue my story now," Mortie asked, "or would you kids like to sleep in your own beds for a change?"

Eric dug his nails into Mortie's arm. "We'll be good, pops. I promise" He turned to me. "Won't we, boy?" I barked my agreement just before Amy nodded hers.

"Ok," Mortie cautioned. "But this is the last time. This is a bedroom not a boxing ring. Any fighting and it's straight to bed for all of you. Your *own* beds."

Eric was annoyed. "Ugh, you say this every night, Mortie."

"And we still wake up right here," Amy added.

"I'm serious this time. Do you understand me?"

"YEEEESSSSS!" the pair cried out.

Having dispensed with the ultimatums, Mortie proceeded to peel off his undershirt and unfurl his arms across the back of the headboard. "Is everyone in



position?” he asked. He took a quick survey with his eyes, discovering my brother and me laying atop the covers to his right. Then to his left where he found Amy beneath the covers, fluffing the pillow that would soon be crammed behind her neck. “Ok, good, I’ll begin. First there was Mushy Tushy.” At the sound of the first Tushy, Amy’s freckles exploded into another frown.

“What now?” Mortie groaned.

“Why does Mushy always get to be the first Tushy? Eric is Mushy and Mushy comes first. That makes him top Tushy.”

Eric unleashed a regal snort. “That’s because I came first, sister darling. Twelve years ago I popped gloriously out of Mommy’s front hole. One year later you stunk up the world by flopping out her back one. That makes me top Tushy.” Eric turned to me with an open palm. “Isn’t that right, old pal?” I dutifully extended my paw. Amy lifted her eyes to our father.

“Why do you let him talk to me like that, Mortie? I’m your little girl.”

Mortie threw his hands in the air. “If you kids want to kill each other, go right ahead. I won’t play referee.”

Amy folded her arms across the front of her cotton tank top and frowned. “Of course you won’t do anything. That would take balls.” Mortie immediately swung his arm around Amy’s shoulders and collected all those angry freckles into his side.

“No.” Amy grumbled. “This needs more than a snuggle. You can’t just snuggle your way out of every problem, Mortie.”

“Do you want me to call Kissy Man,” he whispered slyly.

Amy slapped Mortie on the chest and blushed. “I’m too old for that. You’re

going to have to bribe me with something more appropriate to my age.”

Eric clicked his tongue. “How about we stuff a tampon in her mouth? Is that appropriate to her age?”

Amy’s face darkened.

“Watch your language.” Mortie cautioned.

Eric drew a finger to his lips. “Sorry, pops. I meant to say, stuff a sanitary napkin in her mouth.”

Amy’s gnashed her teeth. “I swear to God, I’m going to punch that pimple-picker in the nuts if he says another word.”

Mortie attempted a stern look. “Eric, stop being such a jerk to your sister.” He checked with Amy to see if this gesture was enough to appease her wounded pride. But a scowl of head-shaking freckles answered the question before it could be truly asked. Mortie turned to Eric and nodded towards the night stand. “Get me the box, would you?”

Amy’s freckles unclenched. “Are you *really*?” She asked.

“Mortie played coy. “Am I *really* what?”

Are you really going to let me wear Mommy’s ring?”

“Will it keep you from attacking your brother?”

“Uh huh. Uh huh.” She panted. And panted is the right word because at this point Amy was excited enough to have agreed to almost anything—from growing out her crew cut to trading in her overalls—to gain a chance to wear her mother’s ring. Mortie cracked open the box and presented the contents to Amy. She gasped at what laid inside: 2.5 carats of near flawless diamond set into the prongs of a glowing platinum band.

Overcome by the sight of the jewel, Amy lowered her fingers and batted her eyelashes.

“Will you do me the honor, daddy?” She asked.

“Of course, baby girl,” he answered.

Mortie draped the thick gem around his daughter’s slim fingers then consecrated the moment by planting a huge wetsy on the side of her cheek. “For my beautiful daughter,” he said, “who I love more than life itself.” There was a pause before he added the line we all knew was coming. “If only your mother were alive to see this”

Amy lifted the diamond to her face to get a better look. “Oh, Mortie, it’s beautiful. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now can I get on with the story or do we need to start planning a honeymoon?” Amy was too preoccupied to answer beyond a wincing grunt. “Ok, now,” Mortie continued. “Where was I? Oh yes, first there was Mushy Tushy. And then came Pushy Tushy.”

“Was she a pretty Tushy,” Amy asked, lost in admiration for her ring.

“Who, sweetheart?”

“Pushy. Was she a pretty Tushy?”

Mortie must have enjoyed the absurd beauty of these questions, for his eyebrows would arch into a pair of amused caterpillars whenever he was forced to answer them.

“Why Pushy was the most beautiful Tushy in all Tushyland,” he said.

“I knew she was,” Amy said smiling. “I can smell a beautiful Tushy a mile away.”

“This is boring.” Eric interrupted. “If Amy gets to wear Mommy’s ring I want to wear your watch.”

Amy’s face grew sour. “You’ll get nothing and you’ll like it!” She turned to

Mortie, her voice recovering something of its sweetness. “Go on with the story, daddy.”

Eric refused to be ignored. “It feels like you’re playing favorites, Mortie. It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Amy snarled.

Mortie lifted his eyes to the wedding photograph hanging above his dresser. “You see what you left me with, Sissy? How do I deal with this? I’m only one man.

Eric looked up at the photograph and then down at Mortie. He repeated the gesture until he decided it was finally time to deliver the hard news.

“Uh, she can’t hear you, Pops. She’s dead.”

Mortie’s eyebrows flattened. “You don’t say,”

“So how about that watch, huh?”

Mortie wearily extended his forearm so Eric could unclasp the silver band.

“It’s so heavy.” Eric gushed, as he weighed the metal in his palm. He lowered his ear to the winder so he could listen for the telltale clacking of the precision Swiss instrumentation. “Wow, you can’t mistake the sound of a real Rolex. The gears are so sharp.” There was a moment of deliberation before Eric offered up the next question. “I get this when you die, right?”

A look of panic seized Amy’s freckles. She turned sharply to Mortie. “But you’re not going to die, are you Mortie. Look at me and tell me you’re not going to die. Look at the picture of mommy and promise her you’re not going to die. Do it, Mortie.” Mortie arched his eyebrows into those familiar caterpillars.

“Of course, sweetheart. I promise. Daddy is never going to die.”

“Good,” Amy said.

“Don’t worry,” Eric chimed in. “The man’s a bull. I saw him do like a thousand pushups this morning with Alex on his back.”

“That’s not entirely true, buddy.” Mortie turned to Amy and whispered a slight adjustment. “I did about a hundred,” he said.

He did thirty one.

Amy pointed across the bed. “So I get Mommy’s ring and Eric gets your watch. What does Rover get?”

Eric cocked an imaginary shotgun. “We’ll just have to take old Rover out behind the woodshed.” A deadly smile spread across his face. “Wanna’ go for a walk, boy?” I snapped my teeth and barked. “Touchy thing.” Eric laughed.

“Seriously,” Amy said. “What’s his . . . you know?”

“Legacy,” Eric offered.

“Sure, that’s close enough. What’s his legacy?”

Mortie lowered his eyes onto my adoring face and let the brown edges soften in the lamplight. “He gets the stories, I guess.”

“Ha,” Amy clucked. “We all get those.”

Eric patted me on the head. “Sorry, boy.”

Amy stroked her chin thoughtfully. “Maybe we *should* shoot him.”

Eric re-cocked the shotgun. “Say hello to Mommy, old pal.”

“Enough already,” Mortie cried out. “I’m going to finish this story whether you kids like it or not.” We all stopped, a little frightened, but more surprised.

“Alright, pops,” Eric pleaded. “Don’t be mad. We’ll be good. Really this time. No fighting.”

“We promise, Mortie,” Amy pitched in. “Pinky promises all around.”

“That’s fine,” Mortie said. “But I shouldn’t have to yell.” He took a moment to try and reorient the story in his mind. “And finally there was . . .” But Mortie’s face went blank. “There was . . . uh . . . Ooshy Tushy.”

Amy scratched her head. “What’s an Ooshy Tushy?”

Eric snorted. “Sounds painful. Should we call a doctor?”

Amy looked concerned. She tugged Mortie’s arm. “Alex has always been Squooshy Tushy, Daddy.”

“Squooshy Tushy.” I cried out, pounding my chest for attention. But Mortie’s eyes were too far away to see.

Amy’s flesh tightened into a patchwork of goose bumps, her skin was the most sensitive radar this side of NORAD. “What’s going on, Mortie?” She asked. But Mortie seemed to withdraw even further.

“Come on, pops,” Eric encouraged. “Finish the story. Tell us how the Tushies went bopping through Roosevelt Park. How they met up with Crazy Fannie at the bakery who stuffed them full of cinnamon rolls; and how they met Uncle Les at his furniture store and slept in the hide-a-beds; then threw eggs at Harry Grossbart; and talked religion with Rabbi Werner; and finally rowed out to Uncle Max’s boat where Mommy was waiting with a basket full of hugs and kisses.”

“I can’t have this anymore,” Mortie said.

Amy’s voice rose two octaves. “Why not?” She waved her hands across the bed. “This is good. Everything here is good.” She jerked her thumb towards the crust of my yellowing undershorts. “Even old piss pants here is good”

Mortie was somber as he began ticking off a list. “My oldest son jokes about shooting his brother. My baby girl swears like a sailor. And my little boy barks like a dog. And when he’s not barking, he’s stabbing toy soldiers in front of the television.”

Eric rose to my defense. “He was only playing guns, pops. Like we used to.”

“We never made blood splatters, Eric. Nedra caught him with a red pen the other day. It can’t go on like this.”

“I knew it!” Amy roared. “What does Nedra have to do with this?”

“You can’t just call her Nedra,” Eric said grimly. “You have to pronounce the whole name, even the hyphen. She’s Dr. Nedra Katz-Nussbaum. Noted child psychologist, general pain in the ass killjoy, and our father’s new love puppet.”

“Watch your mouth,” Mortie cautioned.

“She’s a weirdo.” Amy shrieked. “She won’t say the word fart. How can you trust a woman who won’t say fart?”

Mortie’s nose twitched. “What does she say instead?”

Amy rolled her eyes. “She calls them flicker flies. Like something you swat with a newspaper.”

“She won’t let me take a dump either,” Eric added. “She wants me to perform a BM or drop a doody bomb. A doody bomb, for goodness sake. What is this, *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*?”

Amy cupped her hand into a radio headset. “Pilot to bombardier, pilot to bombardier. We have the target in sight.”

“Is it Nedra’s lap?” Eric asked brightly.

“Why do you call them dumps anyway?” Mortie queried. “Is that appropriate for

a boy your age?”

Eric dropped his jaw. “Yes, Mortie. That’s what twelve-year-old boys do. We take dumps and make farts.”

“And that’s only half of it,” Amy sighed. “There’s the nose picking, the armpit scratching, and the dreadful midnight leakage. A twelve year old boy has to be one of the grossest creatures in nature.”

“I make no apology for my species.”

Amy turned to Eric. “By the way, she doesn’t want us to call him Mortie anymore either.”

“But you shouldn’t,” Mortie interrupted. “I’m your father. I deserve respect.”

Eric laughed. “Please, I’ve been calling you Mortie ever since I had to walk you home from the VFW.” He turned to Amy. “Do you know how drunk you have be to get thrown out of the VFW?”

Amy smiled. “Hell, I’ve been calling him Mortie since I saw him swat Ms. Lipsky across her fat can.”

A worshipful tremor entered Eric’s voice. “You had sex with Amy’s teacher? Damn it Mortie, you’re an animal.”

Mortie’s eyes grew sadder and more distant. “So why should my kids be animals too?”

“Because you raised us like animals,” Amy shouted. “You built us to survive, Mortie.”

“In what world?” my father asked.

Amy slapped the bed. “The real one.”



Eric decided to change his approach. “She’s not a nice lady, pops. She likes to hit.”

“She pulled my hair once,” Amy added.

Mortie was dismissive. “You kids exaggerate. And even if you didn’t, what’s wrong with a little discipline?”

Eric’s voice dropped into a deeper, more thoughtful, register. “It’s not just the slapping, Mortie. She leaves notes on the refrigerator. Not even notes, just words sometimes. Last Sunday it was ‘respect’ and the week before it was ‘consideration.’”

Mortie was growing testier by the minute. “What’s wrong with a little respect and consideration?”

Eric’s eyes flew open. “Nothing if you weren’t plowing her brains out every weekend.”

Amy was equally livid. “Someone needs to respect a sock into her mouth.”

“Sock her in the mouth,” I shouted, punching the bedspread.

Eric put his cards on the table. “Why is she nosing into our lives, Mortie?”

Amy raised the stakes. “Have you done something stupid?”

Mortie folded. “I asked her to help with you guys. I feel overwhelmed.”

Amy grabbed her chest. “Nooooooo,” she cried out. When the emotion passed, she became slightly more rational, rolling her anxieties into a single set of questions. “What is it with you and these sour, pickle-faced bitches, Mortie? Why can’t you bring home a soft, pretty mommy instead?”

“With big jugs,” Eric said, cupping his hands in front of his chest.

“No,” Mortie said flatly. “I’m lonely, I’m overwhelmed and you kids need

guidance. She's a smart woman and I enjoy spending time with her."

Amy's forearms were as bumpy as a rubber basketball now. "What did you do, Mortie?" She asked through clenched teeth.

Mortie set his jaw in a hard line. "Nothing yet. But they're coming over this Friday night for dinner. I want you to be nice."

"*They're* coming over," Amy shrieked. "As in someone else besides awful Nedra and her sour face?"

Mortie's jaw tightened. "Nedra has a daughter. Her name is Portia. I think you'll like her."

A pair of mushroom clouds detonated in my sister's eyes. She drew back her fists and unleashed a flurry of wild punches. In the melee that followed two diamond fronted blows crashed against Mortie's face, leaving a streak of blood across his forehead. It took Mortie over a minute to finally subdue Amy's arms and simmer her atomic freckles into something less combustible.

"Are you settled yet?"

Amy shook free of Mortie's hands and ripped the bloody diamond from her finger. "No, I'm not settled yet. And I never will be." She threw the diamond at his chest. "Here, big man, you can give this to your new daughter when she gets here on Friday."

"Stop being so dramatic," Mortie begged. "This changes nothing between us."

