

**HATE
LETTERS
FROM
BUDDHISTS**

**HATE
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FROM
BUDDHISTS
AND OTHER
STORIES BY
DAVE
HURLOW**

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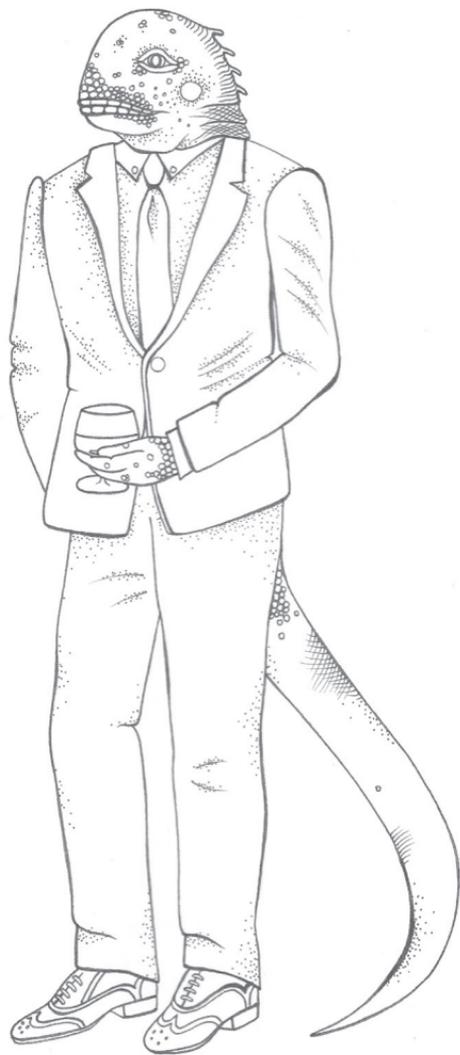
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CONTENTS

The Death of Abel Grand	9
Hate Letters from Buddhists	19
A Lizard in Love	59
A Rowboat at Dusk	85
The Ghost of Stalingrad	121
Parades	151
Friends at a Funeral	177



The Lizard Man

I'd like to thank my parents for their infinite patience and support, Richard Light who explained history and religion to me over many glasses of whiskey, Gabriel Kastner for friendship and dialogue, Curran Folkers and Karen Correia Da Silva for their encouragement and hard work, and finally my bandmates, Mike, Wes and Jason for friendship and support through good times and bad.

THE DEATH OF ABEL GRAND

Abel rolled his ankle as he set out on his south end run. As usual, he'd forgotten to stretch and he cursed himself now as he limped down the street. He recognized a cluster of cute girls from his Descartes seminar drinking on a stoop. They shouted cat calls after him and then dissolved into laughter. Again he cursed himself—or more accurately, he cursed the bright blue, form-fitting, sweat-wicking shirt that he was wearing. It was a birthday present from his father, and while cold weather running would have been hell without it, the embarrassment of wearing a garment with so many superfluous zippers almost cancelled out the benefit.

Once clear of the Halifax student ghetto, he relaxed a bit. No more awkward encounters: just fresh air and stray thoughts.

Abel had given up drinking on Monday after a particularly humiliating weekend. Usually he would have broken abstinence by Friday, but he convinced himself to go out for a late night jog instead. He felt like exercising el-

evated him to a higher moral plane. His bonehead friends were probably filling their faces with cheap beer and making passes at freshmen girls. That's the sort of behaviour his Fridays usually consisted of, but he pushed this fact to the back of his brain. He was a new man. A sober man.

Running gave Abel a rare sense of well being. It was that same thing he liked about stage managing plays and doing layouts for the student paper. These were fairly thankless tasks, but when he was performing them he became lost in the work; his depression subsided. He wished he could preserve the feeling, carry it with him all the time. This, of course, was impossible. Running itself was an escape, an act in which one literally ran from their problems. If it was this aspect of the activity that appealed to Abel, it was because he was a master of crafting networks of complex problems within his imagination. The problems Abel faced were not dramatic. He was not oppressed or disabled. He'd never been abused, marginalized or institutionally impeded. He was ill-fitted to the world in a way that was nearly imperceptible to others, but left him socially and emotionally handicapped.

Abel crossed the Gorsebrook parking lot, jumped off a rock, and landed with a satisfying thump. As he continued running, a cramp spread through his lower left abdomen and he was forced to pause on a bridge overlooking the railroad tracks and the shipping yard. It was a clear and beautiful night, but as so often happened when Abel ran, his powers of external observation were muted. His mind was turned inward with an introspection so thick he could taste it. Abel was so wrapped up in his thoughts that when the pain subsided and he began running again, he didn't even notice.

Abel grew up in a wealthy, predominantly Jewish neighbourhood in Toronto. He was under-fathered and over-mothered. If he'd learned anything in his twenty-one

years of life on the planet, it was this: nothing ever works out.

He could trace this lesson back to the second grade when he got dumped by his best friend. They were so close to beating *Battletoads* for Super Nintendo—just one more weekend of binging on junk food and defying the prescribed bedtime and victory was certain. When he asked his mom what time she would drop him off at Simon's, she broke the news.

“Simon's mom told me she doesn't arrange his play dates anymore. You'll have to speak to him yourself.”

On Monday, during a group project, Simon taunted Abel. He made fun of him for being short, for having a big nose, for being a mama's boy. Simon was as adept in the art of mockery as any seven year old can be, and Abel stewed and stewed until he could take it no more and stabbed Simon in the hand with a sharp pencil. He bled a lot and Abel was suspended. He never found out why his friend had turned on him. This was just the random cruelty of the universe.

The pattern of unpopularity had trailed Abel all the way through high school so that by the time he got to University he was paranoid and angry. He'd barely even gotten into University, though he only actually applied to one: a small liberal arts college in Halifax. He'd been on the waiting list for months, but thanks to his mother's pestering he'd been accepted at the last second. In first year he had the good fortune of meeting a girl who understood him and grew to love him despite himself. She was a sweet Jewish girl from the same neighbourhood as Abel, which pleased his parents. The relationship progressed merrily for almost two years until one day she broke up with him, seemingly out of nowhere, as far as Abel could tell.

Months after the breakup they met in a small courtyard at the campus of the University of Toronto. She was

ten minutes late. This is what happened:

Abel: You're always late. Remember that time you were late to meet me to see *Star Trek* in 3D and we had to sit in the front row like assholes? I swear to God my neck is still sore from that.

Samantha: This is why I didn't want to see you today. You're still so angry with me.

Abel: Fuck you.

Samantha: I only agreed to meet you because you sent me a thousand emails that made me feel like a bitch. You begged me to meet you, so if you're going to sit there and swear at me, it defeats the purpose of me being here.

Abel: You are a bitch. Fuck you.

Samantha: Goodbye, Abel!

A few days after that, Abel drove his mother to a blood test in her Lexus. She hated needles and the doctor had forbidden her from eating before the test. Abel's mother was nervous and silent. Abel sat alone in the car reading an Isaac Asimov paperback until she returned with a tuna sandwich from the cafeteria. On the way home they got stuck in traffic. The sudden increase in blood sugar made his mother extremely talkative. She spoke of the upcoming renovations to the house:

"We're thinking of putting in this heated concrete flooring," she said, "It's hypermodern and the architect is very excited about it. But I just wonder how safe it is. Do you think I'll ever have any grandkids?" Abel nearly drove into the car in front of him.

"What? What does that have to do with concrete floors?"

"Well it's just that if there's small kids around they could hurt themselves. On the concrete."

"Did it ever occur to you that you might already

have grandkids you don't even know about?"

"Don't say that. I'm asking you a serious question."

"I don't know, mom, I'm a bit of mess. I think I should probably figure my own life out before I consider bringing another human into this world. If I were you, I'd harness my hopes to Sabrina. Her and Darryl seem to be doing pretty well. Plus they're both on the career track. Then again they're pretty liberal, so they might decide to adopt. Maybe they'll get a kid from Africa. Wouldn't it be cool to have a black guy in the family? Personally, I think we could use a bit more diversity."

Abel was smiling at his own train of thought, but when he glanced at his mother she wore a look of sadness. "I guess I just miss Samantha, is what I'm trying to get at." Another near collision.

"Mom you know you're not allowed to say that."

"It's just that I had a good relationship with her. I was emotionally invested. I just wish you two could work things out, that's all. I talked to her on the phone the other day—"

"Jesus Christ, mom. You are not allowed to talk to my ex-girlfriend on the phone. That is wildly inappropriate. I'm your son—*we* have a relationship. You're supposed to be emotionally invested in *me*. Who's side are you on anyway?"

"It's not about sides Abel; you see things in such extremes. You're just like your father."

"Ugh. Just fucking kill me now."

That same summer, Elias Abel Grand had been in the hospital for weeks, decrepit from old age, his mind long gone. Abel was the sole witness to his death and also sole witness to the very strange scene that preceded it. Elias had been a professional goalie in the nineteen thirties, playing for the Montreal Maroons. When he got too old to play, he worked construction. When his body gave out, he worked as an accountant. Later on his mind itself gave out to Alzhe-

imers, and the once robust Elias was reduced to a vegetal lump. His face was smooth like porcelain, but it had been chipped away in places by hockey pucks and building debris. He still had a full head of beautiful, silvery hair.

Abel had been charged with spending an afternoon with him. The doctor said Elias was close to death, although the diagnosis was vague. It was important to Abel's parents that they all spend as much time as possible with him in the hospital. On the day of his death, Abel sat across from Elias reading that same Asimov paperback, but he found it hard to concentrate. He thought about smothering the old man with a pillow, probably doing him a favour. This was ridiculous, after all; he didn't even know where he was. The high point of his day probably consisted of shitting himself, Abel thought.

Once in a while Elias locked eyes with Abel and his mouth would sputter, putt-putting, and sending spittle flying. He talked a lot about a place in Montreal called Pan-tagruel Records. He used to go there almost every day, and now his vocal chords were in a constant state of declaring that he had bought such and such records on such and such a date. His mind accessed the finest details from the most irrelevant vault, his porcelain face frozen in a mask.

“Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*. Ken Munson, *Super-flute*. Oscar Peterson, *Night Train*. October 4th 1974. Jimmy was working the counter. Said I was a good customer. I'd been reading Chekhov and quoted something to him: ‘rust eats iron, worms eat the dirt and lies eat the soul.’ But what happens when a lie temporarily becomes the truth? Can the soul be repaired? A very good question, don't you think, grandson?”

Abel's eyes shot up from his book. The old man was laughing, his eyes were awake. The mask had been lifted. Elias sat up in his bed.