"This changes everything," Amy said. She sniffed back a tear "I knew something was up this morning. The feeling stayed with me all day. But I fought it. I fought it because I trusted you, Mortie. Because I wanted to give you the benefit of the doubt." She rolled off the bed and stumbled to the door. She turned before reaching the hallway

and pressed her cheek against the flat wood. “But you always break my heart, Mortie. Every Goddamn time.”

Eric followed Amy out of bed. Mortie reached for his arm before he could clear the nightstand. “You can wear my watch to bed if you want to, buddy.”

Eric dumped the heavy metal into Mortie’s palm. “No thanks, pops, I already know what time it is.”

The room got quiet. I climbed up Mortie’s body and pulled myself along his shoulders. I touched his face. It was no longer the solid mass of flesh I remembered from the playroom. I could only feel the surface of his skin now, as if the muscle underneath had somehow disengaged, or liquefied, exiting his body like so much steam. I looked down at his chest, the two square discs that formed his pectoral muscles and the tight brown nipples that were stretched across them. Without thinking, I tugged out the collar of my t-shirt and examined the soft pink circles below.

Before this moment I felt there was a fluid line running through my father and me. I would examine our images in the mirror while he shaved in the morning and see only one face separated by forty-two years of experience. But mirrors are tricky things. They tell the truth, but they tell it backwards. My father was a Mortie, and he was a Kissy Man, and he was a Daddy, and he was a Pops, as well as a hundred other things it would take years for me to figure out. And I was an Alex, and a Rover, and a Piss Pants, and even a Squooshy Tushy. As I studied the wrinkled mirror of my father’s face that night, I realized I wanted to discover what those things were. I wanted to be as separate and distinct as every twitching muscle on his face. But I couldn’t move on to that moment of separation just yet. I drew my thumb across his bloody forehead then lifted the smear to my mouth. I

began to suckle the red skin as if I were still lying in the crib. I only withdrew my thumb long enough to ask one question.

“Kissy Man?”

Mortie’s eyes returned to his face. He brushed my cheek with the back of his hand.

“Of course, my beautiful boy. Kissy Man will always be here.”

But I knew he wouldn’t. I knew you’d kill him. Not physically, of course, but spiritually and emotionally—a death by manners, a death by propriety. Good families impose rules, isn’t that what you tried to teach us. Growth requires the establishment of healthy personal divisions. You posted the word “boundaries” on the refrigerator the night before the wedding. It was still hanging there six years later, smothered in mustard and relish, when he finally kicked you out.

I’ve learned a few things over the past twenty-five years, Nedra. First, that a cemetery is full of boundaries. The earth ultimately separates us all. And second, that we have to honor our instincts, the emotional truth serum we call memory. Because as we lay Mortie into the cold earth today, I can still taste his warm blood burning in my mouth when I can hardly remember what you look like. What I haven’t learned is how to let things go.

## THE BOSOM OF ABRAHAM

I was eight years old the last time I saw my old babysitter, Othena Baines, the grown woman Aunt Cookie called, "the girl." That would have made her son Cyrus nine. The three of us spent most of our afternoons watching movies at the Wellington Theatre, a converted burlesque house across the park from Miss Othena's federally subsidized apartment. There was a time when we would have gathered before her television and improvised an antenna from whatever coat hangers or soda bottles we found stacked in the kitchen. But after watching an episode of *The Phil Donahue Show* entitled, "Putting the Lid Back on the Idiot Box," Othena decided its presence was no longer necessary. She hoisted the console onto her thick shoulders and carried it three flights down to the laundry room where she left it for the bewildered Kim family who just finished drying a load of whites. Cyrus and I looked on from the hallway.

"We don't need your garbage," Mr. Kim snapped sharply.

"We certainly do not," Mrs. Kim added in a huff, not realizing her two children had already rushed to the television, dropped before the screen, and waited like disciples at the tomb of Christ for the retreating circle of light to come suddenly back to life.

"Big Bird, Big Bird!" the kids cried into the darkening box.

And that's how assimilation begins, the elder Kims must have worried seeing their children thrust upon their knees: first, a disrespect for their parental authority, followed by a gradual abandonment of their native tongue, and finally, a total disregard for the teachings of the Korean Church.

Mrs. Kim wore her anxiety in bright red patches along the top of her cheeks,

making them obvious to anyone who looked: how could she return little Woo Jong and Min Jong to the lessons of the Bible after watching them submit so fully to the terry cloth monsters of public television? How could she maintain any semblance of control when a world of distractions pulled at the very foundation of their piety? A compromise had to be reached with the traditions of the past. Regardless of what the calendar hanging in Mr. Kim's restaurant said about dragons and rats, Mrs. Kim would have to understand that, in America at least, 1978 would be the year of the Muppet.

Though hardly a Muppet, 1978 found my father manipulated in a similar fashion. It was the year that Sol Nudelman promoted him off the street, separating him from the place where he came into his manhood hustling french-fry bags and wax paper to the vendors at the Randolph Street Market. I was there the day Nudelman Sr. delivered the news.

"Mortie," he said, throwing his rubbery arm across my father's shoulder, "this is the first time we've promoted a non-Nudelman. We don't pull any schmuck off the street and make them vice president, you know. We give you this honor because we trust you, because to us you're family, and family always deserves to have a little extra on their plate."

And indeed the Swinefarb plate became much fuller that year, allowing us to move into a bigger house, with better trees, and a long empty driveway that circled the property. But it was clear to everyone, including Nudelman, that Mortie had lost something vital being cut off from the street. His shoulders began to slouch as the year dragged on, curving over his spine into that defeated question mark he had only recently erected himself from since our mother's passing. Evenings were the worst, hours planted

before the television as he tried to dream his lost lover out of the test patterns and particles of passing static.

He began dragging me to Miss Othena's more often, ostensibly to see Cyrus, but mostly, I believe, to reconnect with the city that sired him, the one that kept him upright and hustling when the rest of the world was determined to break his back.

The skyline stretched out immensely on those long drives south, rising like a steel stepladder all the way to the downtown Loop. Every mile or so, a heap of cigar ashes would build up on the steering wheel until a sudden turn swept them across his body. Covered in ashes, it must have seemed to the passing motorists as if my father was in a perpetual state of mourning, grieving some unreachable loss. But at a closer range you noticed a resiliency about him; a strength you could not imagine being crippled by something as incorporeal as grief.

As the summery hues of the outlying suburbs gave way to the grim shadows of the city, a spark returned to his eye. Brushing the soot from his chest, he'd pull me against his ribs. Together, we'd recite the names of the streets as they passed: Montrose, Addison, Fullerton, and so on until a warm glow washed across his cheeks and settled into his stomach. Sometimes he would lay his hand atop my head and finger the curls that spiraled off my scalp, curls that once populated his own head. Or so Aunt Cookie loved to remind him.

"A little darkie should only have such kinky locks," Aunt Cookie would say, never convinced that her brother-in-law wasn't the product of a secret union between his tiny Jewish mother and the *schvartze* Jazz musician she was known to give nickels to on the way to the bus station.

It didn't take much to imagine my father as the product of that union. He regularly scatted along with Ella Fitzgerald on those long drives south or blew imaginary trumpets with Miles Davis. Occasionally, when the music moved him, he'd pull over at the specialty-clothing store on Maxwell Street to try on the latest urban styles. Looking at him with an orange turtleneck held up against his button-down work shirt I thought he'd make a fantastic Negro. "Buy it, Daddy," I'd beg, pulling at the pleats of his stiff blue trousers. "Buy it, please." He would linger at the mirror, tilting the sweater across his chest, until all at once he'd exhale a sharp "Naaaaaah," and usher me out of the store under an oppressive cloud of guilt.

Who's guilt I was never sure.

As we neared the Madison Avenue exit, my eyes would instinctively lock shut, fearing our little Ford would be flattened against the skyline's surging metal. But the city of Chicago doesn't work that way. It doesn't crush you against its iron facade; it recedes before your ambition, sucking you in through its network of converging arteries before it finally slams you between its legendary big shoulders.

It was more or less what was happening to my father at the time, a gridlock of competing emotions all converging on his chest, locking it up in secret spasms. Men of my father's generation had yet to learn how to deal with the grieving process. To them, emotions belonged in the suburbs of the body, leaking out along the sinuses or straining the muscles at the back of the neck. Let it migrate to the interior, they said, and it bubbled into cancer, each swallowed grief another tumor waiting to explode across a vital organ.

My father must have registered a subliminal awareness of that old wives tale for he held me so close during those rides that I thought I could feel all his grief pushing



through my body. As the buildings swallowed us into their shadows, I'd curl into my father's lap and fall asleep dreaming of my future, one that stretched out with as much mystery as the skyline rising up around us. Curled into the ashtray of his lap, I'd wonder how a person could love something as fully as my father loved his family without being diminished by the process.

"The Negroes abandon their children in dumpsters," Aunt Cookie would say, flipping through the afternoon paper. "But what do you expect of these people, they have no sense of family. Only animals treat children like that—animals!"

But an animal is free, Cookie, I want to scream into the past, free from guilt and some say free from grief. Watching my father at the clothing store I worried that he missed that kind of freedom; and that eventually, given the hedonism of the decade, he would reinvent himself as one of those live-for-the-moment Negroes and leave the family to chase a series of feather-headed divorcees across the discotheques of the Midwest.

"Oh, go on," I can just hear Aunt Cookie reply. "Your father is a good Jewish boy. Good Jewish boys don't run off from their families."

But how many good Jewish boys were crowding the bars that year, Cookie? Polishing up their eighteen carat Stars of David before matting down their chest hair with shiny palms full of Hai Karate? You must remember that your brother-in-law was impulsive when it came to love, proposing to your sister after only three dates. At some point, Cookie, we're both going to have to accept that during much of the 1970s your little nephew was never more than one Harvey's Bristol Cream away from the orphanage.

Thankfully, such childhood fears didn't linger. Miss Othena's front window opened onto the carnival that was Madison Avenue in the 1970s. It drove whatever

concerns I had about my father's marital status directly from my head. Behind Othena's lush, purple curtains a circus of outrageous characters performed every day; characters like the old man in front of the liquor store who strummed an old broomstick until somebody bought him a beer. Or the sanctimonious cleaning ladies who crowded underneath the bus stop to testify about what a holy mess they found up north; or the pig-tailed schoolgirls, perched atop their roller skates, twirling through traffic as fat bubbles of pink gum erupted from their lips. It was captivating.

And yet I couldn't look for long. Directly across the street, fastened to a sign above Sweet Willie's Liquors, grazed the meaty, bovine eminence of the Schlitz Malt Liquor Bull. He was a fearsome sight, that bull, with muscular blue shanks that glistened through the cold air while jets of hot smoke pummeled the pavement below. He had garnered a terrifying reputation over the years by exploding through the walls of unsuspecting homeowners to deliver his intoxicating blend of barley, malt, and hops. Even though these home invasions were only part of an advertising campaign, I was certain he was going to do the same thing to me.

The threat of that explosion drove me to fits of weeping that Miss Othena was at a total loss to control. On the worst days—the gray ones that brought out the neon—I'd run to the bathroom and lock myself inside for hours, refusing to come out until she assured me that not one hair on my curly head would ever feel the steam of those furious nostrils. These fits would derail Cyrus, driving him to sink beside the radiator and chew the skin off his thumbs.

Eventually I would unlock the bathroom door and join Cyrus beside the radiator. Othena would scoop the pair of us into her arms and sway us back and forth, massaging

our frazzled nerves with a chorus from an old spiritual she learned from her grandmother in Mississippi:

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham

Oh, rock my soul.

“Abraham was the first Jewish patriarch,” Aunt Cookie would remind me whenever I broke into Othena’s song around her condo. “And let me assure you,” she’d say, pushing out her lower lip as if she were the mammy from *Gone With the Wind*, “he didn’t keep no darkies in his bosom.”

It was Cyrus who helped me overcome my fear of the bull. He would drag me to the window and keep me looking at the street long after I lost my nerve.

"You see those bitches?" he'd say, pointing to the collection of battered limbs gathered into the bull's light. "Those are the women who work this area. When the whistle blows at four-thirty they go over and have sex with the men who come out of the meat factory for money."

"Wow, sex for money."

"And you see over by the phone booth? Those are the men who the bitches work for."

"Bitches?"

"*Bitches.*"

“Wow.”

"One day I'm gonna' be a pimp," he'd say, straightening himself before his

reflection in the window. "Gonna' run this whole damn city. Ain't no Big Momma gonna' tell me what to do."

Nine years of bitterness converged on Cyrus' lower lip as he stood before his reflection, filling it with a sense of hunger I could only access through Aunt Cookie's most graphic stories about the old country. Stepping away from the window, Cyrus would narrow his eyebrows into a fierce "V" and squeeze all that hunger into a pinpoint above his nose. Once he was certain he'd gotten the expression right, he'd return to the sill and shoot that scowl into the glass, pulverizing each childlike feature that shined back.

Already over five feet tall at the age of nine, Cyrus had the deceptive sort of muscularity which only manifested itself in movement. It was a body that tensed in action only to resolve into baby fat whenever he came to a stop. Above the mounds of baby fat, Cyrus wore a scattering of mole-like flecks so indiscriminate it looked like someone had loaded up a shotgun full of freckles and blasted it across his face. I had a few freckles of my own, mostly clumped around my nose and cheeks, but nothing like the great scattershot of color that Cyrus could boast of.

Miss Othena caught us pressing our freckles against the window that day. We were watching the second-shift woman prepare for the four-thirty whistle and wagering on which ones would do the most business.

"Go on now," Miss Othena said, "how many times I got to tell you to keep away from that window?"

"Aw Ma," Cyrus complained.

"Don't 'aw Ma' me. Ain't nothing down there but a bunch of lazy, no good,

niggers."

"But Momma," Cyrus replied, just a hint of confrontation coloring his voice, "ain't I a nigger too?"

Miss Othena drew in a sharp breath of air.

"Ain't we both Niggers?" He asked. "What's wrong with being a nigger?"

Silence followed the remark, ominous and profound like the anxious stretch of time between the lightning and the thunder. With a hand that reached back to Fort Sumter, Miss Othena brought a smack across her child's face that nearly knocked an order into all those shotgun freckles. For a second I felt my own freckles jump.