“That's from Dostoevsky. The bit about the lie be-

coming truth. Now there was a truly psychological writer. A Byzantine writer. You know all about that, right Abel?”

Abel pulled his chair up next to the bed, dumb-founded. Elias continued to speak:

“You read *The Brother's Karamazov* this summer when you finished school. Didn't have a job, just laid on the couch reading all day. Good way to pass the time. You had a dream the night you finished the book but you don't remember, not perfectly. Let's go through it now together.

“The dream begins: you're on top of a train, rushing through the Siberian landscape. You wait until the train enters the forest and you drop down behind a guard and slit his throat. You enter the boxcar where they are holding your brother, Mitya. You've come to free him. He's been falsely convicted of murdering your father. He's tied to a chair, you cut the ropes, but he does not stand. Something glows inside of him and then he is regurgitating a glowing rock. He hands you the rock. You accept it and he urges you to swallow it. You do. Your brother's body collapses like so much rubber and you understand that you are now carrying him inside of you. But this is complicated because within the brother you have placed three of your friends: the one who falls, the one who hides and the one who flies. Please excuse me, I do not know their names.

“With your friends in tow you make your escape, flying up into the sky. The new objective is to reach the end of the universe, but you cannot leave this planet's atmosphere unprotected. You realize that the stone you swallowed is also an instrument and you draw music out of it—a great orchestral piece. As the music plays a ship grows around you. The vessel and the music are not separate things: the vessel is shaped by the sound of the composition; the racing strings, the dancing woodwinds. You enter space and move weightlessly through the ship as it grows. Spheres, domes, turrets and spindles swirl into existence around you.

“The trip lasts weeks, months, possibly years, but dreams condense time into mere minutes. You arrive at a place where outer space laps gently against the shore of the infinite, like the ocean on a lazy day. Here you do not require the protection of the ship any longer and it dissolves. On the shore of the infinite you are met with a rock face and begin to climb. You climb with great determination for many hours. Just as you see the mountain's crowning dome off in the distance, there is a great rumbling. Rocks fall down around you, the shelf you are clinging to rises suddenly and you are almost flung off. As you look around, you realize, horrified, that you are on the eyelid of some giant creature that you have awoken. But this is no wild beast. No, this is the first being ever to have dreamed, slumbering since the beginning of time. He's a virtuoso in the art of dreaming, bringing our complex universe into existence, piece by piece over many millennia. The lives and dreams of all beings sprang forth from the raw material of this primary dreamer. And when, in the dream of a man, the primary dreamer awoke, well, you see the problem here, Abel?”

As Elias described the dream to Abel, it all came back to him in great detail. But it was strange: he would remember things seconds before the old man said them out loud. The words echoing his thoughts as he was guided through the caverns of his mind. He was utterly spooked. How could Elias know all this? It was complete madness. Abel knew that at the root of this dream lay something that had been bothering him: he'd been having suicidal thoughts and migraines since he'd finished reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. He opened his mouth to speak but it was completely dry. His grandfather continued:

“The problem is that he who awakes the primary dreamer must take his place. You've had a suspicion, since that night, that you are still asleep and that the entire world is now being held together by your dreams. That's a lot of

pressure, grandson. You need to let it go.”

“What if it all falls apart?” Abel finally found the words, his face damp with tears. But it was too late—the mask had fallen upon his grandfather once more.

“Duke Ellington, *Live At Newport*. CCR, *Willy and the Poor Boys*. Roy Orbison, *Cry Softly Lonely One*. May 6th, 1979. Francois was working the counter. Said I was their best customer. ‘Work pays the bills, love makes you happy and music soothes the soul,’ I said. Yessir, yessir.”

The heart monitor flatlined and a nurse rushed in. She fetched the doctor but it was too late; Elias had passed on to the other side. Abel never recounted this final conversation to his family. It was too odd of a story. No one would have believed him. He said that Elias passed peacefully, that he'd been asleep when he died. Elias' last words had been helpful in terms of diagnosing Abel's depression, but not in terms of curing it. He still believed that the world was a product of his imagination, that it hung by a thread and that he was not really part of it, that he was lying in a coma in another dimension. No matter how hard he tried, he could not shake this suspicion.

These scenes from the summer streamed through his mind as he jogged. He ran in to Point Pleasant park, down a winding path that cut through the trees. He got to the water and ran along the shore, the flame from the oil refinery in Dartmouth burning brightly across the harbour. It was not until he reached the decorative cannon at the southern tip of the park that he came back to himself. He leaned on the cannon and stared out towards the sea. He stood squinting into the distance for a while, as if looking for something. A spot on the horizon glitched and glimmered. The ocean and the sky appeared to be set and dried like a painting but this one little spot he'd picked out was dancing wildly in place.

Suddenly, winds began gusting heavily. There were

thousands of birds in the sky, flying inland squawking and beating their wings furiously. There was a rumble in the distance and then Abel saw it. At first he didn't understand what he was looking at. It was as though the bottom half of the sky had been blacked out or cut away. As it grew closer he saw that it was a tidal wave the height of a skyscraper, reaching across the length of the horizon. His instinct was to run but he stayed rooted to the spot, hypnotized by the spectacle. He realized that he had no desire to run, and that running would be futile anyway. Instead he walked towards the wall of water. Just before the wave crashed over him, smashing him to pieces along with the entire city, he had a revelation: this was all he'd ever wanted.

HATE LETTERS FROM BUDDHISTS

The first time I heard about the Lizard Man was in the office of Professor Logan Paisley. Paisley was what you might call an ornament of the University. He was part of a network of internationally celebrated scholars in the field of the Philosophy of Science and Technology. He spoke eloquently of truth and science, the colonization of outer space, paradigm shifts in quantum physics, how to save the world from technology, with technology. Rocket ships and revolution. Handsome, and in his mid forties, Paisley had black hair, a permanent glaze of silver stubble and an ever-furrowed brow. His wardrobe was monotonous: black boots, black pants, black blazer with a plain white dress shirt. Never a tie.

It was a sunny afternoon in March and my thesis was way behind schedule. He sat with his boots up on a large wooden desk littered with coffee mugs, stacks of stained papers and piles of dusty, dog eared books. He'd just looked over a fresh draft of my essay and was not impressed.

“Stanislav, what the hell is going on in that curly-haired head of yours? You didn’t make any of the changes I asked you to and you added a huge section on Martin Heidegger and the French Revolution. This thesis is bloated and obtuse.”

I’d taken a bunch of Ritalin the night before and embarked on a massive tangent about political revolution, *Zeitgeist*, the rift between history and reality, and Martin Heidegger. An attempt to tie these themes into my main argument had apparently failed and we were left with a gaping hole in the center of my paper. Paisley was enthusiastically slashing five pages of text with a red marker.

“What this paper could really use is a section on situational knowledge. You could use the example of Darwin’s encounter with the Tierra Del Fuegians,” Paisley said.

“Come again, sir?”

“The Del Fuegians, Natives of the Tierra Del Fuego archipelago. Do your homework, Stanislav!” he boomed. “The main purpose of the Beagle Voyage was to create more accurate maps of the southmost cluster of islands that make up the bottom tip of the Americas. They discovered a channel that ran parallel to the Magellan Strait, and named it the Beagle Channel. On one of the islands they came across some primitive natives, quite a fascinating people. Around the same region the Lizard Man comes from, I believe.”

“Sir?”

“The Lizard Man, Stanislav. You’ve never heard of him? Do I have to explain every little thing to you? Jamyang Gyalpo, AKA the Lizard Man, taught Comparative Religion here at the University in the eighties when I was a student. I was a member of the fencing society, a club that he founded, so I got to know him a little. We became friends when I returned from Japan to focus on my postdoctoral research. Sadly he died not to long ago. Jamyang always claimed that

he was from a small tribe on the Tierra Del Fuego. Said he was born in the late nineteenth century, just a few decades after Darwin passed through. No one would have believed his story if he hadn't been so obviously part chameleon: stereoscopic eyes, prehensile tail. His peculiar genetics must have given him a greater life span, I suppose."

After that meeting, the Lizard Man became something of an obsession for me. What little I knew about him was the stuff of myth come to life. I'd always taken my own special ability in stride, but the knowledge of another being possessing otherworldly qualities had awoken something in me and I hungrily pursued any information I could gather about him.

I dug up some old year books in which Jamyang was pictured alongside a group of men in white fencing outfits holding up sabres. He was basically the same shape and size as a man, but if you looked closely, his large tail could be seen, swept to the side, and indeed the proportions of his eyes and his head were somewhat irregular as well. The picture was blurry and I was tormented by a desire to get a clearer picture of him, better yet, to see him in motion.



If, as Professor Paisley had suggested, the Lizard Man was born in the late nineteenth century, a significant period of his life had gone completely unrecorded. Below is a condensed history of the later part of his life, cobbled together by myself from interviews with former colleagues at the University, and his disciples from within the Shambhala community:

The Lizard Man surfaced in a monastery in eastern Tibet in 1950. Although he was an outsider, his intense karmic energy indicated that he was no ordinary being. Against

all established precedent he was identified as the reincarnation of the eleventh Trungpa, a figure of some consequence in the Buddhist Universe. He was appointed supreme abbot of the Surmang monasteries in eastern Tibet but fled in the Dalai Lama's tracks after the failed uprising against China in 1959. The Lizard Man, who had since taken the name Jamyang Gyalpo led a group of monks through the himalayas on horseback, eventually finding refuge in India. From India he travelled to Oxford where he studied Comparative Religion and taught Buddhist Philosophy. He was attracted to western comforts, and soon took to drink and carnal acts unbecoming of a monk. At this time his energy seemed to be torn between East and West and this friction manifested itself in the form of car crash. In 1969, the Lizard Man blacked out behind the wheel of an Aston Martin and drove into a cake shop.

Ashamed of his debauched behaviour, Gyalpo disappeared. Once again, there is no record of his activities for a significant chunk of time. The popular speculation is that he spent most of the seventies drinking and gambling in Macau. By the end of the decade he started making appearances in the Buddhist communities around the San Francisco Bay area. He'd renounced formal religion and began disseminating his peculiar vision: a secular offshoot of Buddhism called Shambhala. In Buddhist lore, Shambhala is a magnificent kingdom. Some believe it is a historical kingdom that truly existed, others see it as a spiritual destination.

Gyalpo claimed that Shambhala could be built in North America on a foundation of compassion and meditative practice. The Lizard Man wanted to be the leader of a thoughtful, forward thinking community in which people of all races and beliefs were accepted. Between his own seductive charisma and a strong endorsement from the Science Fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein, he quickly developed a

solid following and established several popular meditation centers. At this time he was still drinking heavily and sleeping with students. He also developed an expensive cocaine habit, and took a hypnotic barbiturate called Seconal to soften the come-down.

In 1984, Gyalpo shocked his followers by declaring that the earthly location of Shambhala was Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. To most people living in San Francisco in the 1980s, the idea of moving to a small port city in Canada with a harsh climate (and that had yet to begin importing kiwis) would have been unappealing. And yet many Californians pulled up roots and swapped coasts and latitudes in the name of Shambhala.

Halifax had a mellowing effect on Gyalpo. He stopped using drugs. He reduced his alcohol consumption to two glasses of Brandy a night. He took a job at the University. He continued sleeping with students. The Shambhala community thrived, establishing schools, yoga studios, farmer's markets, recycling initiatives, and newspapers. Alternative bookstores and organic cafés sprung up everywhere. Emboldened entrepreneurs began importing kiwis, dragon fruit and mangosteens, much to the delight of the San Francisco ex-pats. By the early nineties, Halifax was home to a higher number of non-Asian Buddhists per capita than any other city in North America. Many happy years passed, the community grew and strengthened, and the slow modernization of Halifax caught up and was swept up with the Shambhala movement.

Two years ago, the unthinkable happened: Jamyang Gyalpo suddenly died, ostensibly of heart problems brought on from years of alcoholism. The funeral lasted several days, and his body resisted decomposition throughout. After the funeral, in keeping with his wishes, Gyalpo's followers laid his body in a boat full of lilacs and pushed him out to sea. It is said that a rainbow formed and eagles circled in the sky

as the tides carried him swiftly away.



Having pieced together the events described above, I grew uneasy. The uneasiness followed me back to Toronto after graduation, gnawing at me all summer. I was gripped by a conviction that the Lizard Man was not in fact dead. The bit about the rainbows and the eagles circling seemed somehow plausible, but there was something fishy about the lack of decomposition and the fact that his body was never laid properly to rest. I spoke to a couple of Shambhalists who confirmed that Gyalpo's body had been cold and pulseless when they sent him out to sea. I believed them, but I also felt that the rules of science that apply to man should be set aside in the case of a hundred year old lizard.

At the time of his death, Gyalpo named Dan Landry as his successor. Landry was a gentle, red-headed giant from Cape Breton who'd made a small fortune selling real estate to other Shambhalists. Although he seemed to possess the deep wisdom and calm one would seek in a spiritual leader, he was awful at public speaking and constantly fell victim to embarrassing stutters and gaffes. He was, in short, the opposite of the affable Lizard Man. Deeply aware of his own shortcomings, Landry journeyed to Tibet where, with the guidance and approval of several prominent monks, he reconciled secular Shambhala with formal Buddhism.

To some this seemed to legitimize the religion, connecting it to a spiritual center, but to others it was a betrayal: a corruption of the kingdom that Gyalpo had set out to establish. Everyone in the Shambhala community had felt vaguely uneasy about Landry before his trip to Tibet, and now he was championed by one half and loathed by the other. The turmoil amongst the Shambhalists at that time neatly mirrored my own inner conflict, which might explain

(at least in part) why I was so intent on tossing an incendiary bomb into the whole affair.



When I'm depressed, it's harder to fly. The summer after I graduated it felt like someone had turned gravity up to the maximum. I went to work for my dad's company doing data entry, a total mind killer. I fell in with some unsavoury characters and started drinking heavily, snorting cocaine, doing all sorts of drugs—sometimes putting shit up my nose without even asking what it was. I basically lost all sense of reality, which is why I broke up with my girlfriend Meghan, over the phone, like a dick, for no reason.

We'd been dating for almost a year and she'd decided to stay in Halifax for the summer, working at a hippie cafe/bookstore and picking up a couple of summer credits. We were on the phone one morning (I hadn't slept) and she mentioned she'd been hanging around with this guy I don't like—this bag-piping, Nietzsche-quoting son of a bitch. I went off on her. I said all kinds of terrible things. Once I finally got some sleep and came to my senses I called back to apologize, but she wouldn't accept; she said you can't take back the kind of shit I said. She was right.

So the night we split I went out to a bar and ran up an incredible tab. I was acting like an asshole, buying drinks for the whole place, snorting huge lines of whatever off the back of the toilet seat in the men's. Even though I was depressed this meniscus of synthetic joy built up inside my chest and filled my whole body. In this incredibly inebriated state I got the brilliant idea to fly to Halifax and the next thing you know I'm blasting off from the bar patio, leaving my fake friends stuck with this crazy tab.

I came down in Bar Harbour, on the coast of Maine; just shy of the water, and nearly killing myself. A

fisherman living out of a shack was up early in the morning to check his lobster traps and saw me land on the beach. I lay face down in the sand suffocating, barely breathing. He came over and dragged me inside the shack. I was unconscious for forty eight hours, so the flight took a lot out of me. When I woke up, the fisherman, Frank, boiled us up some lobsters. We drank bottles of Miller High Life out of an ice bucket and ate fresh clams. He was pretty amazed by what he'd seen: a man falling out of the sky. I told him the whole story and we had some laughs. Frank was happy to have the company. I think he was pretty lonely. His wife had left him a decade earlier and his son had shot himself dead upon returning from a tour of duty in Iraq. He had a daughter, a lab technician in Boston, but they weren't on speaking terms.

I spent a week by the water, regaining my strength, fishing in the morning, drinking and reading through a stack of old Life magazines in the afternoon. There was a phenomenon at dusk where the receding tide exposed a sand bar, a natural pathway from the mainland to Bar Island, a beautiful chunk of Maine richly forested with pine and birch trees. It became my evening ritual to stroll out along the sand bar, contemplating my recent near death experience. I assessed the circumstances that had led me here: the drugs, the breakup, flying under the influence. I turned my life over and over in my mind like a ball of dough. My fixation with death took on the qualities of a fetish and I realized that I needed to change my behaviour if I was to be worthy of this world. When you decide to make a change in your life it is quite inspiring and suddenly you become very hopeful. The real struggle to change is far more depressing, I later found out.

Nine days after I crash landed in Bar Harbour, I awoke as Frank rose to check his traps. We shook hands and said goodbye. I bent my knees and hurled myself into the

grapefruit sky. I left at the crack of dawn, and soon it was light out: a perfect, windless August morning. I flew east across the Bay of Fundy, found Nova Scotia and traced my way along the south shore. By noon I'd reached the forested area outside of Halifax, and I came down safely in the trees. I hitch hiked into the city, found a payphone and called my folks. They were furious. They'd called the police and everything—my mom thought I was fully dead. I told them to ship out my stuff: I had a relationship to fix and a lizard to catch.

After my unceremonious return to Halifax, I drafted an article for the college newspaper with the dramatic title *J'Accuse*, pretentiously borrowed from Emile Zola's 1898 polemic. It outlined the discord within the Shambhala community, painted Dan Landry as an impostor and claimed, most daringly, that the Lizard Man was alive and in hiding. While a lot of what I wrote was conjecture, I'd spoken to several disgruntled Shambhalists who were eager to share their discontent, which provided me with the details to give my piece the real feel and ruffle some feathers. My purpose was to smoke out the Lizard Man: make enough noise that he'd have to confront me.

At a glance, it was a foolish thing to do. For one thing, the article would make the school vulnerable to charges of libel; and secondly, it seemed unlikely that it would achieve its desired effect. Despite the flaws in my plan, I recruited my friend Abel Grand to help pull it off. It's not as though Abel was the chief editor or even anyone remotely important at the paper; he was just the nerd they got to do the layout.

The night before the paper went to press we slipped my story in at the back, after the gossip column. We sipped whiskey late into the night going over the copy and imagining what it would look like if a group of Buddhists took a liberal arts college to court.

HATE LETTERS FROM BUDDHISTS

The story went to print. Buried in the back of a school newspaper as it was, it surfaced on the internet and split the rift wide open, inciting one of the longest, angriest comment threads I've ever seen. The online format gave mild-mannered Shambhalists the chance to spit their venom from behind a computer screen, rather than in public where they feigned civility. I'd published the article under my own name because I wanted to make it easy for Gyalpo to find me, but this also made it easy for disgruntled Shambhalists to find me. Soon massive amounts of hate mail spilled over the brim of my mailbox and dominated my email account like a belligerent and invasive fauna.

A month passed and I never heard from the Lizard Man. Abel was fired from the paper. Civil war raged amongst the Shambhalists. I tried to become a better person and failed. Unfortunately, I was too late to save my relationship. Megan was already dating that bag-piping Nietzsche-quoting son of a bitch. Obviously.

I sent out a mass email to the client list of Free Your Mind (a lifestyle service for students I'd established during undergrad), announcing that I was open for business again. To fill up the rest of my free time I got a job as a teacher's assistant in a third year Holocaust Studies class and started sleeping with the students, mainly freaky cerebral Jewish girls. I was leading an exhausting double life on the surface with zero substance underneath. I was drinking heavily and smoking too much pot. I was not behaving in a way that screamed "worthy of this world."

On a crisp, golden day in late October, I reached for my bong at eleven in the morning. I'd been calmly working through a stack of first year philosophy papers without any resistance. Guava juice, Cheerios, Berlioz on the radio. Perfection. Then I ran smack into this third year Medieval Economics paper on fluctuations in the population of England following the Black Plague. Usually I don't touch

that stuff—it's way out of my comfort zone—but I'd been intrigued by the subject matter and figured I could use a challenge. Big mistake. This thing was a monster. I needed twelve secondary sources, an annotated bibliography; I had to analyze all these charts and graphs. It was just a nightmare.

I chopped up some pot on a Frank Zappa biography, loaded the bowl and fired it up. I blew a couple smoke rings, inhaled deeply and took a second to feel the smoke in my lungs. I let out a long, satisfying breath. Immediately I felt so much better. The room softened. Malthusian principles dissipated from my frontal lobes. I fixed myself another bowl of cheerios. If I'd known the challenges that lay in store that day I would not have taken that bong hit, I would not have muffled the brain's focus, I would not have taken twenty minutes to listen to a King Crimson song and perhaps would have navigated the day with more poise and less anxiety. The future is not ours to see. The future is this crazy thing. On the walk to Holocaust class I accidentally hopped up in the air and drifted for a moment, belched a cloud of smoke and floated back down laughing. I looked around, but no one had seen me.