Cyrus bit down on his lower lip as he attempted to shake off the trauma of his mother's palm. Othena was unfazed. "Ain't no niggers up in this house. You hear me? Ain't no niggers up in this house."

An inbound "L" train released a flurry of paint chips from the ceiling as it screamed past the window.

"That hurt," Cyrus said once it passed.

"I know," Othena replied.

They kept their eyes locked until the outbound train rumbled by in the opposite direction. Cyrus dropped his chin to his chest and rolled his eyes upward, searching for some kind of détente in the escalating war of wills.

Othena answered her son's peace offering with a contemptuous snort then strutted off to the bedroom, snapping her fingers in a triumphant circle around her head.

Cyrus called out to his mother's back. "Ain't no niggers up in this house but you!"

When Othena returned from the bedroom she had a white cigarette slanted across

her lips and a pair of folded grocery bags tucked beneath her arm. Cyrus stood on the spot where he'd been smacked, hoping to coax a sliver of remorse out of his steaming mother.

She didn't give him a second look.

"Go on and pull that chicken out of the fridge at five," she said, gathering up her wallet and keys, "and try to wipe up some of this paint while I'm gone. And don't let me catch you looking out that window. I've got eyes in the trees, and ears in the wind, and if I find you be at that window, you know what I'll do." She pulled her heavy jacket across her shoulders and slung her purse across her back.

"Okay, Baby, no sugar from Momma now. Momma's got to go do her shopping. Remember, get that chicken out of the fridge at five, drag a broom across this hallway, and for God's sake make sure that boy don't run off to my toilet again. We don't have enough water to flush him home."

Cyrus' lips quivered as the door slammed shut. I watched his chin weaken and his eyebrows shake. With the sounds of the city pushing at the windows, I offered my friend the only solace I could.

"Do you wanna' play nigger?" I asked.

Cyrus nosed back a drippy tear. "Let's give her a couple minutes first," he said.

Playing nigger began innocently enough. Two months before this incident, feeling an absence in our lives accentuated by the images we soaked up from the street, Cyrus and I took to putting on his mother's wigs and stuffing rolled sweat-socks down the front of our pants. Once dressed up, we'd throw open the window and flip on the stereo, hoping to catch a simulcast of last week's episode of Soul Train.

We took turns strutting across the living room, primping our afros and adjusting

our bulges. It was amazing how much those little wads of rolled cotton altered our gait. It allowed us to add a unique rhythm to our walk, pronounce a manly limp by dragging our right leg heavily behind the left as if the additional weight in our pants could no longer withstand the constrictions of the average suburbanite's stride.

It was the stride of my father all scrunched up against the wheel of his little Ford Maverick, I must have realized on some level; and the stride of his father too, nursing his hunched extremities all the way home from the garment factory where he was never allowed to expand into his body; and it was the stride of the Nudelmans, all six of them, fussing over the polish of the mahogany conference table where they routinely called my father to task.

We fell into a particularly engaging scenario that day. Big Momma, as Cyrus called our nemesis, was trying to take over the street. She kidnapped all the second-shift girls and kept them fenced inside an area behind the meat factory. And there Big Momma beat them every day. Beat them because she was big, beat them because she was bad, and beat them because she was just plain mean.

Financed by the shrewd investments of Irving Cohen—a character inspired by Crazy Irv Mandzelman, co-owner of Crazy Irv's resale shop two doors down from the Wellington Theatre—Sweet Willie Balls (Cyrus) and Iceberg Schlitz (me) geared up to mount an expedition to rescue the girls. But just as the tanks were about to roll out, just as we were about to storm those imaginary fences, the real Big Momma burst through the door, took one look at us all dressed up in her wigs and damn near had a stroke.

She went apoplectic with disbelief. One eye seemed to pop out of her head while the other shrank to nothing. The weight of her body shifted across her pelvis like the

sides of a scale thrown suddenly out of balance. It was amazement brought to us courtesy of the Warner Brothers—cartoonish in the most alarming sense of the word.

Cyrus was the picture of calm. "What," he said, "we just playin'."

Othena threw down her groceries and went for her belt. I ran to the bathroom, whipping my sweat sock out the window along the way. Cyrus dug his feet into the carpet, refusing to flinch at the beating he knew was about to come.

"Tell me again how this is going to hurt you more than it hurts me," he said, or rather I thought I heard him say through the bathroom door before I immediately covered my ears. The rest was a flurry of yelps and snaps. I cowered behind the toilet, pressing my knees into my chest, hoping by some miracle to be sucked down the drain. There was safety between that sturdy block of porcelain and the wall of crumbling plaster beside it. Even when the beating stopped, I refused to come out.

Miss Othena would have none of it. After pounding on the wall until the ceiling threatened to cave in, she smashed through the door. With her meaty hands wrapped around my ankles, she dragged me into the kitchen and left me beside her battered son. I didn't feel worthy of sharing the same spot as the boy who endured such a beating. Cyrus insisted I sit up if I were to join him.

Flank to flank, with our tailbones crushed into the baseboards opposite the kitchen window, Cyrus and I braved the lurid light of the approaching evening. His face hardened as the sky went purple. The hungry "V" he practiced earlier now seemed stamped into his brow.

"Oh lord," Miss Othena cried, "what am I gonna' tell this boy's father?"

"Why you got to say anything?" Cyrus challenged.



Othena puffed up like an overcooked pie, but decided to cool off by the window instead.

"Don't you know you got to love yourself?" Othena began. "You don't need all these . . . these . . . *costumes* to feel good about yourself. At the end of the day, you are who you are. The Lord doesn't make mistakes. You're two fine boys. I raised you myself. And if I can love you, if Miss Othena can love you, than surely you can love yourselves." Othena walked slowly back to the living room. She let out a long breath before collapsing into the recliner.

It was November and the dusk was settling early along the "L" tracks. Those deep hours of autumnal darkness between four and six seem to linger for a lifetime in the memory of a child. Cyrus and I were convinced we'd sinned beyond redemption. Soon my father would come trudging up the steps and who knew what would happen next.

I sat silently in the kitchen, comforted by my proximity to Cyrus but careful not to touch him in any way. I opened my senses to the light pouring through the window and watched the sky. I noticed its touch, its taste, its sound, its smell; how the clouds had different textures at different layers, how it all got bluer, the colors became richer in the darkness once your eyes grew accustomed. And getting outside my body somehow I saw Cyrus and I from the back and sensed that we were part of that panorama, black shadows before the gloaming, connected to it and to each other at various points, supporting each other's weight, our shoulders now touching, as the fear closed in around us. And together we watched the sun recede, grow darker still, until whatever fire there was to light the day was just a crimson smudge quivering on the horizon, and then a pinpoint, and then nothing.

It wasn't long before we heard the sound of my father entering the building. I grabbed Cyrus' hand for comfort. He grabbed mine back. The footsteps grew louder.

Miss Othena choked on the intrusion into her slumber. After three aborted tries she finally generated enough momentum to rock her body free from the recliner. She took a moment before reaching the door to cast Cyrus a sinister look.

"You don't feel the least bit sorry, do you Boy?" she said.

"At the end of the day, you are who you are," Cyrus answered defiantly.

"Can't be something you're not," I added in a whisper.

"I'll show you something I'm *not* in a minute," Othena snarled, reaching for the door. "The knot at the end of my fist."

But as the door flew open, Othena's expression changed entirely. The fist that was meant to discipline her child was suddenly jammed into her mouth. Seconds later she was thundering back to her bedroom, shouting something about this masquerade of a world no longer making sense.

There, behind the door, stood a man who looked in every way like my father except his white, button-down shirt had thickened into a bright orange turtleneck, his sensible brown loafers had sharpened into a pair of shiny black boots, and the loose raven curls that once crowned his head were now teased into a mighty afro.

"What do you think, boys?" Mortie asked, lifting a zodiac medallion off his sweater for inspection, "pretty groovy, huh?"

Cyrus sank his head into his fists and tried to grind the image out of his eyes. I blinked twice before releasing a tidal wave of urine into the protective lining of my Spiderman undershorts. When my father finally coaxed me out of the bathroom an hour

later, we left without saying goodbye.

From the street below, I saw the hulking figure of Miss Othena in her bedroom. Mortie offered up his hand in a parting gesture. Othena threw down the curtain as soon as it came up. As we passed her shadow in the window, I noticed my knot of sweat socks marinating in the gutter. Something inside of me wanted to run up and squeeze it dry, take its magic back with me to my new home on that long, empty driveway. But the Maverick was parked by Sweet Willie's Liquors so my father had to yank me out of the gutter to reach it. As we crossed the street we were forced to pass beneath the angry blue light of the bull. I pulled up sharply when I noticed it swinging in the wind before me.

"What's wrong, *Tatteleh*?" my father asked, "did you make another sissy in your pants?"

I couldn't bring myself to say a word.

"Do you want me to get the car for you?" he asked, petting my curls.

Again, I said nothing.

Following my eyes to the sign, he pulled me closer. "Do you want me to ask them to shut it off?"

More silence. Then frustration took hold. "Do you want me to cover your eyes, do you want me to pull it down, what do you want?"

"I want you to carry me," I finally said.

"Oh," he answered. And soon I was up in his arms, cradled into that special spot between his head and chest where the troubles of the world could no longer reach me.

Cyrus slid down the fire escape while Mortie was coaxing me out of the bathroom. He now stood in the alley, watching us from the shadows. I saw his red eyes

flash out of the darkness. A burst of warm air shot from his nostrils as he kicked the gravel beneath his feet. If I didn't know any better, I could have sworn he was going to charge. I sank my head deeper into my father's neck and thought about how often he and Aunt Cookie called Othena family.

"Everyone at this table is a Swinefarb," my father would announce drunkenly on Passover; this after making a big deal of letting Othena put down the dishrag and join us for dessert. But this didn't seem like how you treated family. You didn't leave them out in the cold, seething in the dark. I should have wanted to share some of my good fortune with this boy, my Passover brother. But my father's neck felt too good to let go. And unlike Othena's ample bosom there was no room for a twin. Guilt washed over me for the first time, pale, hot, and sticky. I unclasped my hands from Mortie's neck as we reached the Maverick and let him buckle me into the back seat. The engine fired up without a cough or sputter. He spent the next few moments scrambling through the glove compartment before finally settling on an eight track. Soon the sounds of Neil Diamond were pulsing through the speakers. Mortie gave himself a quick check in the rearview mirror before pulling out into the street. By the time we reached the expressway, he had switched out Neil Diamond for Barry White.

## AFTER BIRTH

Some of these are my father's memories, the weepy-eyed recollections of a sentimental Jewish toilet paper salesman. And yet they are so entwined with my life, these knot-in-the-throat remembrances, that I believe they are alive in my bones shaping how I face the world.

Or don't face it.

The story begins in 1971, over forty years before these words began their slow crawl towards paper. I am twenty months old at the time, months being the medical community's preferred method for marking my development, as if I had such a fragile hold on existence my survival could not be measured in anything more ambitious than weeks and days. And yet I wasn't the sickly one.

After a rough bath in the sink, and the word 'rough' doesn't do justice to the event—I'm told my mother would wash and dress me like a chicken, plucking the crumbs off my body as if I were to be hung upside down in a butcher's window—after such a bath, my mother would pin a diaper to my backside and send me off to play. My father assured me this was the routine, adding only a pair of powder blue footsy pajamas to the picture and a knitted green cap. It's hard to gather a more cohesive image of those snuggle-footed days because my father would only tell the story when medicated, which for him meant three quick swallows of brandy before nodding off in the recliner.

“It was November, *tattleh*,” he would begin, lifting his woozy eyes to the photograph of my mother hanging above the sofa. “And you were wearing the green ski cap your *bubbe*, I mean your grandmother, knitted for you that August, the one with the

yellow puff ball that would shake from side to side. Oy, I could just eat you up then, you and all those dark curls spilling beneath those *meshugeneh* earflaps. Such hair covered my own head when I was a boy,” he would say, lifting his yarmulke to reveal the soft curve of his skull. “See?”

“You had just received one of them . . .” he would throw his arms out to the side as if trying to frame something too large for words. “*Big deals*” is the term he would finally settle on. “You had just received one of those big deals from Aunt Cookie and Uncle Sasha and were riding it through the apartment. Oh how you loved your big deal,” my father would beam, winking at the photograph hanging above the sofa, “didn’t he, sweetheart?” He would pause for a moment to blink back the wall of tears that threatened to spill out of the corners of his eyes, before finally aiming those eyes at me.”

“And you, you little *pisher*,” he would exclaim. “You would ride your big deal all around the house. Around and around you would go. My son, Alex Ben-Shlomo, the little cab driver.” He would lean forward and grab an imaginary set of handlebars in front of the recliner.

“You would peddle up to Uncle Sasha and honk your little horn. And Uncle Sasha would look down over his big belly and say, ‘Hello, Shlomo!’ and off you would go. And then you would peddle up to Aunt Cookie, run right into the hem of her flowery skirt, and you would honk your horn. And Aunt Cookie would look down over her bandaged nose, the one the surgeons could never trim to her satisfaction, and she would smile and say ‘Hello, Shlomo!’ and off you would go. Even the rabbi was not immune to your charms. You would peddle up to his holy slacks, honk your horn—Gabriel, we should have named you the way you blew that horn—and the rabbi, looking down from such reverent

heights, would suddenly find a new light twinkling in his eyes, and he would bend over and kiss you on the forehead, whispering, “God bless you, Alex Ben-Shlomo.

“And Mommy,” I would ask.

Here my father’s features would darken.

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I had gotten the rest of the story five years earlier in September, 1996. Aunt Cookie was lounging in the sunroom of her beachfront condominium waiting for dawn to break over the choppy waters of Lake Michigan. Cookie was fastidious about her breakfast and refused to take her morning coffee in the dark. I was fresh out of the army and living in her guest room when it occurred to me—not exactly out of nowhere—that in order to figure out my future I needed to piece together my past, a past that had driven me, under the aegis of the United States Army, to commit acts of violence that I was only dimly beginning to understand. A violence that scratched its way into my personal life and ruined yet another relationship, leaving my one time fiancé Hannah with two cracked ribs and a bloody nose, not to mention the three broken fingernails from where she attempted to claw apart my chest.

“Your mother was sick,” Aunt Cookie announced. “What do you want me to say? She spent a lot of time in the bathroom washing bandanas and cleaning vomit out of the drain. And you would peddle up to her in your little green hat and . . . and . . . why do you always want to talk about this stuff? It’s a sick fixation with you, you know that. You’re like the opposite of a moth, Alex, something drawn to a dead flame.”