Jolenta Zajac had a love of birds with broken wings and all things downtrodden. One of the foremost Holocaust scholars in North America, she was drawn to tragedy, despair and ultimately to the idea of redemption. I can only assume she'd hired me out of a fondness for racial minorities, as I could not possibly have been the most qualified applicant for the job. Jolenta could always tell when I was unhappy. She would gaze silently into my eyes and a frown would form, her eyes would darken. If I was in a good mood, her reading would elicit a smile, her eyes shining

brightly, but that was much rarer. We were going over the syllabus and discussing the assigned material, what to focus on in tutorial, etc. In the midst of a conversation about Chaim Rumkowski, self proclaimed King of the Lodz ghetto, I drifted off mid-sentence. She squinted worriedly into my eyes.

“Stanislav, is something troubling you today? You’re unfocused, you don’t look well. I worry about you sometimes,” she said, her words soft and even.

“Dr. Zajac, please, just call me Stan. Everyone else does.”

“It’s important to remember our cultural identities, where we come from. Stanislav is a beautiful name, it means you will attain fame and glory, so why on earth would you want to have such a plain name as Stan?”

“Jolenta, I’m like, third generation on that side. I totally appreciate my Ukrainian heritage, but it’s pretty far removed from my identity.”

“Stanislav, you didn’t answer my question: are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I had a big bowl of soup for lunch. It was really hot and I ate it too fast. People say not to eat too fast and to chew carefully, but you can’t chew soup.”

“Yes I suppose that’s true, you can’t chew soup,” Jolenta responded, looking even more concerned. “Are you sure nothing else is the matter?”

“Well, to be honest I’ve been a bit depressed lately. I was rereading Heidegger the other day and I came upon that question, ‘Why are there living beings instead of nothing at all?’ and it really got to me. He nailed it with that one question. I’ve been lying awake at night thinking about it: there might as well just be space dust and nothing where this planet is right? It wouldn’t change anything. Nobody would be upset because nobody would be. Save us all the hassle.”

“Stanislav, you know how I feel about Heidegger. The man had his head firmly planted up the black forest of his own asshole. But if you’d permit me, I’d like to address your existential crisis with the story of another philosopher.”

The story of Walter Benjamin’s final days, as told by Jolenta Zajac was a classic. I’d heard it twice the year before in two separate classes: the theory of the gift and postmodern strategies in feminist literature. I made no mention of this and listened attentively to the familiar tale.

“When the Wehrmacht marched on Paris in June 1940, they had orders to arrest Benjamin at his flat. But they did not find him there. He had fled to Lourdes. Benjamin’s friend and collaborator, Max Horkheimer had arranged a visa for him in the U.S. which he planned to reach by crossing Franco’s fascist Spain and sailing from Portugal. Benjamin crossed out of France and reached a town called Portbou, in Catalonia, but here he found that the borders had been closed. He was told that the Spanish police were deporting refugees back to Nazi occupied France. Not wanting to fall into the hands of the Gestapo, and refusing to be subjected to the systematic violence of the Nazis, Benjamin overdosed on morphine, killing himself. As it so happens, the following day the borders were inexplicably opened.”

Jolenta rolled her eyes up towards the ceiling, clasped her hands and took a deep breath, as if she was in direct contact with the deceased Jewish philosopher.

“An intellectual giant, smashed on the chopping block of history like so many of his peers. Do you know what else?” I asked what else. “Benjamin had a briefcase with him at the time containing an unfinished manuscript, perhaps his great masterpiece, perhaps containing within it the answers to the secrets of the universe. It disappeared mysteriously. We will never know what was in it.”

“But what does any of this have to do with Being;

with the cruel and random facts of existence?" I demanded, exasperated.

"Walter Benjamin died on September 26th, 1940," she said. "Before and after that day, it always and already would have passed as such. Whatever was in that briefcase may have been destroyed before anyone read it, but the fact that it was written, that it existed, is still meaningful. The universe will be a cold, dark, lifeless place one day, but we will always have already been here, to witness all this. That, Stanislav, is worth the hassle."

We sat in silence for a moment. She leaned forward suddenly, remembering something.

"You know Stanislav, when Professor Gyalpo was drunk at faculty parties, he used to insist that he was with Benjamin in his final days. He said he'd been in the region fighting on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. After the fascists prevailed, he stuck around facilitating escape routes for Jews, Romanis, or anyone the Nazis had their sights set on. He made the tantalizing claim that he'd inherited Benjamin's briefcase. He loved to tease us with this anecdote, but of course it's completely impossible. Then again it was always hard to tell with Jamyang." Jolenta blushed, evidently summoning an affectionate memory of *The Lizard Man*.

After our meeting Jolenta and I split off into separate classrooms for Friday tutorial, where the discussions were meant to be focussed and driven by the students. In practice, this never quite worked out because most of the students were either behind on their readings or skipped them altogether. The topic of discussion that day was everyday life in the concentration camps, as described by Primo Levi.

Chip, a tall, muscular, shaggy-haired kid who rode a long board to class (a poster boy for *Free Your Mind*) was wondering why the Jews didn't just band together and beat

down the Nazi guards. One look at his copy of *The Drowned And The Saved* told me that it hadn't even been opened.

"This isn't *The Great Escape*, with Steve McQueen on an awesome motorcycle, beating up Nazis," I tried to explain. "It's more like *Day of The Dead*. The way that the Nazis systematically broke their prisoners, physically and mentally, there was only a sliver of room for redemption. These people were starved, sleep deprived and humiliated. Mounting a successful escape would have been about as easy as slipping through the eye of a needle.

"Jews had to assimilate into the prison system if they wanted to survive. They had to work with their captors. The unit that ran the gas chambers, The Sonderkommandos, was comprised entirely of Jewish prisoners. In addition to managing the executions, they were in charge of salvaging valuables: gold teeth, hair, etc. And disposing of the dead. The first task assigned to each new Sonderkommando unit was to clean up the bodies of their predecessors. Like the Goblin King in *Magic Cards*. You see what I'm saying? No room for redemption."

"Whoa." Chip said, "Bummer." Half the class rolled their eyes.

"Yeah," I said. "Mondo bumper."

I spent the rest of class drawing idiotic parallels between Nazism and Wall Street, trying to explain why resistance from within the Nazi Party was so scarce. The problem with teaching the children of liberal yuppies is that their sense of social justice is so deeply ingrained. They think a whole nation of people sat passively by while Hitler and the SS exterminated millions of Jews. To them this is incomprehensible, but of course it's more complicated than that. If you're able to isolate that moment in history and the journey of the human psyche, you can sort of start to understand how it happened.

Everyone is so totally melted together in our cul-

ture that kids today can't fathom the vicious climate of tribal, racial and religious hatred that permeated Europe in the early twentieth century. Not that this explains away The Holocaust or anything, but there were a lot of moving pieces involved and I think a lot of the time kids who study too much philosophy fail to grasp important historical contexts. My personal belief is that most people can't even form their own convictions, so they go through life scared and malleable. Once in a while a figure comes along who knows how to manipulate that raw resource: the impressionable, oppressable masses. Those are the figures who shape history, for better or worse.



“You still getting hate letters from Buddhists, Burdock?” Veronika asked, out of breath and dripping with sweat. I nodded.

“That’s fucked up,” she said. “Aren’t you a little worried. Like, for your safety?”

“Not really. We’re not talking about Islamic militants here. It’s not like there’s a Fatwa on my head. Buddhists are gentle by nature, right?”

“Actually there’s a long history of violence perpetrated by Buddhists in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslim population. It’s fairly common knowledge.”

“Well whatever, Vee. We’re not in Myanmar, and I’m not a Rohing—whatever. The point is, my situation is different. Can we just play?”

Friday afternoon meant squash with Veronika Tierney at the Halplex Gymnasium. I’d met Veronika at The Submarine on Single Malt Monday the first week of September and we discovered a mutual passion for racquet sports. She’d played squash on her high school team and had a fierce competitive streak. I was consistently able to

best her, despite my lack of proper technique. Did I use my special abilities to win? Yes. Never underestimate the willpower of a man trying to impress a woman. That day I was up two games to one and we were in a dead heat to claim the fourth game. It was my serve and as I aced her, sending the ball in a high arc into the back corner, we resumed a debate that had been raging since that first, Scotch-fuelled night.

“Vee, I totally concede that twenty million is huge and respect to Stalin for putting up those numbers, but let’s be real: Russia is a deathtrap of a country, so a lot of those deaths were incidental. That’s a harsh climate, that Russian climate. Germany’s much more temperate, it’s harder to kill people in temperate climates.” Veronika was a history major with a special interest in Russia, and since I was a Holocaust man on the academic landscape, I felt it was my duty to stand up for Hitler as the more brutal of the two dictators.

“I don’t know why you bother arguing with me—you know I’m right. Hitler’s already the more popular villain, but you know the stats, so just admit flat out that Stalin was worse. It won’t change the public perception.” Veronika bunted a shot just above the tin, ending my streak.

“I understand that the raw numbers are in Stalin’s favour, but there’s more to take into account here. Stalin came to power through the party system; he was cunning but he played it by the book. But Hitler? With the Beer Hall Putsch? That was some cowboy shit. The man was a wild card, a garage band dictator. Stalin was like the U2 of dictators: he was huge but his methods were pretty formulaic. Also, Hitler was only in power for a few years; Stalin had twice as much time to terrorize Europe.”

“He was in power for longer because he was a better dictator. How many times do I have to say it? Hitler could’ve killed more people if he’d been smart about his campaigns but he made a bad gamble and it ruined his streak. Stalin killed six million Ukrainians before the war

even started, starving them to death during the grain shortage. It's popularly regarded, even by our own government, as a genocide. Those are your people, Stanislav—where's the hometown pride?"

"Hey, enough with the 'Stanislav,' let's keep this civil." I lobbed the ball off the wall, over our heads, against the back glass. Veronika made an incredible shot between her legs and finished the rally. I shot her a quizzical look.

"Have you been practicing in secret?" I asked. We were tied at nineteen. "I don't even understand why we have to argue about this," I continued. "I know these guys were adversaries, but they had a lot in common too, right? They basically ran a train on Poland, forming the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. That's a pretty serious bond. They both loved slave labour: Stalin had prisoners build that insane canal connecting the White Sea and the Baltic Sea, and Hitler used POWs to clear rubble and manufacture munitions, keeping the wartime economy running. In a different life, these men could've been pals."