I angled my torso into the spikes of sunlight driving through the blinds. The maneuver helped bring the First Infantry Division tattoo on my pectoral muscle into

focus, as well as the bloody scratches that ripped through the defiant “one”.

“Look at Mr. Tough Guy.” Cookie laughed. “I get it. You’re not the chubby little boy who used to go swimming in his t-shirt anymore. Now you’re a full grown man. A full grown man who knows how to drive the ladies crazy in bed, I see.” She ran her eyes across the length of my body. “I guess I finally know what you do when you leave this house at all hours of the night.”

I glanced down at my chest. “Those aren’t sex marks, Cookie.”

“So you’re a full grown man who’s trying to bully his loving Aunt then.”

“I’m not trying to bully you, Cookie. I’m merely stretching.”

“Well you should stretch yourself back to bed. I know that look.”

“What look?”

“That sleepless, I-want-to-pull-the-house-down-on-top-of-my-head look. I used to get that look from you whenever you missed your afternoon nap. Any moment now a big yawn is going to crack across your face and you’re going to fall into a deep sleep. Your uncle slept for three days straight when he got home from Korea.

“I’m twenty six, Cookie. I don’t need a nap.”

“No. You just want answers. Trust me, sugar, a nap would serve you a whole lot better.”

“Don’t distract me, Cookie. Just fess up. Why all the hard silence about my mother? Did the woman beat me, sell me to the gypsies?”

“Your mommy didn’t beat you guys,” Aunt Cookie dismissed, picking a ball of lint off her Bermuda shorts. “She spanked your tushies once in a while. That’s all. A little spank on your tushies. It was a different time. Different opinions about discipline.”



“She *potched* my *tuchas*,” I said, switching to the more familiar Yiddish phrase.

“Exactly,” Aunt Cookie replied, examining another ball of lint. “She *potched* your *tuchas*. And let me tell you, she wasn’t the first mother to give a little *potch* to her children. Some say she should have *potched* you kids more. A lot more.” A ball of lint went sailing over my shoulder. I grabbed the Yiddish-English dictionary Cookie kept on the coffee table to impress her Mah Jong friends and opened it to the word “*potch*.” I showed Cookie the entry. She pulled the bifocals off her chest and started to read. This is what she saw: Potch: to mark or bruise; cause discoloration as in the rupturing of capillaries due to traumatic contact or injury.

Aunt Cookie dropped the glasses to her chest and rolled her eyes at me. “She was sick. Why can’t you understand that? And you were riding around on your Big Wheel. Ach, I should have never got you that stupid thing in the first place. You were riding around on your Big Wheel and you were wearing your green hat with those goofy earflaps and . . .”

“. . . And she *potched* me.”

“And what if she did? A dying woman acts emotionally. What does it prove? How does it help you live your life any better?” At that moment Cookie leaned across the table, the lamplight shadow of her bosom smothering the book of Chagall reproductions that sat beside the ashtray. “Let me tell you something, sugar,” she sneered, her face set harder than the marble in her floor. “We all had a bad childhood, maybe it’s time you learned to move on.” With that she stood up and walked to the blinds that swung before the balcony. With a sharp twist the heavy slats flew open and the room was bathed in a hard wash of Midwestern light. She turned to me, silhouetted by the morning sun. “If we

wanted to be stuck in the past, darling, we would have stayed in Poland. Now put on your damn shirt and help me fix breakfast for your uncle.”

The moment was too perfectly orchestrated to allow a meaningful response. The exiting flutter of Cookie’s blouse was designed to end all conversation. And in the past, it had. The morning light would signify the emergence of a new understanding between us. But the old signifiers had lost their power since I left the Army—most of the old voodoo had—except for my radar stomach which began pitching balls of acid at the back of my throat the minute I encountered that blazing sun. I shielded my eyes and proceeded towards the balcony where I promptly twisted the blinds shut. Before I could dig up a fresh pack of Roloids, however, I found myself intercepting Cookie’s arm as it reached out to open them again. I gave her wrist a gentle squeeze before speaking. “I’m sorry, Cookie, but I can’t let you end our conversation with a punchline and a dramatic flourish. This isn’t *Tartuffe*. You need to answer for your sister.”

The heavy lapis lazuli stones of her bracelet scraped my skin as she yanked herself free. “In my house, sugar, I say what I want. When you get a house, you can say what you want.”

I followed her to the fireplace and watched as she began to fix her make up. She stared deeply into the mirror above the mantle. Her face was no longer the placid lake of foundation and powder it had been since she emerged from the bedroom. The shadow of her liver spots became visible with the rush of blood that was rising into her cheeks. The skin underneath was veiny and translucent.

“Are you going to answer for your sister, Cookie?”

She found an old compact on the mantle. The house was littered with them. “I

told you, the woman was sick. And there were problems at home. What other answers do you want?"

"I want to know exactly what problems could have driven a person to beat up someone who was that much weaker."

Cookie rubbed the skin below her bracelet. "Maybe you should ask yourself that question."

Another ball of acid erupted in my throat. I tightened my fists. "Please, Cookie. Don't. Just don't. You know that voice of yours—that murderous, castrating voice—you know it triggers me. It takes me right back to that beat up two year old boy. That same voice was coming out of Hannah's mouth last night. Before her nagging turned to yelling, and her yelling turned to scratching, and you can imagine what the rest of the night turned into."

"You're going to beat me up now too, is that it?" she snapped open the compact and began applying powder to the spongy disc inside. "Sorry, kiddo, my father was trampled by Cossacks and my mother was chased by Nazis. Violence doesn't scare me."

I drew in a deep breath. "Of course I'm not going to beat you up, Cookie. Why would you even say that? I just need to figure out what to do with all the anger I have running around inside me."

Cookie started daubing her cheeks with the spongy disc. "What you need, my darling nephew, is therapy, and a whole lot of it."

I squinted into the mirror as Cookie dragged the spongy disc around the shiny pores of her face. Intrigued by the process, I glanced down at the scars on my chest and wondered how they would fare with similar treatment. After assessing the density of the

wounds, I realized some imperfections require more than just a dash of Clinique. I returned my attention to Cookie. “Did you say therapy?”

“Yes, my love. I can’t have you ticking around the apartment all winter like a time bomb. Not with your uncle the way he is. The man is sick, Alex. The stroke, the heart thing, he’s not well. No, my darling, if you want to stay with us you’re going to have to get help, you’re going to have to call Buddy.”

I slapped my head. It was the only gesture available to register the absurdity of the request. “Are you serious? You want me to call Buddy Saville?”

“Yes, Buddy Saville. Why do you say his name like that, like he was just convicted of manslaughter?”

“I thought it was insurance fraud?”

“You may not know this, Alex, but Buddy Saville helped your cousin overcome her anorexia when that disease nearly destroyed this family.”

“Yes, Cookie, by prescribing her amphetamines and buying her wine coolers.”

“He helped me become more spiritual,” she nodded towards the frayed dream catcher hanging from the mantle. “Did you see that? I made that at his retreat last year. I bet you didn’t know that, that your aunt was spiritual?”

I tried not to laugh. “You’re a picture of inner peace, Cookie. I guess I should let you go meditate in your sand box now.”

Cookie snapped the compact shut and turned from the mirror. “Everything’s a joke to you, Alex. A fight or a joke. And lately it been more fights than jokes.”

I grabbed my aunt’s shoulders and drew her towards me. I had forgotten how tiny she was, how bony and slight her pigeon-chested frame, how dry and tan her peanut

butter skin. Underneath my palms, she felt nothing like the monster I conjured. She was soft and submissive, ready to listen to my thoughts, at least for the moment. “We’re fighting now, Cookie,” I began, “because I don’t need therapy.”

“So you say.”

“So I know. What I need, my loving aunt,” and here I tapped her on the forehead, “is time to dig through that flower box you call a brain, time to root through all the secrets you keep buried up there until we can make some beautiful new truth finally blossom between us.”

Cookie turned back towards the mirror. “You’re a gardener now, is that it? You like picking through the dirt? Well, don’t waste your time on me, kiddo. Go grab the spade and fix my geraniums. They’re late bloomers just like you.” She pulled her shoulders free from my hands and headed towards the kitchen. I blocked her path before she could get two steps from the fireplace.

“You have to answer for your sister, Cookie. I need to know why every woman I bring into my life turns into the same raging b . . .”

Cookie was quick to interrupt me. “Don’t say it, Alex. You know how I hate that word.”

“Then tell me, Cookie. What did my mother do to me?”

Our eyes met in an explosion of blood vessels. “My God it’s been over twenty five years. Why can’t you let that woman’s bones rest already?”

“Because my bones can’t rest. You must realize that your sister and I share the same skeleton-rotting disease. It’s called bullshit, Cookie. A terminal reaction to lies. Now come on, tell me. What really happened?”

She was growing frustrated. “I already told you, Alex, there were problems. Problems with the family and problems with the marriage.”

I lowered my voice into a divulging whisper, “I think the problem was with her, Cookie.” And then I raised my voice just enough to deliver the knockout blow. “I don’t remember Mortie ever hitting us.” Once my father’s name was mentioned, Cookie’s body stiffened. She leaned forward, her eyes hawkish, angry and predatory.

“It’s like a cult with you kids and that man, you know that? It’s a wonder anyone can breathe up on that pedestal you’ve placed him. Listen to me, Alex. And listen to me good. Don’t let his syrupy tongue drizzle those days with a sweetness they never had. There were problems with the marriage almost from the beginning.”

“Like child abuse?”

“Like *life*. You don’t understand. Yes, your mother yelled; yes your mother slapped; and sometimes your mother slapped when she should have talked.”

“Slapped when she should have talked? Jesus, I was only two. No, I was wasn’t even two. I was twenty months. Twenty months old, Cookie. That’s not old enough to be a child, that’s not even old enough to be a car loan. But it’s just old enough to carry around a vague sense of rage and insufficiency for the rest of your life. Slapped when she should have talked? Jesus, how can you be so cavalier about it?”

Cookie shifted to the attorney voice she borrowed from TV. “I agree that twenty months might have been too young for the style of discipline your mother practiced.”

“Practiced, please. Don’t be so clinical. The woman knew what she was doing. She didn’t need any practice.”

“Fine. But your mother worked, and your mother cleaned, and your mother

dragged you three kids around all day when your father was out doing God knows what.”

I could feel the camera tilt, and the James Dean *East of Eden* tremor enter my voice. “Dragged, Cookie? I was her kid not a goddamned sack of groceries.”

“Yes dragged!” And here the image of Medea with her bloody jaws leapt into my mind, driving poor James Dean into a ditch off the side road of my memory. I felt myself shrink in my aunt’s presence, cowered by the possibility of imminent dissolution. “Let me tell you something, Alex,” she began, eyes blazing, “something you’ve needed to hear for a long time. Motherhood isn’t a gift. No one sprinkles fairy dust on your uterus and then—boom—suddenly you’re in love with the animal who’s been kicking apart your insides for the past nine months. Loving your child is a process that happens after birth. That’s right, it’s the afterbirth: blood in your nose, blood on your thighs, wet, feathery and placental. It’s never what you think. And you’re never prepared when it happens. It outguesses your best assumptions and cripples your strongest resolve. And once it starts it never ends. It rolls on to the grave, calling attention to itself with each passing year. But whatever this thing we call motherhood is, Alex—and I’m not saying I know what it is either—but whatever this thing is, I don’t think it should be defined by the perceived wounds of a bunch of two-year-old boys anymore.” The moment cried out for the consecration of silence, perhaps even a round of applause, but Cookie began patting down the pockets of her Bermuda shorts and yelling as if I had personally kicked her uterus to pieces.

“Goddamn it, I haven’t thought about a cigarette in over three years, Alex. But every time I’m with you lately all I want to do is smoke.”

I nodded towards her steaming forehead and made the only joke I could think of.

“If it’s any consolation, Cookie, it looks like you’re smoking now.”

Cookie narrowed her eyes. “Do you want me to throw you out of the apartment? I swear to God, Alex, I will throw you out this very minute and you can go live with one of your little uptown whores.”

I fished a pack of Marlboros out of my cargo pocket and laid them on the mantle with great precision, just close enough to tempt Cookie to make the reach, but far enough away to remind her that she needed permission.

Cookie scrutinized the positioning of the Marlboros and glared at me. I could see the condemnation forming at the back of her eyes. *How dare you make me beg*, those eyes raged.

“We were talking about the naturalness of motherhood.” I said, enjoying the advantage of a man who hadn’t lost his temper, “and why some women have a hard time forming loving bonds with their children.”

Cookie glared at the cigarettes and back at me again. “Maybe because some kids aren’t very loveable. Have you considered that?” She folded her arms and pivoted towards the balcony.

I inched up behind her and relaxed my voice. “Still, Cookie, love didn’t seem like an unnatural act for you. I have these great memories of your house. Sleepovers, with all the cousins laying on a bed of pillows you set down by the fireplace. You would squat beside Jerry and Ellen and touch their hair, rub their shoulders, and with a sweet voice ask how their day was, what they learned, and what made it special. It’s all so corny I thought I would puke. But I was jealous of every rubbed shoulder and stroked head.”

“I would do that for you too, Alex. And for your brother and sister as well. You



were all my children. ”

“I know, Cookie. You were a wonderful aunt.”

“Not that I get any credit for it.”

“You should. That’s an unforgivable oversight.”

“Well I don’t need credit, Alex. Like I told you, I do these things because I love you guys, love you like you’re my own children.”

“I know, Cookie.” Here my voice grew slower, sadder. “But in some ways I think that only made the situation worse; knowing what your kids were getting every night while we went days, sometimes weeks, without being touched at all. Or being savagely beaten by one prickly woman after another. The only thing that kept us human was . . .”

Cookie threw her arms in the air before I could speak my father’s name. “There you go again, defending him. Tell me, Alex, what did he do to deserve all the credit, all the love and adulation I’ve heard gushing from your lips all morning while you keep crapping on your mother? Did it ever occur to you to ask who kept bringing those prickly women into the house? It’s not fair, Alex. Why does he get the prize while she gets the shovel?”

The simplicity of the answer overtook me. I almost burst into tears saying it. “He loved us, Cookie. That’s what he did.” Then my head dropped under the weight of the question that followed hard on its heels. “Why couldn’t she?”

Her lips tightened. “Of course your mommy loved you. Just because she didn’t slobber all over your face like a St. Bernard doesn’t mean she didn’t love you. Look, we’re all very fond of your father. He’s a wonderful, expressive man. But you must have figured out by now that he wasn’t always the best husband. He wasn’t a go-getter, if you

know what I mean. He was . . . well . . . he was a schlep, Alex. Do you know what a schlep is? It's someone who just kind of sits there while the rest of the world goes out and does things. Your mother, now . . .” And here Cookie shook her head as if she'd just been splashed in the face with hot water. “Your mother, now she was a go getter. Oh boy, was she a go getter. She did things, Alex. She disciplined you three kids for example. And she kept your father's business in order, the bills, the coupons, and the receipts were filed and tallied daily. All this while she was being eaten alive by that horrible disease. The woman lost both breasts, half her ribs, and a gallbladder, Alex, while still remaining active in the PTA and repainting the living room. So don't sing your father's praises to me, my soft-hearted young nephew. It's easy to love a schlep. They don't take on any extra responsibilities. And without responsibilities nothing weighs us down; so we're free to be everyone's friend. But somebody has to crack the whip, Alex. Somebody has to keep the team moving forward. And lord knows it wasn't going to be that giant marshmallow you call a father.”

A bolt of gas cracked across my chest. My stomach weakened. I felt like I was about to fall to my knees, grab Cookie's belly and weep all over that saggy pouch of skin from whence we had all spiritually descended, the tough leathery womb of our hard-as-nails matriarch. But that gesture seemed just as false as the light-and-dark masquerade Cookie and I played with the morning sun. And just as inescapable. I took up my aunt's hand, dragged a thumb across her hard knuckle and spoke as plainly as I could.

“No, Cookie. That's where you're wrong. Whips are for pack mules and horses. Our wagon train stopped decades ago. Look around you. Look at the sun driving through the blinds, see how the light glistens on the glass table and dances off the stainless steel.

The world you grew up in is gone.” I pointed at the morning Tribune laying on the counter. “They just put a McDonald’s in Red Square. We’ve made it, Cookie. This is the Promised Land. Do you think we can maybe stop whipping each other now?”

A vein throbbed on her temple. Her hands trembled and her eyelids twitched. She glanced down at the cigarettes. “If I told you how many times your uncle and I had to help that man out.”

I nudged the cigarettes towards her shaking fingers and threw down a book of matches.

“You just did, Cookie. And it doesn’t matter. Some part of me will always forgive him. And when you try to chop his balls off, the way you just did, it’s like your chopping mine off too, and you can imagine how that makes me feel.”

Cookie kept her attention focused on the cigarettes. With a ballerina’s precision she picked up the Marlboros, shook a loose butt to the surface, and dragged it free with her lips. She glanced down at the pack before reaching for the matches, scrutinizing the black lettering.

“I thought you smoked Salems.”

“Nope, Marlboros.” I was confused by the question so I deferred, as always, to the easiest available joke. “I don’t smoke those witch burners.”

Cookie let out a small laugh. “I guess because you beat up your girlfriend you think you’re a cowboy now?” She folded back the cover of the matchbook, peeled out a match, then struck up a flame. She sucked the fire into the end of the cigarette and watched the heat cut red circles into the white paper. After inhaling the smoke, she flared her nostrils and exhaled two powerful jets. The flood of nicotine changed her aspect,

made her lips tight and her voice husky.

I called to her through the veil of rising smoke. “Did you hear me, Cookie?”

“Yes, I heard you,” she said, taking another drag. “No more picking on your father. But let me tell you something little Shlomo.” Her eyes flashed beautiful and serpentine through the billowing clouds. At this point I think we were both more comfortable with her playing the dragon lady than the loving aunt. “Let me tell you something. Your father chopped his own balls off. And if I were you, I wouldn’t spend the rest of my life trying to nail them back on.”

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Somewhere in the dark haze of my father’s brandy-addled brain he would find the courage to finish the story. It didn’t matter that I had already gotten the ending five years earlier from Aunt Cookie. I needed the closure that his words could bring, the second burial that goes by the name of grief. He would release the imaginary handlebars in front of the recliner then pick up his bottle and proceed unsteadily towards the stairs.

“What about Mommy, my son asks. Thirty-two-years-old and he’s still asking about Mommy.” He would brace himself against the banister as he tried to lasso the stampede of emotions that went galloping through his body. Once he did, he would turn to me and smile. “Look at that wounded little boy face of yours. That’s the same face you used to peddle around the apartment on your big deal, remember?”

I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of responding. He would struggle through the brandy to regain his composure. “All right, you want to know about Mommy. I’ll tell you about Mommy. No more big deal after Mommy. All day in the crib or out in front of the television weeping. That’s Mommy. You didn’t eat for a week. I had to do cartwheels to

get you to take the bottle.” Here my father’s knees would buckle and I would wedge my shoulder under his armpit to keep him from falling. He would look at me with his sad European eyes and muster just enough insight to break my heart. “And you, Alex Ben-Shlomo, you never reached out to people anymore, you pulled back into your own world.” He would brush my cheek with the back of his hand. “I don’t think we ever got you out.”

Most days he was too exhausted to make it up the stairs. I would nurse him down the steps and urge him into the recliner, tucking the afghan around his knees. I would start to swivel the chair to the window and the distant skyline beyond. All at once he would dig his feet into the carpet, stopping the momentum of the seat so it faced the sofa. He would grunt three times and shake his hand at the wall. I knew immediately what he wanted. I would gaze up at the photograph of my mother, a high school graduation portrait from 1959. I would try to see beyond the photographer’s tricks, past the soft lighting, the gauzy shadows, and the impenetrable black and white smile. But there was no getting beyond the waxy surface of the paper, no inlets into blood and muscle; into the cells that even then must have been preparing to devour her body.

“Please, Shlomo,” he’d say, groping the empty air. “Give it to me now. Before all the sweet wine turns my lights out.”

But I wouldn’t answer. Instead, I’d remove the photograph from the wall and lay it on the end-table just beyond his reach, close enough to let him feel the heat of his lost love, but not close enough to draw any warmth. “You need to let her weary bones rest, pops.” I’d say before leaving the den.

He’d call to me as I flew down the hallway. “Wait, Shlomo, There were good

times too. I promise.” But I don’t remember hearing any examples. And they wouldn’t have mattered. I was determined to declare my independence from those memories, announce my freedom with a defiant slam of the front door. Sometimes I would make it all the way to the curb before I came rushing back to kiss the warm folds of his face, counting the freckles below his yarmulke before he nodded sweetly into the past.

By the time I reached the recliner, he was usually snoring into the afghan, hands wrapped tightly around my mother’s photo.

## TIFFANY, DARLING

“Tiffany, darling. Look at you. Eyes so blue I can see the ocean. A regular star spangled sweetheart. Come, let me get my arms around those soft shoulders. In this house we hug. Now sit and have a coffee with me. We’ll talk a little and maybe eat. I bought a box of rugelach while down at Kaufmans the other day and a nice cinnamon ring from the A&P, or what used to be the A&P. It’s some Indian fella’s store now, his wife with the dot so red she could stamp passports, and him with the armpits that make my eyes water. Am I supposed to buy *food* at this place, I ask you? It’s all I can do to keep my lunch down. But I don’t like to judge. We’re all cut from the same cloth, aren’t we? Of course some people should learn to wash with that cloth once in a while. But please, don’t be shy. Have a nosh. You look positively pale. In this house we eat.”

"Ach, you should’ve seen the girls my nephew used to bring home. Cadavers in baggy pants more like it, girls who looked like they needed a blood transfusion let alone another piece of metal jammed through their heads. And what with the causes, and the piercings, and the not eating meat. Look, I can understand working to make a better world, but I ask you, what revolution would begrudge their soldiers a nice piece of pastrami, and I'm not talking about that store bought junk I offer them, but fresh from the slicer.”

"So one day this girl’s over at my house, again not eating my meat, and so I go ask her. I say hey, string bean, you're what, maybe eighty pounds soaking wet? And even if you carry half that weight between those slumping golf balls you call shoulders—the girl was sixty pounds of breast meat, Tiffany, darling, I swear to God, a chest wrapped

around her body like a belt of Michelin tires—anyway, I say to her, and even if you carry all your weight between those slumping golf balls you call shoulders, how are you going to give my nephew what he needs?

"You see, and this I pull my chair up close to tell her, we Swinefarbs come in two fashions: readers and breeders. And for all my nephew's fancy travels with the Army, I doubt he's ever once picked up a book. In this way he's like his Uncle Max. And I can tell you this like a sister Tiffany, darling, not much upstairs, that Max of mine, but in the bedroom—oy, like a Plymouth!"

"One afternoon we're at the K-mart shopping for seat cushions. I don't normally shop at the K-mart, but for seat cushions why should I drive half way around the world? Anyway, I'm wearing this little red pant suit, a floral pattern with a white stripe down the side, what can I say, I like flowers. Anyway, the next thing I know I'm bent over a folding table, my slacks are pulled down around my ankles, and we're having our own blue light special right there in the fitting room. 345 is the man's fasting cholesterol but one look at my backside and all of a sudden his pipes are clear, complete and unimpeded blood flow to all his extremities. Some days, I have to tell you, Tiffany, darling, I wish that enlarged heart of his would finally give out. I'm already on my second hip.

Okay, so I add a little color to the things I say. This upsets you. I can see it in that glowering *shikse punim* of yours. But what is the truth anyway? It's a negotiation, something to be traded back and forth across the desk of a car salesman. You never accept the first offer. Always hold out for the extras. You remember that should you ever get mad at my nephew. He'll try to sell you all the extras he can, that one. More important, sweetheart, don't be upset if the invoice doesn't always add up to the article, if



you know what I mean. You think this America of ours was the golden land Columbus said it was? The man had to sell it first. And boy did he ever: rivers of gold, topless native girls. Admiral of the Seven Seas they called him. Ha! Admiral of Bullshit is more like it. There are men who have gone to jail for telling lesser lies. But don't fret Tiffany, darling. An extra coat of polish never hurt the truth any. There's nothing criminal about wanting to believe the best in things. It's what makes us who we are. And everything, even this beat up country of ours, deserves a chance to shine.

## AGAIN WITH THE ICEMAN

My return to fatness began on a drizzly November afternoon under the green awning of the Old Country Buffet. I was standing behind Muriel Eiserman and the rest of the three o'clock dinner crowd waiting to shuffle past the frowning Puerto Rican woman who was posted at the entrance. It was her job to confiscate any containers the three o'clock regulars might use to smuggle out portions of their supper. Looking through the window at the fists of brown lettuce being packed into the salad station, I couldn't imagine this was much of a problem. Thankfully, they kept their coffee a healthier shade of brown. It was free until 4:30.

Muriel reached into the knitting bag draped across her walker and pulled out a mini Hershey Bar. "Here," she smiled, "these lines can take forever." Three minutes ago we were complete strangers, as foreign to one another as the Pilgrims and the Indians in the shadow of Plymouth Rock. But now, bonded by the expediency of the buffet entrance line, we were fast friends. I wanted to remain strangers. I turned my head toward the nursing home across the street hoping to decline the offer by a show of indifference. But Muriel would not be ignored.

"Go on," she insisted, thrusting the bar of chocolate into the side of my neck, "you've got to keep your strength up."

"I'm sorry," I offered wearily. "But I'm vegan."

"You're a *what*?" Muriel quacked.

"A vegan," I repeated.

“At your age?” The old woman tittered. “What’s the matter, don’t you like girls?”

I let out a long sigh. "It means I don't eat any products that come from animals."

Muriel scratched a finger into the forest of silver curls that spiraled off her scalp.

"But it's not an animal, dear. It's candy."

My mind went blank before it could generate a response. Previously, when confronted about my eating, I would engage people in a series of heated arguments about the morality of their food choices, lecturing them with an indignant scowl how trembling calves, still wet from the womb, were penned up flank to flank and slaughtered for their meat. But I had no response for the buffet line assertions of Muriel Eiserman. Having survived both the Great Depression and the world war that followed, she regarded the denial of free food as nothing short of insanity, an act of gastrointestinal hubris. It made confronting her about the high crimes of the Hershey Corporation seem downright silly, if not insulting.

It was at that moment, looking down on the soft, puzzled features of Muriel Eiserman that the absurdity of the past five months came sharply into focus: the radical weight loss, the animal activism, and the beans, God help me, the beans. In my heart I knew it was all a sham. Underneath all my organic posturing lurked the same chubby cheeseburger who used to smash down an entire box of Pizza Rolls before supper, only now he was a balding, thirty-nine year old cab driver obsessed with a girl fifteen years his junior (the poet Sophia Snow) pretending he shared her values, her commitments, all the while secretly lusting after curly fries, Tuna Helper, and sweaty mugs of O’Malley’s home brewed ale.

But how does one explain such obsessions to a woman like Muriel who probably

spent half her life in a tattered housecoat stretching a series of scrawny meat loafs with a bag of food pantry breadcrumbs? How could I tell her that through my devotion to Sophia I was trying to love myself again, make up for the years of gorging, and somehow come to terms with my firehouse appetites? Unable to discover a meaningful answer to these questions, I found myself taking the tiny rectangle of chocolate from Muriel's hand and searching for the possible upside to a life of heart disease, diabetes and burgeoning c-cups.

"There now," Muriel beamed, "that's a good boy."

And I must have been a good boy, because the second I took hold of Muriel's chocolate—just took hold of it, didn't even feel for the silky edges that ran beneath the brown wrapper—something inside of me unclenched. The caps of my guard tower shoulders stood down, easing into my collarbone, while the ulcers raging in my stomach fizzled away with a sour burp.

"Excuse *you*," Muriel giggled.

I thumbed off a quick text to Sophia. She was teaching a supplementary writing course at the nearby technical college. It was the same course I had taken from her last summer when a flicker of talent in my otherwise bleak prose drew us into a prolonged conversation about the responsibility of writers, then drinks, and then a relationship. Roughly translated from my iPhone shorthand the message read: Having coffee at the Old Country Buffet. Grandmas everywhere pushing chocolate like heroin. Resolve crumbling. Hunger rising. Please help.

As these words bounced across the satellites circling Willowstone, Illinois, Morris Berger was at the front of the inspection line relinquishing his plastic bowl.