"First of all, if you ever say 'run a train' in front of me again, I will remove your testicles. Secondly, it's funny you mention that, because I realized something else they have in common the other day," Veronika's serve scraped the wall just above the red line, putting me back on the offensive. "Hitler had a niece, a half niece, Geli Raubal, who lived with him and he was totally obsessed with her and very controlling. He snuffed out a couple of blossoming romances, always had people watching her. He was so overbearing that in 1931 she shot herself dead, with his pistol no less. He later said she was the only woman he ever loved. In 1932, after a public dispute, Stalin's second wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva, shot herself dead with a pistol as well. That same year Eva Braun shot herself but survived. She'd recently started spending time with Hitler. In 1945 Braun and Hitler married and swallowed cyanide caps as the Allies descended

on the Führerbunker in Berlin. All these women committed suicide. Can you imagine being the object of affection to a real life, megalomaniacal, mass murdering monster? I'd rather have a steak tied to my face with a wolf in the room."

"But come on, if you had to sleep with one of them, it'd be Stalin right? His moustache was so much more lush than the Führer's."

Veronika shook her head in disgust and sent a high shot towards the back right corner. I jumped a little higher than is natural and slammed the game winning shot off the wall over her head. She lurched into the air but it was out of her reach. She looked at me, disappointed but unsurprised.

"Every fucking time," she said, and whipped her racquet at the wall.

"Don't feel bad," I said, gulping down water. "It's fairly commonly knowledge that white girls can't jump."

Veronika had green eyes, pale skin and a healthy, athletic body. Her hair was dark near to the point of blackness and she wore bangs. When we first met I was still pining for Meghan, and she was going through a difficult breakup as well. That first night (Night of a Hundred Scotches) I tried to kiss, her but succeeded only in embarrassing myself and barfing into some carefully manicured shrubs. I awoke the next morning underneath some blankets on a couch where she'd placed me, having previously force-fed me two gallons of water. I'd foolishly tried to match her drink for drink the previous night not knowing that she was half Russian and half Irish, thus possessing the tolerance of her forebears. While I made an ass of myself, she maintained a relative composure. She never made reference to my awkward come on, but it stuck with me painfully as we built our friendship and I was reluctant to try anymore funny business.

After squash we grabbed some beers at the Submarine. The Sub was a dank bar in the basement of the student union building. The beer was cheap by any standard, and at

Friday happy hour it was especially so. Veronika bought a pint and for the meager sum of eight dollars I purchased myself a jug of amber ale.

“Seriously?” Veronika said. “What’s up with you?”

“What?” I replied. “Nothing. It’s the weekend, lighten up.”

Veronika handed me my own ass several times at the foosball table in revenge for my victory on the squash court. Eventually someone took my place and I drifted off, feeling detached, drinking from the spout of the pitcher. I settled into a seat at a corner table by myself, switched my mind off and concentrated on the beer. By the time Veronika came over to join me, I was working on a second pitcher.

“I read a great article today,” she said. “So the New Democrats are basically accusing the Conservatives of misappropriating taxpayers’ money.” I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair. She knew that Canadian politics were anathema to me.

“Not only are they saying that the Treasury Board is lapsing into a state of non-transparent accounting,” She continued. “They’re also questioning the government’s decision to purchase a set of ridiculously expensive stealth jet fighters that won’t be out of combat testing for six years. Harper’s under the gun, but mostly it’s the defense minister who’s taking the heat. The Liberal’s are calling for—”

“Please, stop!” I cried, making a cross with my arms.

She eyed her empty beer glass. “Why don’t you act like a gentleman and share your beer, Burdock? Maybe then we can change the subject.” I sighed and poured part of my pitcher into her glass.

“Probably don’t need all that anyway,” I muttered. It started to get dark outside, cool air drifted in the high windows from the misty quadrangle outside. The lights

dimmed and the music got louder. *Loaded* by the Velvet Underground. We shared paper marking horror stories and I told her about class that day, about my theory that the majority of humanity is lacking in conviction.

“I don’t disagree with you,” she said. “It’s just hard to admit that humans are so weak. I don’t mean the Nazis or the Jews specifically, just everyone. There’s no good guys or bad guys, just all these confused people whose circumstances dictate their behaviour, rather than an idea. We like to think there’s a noble motive behind our words and actions, but most people’s behaviour is purely self interested, even if they pretend otherwise. It’d be nice to find a purely good idea and give your life to it, don’t you think?”

“Jesus,” I said, “you sound like fucking Tolstoy.”

“And what’s wrong with Tolstoy? Tolstoy happens to be my favourite.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Tolstoy, except that he writes like if Dostoevsky was on vacation and only half trying.”

“Oh, whatever. Who do you read? Other than Dostoevsky? And depressing Jewish philosophers? Let me guess, Ayn Rand.”

I waved my hand in dismissal. “I don’t want to talk about writers,” I said. “I want to talk about my favourite artist.”

“And who might that be?” She asked

“Adolf Hitler.” Vee stared me deadpan in the face. “Seriously,” I said. “He does great landscapes.”

“You’re shitting me; Hitler is not your favourite artist,” she said, dismissively.

“All right, you’re right. But he’s not my least favourite, either. His art’s not that bad. Have you ever looked at his watercolours? They’re pretty good in a way: courtyards, farms, Viennese architecture. He had a very distinct style, there’s never any people in the pictures, for instance.”

“That’s because he wasn’t good enough to draw people.”

“Still, I think it gives the pictures a nice peaceful quality.”

“You’re being a bit cute, Burdock, what’s your clever point?”

“In 1908 Adolf Hitler was a sensitive young man with a modicum of talent whose sole ambition in life was to be a respected painter. The art school in Vienna rejected his application and he ended up pursuing a career in politics and we all know how that ended. I guess my clever point is that Hitler was as much a victim of circumstance as anyone else. He probably felt like a failure settling for a second-rate life and in that life he picked up this idea, this national socialism, and became a monster. Just think: if he’d done just a little better on his art school application, if those snooty art instructors had let him in—”

“And Stalin’s my favourite singer.” Veronika sipped her drink and leaned on her elbows.

“Come again?”

“Every Russian history student knows that Stalin had a beautiful singing voice, but if he’d gone into show biz and Hitler’d become the German Monet, well, what the fuck would you and I have left to argue about?”

I was watching her lips move as she said this and something strange happened: time suddenly slowed and twisted at a sharp angle. I felt like I was on LSD. I was hypnotized to the point of paralysis by the beauty of Vee’s face. A thaw spread through my body, awakening some hibernating piece of my soul. I felt my face flush hot and red. I realized I was very drunk from perspiring so much and replenishing that perspiration immediately with beer.

“Stan?” She said, looking concerned. “Are you okay? You look like you’re gonna puke.” Mercifully my phone buzzed on the table. It was Chip, in need of a bag of grass.

“Duty calls,” I said, recovering a bit and trying to sound suave.

“Hey you want to come over in a bit? I’m gonna make popcorn and watch Doctor Zhivago for the hundredth time.”

“Julie Christie is so fucking hot in that movie. I’ll be there for sure.”

“Oh, whatever. Omar Shareef is way out of her league. It’s like God concentrated all the sexiness of the Egyptian people into one man and hung the rest of the nation out to dry. Be a dear and grab a bottle of dry white on the way up. Over twelve dollars and make sure it’s chilled, okay Burdock?”



Chip’s place was a short walk from campus. The Halifax neighborhood that was referred to as the Student Ghetto was actually just a normal, nice neighbourhood mostly populated by middle class families. Unfortunately for these families, a large influx of rich, spoiled, party-crazy kids from Toronto had saturated the lease-able properties on their streets over the years, disturbing the peace with lewd public behaviour and overdriven subwoofers booming late into the nights. Chip and his roommates were prime specimens: I could hear the bass warbling and smell the pot smoke down the block as I approached his house.

As I walked through the wide open door into the hallway I was overcome by the familiar aroma of stale beer and red bull. I walked into his room and was accosted with another strong odour; the sickly sweet tang of men’s body spray. Chip was sitting in a large desk chair staring at a giant, high-resolution computer monitor where an epic battle between a powerful mage and a giant fire monster was raging. There was a tank by his window that housed a spiderball

cobra. His massive skateboard lay upside down on his bed. The bass coming out of his speakers was so loud he hadn't heard me come in. I watched in awe as his mage dodged massive blasts of lava, lobbing ice spells into the monster's mouth until it shrivelled up and turned to ash. Chip pumped his fist and spun his chair vigorously, noting my presence. He slowly came to rest and turned the music down a hair.

"Stu Burdock, the man with the grass. What's happening homie?"

"Hi Chip, I've got an eighth for you here. That's thirty bucks."

"C'mon Stu, sit down for a minute. Hang out with me." Chip gestured at a bouncy exercise ball.

"Listen, I've had a long day."

"All the more reason, homie!" Chip grabbed a bottle of good ninety proof bourbon from a row of expensive liquor bottles and poured us both a drink. "Take a load off dude, it's the freakin' weekend."

I sat. The ball was surprisingly comfortable.

"One drink," I said. "You've gotta put on mellower music though: this dubstep shit is killing me."

"Cool, cool. Check it out: I made this ambient electro mix when I was rollin' on Molly last weekend."

Chip dimmed the lights and changed the music. I'm pretty sure he had just added an electronic kick track to a Brian Eno record.

"Man that was such a rad tutorial today, Stu. All that shit you said about Occupy Wall Street? Totally insightful, man; really got me thinking, like a lot. Hey you wanna smoke a bowl?"

"I feel as though I'm being buttered up for something, Chip. Is there something specific that you want from me?"

"Oh shit! Haha, you totally caught me with my dick in the toaster."

“Come again?”

“It’s just a saying.”

“No it’s not.”

“Okay, well you’re the expert, Stu. But anyway, yeah, so you know how we have that mid-term paper coming up? ‘Representations of the Holocaust in Popular Narratives?’”

“Stop. Stop right there. No way. No fucking way. Chip I told you, I will write you a custom paper for any class but my own. I know I’m not the world’s greatest role model, but you’ve gotta draw a line somewhere and that’s where I draw mine.”

“Come on, Burdock, I hate this fucking class. It’s depressing to think about this Holocaust shit. Plus it’s retro night at the Halcyon Club on Sunday and I do not want to miss that. There’s no way Zajac’ll find out, I promise. You’re already an academic crime lord, plus you sell pot to your students. What’s the difference, man?”

“The difference is that I’m gonna end up marking a paper that I wrote myself and if I get to that moment in my life then I swear my head’s gonna fucking explode. Why’d you sign up for this class anyway if you hate the subject matter so much?”

“I heard Sarah Hawthorne talking about how she signed up for it, and that girl is so fine it’s crazy.” I took a deep breath, trying to be patient.

“Look, Chip, you seem like a nice guy. I want to help you out, but you have to work with me here. Pick a different class and I’ll write your midterm paper for it, and I’ll guarantee an A minus. For Zajac, you’ll write on Spiegelman’s *Maus*. It’s a comic book, you’ll love it.”