“This is discrimination,” he bellowed. “Next, you'll want to pin a yellow star to the sleeve of my overcoat and knit a lampshade out of what's left of my hair.”

“Jou know da' routine,” Carmelita, the frowning Puerto Rican woman, said.

“Yes,” Berger replied. “I know the routine. It's the same one they had at Auschwitz.”

Muriel grabbed my arm. “He wasn't even in the war,” she whispered. “He sold dresses with his father in Roosevelt Park. Cheap ones too,” she added, as though the worn green trousers that currently encased her body once hung in the racks at Chanel.

“What's the big deal,” Berger continued. “Would it be a capital offense if I took a little potato salad across the street for later?”

“I'm only following orders,” Carmelita announced.

Berger narrowed his eyebrows into a bushy ‘v’ and leaned forward. “Just following orders, huh? That's what Eichmann said. You want the Mossad to come after you next?”

Upon hearing the name Eichmann, Carmelita launched her fingers into the air and began waving them in a series of wild circles. “Again wit' da' Ice Man,” she erupted. “Every day, that's all I hear from jou people. Iceman, Iceman, Iceman. Who was dis guy, jour banker or something?”

Berger looked dumbfounded. “You don't know who Adolph Eichmann was? The man who invented the Holocaust?”

Carmelita clicked her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “How many times have I told jou, I dunno who Arnold da' Ice Man was. Or why he rented an ocelot.”

Had this been a cartoon, Berger's eyes would have rolled so fully in their sockets

that shiny coins would have come spilling out of his mouth.

“If you don’t know who Adolph Eichmann was, then I’ll show you.” Before Carmelita could object, Berger began stomping his orthopedic loafers against the cold cement until he was goose-stepping in front of the Old Country Buffet as if it were Hitler’s birthday.

“Oh, for goodness sake,” somebody called out from the back of the line.

“Why does he keep doing these things,” another person hissed.

“This is why no one lets him play bingo.” Muriel frowned.

Carmelita laid her hands on her hips as she watched Berger parade in front of her podium. “*Dios Mios.*” She laughed. “I think I’m being invaded.”

But Berger was undeterred. He launched his arm forward in a Nazi salute and began addressing the crowd, “Today, Willowstone,” he cried out, “tomorrow, the world.” But there was no tomorrow for Morris Berger. Somewhere around his fifth turn a Velcro shoelace got caught in a crack of cement and drove the old man stumbling into the bank of windows that ran parallel to the parking lot.

“Jor an Iceman,” Carmelita shouted as Berger struggled to regain his balance against the panes of shaking glass.

“Somebody check that girl’s papers,” Berger shot back as he brushed the wrinkles from his overcoat and sulked off in the direction of the nursing home.

“Not one day in the army,” Muriel pressed on. “The world is at war and he’s safe at home selling dresses. What kind of man is that?”

“A smart one,” I answered.

Above my head, a wall of gray clouds had swallowed up the sun. I tugged my

collar north of my ears then reached into my pocket to see if Sophia had answered my text. Muriel interrupted me before I could locate the phone. "Aren't you going to eat your candy?" she asked.

"I'm saving it for later," I deflected nimbly. "Besides, isn't everything a little better when you have to wait for it?" It was the same logic Sophia used on me when I began pressing her for more earthy forms of sex, and by earthy I meant any position that wasn't cloaked in the stale veneer of karma or transcendence. That and maybe a blow job in the car.

Muriel was more prepared for this tactic than I was. She popped open the wooden mouth of her knitting bag and shook the contents under my chin. "Don't worry, child. I have plenty of extra. See?" Inside sat nearly a dozen similar treats all in varying stages of decomposition. My heart sank at the sight of it.

"This must be my lucky day," I groaned.

Muriel lifted her eyes to my face and smiled. "It's always a lucky day when you have friends."

Wooed by such optimism, I decided to give Muriel's chocolate a closer look. Judging by the faded brown wrapper, I concluded the morsel had been sitting in a dish somewhere at the back of her nursing home, poked at by therapy dogs and drooled on by stroke victims. It was hardly food anymore. Even Morris Berger, willing to smuggle a bowl of potato salad out of the Old Country Buffet, refused to touch it. Only sweet Muriel, with her encroaching senility and penchant for candy hoarding, had the courage to give it a home.

"Go on," she encouraged. "It won't bite."

I wasn't so sure. I turned the chocolate over in my palm and continued the examination. The inner foil wrapper had lost its crunch and was so worn it left flecks of silver powder on the tips of my fingers. When I finally removed the foil wrapper—driven more by curiosity than hunger—the bar underneath was so pale and dusty it practically dissolved in my hand. I could just imagine Sophia turning her slim, pierced nose into the air when I told her about it that night, asking why I'd want to poison my body with such garbage when she had a fresh batch of lentils rinsing in the sink at home.

Food was so much a part of what Sophia and I were about: the obsessive calorie counting, the mornings of soy paste and yoga, then arm-in-arm through the co-op, hunting the dusty aisles for a particular brand of turmeric or coriander, the long days of hunger and narcissism enflaming a sense of personal satisfaction I had never experienced before, or felt I deserved.

Part of me didn't want to give it up. And yet another part was ready to chuck it into Lake Michigan, because just the thought of another night of earnest, face-to-face love making with Sophia—her merciless belief in the possibility of change at any age—threatened to reignite the fires of my slumbering ulcer. And true to form, it wasn't long before that smoldering knot in my belly threatened to burst into flames. With the morning's acid refluxing into my throat, I realized even a cup of coffee was out of the question. And yet I didn't want to disappoint Muriel who was staring up at me with that sour milk smile of hers waiting for the gestures of gratitude that would explode across my face once I had devoured her candy.

“What are you waiting for?” Muriel asked.

The truth was; I didn't know. Nothing about the past five months felt real. It was



as if I had dieted my way into another man's body and everything that was once distinctive about me had melted away with the extra pounds of flab. I reached again into my pocket, hoping Sophia finally delivered the words of encouragement I needed. But when I tapped the message icon flashing beneath the Apple logo, the only words that swam to the surface were in the form of a reminder to pay my Verizon bill. Behind the silhouette of my cellphone, the reflective glass of the surrounding strip mall began to close in, making the obvious questions unavoidable, questions Sophia was supposed to answer for me, but wouldn't.

Who was this emaciated creature staring back in the glass of the Old Country Buffet, the questions began, and what had he done with the adorable, greasy-faced monkey who smiled his way onto nearly every photograph hanging in O'Malley's Pub next door? The lingering pull of O'Malley's being part of why I took my coffee at the Old Country Buffet in the first place.

Would any of my old drinking buddies recognize this new Alex; this restrained Alex, this vegan Alex, and if Sophia had her way, this writer Alex, and a graduate student Alex no less (because that's how she'd done it) with all the slim-fit, coffee-house expectations that come with that line of work, as if good writing were something that could be starved into existence?

At that moment I had a vision of Sophia. She appeared behind me in our bathroom mirror. We were both naked. I was shy, as usual, embarrassed about the deflated appearance of my new body. Sensing my discomfort, she ran a series of soft kisses along the back of my neck and into my ear.

"Everything will be okay," she whispered. "I love you."

With her left hand, she proceeded to reach below my navel and cradle the pile of empty skin that slumped over my waistline. She then fashioned her right hand into a gun and pointed the fingernail barrel at the ring of dark circles that encased my eyes. “This, babe, is what being happy looks like,” she said.

And then I had another vision. It was Morris Berger calling to me from the far end of the Old Country Buffet. He was dressed in a Waffen SS uniform and holding an oversized bowl out in front of him. Inside the bowl he carried a brick of tofu, a copy of Hillary Clinton’s *It Takes a Village*, and what appeared to be a photograph of Sophia and the rest of the 2005 Oberlin College ultimate Frisbee team, their tan bellies exposed to the sun beneath a collection of sweat-stained sports bras. “They were all just following orders,” Berger cried out before dumping the contents of the bowl down the front of his trousers. “What are you following?”

“Well,” Muriel said, tapping her wristwatch, “that candy isn’t going to eat itself.”

I decided to leave the decision to fate. I thrust my head back and dangled the dusty confection over my lips secretly hoping a strong wind would rise out of the gray clouds and blow the thing into the street.

That’s when I had my final vision of Sophia. She was frowning at me from the loveseat, making expressions of failure and disappointment. “How can you do this to me?” she whimpered. “How can you do this to *us*?” My elbow began to weaken as I absorbed the disapproving energy of those questions. I was just about to lower it to my side when Morris Berger, having built up a new head of steam, broke from the back of the line to make another run at the buffet entrance.

"Geronimo," he called out as he charged the podium.

By the time the old man leapt over Carmelita's boot and slipped through the metal door behind her, Muriel's chocolate was melting on my tongue.

"Isn't that better?" Muriel asked.

It was more than better. My knees buckled as the waves of sugar entered my blood stream. An inexplicable joy followed, not only because there was more candy in Muriel's purse, but because there was more candy in the world, more decadent desserts here at the Old Country Buffet, and in drive-thrus along each road that brought me back to Sophia.

A ruckus broke out by the entrance as the last chunk of Muriel's chocolate dissolved in my throat. Two burly muchachos in hairnets and rubber boots were dragging Morris Berger into the street.

"Jou'll get jour bowl back tomorrow," Carmelita called out from her podium.

"You're damn right I will," Berger shouted over his shoulder. "And it better not stink of frijoles either."

Through the window behind Berger, I noticed a buffet employee wrestling a large pot of gravy off a burner. During the confrontation, a bubble of sauce had risen to the surface and exploded all over the man's chest.

"Some melting pot," I thought I heard the employee curse.

"That's how it happens," Muriel said wagging her finger in judgment. I was too busy staring through the window to hear what she said.

"How what happens?" I asked.

"Holocaust," she said looking foggily into the sky. A ripple of lightning flashed through the gills of the approaching storm clouds. I blinked hard against the glare of my

growing uncertainty. "Did you say holocaust?"

Muriel's eyes grew wide. "Heavens no, child. I said it's a horrible loss when people stop communicating. We all get so hot under the collar. And everyone's got an opinion these days. Live and let live, I say. Winter's coming."

I turned just in time to see the muchachos dragging Berger into the street. As the old man was being pulled past the customers at the end of the line, he thrust a determined finger into the air and began to speak.

"Don't worry, friends," he called out with all the authority of a Jewish General MacArthur, "I shall return

"Goodness," Muriel snorted, reaching into her knitting bag for another piece of chocolate, "let's hope not."

## HOW LES AND LIBBY STOMACH THE SUBURBS

The wind was whipping the rain sideways the night that Libby Sizzleman confronted her husband's constipation. A new resolve had taken hold of her face, lifting her basset hound cheeks into the snarling aspect of a Rottweiler. Wind or not, she would deliver her Lester to that new specialist downtown. "And if he can't help you," she warned, folding her arms across the pleats of her polyester jump suit, "then it's the plumbers next."

Lester grabbed the banister and launched his body up the staircase. Under no circumstances would he allow some schmuck to bend a flashlight up his backside then charge him for the privilege. Les Sizzelman would open his blockaded body the only way Les Sizzelman knew how: by the application of pure will. Or so the slamming of the bathroom door was meant to say.

Libby unfolded her arms as the bathroom door crashed shut and retreated to the safety of the kitchen. Within moments she had a pot of prunes simmering on the stove, knowing that when it came to her husband's digestion it never hurt to have a backup plan. But as the sound of Lester's groaning began to punch deeper into the house, Libby rolled a nervous eye towards the cabinet below the refrigerator.

"Please, God," Libby whispered to any available deity, "not the contraption."

Libby Moser had steeled herself for many things during her marriage to Les Sizzelman: his hairy feet scratching her under the blankets at night; his desire to hear, "Thank you, Big Lester" at least once during their weekly coitus; and the rage-fueled outbursts that drove them from therapist to therapist until only the free ones at the Jewish

Community Center consented to treatment. But looking down at that dark cabinet, and knowing the secrets inside, Libby began to worry there were some things even the well-meaning counselors at the Jewish Community Center couldn't fully prepare her for. A deep sigh welled up in the pit of her stomach.

"When did my life become a Philip Roth novel?" she asked the appliances in her kitchen with a defeated look.

"When you started replacing the people in your life with things," she thought she heard the Oster 6000 food processor reply.

"Prunes?" Grandma Rose announced as she emerged from the basement with an armful of folded boxes. "The man is up to his eyeballs in mortgage papers and aggravation and you want to fill him with hot fruit? A stick of dynamite, maybe, to loosen the hold your cooking has over his *gaderum*, not shriveled plums."

"My husband's intestines are none of your concern," Libby scolded her mother.

"Don't tell me what my concern is," Rose warned as she reached for the roll of tape sitting on the counter. "At my age everything is a concern."

"Oh, go fold your boxes." Libby frowned.

As far back as Libby could remember her mother was always packing things into boxes. It was not only putting things into boxes that gave Rose pleasure—heaven forbid the Germans should return—it was the piling and the labeling that she loved, so high and centered no one would dare disturb them.

"Let me tell you about prunes," Rose called out as she dragged a seam of tape across the box of dishes clamped between her knees. "Back in my village of Tabachnick, Yodle the Rag Salesman was blocked up just as badly as your husband. For fifteen days

the town nurses stuffed him with hot prunes until one night—KABOOM—his stomach exploded, entrails scattered across the ceiling like hot salamis."

"I'm sure it happened just like that," Libby snorted.

"Of course, his wife couldn't cook either," Rose said, nodding towards the cauldron of loose fruit bubbling on the stove. "But that's because Yodle married a Ukrainian girl with blond hair and blue eyes just like that Mimzy Bancroft we got living across the street, the one with the willow trees half way up her *pupick* and the old darkie fussing after her like she's Scarlet O'Hara. And just who does she think she's kidding with that tennis skirt at sixty five years old? Who are these people that we've moved in with, Libby?" There was a dramatic pause before Rose leaned in and delivered the verdict. "*Goyim*, that's who, White people."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Ma, its 1973; nobody talks like that anymore."

"Yes, yes," Rose, dismissed. "I've seen the commercial. We're all part of the same rainbow, a bottle of Coca-Cola in one hand and a smiling *shvartze* in the other. I'm sorry to tell you this, Libby, darling, but the world isn't some soda pop rainbow you see shining on the television. It's a ghetto, bitter and cruel. And the lessons we learn mashed up against our own people don't just fall away once you reach the fancy hills of this Willowstone."

Libby searched the prairie outside her window for any sign of these hills even though she knew her mother was always misreading the terrain when it came to people and their soft drinks.

"It's in here," Rose said, thumping her daughter on the chest. And then she pointed out the window to the towering homes across Farnsworth Avenue. "Sure, you can

smile at them, make small talk about what you saw on the Johnny Cason program last night, but they're not Jewish. How do you know what they think?"

The lump welling in Libby's throat confirmed her mother's theories were not entirely off base. Some days Libby could feel that ghetto fear pushing through her body, driving her to duck behind the pyramid of canned peaches at the grocery store whenever she saw Mimzy Bancroft conducting her cart through the produce aisle like some untouchable queen. Fear was the inheritance of the ghetto, and no matter how many years Libby piled up in the suburbs she knew these fears would mark her like a scarlet F.

Before Libby could mobilize this realization into a series of life-altering changes, a barrage of grunts came booming through the bathroom walls. Libby felt her eyes shift nervously to the cabinet below the refrigerator.

"You still think he wants a glass of prunes?" Rose asked, fluffing the collar of her housecoat with a triumphant smile.

You couldn't fault old Rose for the sudden burst of pride. After nearly thirty-five years of darkness, the light of fashion had finally shined on her rumpled shoulders. The white hair and blue housecoat she donned shortly after escaping Poland had been sported by no less than Golda Meir the previous summer. Not that Rose went in for this sort of thinking, but if the Prime Minister of Israel could address the United Nations in something close to this outfit, then Rose felt she could handle the mood swings of her increasingly grumpy daughter.

Each morning, inspired by Golda, Rose would twist her hair into an explosion of grey clumps. The coif, she felt, endowed her stooped shoulders with a special air of authority, suggesting not only her blessed Golda to passers-by, but Albert Einstein and



David Ben-Gurion as well. Eccentric hair being the prerogative of Jewish genius, according to Rose. Rose would crown this ensemble with a pair of discount reading glasses so thick they made each eyeball stand out like a ceramic dinner plate. Were it not for the smells of dried fish and cold chicken that clung to her body, giving it a hint of metaphysical ballast, you might not think that Rose was real, but some horrible cartoon creation liable to have been plastered across the buildings of the Third Reich.

Being the author of her own stereotype, though, Rose was not terribly affected by the accusations leveled at her by irate members of the Temple Shalom sisterhood. Accusations that made her seem like Al Jolson in reverse, the burlesque of a Jew.

"Should I want to be any different?" Rose would curtly reply over brunch. "This is a cartoon country, to make an impression you need to paint in broad strokes. And besides," she'd continue to her daughter Libby at dinner, "who am I, Cookie Kleinberg with her frosted hair and that *facacta* green shrub she stuffs into her family room every holiday? What is a 'Hanukah Bush' anyway?"

Old Rose refused to be Cookie Kleinberg. She wouldn't assimilate at the point of a candy cane or eight tiny reindeer. She had survived Hitler's genocide dressing like this, so she figured she'd survive the Temple Shalom sisterhood as well.

"I think there's a brick in my stomach!" Big Lester shouted through the bathroom walls.

Libby felt the blood drain from her face.

"You want I should go up there?" Rose asked, wiggling an index finger above her head. "It's how we cured the impacted livestock of Tabachnick."

"Absolutely not!" Libby shrieked. "My husband is not the village mule."

"You're telling me." Rose clucked. "The mule made less noise." Then after a considered pause she added, "And a better living too."

"You think this is funny, Mother?"

"Funny? Only if you want we should listen all night to this *mishegoss*, then yes it's a regular Sid Cesar Hour."

"You got it, Ma. We're going to sit here all night until my husband's bowels release or the Messiah comes."

"Ok. No need to get snippy. I was only thinking of your husband."

"Of my husband." Libby laughed, catching sight of the additional finger her mother now curled above her head. "Your kind of help nobody needs."

A wave of embarrassed heat washed across Rose's face. She was not about to let her daughter's attitude go unpunished. She quickly gathered up her pocketbook and went barreling towards the door.

"Really," Libby cried out, "this again?"

But Rose would not be stopped. The aria, once begun, had to reach its crescendo.

"Let '*Mrs. Ungrateful*' get the twins from ballet," she sang out as she scooped her car keys off the end table. "Let '*Mrs. I'm-too-good-to-help-my-impacted-husband*' box away the rest of the Passover dishes," she crooned as she fastened her headscarf under the cleft of her stubborn chin. "I know when I'm not wanted."

Before reaching the door, Rose stopped in the foyer to make her final goodbye. Curling her hand into a megaphone, she lifted her face to the ceiling.

"Yoo-hoo, Mr. Clench-Bottom, I'm off to your brother-in-law Mortie's house to spend the night. They may not have as much as you, but at least they get the job done."

“Enough, Ma,” Libby cried. “If you’re going already, then go.”

“Going,” Rose mocked. “Who’s going?” And then she lifted her face one last time to the ceiling, “I’m the only one *going* in this house!”

Libby collapsed into the sofa as her mother’s Oldsmobile backfired down the driveway. It was times like these that Libby missed her sister most of all, times she needed the extra back of Sissy Swinefarb to help shoulder the old-world insanity of their temperamental mother. Some days she thought Sissy got off easy with the cancer. What’s the eternal sleep of death when compared to another holiday with Rose? Or, God help Sissy, a lifetime with crazy Mortie and the kids.

Not long after these thoughts ran guiltily through Libby’s head, a seismic plop was heard splashing down in the upstairs toilet. The long sigh of relief which accompanied this miracle rang through the Sizzelman house like a chorus of church bells announcing the end of a terrible plague. But as Libby’s eyes surveyed the disaster area that had become her home—the stack of bills piled on the roll away desk; the heap of laundry spilling out of the hamper; and the shredded ballet slippers rotting in the corner—she felt a stab of anxiety pinch her own *gaderum*.

So this was the price of escaping the city, Libby mused as she folded her arms across the apron of her bloated stomach, a prairie-sized constipation that bore down on anyone who pushed north of The Roosevelt Park Highway. A wince of pain escaped her lips as she attempted to massage away the high cost of freedom. It was quickly answered by a thundering yelp from the upstairs john.

“Here I go again,” Big Lester cried.

A set of church bells rang out in the distance. Libby pulled her knees into her

chest. In a few days little Gentiles would scramble across her neighbor's lawns searching for colored eggs and cellophane bunnies. Everything would be powdered and pink unlike the streets of Roosevelt Park where a driving rain would bring scores of earthworms to the surface in an ecstasy of slime and mud.

The truth was simple: Libby's stomach ran like a faucet back in Roosevelt Park; Lester's too. Here, everything dried up except the watered lawns. She could just see her crazy brother-in-law Mortie beaming atop his Roosevelt Park throne, flushing turd after turd into the muddy lake, while her defeated Lester slumped over an empty pot. Maybe there was something medicinal in the streets of the old neighborhood that was missing from the lawns of Willowstone. Maybe the old Yiddish proverb her mother recited each morning was truer than she wanted to admit: live with the *Goyim* and lose your *gaderum*.

"God damn my stomach!" Lester shouted. "There's got to be more in there."

"I'm stewing some prunes," Libby called hopefully up the stairs.

"Forget the damn prunes, Libby. You know what I need."

"Not really, Les. I'm not a mind-reader." But Libby knew.

"You know . . . the thing."

"The *thing*?"

"The contraption."

"You mean the *en-e-ma*?"

"Jesus, Libby, don't pronounce it. Just bring it."

A light clicked on in the house across the street. Inside, Mimzy Bancroft was pouring her first glass of scotch while her husband fed logs into a glowing fire. *Goyim*, Libby thought as she untangled a length of hose from the cabinet below the refrigerator.

“Today, Libby!” Lester hollered through the floor.

“I’m coming!” Libby hollered back.

Libby tucked the bag under her arm and charged up the stairs, the hose trailing behind her like a six thousand year old tail. Dipping her shoulder, Libby leaned forward and nudged an opening into the bathroom. The oak door gave way with little pressure and soon Libby found herself on the other side. Once her eyes adjusted to the aerosol-smoky lighting and the overwhelming stench of lavender bathroom spray, she discovered Lester bent meekly over the bowl. His hands were gripped tightly around the rim while his pale bottom winked mightily in the air. Libby couldn't fight the smile that raced across her lips. “In a hurry?” she asked.

“Please,” Lester whimpered, “don’t make this any worse.”

“Worse?” Libby cried heavenward. “How could this be any worse?”

Under such circumstances Libby should have grown resentful, become what her therapist called “self-loathing.” But the fact remained that Libby never felt more connected to her husband, and even to her Judaism, than when she was perched atop the bathroom vanity flushing the weekly troubles from Lester’s behind. It was a kind of intimacy the Bancrofts, with their warm fires and mellow scotch, would never know. And while this might strike some as a massive rationalization, it was enough to bring Libby up the stairs each week to service her husband in a way that no spouse, Jew or Gentile, should have to experience more than once.

## THIS AMERICA

One look at those furious green eyes was all you needed to see that Barbara Brodsky was out of her mind. They cut through space, the irises a kaleidoscope of broken glass with each shard ripping through the soft fabric of the visible world. As the spring of 1973 drew to a close, Barbara decided to fix those eyes on Moredecai "Mortie" Swinefarb, independent distributor of the most luxurious line of toilet paper east of the Chicago Sanitary Canal.

Barbara followed Mortie through the streets all season, turning up at movies, arriving unannounced at parties, a fire at the back of her eyes burning brighter than the lights atop the nearly completed Sears Tower, reaching into every unseen corner of the city. On one occasion, she followed Mortie through six miles of housing projects just to get to the synagogue where he was planning to say Kaddish for his wife even though the doctors hadn't officially pronounced the woman dead yet, just uncooperative. There are even those who claim Barbara was present when they finally laid Sissy into the ground. According to reports, Barbara kicked her sandals into the nearby grass and curled her toes into the family plot, determination now spinning in those kaleidoscope eyes, squeezing out the rising flecks of vernal light.

And yet it was partly her mother's determination that spun in Barbara's eyes that spring and summer, for Barbara had sworn off men after her last date pinched her behind the salad bar at the brand new Spirit of 76 Steakhouse, a possibility that Mother Brodsky tried to warn her daughter about before the girl went grab-assing down the street with her latest beau.

Fannie was standing in the doorway when Barbara came home that night, hoping to convey a kind of kitchen sink stoicism in her flannel housecoat and orthopedic socks. She had piled what remained of her snowy hair into a magnificent mountain then welded it to her skull beneath an impenetrable shield of will power and Aqua Net. Barbara was unimpressed by her mother's efforts. She elbowed her way past the old lady's hairdo and flung herself on the sofa, landing with a crunch against the plastic cushions. "Why is everything so difficult?" she sobbed.

"And here come the theatrics," Fannie cried out. "You'd think we could get through one night around here without your latest performance of *Poor Me*."

"This isn't a joke," Barbara whimpered into the lavender throw pillows. "I'm really hurting."

Fannie followed her daughter to the sofa and cocked a weary hip onto the edge of the credenza. "So let me get this straight. You invite some stranger out at half past midnight, paint your face up like a *shvartze* street walker, then expect him to settle for ham salad and deviled eggs?"

"I expected him to be a gentleman," Barbara said, lifting her runny face off the pillow.

Fannie lowered her eyes to the carpet as a belly full of sour gas began to ripple towards her dentures. Soon the air above the china hutch was filled with the stale aroma of cold Sanka and pickled herring.

"A gentleman," Fannie blurted out on the heels of a warm belch, "A *gentleman* you say. And just tell me, Professor Einstein, who taught you there was anything gentle about men?"

There wasn't anything gentle about Fannie either. At sixty five she was the oldest counter girl at Kaufmann's Bakery, a woman who wore each minute of her seniority in the trenches that carved up her face, the gravity of nearly forty years of rugelach, crumb cakes, and apple slices driving the flattened dough of her cheeks relentlessly into the floor.

Mortie didn't object to the sight of Fannie's weather beaten face each morning. He would stop by Kauffman's on the way to the hospital hoping to find something beneath those flagging jowls to tempt the sickness from his wife's appetite. A little schmoozing couldn't hurt his chances of getting the freshest goods, Mortie would determine on his way into the bakery, not that Mortie Swinefarb needed an excuse to schmooze. He would lean into the counter, flick the rim of his fedora, and in his sugariest voice entreat from Mother Brodsky the finest of her morning labors.

"Do you think I could get one of your cinnamon coffee rolls?" Mortie would ask, then almost as an afterthought add, "young lady."

Young lady, how that killed her.

"Go on, Moredecai," Fannie would blush into the honey cake. "I'm almost twice your age."

"But love has no age." Mortie would return devilishly.

Upon hearing such words, Fannie would stumble backwards into the shelving, dizzy from the sudden blast of male attention. Only when Mortie felt certain that Fannie's stop-and-go organs would not give out in a great thrombosis of love would he return his hands to the top of her trembling wrists and continue the playful seduction.

"So, how's my girl?" he'd ask.



"*Gut in himmel*," would come the ancient cry as Fannie, drawing back her wrists, would invoke the old Yiddish God of Ellis Island for protection, the one who presided over these women: their babushkas and their shopping carts, their chopped liver and their varicose veins, the great bearded patriarch who protected each of their quivering chins against the encroaching dangers of the New World, dangers that included air conditioning, automatic grocery doors, and overly familiar merchantmen with sweaty fedoras and a taste for wrinkled flesh.

Mortie would pull Fannie back to the twentieth century with a playful tug, grabbing her gently under the collar of her flour-splattered blouse. Thus positioned, Mortie would darken his eyes and effect his most mysterious voice.

"Stop being childish, Fancheon. What we have is serious. The French even have a word for it."

Enchanted by the promise of anything continental, Fannie would lean in the direction of Mortie's fists, her flaccid cheeks suddenly aflame with all the warm blood her cholesterol-packed arteries could carry.

"What Mordecai, what do the French call it?"

"Oyskidatz," Mortie would answer after a nervous pause.

"Oyskidatz," Fannie would repeat, pulling away from Mortie's grip. "This is *French?*"

"It's Roosevelt Park, French, darling."

"But Moredecai, sweetheart, oyskidatz is Yiddish for crazy," Fannie would point to her head for emphasis. "You know, out to lunch."