“What? There’s a Holocaust comic book? No way!” At that very moment, Chip was chopping up weed on an immaculate copy of *Maus, Volume 2: And Here My Troubles Began*. I didn’t bother pointing this out to him.

“How are you on Rousseau?” he asked. “I’ve got

a paper for Philosophy and the French Revolution. It's due next Wednesday."

"Why didn't you say so earlier! I'll murder that paper for you. Your guarantee just got raised to a straight-up A. Now, if memory serves me correctly, your account is past due: you still owe me for Thomas Hobbes and Albert Camus. We've gotta settle up before I start work on Jean-Jacques."

"Yeah, about that," Chip began. "My parents transfer money into my account at the beginning of every month and I'm already wiped out for the time being, so it's gonna be at least a week and a half—"

"You get a fucking allowance?" I said, incredulous. "And you still can't pay me for my excellent services? What the fuck, Chip?"

"Whoa, Stu, chill out, man. It's just a couple weeks. Here I can pay for the pot at least." He passed me thirty bucks. "Come on, man. I really need this paper."

"And I need to get paid. No money, no paper."

"What about Sanchez, my spiderball cobra? I'll give him to you with the tank and full heating set up and everything. That's worth a fortune."

"I don't want your spiderball cobra," I said. "Who the fuck am I gonna sell it to? Thing's liable to kill me."

"All right, all right," Chip scanned the room looking for valuables. "What about my land yacht. Take my board, it's gotta be worth at least two hundred dollars. It's almost brand new."

I sighed, "Chip, you love that board. And besides I'd be more likely to die on that thing than if you gave me Sanchez. I'll write the paper on credit, but this is the last time. From now on, you pay up front, understood?"

Chip nodded happily "Absolutely. Stu, you're the best, I don't know what I'd do without you."

I helped myself to another drink and Chip fired up

the bowl. I sat on the bouncy ball a little while longer and tried to convince Chip to forget about Sarah Hawthorpe.



I tried to get my head on straight on the long walk to Vee's place, up in the North End. The fact that I was wasted didn't help. I was in trouble because I knew I was in love with her, but I felt like an unworthy fuck up.

I don't know if you've picked up on this, but I'm a pretty amoral guy. I don't feel like I've got a lot to hold on to in this world. Growing up, almost all the kids at school were white and I felt like something of an outsider. Once I figured out I could fly, that feeling was cemented. I thought that the Lizard Man could help me shake the feeling that I was alone in this world. But maybe the real key to my happiness lay in the arms of a hard-drinking Russian history expert. But did I deserve her?

I took the mood lighting as a good sign as I climbed into Veronika's second story apartment, clutching a frosty bottle of pinot grigio. She wore high-waisted jeans and a low-cut black shirt with a flannel over top. She gave me this weird smile as we sat down on the couch and I wondered if I'd ever seen her smile before. For the first hour of the movie we sipped the cold wine and ate popcorn, slowly nudging closer to each other. It was during the scene where Julie Christie shoots Komarovsky and Tom Courtenay realizes his fiancé's honour has been besmirched, that we started making out, rubbing our buttery hands on each other and dry humping. Not long into the make-out session I realized I had to pee quite badly, as Vee's pelvis was thrusting into my overfilled bladder. I'd been standing in her bathroom for a minute, waiting for my erection to subside, when my phone went off. The call display read Prof Paisley, which was super weird, so I picked up right away.

“Well it’s a damned awkward spot you’ve put me in, Burdock, and I don’t mind saying I’m more than a little annoyed with you. But it looks like you’re going to get your way: the Lizard Man wants to meet you.”

A wave of excitement swept over me. “Where? When? What? He alive?”

“You always were tremendously articulate, Burdock. Yes, he alive. He wants you to meet him—and these are his exact words mind you—in the airspace above the commons. Does that make sense to you?”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the lingo. When’s he want to meet?”

“Immediately. This is your one chance, understand? You need to drop whatever you’re doing and go right away—dammit Burdock, are you peeing? That is poor form, man.” Embarrassingly enough, I was indeed relieving myself.

“Paisley I’m so sorry, I didn’t think you’d be able to hear that. Shit, this is so fucking weird. What are you to Gyalpo? How come he trusts you, I mean?”

“I’m writing his biography. You don’t think a man like that goes to the grave without having someone document his life, do you? You’re lucky you get to meet him, especially at this late stage. A word of advice, Burdock: tread lightly. He prizes his privacy above all else, so a wrong step could be fatal. I get the feeling you might be a little out of your depths on this one.”

At that Paisley hung up. I washed my hands and stepped back into Vee’s living room. I told her there was an emergency, that Chip had electrocuted himself with a toaster and called me from the hospital. I said I’d be back as soon as I knew he was okay.

“Maybe you shouldn’t come back,” Vee said. “Maybe this wasn’t such a hot idea.”

“Are you fucking with me? This is a great idea, we

should have hooked up ages ago. Anyway, I have to come back, I forget how this movie ends.”

“It’s Russian, idiot, it ends in tragedy. And for the record, I would’ve jumped you the first night we met but you were too busy regurgitating a healthy serving of chow mein all over the quad. Then you got all sensitive and self-conscious and it took you until tonight—that’s right, I saw the way you looked at me in the bar—to get over it and come to terms with the fact that you adore me.”

“Damn, Vee, you’ve got a real knack for plot summary,” I said, pulling her towards me. As I charged down the stairs the sensation of her mouth lingered pleasantly on mine.

I hit the street and waited for a group of drunk students to pass and then lifted off into the air, heading for the commons. The commons is a large, flat, treeless park that divides the safe south end of Halifax from the freshly gentrified north end with its cheaper rent and higher crime rate—a sort of urban no man’s land. In the distance flew a crimson figure. It grew closer quickly. Oh fuck. I froze, free floating, and then: a foot, planted squarely in my chest, sending me spiralling out of control towards the grass below. So much for my Spidey Sense. Fortunately I was able to untangle myself and recover. As I flew back up I realized I’d come terrifyingly close to hitting the ground. In retaliation I gathered all the speed I could and barreled into my assailant. I was flying so fast all I could make out was his bright carrot top: it was Dan Landry, pretender to the throne of Shambhala. I hadn’t been in a fight since grade school, but in that moment, as I tackled a man twice my size and bulldozed him across the sky, I understood that there was an element of strength that went part and parcel with the flying thing.

We soared through the air, pummeling each other. We moved south over the roofs of Dalhousie campus, then Saint Mary’s. We battled over the shipping yard, the

colourful crates below resembling bricks of lego. I faked with my left and then cracked Landry in the jaw with my right. The punch sent him flying a hundred yards over Point Pleasant Park. My fist smarted like hell from his goddamn oversized gorilla skull. He nearly crashed through the trees, but recovered himself. I imitated his earlier move, came at him with a flying kick, but this was a mistake; he caught my foot, flipped me towards him, grabbed me by my shirt and popped me in the face with the butt of his head. I lost consciousness for a second. Landry put me in a full nelson and carried me out over the ocean. I figured that was it for me, I'd given it my best shot and I was proud of myself for putting up a good fight, but now I was going to die. He took me out pretty far and dropped me. I tried to fly but there was nothing doing—some invisible force was blocking my power. As I approached the water I could see a shadow the size of a house beneath me. It shimmered and shifted and then opened up like a gigantic mouth. Inside that mouth I saw emaciated figures crying out and dying; I was falling towards a gas chamber. I screamed but there was no sound. As I passed into the ocean's angry maw, everything went dark.



When I awoke I was not dead. I knew that I was not dead because I was in a great deal of pain. *Bolero* was playing, by Ravel. I was on a couch in a large, dimly lit room. I sat up despite the pain. There was a television in the corner playing a tennis match. The names on the screen read Borg and McEnroe; either this was a repeat, or I'd travelled back in time. Then I saw the tail. There was a man, sitting in a chair with his back to me, watching the match. I could not see him, but the chair had a hole cut out the back to accommodate his tail, which swung lazily on the wooden

floor. "Hello," I tried to say, but it came out as a rasp and I coughed violently. The Lizard Man rose slowly. I tried to stand but a series of pains shot through my ribcage. The ground beneath me felt as though it were rocking. I fell back onto the comfortable couch.

"Please, don't get up," said The Lizard Man. "You've suffered some grave injuries. I didn't mean for Daniel to hurt you quite so badly. Looks like you put up a good fight, though. Congratulations on your youthful vigour." He paused the tennis match. "Wimbledon, 1980. Borg and McEnroe, fire and ice: a classic rivalry. Please, let me get you a drink." The Lizard Man fetched two snifters and decanted an amber liquid into them. He handed one to me, swirled his glass and took a slow sip. He sat down in an armchair across from me, his tail popped up behind him and then settled on the floor. I looked around and realized all the chairs had tail holes. There were even holes through the couch. The Lizard wore a tailored grey tweed suit with a white cotton oxford and tan leather brogues. His body resembled that of a human but his movements were elegant and surreal. He had the face of a chameleon and yet the force of its expression eclipsed anything I'd ever seen in a human. He was glorious. I noticed a ragged briefcase sitting on the floor next to him. I managed to sit up and have a sip of brandy. Again I got the sensation that the room was moving.

"We're not on land, are we?" I said.

"No, we're out to sea, my friend. I'll never set foot on land again, unfortunately. Welcome to my cabin of solitude."

"You're telling me that we're floating in the Atlantic right now?"

"That's correct. Daniel dropped you directly over my house, which floats on top of the water. I softened your descent and carried you inside." I looked at him incredu-

lously. He tapped the side of his head. “You must understand at this point that there’s more to this world than meets the eye. That’s what this is about, no? Your quest to track down the improbable element? You’re trying to understand yourself, to connect with something. Well I’m pleased to inform you that a degenerate boy that can fly is by no means the most impressive article in the land of the metaphysically strange. I snatched you out of the sky and tossed you on the couch with my mind as I enjoyed a tennis match, for instance.”

I was overcome with a thousand questions. “How come you faked your death? Why are you living like this? And why did you wait so long to reach out to me? It’s been a month since I published the article.”

The Lizard Man sighed. “I knew I’d have to answer a lot of questions if you came here. I probably should’ve let you drown. Paisley liked that idea, but Landry wanted you alive: he’d like an official retraction. That’s the deal I’m willing to strike, by the way. I’ll answer your questions, but you need to take back what you said. You’ve made a great many people very angry and you’re getting what you want now, you selfish prat, but you’ve got to fix what you did, understood?”

“Prof Paisley wanted to drown me?”

“Yes, Logan said that you were a thoroughly useless young man and that your thesis was obtuse. He was morally comfortable with the idea of killing you. Is that seriously the kind of question you’re going to ask me? I’m quite keen to get back to the tennis, you know.”

“All right, all right, I’ll publish a retraction, I’ll take it all back. I never meant to fuck with the Buddhists. I just wanted to meet you.” The Lizard man replenished our brandies and took a deep breath. It was “Freddy Freeloader” by Miles Davis on the stereo now.

“By the time I washed up in San Francisco in the

70's, I was a hundred years old. My life force was waning from years of hard living but I was still spiritually virile. It was at that point that I started to feel the call of this region. Something in my animal DNA informed me that this was the only climate in which I would survive, as if Nova Scotia were the peaks of Switzerland or the waters of Vichy. Every day I grew weaker. It was as though a pillar was stuck through my heart. I would get flashes, visions of the ocean and citadel hill. At first the visions confused me but slowly I deduced that this place, this land where I would find redemption, was Halifax. A quick survey of the local culture depressed me. Halifax in the eighties was a spiritual vacuum populated by drunken sailors and dead-eyed Catholics. I figured if I couldn't stay at the party, I'd bring the party with me. I executed an elaborate scheme: I created Shambhala Buddhism, recruited hundreds of followers and claimed that Halifax was our promised land. Dishonest? Yes. Selfish? Indubitably. But, it was a lot of fun. My freak family and I moved to Halifax, the community flourished, my health improved, I got a job at the University. Well, you know all this anyway I'm sure."

"But then what happened? What made you decide to fake your own death?"

"The first ten years were likely the best of my entire life. But I grew restless. The restlessness turned to misery. That's been the story of my life: ten years here, ten years there and then, zoop, the old exit Anglais, the Irish goodbye. Straight out the back door with no explanation. This time, though, I was glued to the spot. My fragile constitution could not abide another move. My followers had grown into middle aged yuppies, obsessed with the gender dynamics of their children, their cars and their vacations. These matters held no interest for me. The world began to narrow. North America is too safe, especially Canada. Everyone's pre-occupied with health, money, the minutiae of political

correctness. None of these things are bad, but they're boring to me, mere afterthoughts.

"As the intellectual and spiritual world around me seemed to shrink, so too did my health. I would stroll through Point Pleasant park and gaze at this exact spot on the ocean. I could feel it's power, drawing me towards it, tugging at the pillar in my heart. We're on a Nexus, you see, a portal through which the unseen energy that give us our special powers flows. You can feel it, yes? Healing your injuries.

"Once I'd located the Nexus I enlisted Dan Landry to assist me. Landry may be lumbering and inarticulate, but he was an incredibly loyal and ambitious student. He was strong, spiritually and physically. Also, I needed a flyer, so he was the perfect candidate. In return he wanted to be named as my successor. Damned if he hasn't made a mess of things, but I can say confidently that his intentions are pure. I designed the house and gave him the specific coordinates, I drafted a will that included that hippy viking nonsense about being sent out to sea in boat of lilacs. I feigned ill, and then I feigned death. Chameleons are ectotherms you see, and my particular animal nature allows me to lower the temperature of my body and slow my heart rate to the a point where it is undetectable. It all went quite smoothly. This was not the first time I'd faked my own death. I had a good sleep, drifting in and out of consciousness, listening to old friends soliloquize my accomplishments. And then finally the excitement of drifting through the waves towards this this peaceful place, never to be heard from again. Happily ever after. Until you, Burdock."

I didn't recognize the composition that was playing now so I asked. It was Jean Sibelius' *Symphony No. 2*. It had started as a whisper, but slowly it grew more and more intense. I finished my second brandy and was finally able to stand again. The Lizard was right: my pain seemed to be

subsiding rapidly. The walls were sparse but there was a captivating portrait of The Lizard Man that looked as though it had been painted by Modigliani. A few yards over there was a circular piece of gold surrounded by golden shards, forming the image of a sun. I felt elated, came up off the ground a little.

“Let me give you a little free advice,” the Lizard Man said, looking up at me. “Don’t get stuck hanging around feeling sorry for yourself. You’ve been given a great gift. Explore it, explore the world. Figure out what you believe in and fight for it. One look at you and I can tell you’ve been living in the land of the setting sun. You’re anxious, neurotic, worried over meaningless problems. In Shambhala we speak of the philosophy of The Great Eastern Sun,” he said, gesturing towards the sun that hung on the wall. “This means appreciating the small things in life, letting go of your fears. That is what I preached, but I was never fully able to fully practice it. I was always stuck in between the setting sun and the great eastern, in some melancholic dusk land. Throughout my life I was hit again and again by the desire to abandon my situation and seek something better. Often I would end up engaging in self destructive behaviour. I repeated this process continuously, never finding true happiness. At times I’ve acted as a humanitarian. I’ve been an activist, fought in wars, aided refugees. I even spent some time as a masked vigilante in Cleveland. And yet, by my latest calculation I’ve still done more harm than good. I consider myself a failure. Now at least I can rest in comfort. Remember this, young man: your world is a tiny island, and the planet is a universe of infinite possibilities. Find a way to escape the land of the setting sun, or you’ll never find what you’re looking for.”

I managed to drift back down to the floor. “Come,” said the the Lizard Man. “It’s almost time for you to go.” He picked up the briefcase, walked slowly to the front door

of his house and pulled it open. A blast of ocean air and the sound of waves filled the room. I followed him onto his front porch. The house seemed to float freely, although nothing tumbled about inside. I wondered what it would be like if there was a storm. It seemed as though Landry had attached a heavy anchor to a large raft, which in turn supported the house. I could make out the skyline of Halifax and the flame from the refinery in Dartmouth, off in the distance.

“Seems to me we’re on a major shipping route,” I said, recalling the site of tankers on the horizon from the equivalent distance on land. “How is it that a boat hasn’t smashed your house to bits? How, for that matter, has no one seen this place?”

The Lizard Man smiled a wry smile. “Camouflage is a strong suit in my lineage,” he said. “I’ve chameleonized this place rather efficiently. The house is invisible to a passing glance, but The Nexus also gives off an aura of deterrence. Navigators instinctually know to avoid it. If one stares directly at this spot for more than a second or two they are treated to a terrifying hallucination of their own conjuring. It is a most harmonious arrangement.”

I recalled the horrible vision I’d had on the way down, it all made sense now.

“There’s one last thing,” said the Lizard Man gravely. “I must admit, I had an ulterior motive in bringing you here tonight.” He nodded at the briefcase.

“So it’s true? You’ve had Benjamin’s lost manuscript all these years?”

He held up his one free hand and gave me an exquisitely pained look. “I’d rather not go into the details. The matter of the briefcase, well, it falls into the category of more harm than good. Let’s just say I didn’t acquire all of my powers by natural means, and I could not have lived this long on a strong constitution alone. At the time of Ben-

jamin's death I struck something of a Faustian bargain. It was a dark moment, but the past is the past. When the case is open, my life will be extinguished. I'm nearly ready for death and I'm not so selfish that I'd let an article of such great value languish in obscurity. This isn't something I feel I can trust Landry or Paisley with. In this circumstance your lack of ambition is an asset to me, Burdock. In other words, I believe that you won't try and manipulate this situation into your own petty personal gain."

"You want me to kill you?" I asked in amazement.

"I don't want you to kill me, Burdock, I want you to help me die. It's a subtle distinction but I think you can wrap your head around it. You'll give me the month to finish up with Paisley and then I want you to open the case. Take it to Professor Zajac. She'll know what to do with it." He pressed the briefcase into my arms.

I was stunned, but managed to get the words out. "All right. One month. You got it."

"This is the last you'll see of me, I hope this was worth something to you." The Lizard said, suddenly looking drained and impatient. "Remember to print a retraction or Landry will likely kill you. Fly this briefcase straight home without stopping and keep it somewhere safe. A basement would be ideal so long as it's dry. Avoid carrying it in flat open spaces at all costs. Now, If you don't mind, there's a rather juicy tiebreaker I'd like to get back to—McEnroe looks as though his head's about to explode." The Lizard turned brusquely, headed back inside and shut the door. I heard the lock click. Conversation over.

It was late and it was cold outside, I pulled my sleeves over my hands, hugging the briefcase and flew through the cloudless night like a human missile. As Point Pleasant appeared beneath me, a bright blue splotch caught my eye just beneath the surface of the shallow water. A red flag went off somewhere in my brain. Good ol' Spi-

dey Sense. I decided to investigate, circled back, landed and scrambled down the rocky bank. As I grew closer I saw that it was a body floating in the water. I waded in and hauled it onto land. It was Abel Grand, wearing shorts and one of those goofy sweat-wicking running shirts. His body was limp and lifeless. I performed some version of CPR that I half remembered from childhood swimming lessons, but it was no good. He wouldn't breathe. I summoned all my strength and carried him into the air, juggling him awkwardly with the briefcase. I flew fast over the trees, across the residential South End neighbourhoods and came down hard at the emergency entrance of Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the destination I'd given Vee when I lied hours ago. I hit the ground running, nearly fell over. Several people who had been mulling around stopped and stared, a paramedic dropped his cup of coffee.

“Don't just stand there, asshole—help me!”

They loaded Abel onto a gurney and rolled him inside. One of the nurses gave me a blanket and sat me in a room nearby. I must have looked pitiful, all beat up and shivering like a leaf. I was a mess on the inside as well. I convinced myself that if Abel was dead it was all my fault: I'd started this whole thing, this wild lizard chase, and gotten him mixed up in it. Now he was probably going to die. But what the hell was he doing in the park anyway at this hour? How had he ended up in the drink like that? It was strangely typical of him. Abel was a lovable fuck up that never really had any luck. What few friends he had were extremely protective of him. Maybe it was because he was so little, so vulnerable to the world around him that seemed to overwhelm and disappoint at every opportunity.

Eventually a doctor came in and told me that Abel was alive and breathing. I burst into tears, sobbing violently. Once I calmed down, the doctor assured me that my unaccountably quick delivery of the patient to the hospital had

been instrumental in saving his life. Abel was going to be fine, though he was in no condition to go anywhere. He pointed out that I seemed to have sustained some injuries and asked if I wanted him to take a look. I told him it was cool; said I had to get going. He started saying something about filling out paperwork but I just took off through the sliding doors and kept on walking.