"Precisely," Mortie would exclaim with great relief. For Motie knew about as

much French as he knew Chinese, "Very much out to lunch." He would take up Fannie's hand and lower his voice. "Who can be rational in the presence of such beauty?"

That was all it took to send Fannie's skittering heart into overdrive. Unfortunately for Fannie, the sudden burst of excitement would savage her glucose levels as well, forcing the old girl to spend the rest of those heated afternoons sipping juice in the corner, sucking the life out of a box of peppermints.

"What a character," Fannie would pant, slumped into the orange footstool. "And not a bad match for my Barbara either. Crazy needs crazy. And those two are a pair of matching coo-coo birds."

The needling would begin as soon as she got home.

To force any descriptive flourishes upon the bouts of ritualized nagging that followed these heart-fluttering encounters would only drain the intensity from the experience. In order to preserve the immediacy of the event, simply imagine two women, one old and one young, sitting in a pair of matching recliners. The recliners are turned inward to face the fuzzy tube of a nineteen inch black and white television sitting on a portable tray. It is important to note that neither woman makes any eye contact during the conversation that follows, choosing instead to communicate their thoughts through the lips of Eric Severeid and the rest of the CBS evening news team.

FANNIE: You know who's a nice man?

BARBARA: Dr. Kissinger?

FANNIE: Moredecai Swinefarb.

BARBARA: The guy with the sweaty fedora?

FANNIE: There's no shame in hard work. Your father, God rest his soul, didn't

get this house by dancing for the king.

BARBARA: I know, but selling toilet paper from a cart?

FANNIE: You think it's so easy for a Jew to get a job? My Sheldon wrung chicken necks for twenty years. Are you, his only child, any less special?

BARBARA: Still, toilet paper?

FANNIE: Toilet paper, chicken necks, never ask a man how he makes his living. Under every dollar you're liable to find the thumbprint of a man who chokes a chicken.

BARBARA: [frowning] Its all one big punch line to you. Isn't it?"

FANNIE: I'll punch you Miss Smarty Mouth. You have to go and make everything I say dirty.

BARBARA: Everything you say is dirty.

FANNIE: [slight pause to regroup] A real *mensch*, this Mordecai. Always insisting on the best pastries for his wife. And her with the cancer everywhere. On the wallpaper even. Such a man knows how to be good to a woman. And you, with your moods, all locked up in your room growling like a caged animal, you need all the kindness you can get. Of course, if you should want to stay home and shame your mother into an early grave . . .

BARBARA: Early grave? Please, you've been dying of the same heart attack since 1948. Face it, Ma, people like you live to be a hundred.

FANNIE: So you think it's funny to taunt your ailing mother? Maybe we should go down to the polio hospital next and kick around the cripples. Maybe bash in a few iron lungs while we're at it?

BARBARA: Jesus, there hasn't been a case of polio in . . .

FANNIE: You have something against polio now?

BARBARA: Do I have something against polio, listen to you. I'm just saying, maybe we should let the woman's body go cold before you marry me off to her husband.

FANNIE: Barbara, darling, your thirty four now, yes, soon to be thirty five? Who do you think's going to go cold first?

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Unlike New York with its garbage-packed streets, Chicago is a city of dark and crowded alleys. These alleys carve each neighborhood into two distinct areas: front and back. The eye is drawn first to the stone-faced, terra cotta, front: the gleaming stoops that receive the morning newspapers and the glittering bay windows that look out over the obsessively swept sidewalks. This is the neighborhood's public face: preened and polished at the crack of every dawn, glossed and gilded on the cusp of every evening, always open for business and ready for company.

In Roosevelt Park, this is where the ruddy-cheeked mailmen, decked out in their shiny blue uniforms, delivered packages from across the globe: jewelry, vases, dishes, whatever small treasures that were still being recovered from the previous war then shipped back to America to be driven up such streets that, while not exactly paved in gold, still managed to achieve something of a hopeful luster. Down these optimistic boulevards the portly Irish alderman would promenade each November, stately in their overcoats, with one smiling hand extended on behalf of the Democratic Party and the other one bent sideways above their freckled heads, pressing down the sheets of combed-over hair whipped vertical by the driving wind.

It was here on Friday evenings that pious Jews still put candles in their windows

to observe the Sabbath, lighting the cobblestone beneath their flower boxes in a warm orange glow. In this soft, mournful light people in their best suits mingled on the way home from temple making polite, if restrained, conversation, the wail of the dive-bombing Stukas still a fresh enough memory to keep each family generally to themselves, sharing as they did the guilty secret of their tribe: survival.

Behind the rows of soft, mournful, cobblestone lurked the cindery alleys where such secrets came to rest. Here, the bellowing mufflers of the old fin-tail cars belched clouds of exhaust up through the maze of telephone wires and clothes lines that crisscrossed overhead, giving the appearance from a distance that the area was engaged in armed revolt, as if the Jews of Roosevelt Park, having finally achieved a foothold in the land of milk and honey, would ever burn it to the ground like those crazy *shvartzes* on the West Side with their black power and bottles of flaming gasoline.

Barbara found Mortie in the alley between the sanitary canal and the Hassidic temple. He was tossing a rubber baseball back to one of the boys. "Don't drop your elbow, Tishman," he shouted into the fray. "You'll never hit one straight."

Barbara lurched her Chrysler to a gravelly stop in the parking lot beside Rosen's drug store to get a better look. Safe behind a pair of oversized sunglasses, she unrolled the heavy window of the Chrysler Imperial and began sizing up the man her mother simply couldn't stop talking about. At first, he didn't seem like much. The sweat was collecting in a dark ring around the brim of his fedora and falling drop by drop between his splayed feet. Oblivious to his surroundings, he then plunged a meaty fist into his distended t-shirt pocket fishing for the stump of an old cigar, releasing a volcano of pen caps, loose matches, and sunflower seeds as he did. Barbara's nose twitched as she

watched Mortie lick down the frayed leaves of the dry cigar and jam it into the corner of his mouth. With the stogie planted firmly between his lips, Mortie called out to the passing Hassidim in their fur hats and black coats, hoping to make his first sale of the day.

"Why are you walking so stiffly, Rabbi, has the Lord smote your *tuchas*?"

He could have been talking to any of them, but it was Rabbi Hyrum Werner who answered the toilet man's brazen call.

"What's that?" Rabbi Werner replied, squinting towards the blurry shadow of Mortie and his cart. "Is that you, Mordecai?"

"Look at you," Mortie scolded. "You've scrubbed yourself raw with that cheap synagogue sand paper again, haven't you? How many times have I told you, Hyrum, with Grossbart down the street you get what you pay for?" He approached the old scholar with a handful of samples from his cart. Barbara's eyes grew wide behind her glasses.

"Here, your holiness." Mortie smiled. "Allow yourself a small, secular pleasure." At this point Mortie lifted to the Rabbi's face, like the Torah itself, a gleaming roll of Heavenly Bouquet, his most celebrated product. Had a nearby bush suddenly burst into flames the old Rabbi could not have been any more transfixed.

"Go on," Mortie encouraged, pushing the roll up to the Rabbi's face. "Touch it." A pair of gnarled fingers reached out from a sleeve of shiny gabardine to take a timid squeeze.

"Nice, huh?" Mortie nudged. "Two plys of paradise right here on earth. It's the same stuff they use at the Palmer House. Why should Frank Sinatra and his entourage sitting in booth one have all the comfort in life? Between you and me, Rabbi, one roll of

this stuff and we won't need to wait for a messiah, the whole universe will open up to our command, with our undersides smiling their thanks for all eternity.

Seduced by the promise of a smiling underside, the Rabbi lifted the fur hat off his head and reached inside the damp lining for the few rusty Sheckles he kept tucked away for a rainy afternoon.

Mortie waved a hand in front of his face. "Absolutely not, Rabbi. For you, free. But maybe after the next holiday, when the donation plates are full, you should consider treating your whole congregation to such luxury, for as the Talmud says..."

The old Rabbi stopped Mortie with a frown, knitting his brow into a look so intense it may have been God's own eyes glaring in disappointment.

"And who are you," The Rabbi blurted out, "the Tevea of toilet paper?"

The Rabbi's descent into the vernacular shocked Mortie. It shocked Barbara too. She bit down on her lower lip.

"This is my life you're mocking," the Rabbi continued, "not some traveling road production of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I live these traditions you scorn. They give me energy and balance. A sense of connection to almost six thousand years of history. That's a lot of years to turn your back on for the sake of a few quick jokes."

"I'm sorry, Rabbi," Mortie said. "I was just trying to make a point."

"I understand, Mordecai, but tell me, as an intellectual experiment, what is it you have against your people? To hate is sin enough, but to hate one's self..."

"Let me stop you right there, Rabbi. I'm not one of those self-hating Jews you read about in one of your scholarly journals. If you must know, I'm a Jew hating Jew. A man fed up with the physical and emotional stinginess of his tribe. Seriously, would it kill

you to shave? I carry a very nice line of lotions. You'll look ten years younger. And the toilet paper, my goodness, why must you people be so cheap? You'll suffer for weeks with an inferior product just because that *chazzzer* down the street Grossbart promises to save you a few pennies."

Barbara grabbed her chest. For a layman to punch it out toe-to-toe with a Rabbi was something she'd never heard of before, let alone witnessed. It came as a revelation. How often had she and Fannie blindly accepted the grim pronouncements of these grizzled men of God and soldiered on through a desert of uncertainty and pain, particularly that night fifteen years ago when her father dropped face-first onto a steaming plate of brisket having suffered a massive coronary brought on by night after night of Fannie's magnificently plated meats, and just a little bit of her nagging.

"This is how you answer my question," the Rabbi broke in, "evasions?"

"The God's honest truth, Hyrum, when my Sissy first became ill I went to your synagogue. You were visiting Mitzy Cohen in the hospital, administering to her ingrown toenail or some other ridiculous thing. Rabbi Girshbaum agreed to see me. Girshbaum of the Cossacks and the pogroms and the sneaking out of the Warsaw Ghetto in a coffin just so he could say Kaddish for his father. I told him about the problems with my Sissy, about the tumors that were chewing out her guts, and about my three soon to be motherless children. What did Girshbaum do? He swung his chair to the window so he could face the skyline and cried out, 'Ach, this America!' then shook his head weeping. His verdict? My wife was dying because we had turned our backs on our religion, somehow merged with that skyline, rejecting God in the process. Glass and steel idols, he called those buildings. As if I intended them to Bar Mitzvah my children instead of you.



I'm a reasonable man, Hyrum. I don't expect miracles. I came with an honest question: Why must good people suffer? I deserved a better answer.

A tear welled up in the corner of Barbara's eye.

The Rabbi's eyes moistened as well. He returned his hat to his head and kicked a dark stone over the railing into the muddy canal. "That shouldn't have happened," the Rabbi acknowledged. "Girshbaum is an old man; older than me. But you and I are going to have to reach an accommodation someday, Mordecai. I can't afford to lose any more reasonable people. Have you seen my congregation? More wheelchairs than a retirement home. Half my flock has flown off to the country, or do they call them the suburbs now, where the rivers run with Pepsi and the hills are cooled by air from Westinghouse. At Temple Isaiah in Willowstone they have velvet chairs that vibrate to relive back pressure. I can't compete with vibrating pews, Mordecai. I spend my time reading Torah and contemplating the infinite, not having bake sales and sponsoring sisterhood productions of *South Pacific*.

"This is true," Mortie interrupted, shaking a roll of Heavenly Bouquet under the Rabbi's nose. "But you can't get the good stuff up there, now can you? A few cases of this and the chosen people will once again be choosing you for their spiritual salvation."

"All right, Mordecai," The Rabbi relented. "I'll bring the matter up to the board after the New Year and see about placing an order. But you and I will talk again. We have much to discuss. Your children for one."

"Their spiritual salvation?"

"Their lack of a mother."

A fire took hold of Barbara that afternoon. She began to stalk Mortie through

the city like a lion on the savannah. Up and down the Roosevelt Parkway, inside Drenka's deli where he installed a new set of dispensers. At the yeshiva where he restocked Rabbi Isadore's private commode then raised the water pressure so the old man could flush more of his backlogged product. And finally, speeding past Harry Grossbart's stand on the other side of the canal where he called out to Harry from the window of his passing Maverick, "Hey, Harry, guess who doesn't have the toilet paper concession at Temple Shalom anymore?"

Six weeks after they laid Sissy in the ground, Barbara hit on a plan to snag Mortie for good. She decided to sneak into the back seat of his Ford Maverick while he was closing down the cart and surprise him on the way home from work. All day she dreamed about the meeting, the shock and delight of leaping into his arms. The heart-melting quiver of receiving his first kiss. Something in his soft, brown eyes—her father's eyes really, or what she remembered of her father's eyes—deepened the attraction, made it seem safe and familiar, yet somehow thrilling and forbidden. It was a smell too. Something Barbara caught on the wind: Old Spice, perhaps, or Aramis, or maybe just the thick summer air drenched in the toilet man's potent pheromones, sucked in through the air conditioning vents of the overheated Chrysler. It made Barbara flushed and dizzy, just like Fannie at the bakery.

Barbara pulled a tissue out of the small plastic case she carried in her handbag and began to blot the corners of her face and neck. The sheets of perspiration made her realize there was something different about this feeling. This wasn't the scentless, non-committal attractions she felt for men like Barry Feingold, Elsie's boy, who groped her behind the salad bar of the Spirit of 76 Steakhouse. It was something deeper, something

limbic, something coursing through her liver that made her feel all hot and cold at the same time.

The sun was setting above the muddy waters of the sanitary canal. Floating in the brown current were wads of red, white, and blue bunting left over from the Independence Day festivities. There was something resilient about that bunting, Barbara thought. It seemed to ride the currents of sewage instead of being devoured by them. Perhaps hope springs eternal, Barbara wondered as she watched the colorful flotilla pass below her feet. Perhaps we are all tougher than we think.

A voice from the darkness: "Don't trust hope."

Barbara tried to shake off the encroaching gloom, her mother's gloom she realized, carried over to this country after centuries of oppression and filth. She thought about Mortie and his Maverick, about his soft eyes and quick wit. The gloom receded for a moment. All will be well tomorrow night, Barbara concluded. Providence has things safely in hand.

All the same, she stopped off at Silverman's Hardware before going home to purchase a crowbar and a slimjim.

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