I know I shouldn't have just left him there but I was aching to get back to Vee. It'd been such a fucked up night, all I wanted was to crawl into bed with her. I walked sluggishly across the empty commons back towards her place, still carrying the briefcase, feeling drained. I'd spent every ounce of excess energy and my feet felt heavy. I was cradling this warm feeling inside me, though. I'd never used my powers for anything useful before and that night. I saved somebody's life. I still wasn't sure if it was my fault that Abel had been in danger in the first place, but the fact that I'd intervened felt profound. Maybe this was the moment of change I'd been pursuing, the dawn of The Great Eastern Sun. I couldn't wait to see Vee, to hold her and kiss her and tell her everything.

As I neared the center of the commons, something caught my eye. At first I thought it was an optical illusion, but as I grew closer it took on clarity: a small white spherical object floating five and a half feet off the ground. It was somebody's skull. Soon I was face to face with it, running my hand underneath, expecting wires, wands, rabbits and hats. Considering the way the night was going I should have known it was just good old-fashioned black magic. The skull suddenly dropped to the ground, rolling onto its right cheek bone. I leaned down and carefully scooped it up. I turned it over in my hands, studying it. I'm no expert in human skulls, so I don't know what I was looking for. A chill ran slowly up my spine from the base to the brain. When I looked up I was surrounded by several figures whose features I couldn't

make out. Their outlines were blurred and vague, as if they were creatures made up of the fabric of the night. They descended upon me and I was thrown to the ground. I tried to fly up but the tank was empty. I held the briefcase tight, but they wrestled it from me. I remembered the Lizard's words: avoid flat open spaces. Idiot. One of the creatures popped open the case. A bright, searing light shot out and flooded through me, unbearably and ecstatically. Across the water I felt the Lizard Man slip cozily into death as if it were a hot, freshly drawn bath.

A flurry of fists and feet pounded down on me. The pain was intense. I tried to remember the end of Doctor Zhivago to distract myself but nothing came to mind. All I could remember was the part where Omar Sharif and Julie Christie are living in an incredible winter palace in the countryside where everything is magical and idyllic and Zhivago writes all these beautiful poems for his daughter. But, of course, nothing could be that perfect forever. Vee's words ran through my mind over and over: "It's Russian, idiot: it ends in tragedy." The punches and kicks came hard and fast. I fought for breath as the figures vanished one by one, leaving not a trace. And then there was nothing.

A LIZARD IN LOVE

From Professor Logan Paisley's first and only interview with Jamyang Gyalpo ("The Lizard Man"), in preparation for a biography that was never completed:

I was born on the on the Isla Grande of Tierra Del Fuego some time in the mid 1870's. My mother was a giant chameleon, and my father was a nomadic Selk'nam hunter named Kamshoat.

One day my father was hunting in the forest. My mother was hidden in a tree, but Kamshoat's eyesight was excellent and he spotted the outline of her body. She turned orange to match the autumn leaves. He climbed towards her but she climbed higher still. It was a very tall tree. Eventually they reached the top and met face to face: her camouflage vanished. As they stared into each other's eyes, my father decided to tackle my mother in the romantic tradition of the Selk'nam peoples. For the record, it was not customary for the Selk'nam peoples to engage in sexual deviance of

that nature, but some wicked chemistry was at work that fateful day.

The odd couple tumbled the length of the tree, crashing through branches and thrashing each other until suddenly they were making love violently. Thus, in a perverted act of bestiality that defied nature, I was conceived.

Kamshoat returned to the campsite empty handed, but with a grin on his face.



While my birth seems to have defied the laws of science, I've done some research and discovered two things: First of all, my mother's species of chameleon must have been extremely rare and reclusive, for there is no record of such creatures. Secondly, although most chameleons reproduce in the oviparous fashion - laying eggs, that is - some are ovoviviparous, which entails a five to seven month gestation period; the latter is slightly closer to mammalian birth. Therefore, as is my understanding, five to seven months after the aforementioned encounter, I sprung forth from the membrane of a healthy yolk sac.

The human half of my genetics precluded me from hunting as a baby. Most chameleons would have been left to die, but my mother, perhaps capable of compassion and almost certainly baffled by the fact that her pregnancy had yielded a single deformed looking monkey rather than thirty healthy lizards, took measures to save my life. One day, as Kamshoat set off on a hunt, he found me wrapped in moss at the edge of the forest.

When I think about it now, I realize that his initial instinct must have been to throw me off a cliff, but his curiosity got the best of him and he took me into his home to raise me amongst his other children. As Kamshoat was a widower, this decision was made unilaterally and without

objection.

The year of my Hain, or ceremony of manhood, a whale washed up on shore near camp. It was the sign of a very good year. I was called into the hut of darkness to wrestle with demons. In reality the demons were nude tribesmen covered in body paint, and wearing large cone-shaped head pieces. These wrestling matches took place over many months and culminated with a test of strength against my own father. Kamshoat almost had me pinned at one point, but I knocked his feet out from under him with my tail and held him on the ground. I beat my chest in victory and danced wildly. It was a very proud moment. I returned to the hut of darkness and was told of Kénos, creator of the sun and the moon, of Temáukel who kept order in the world and of /xon/ who controlled the weather. Afterwards, my father sat me down by the fire and told me the story of my birth, and of my mother; the only woman he'd ever truly loved. He was still naked but he'd removed his hammerhead helmet. His body paint was running from the sweat. To recall this image, even now, fills me with emotion. It was the only time I ever saw the old man cry.

It was not long before this that the first settlers began showing up on the island. At first, it was just a few sheep ranchers, but more and more seemed to arrive every day. Our tribe had no concept of property and we hunted the sheep, for their meat was far more delicious than the local guanacos. The Europeans took great offence to this and paid bounty hunters to kill Selk'nams. Often the bounty hunters would simply cut off an ear as proof of a kill and soon several members of my tribe were going about earless and humiliated.

In 1883 a sheep farmer discovered gold on our island, which gave way to a massive influx of prospectors. Spaniards, Chileans, Argentinians and Dalmations descended upon our home, infected with the greed of the new

world. Evidently they were infected with something else as well because amongst all the violence and culture shock the people of my tribe became very ill. Somehow I was immune and I alone was spared. By the end of the gold rush, though, I'd buried everyone I'd ever known.

For a time I lived a painful, lonely life. I was a talented fisherman and a strong swimmer. I dove for clams and speared seals for survival. In the winter I made due as a sheep bandit. But eventually I grew very lonely. One day a group of Italians showed up at my hut. They were at once disturbed and thrilled by my appearance. Despite the language barrier they were able to communicate that they wanted to help me. I was already afflicted by the restlessness that would plague me for the rest of my life (although at this time I had no name for it) and so I went with them, despite the risk.

The Italians were Salesian missionaries that had recently been allowed to set up shop on the nearby Dawson Island as part of a concession from the Chilean government. Although there were Selk'nams from other tribes at Dawson Island, I was not sociable with them. The Italians began teaching me their customs and I was a quick learner. Because of my unique appearance I received special treatment. Soon enough I was wearing European clothes and even speaking a little Italian. I could recite the Our Father, the Hail Mary and even explain the Holy Trinity. The head priest at the mission was so shocked and impressed that he sent me off to Rome to be presented to King Umberto. He said I was a miracle. And with that, I was off to the new world.

For many weeks I rode upon choppy waves in a merchant vessel. I was extremely agile and the sailors encouraged me to climb the masts and unfurl the sails on occasion, though the captain would beat them for their laziness if he saw. We stopped at dozens of ports up along South and Central America. The climate grew warm, I tasted cof-

fee, plantains and seasoned beef for the first time in my life. I was even given a bit of rum one night which inspired me to scramble up the main mast and sing Argentinian folk songs to the moon.

We were within a day or two of our destination when a violent storm destroyed the ship. I'd seen land on the horizon earlier in the day and though the shoreline had receded I had a pretty good idea of which direction to swim in. I'd had a lot of practice holding my breath underwater from hunting sea creatures and it seemed that my lung capacity was superior to that of ordinary humans, otherwise I surely would have died. I dove beneath the waves and left the Italians to their fate. After a couple hours of what felt like torture my arms and legs gave out, I was exhausted. I floated on my back for a moment and then allowed myself to sink with great relief into the sea.



When I awoke I was not dead. I knew that I was not dead because I was in a great deal of pain. The most incredible creature I had ever seen was standing over me. She resembled a woman but she gave off an aura as if she were a being from another world. The delicate pinkish hue of her garments, the pearls and jewels she wore, the golden glow of her carefully styled hair culminated in what I can only describe as insectile beauty. This ethereal woman leaned down and gathered me from where I lay panting on the sand and carried me into her mansion. It was in this manner that I was adopted by a prominent member of the French Aristocracy.

Eugénie Geneviève Chateaubriand was a Vicomtesse by birth, but by the time I washed up on her beach she had silently renounced her title in favour of personal freedom and egalitarian ideals. She'd defied her parents as

a youth and eloped with Anatole Demidov, the Russian tycoon. After a nasty break with him she became the lover of Amadeo I, the Gentleman King of Spain, followed quickly thereafter by Karageorgevic, pretender to the Serbian throne. She got out of Belgrade shortly before things went south and settled briefly into a happy marriage in Paris with a more low profile suitor: the composer George Bizet. During their marriage Bizet wrote *Carmen* which would go on to become perhaps the most famous opera of all time. In its initial run, however, it flopped and Bizet died prematurely of a heart attack thinking himself a failure. Ten years later, when the opera became a smash hit, Bizet's widow received a hefty endowment. Between the money from *Carmen* and from selling off the extravagant gifts of her former suitors (including a luxurious cottage in Majorca), Eugénie was able to afford a good sized house in Monaco, the paradisiacal tax haven and playground to the rich.

Bizet and Eugénie had had a son who'd died very young and despite my late age (I must have been about fifteen when she found me), she set about raising me with the passion of an unfulfilled mother. I had my own bedroom, a vast wardrobe custom tailored for my unique physiology. I had a valet, and a tutor. I learned history and philosophy, fencing and other sports; how to eat properly, to debate, to dance. I was given Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert to read so that I might gain an understanding of French society. I passed innumerable afternoons devouring novels on the beach. In the evenings, gay parties of men and women resembling penguins, walruses, doves and peacocks in their elegant outfits appeared two by two for extravagant dinner parties. I was privy to the most distinguished opinions of the day, expressed in the wittiest manners, and I quickly developed a sharp tongue myself. I became a mascot to the smart crew of liberal-minded elites that surrounded Eugénie; they adored me. I was very fortunate that the Vicomtesse was so

forward thinking: not only did she accept my appearance, she was rather proud of it. She loved to show me off to her guests, as if I were a symbol of modernity, of her scorn for the royalists, the Catholics, the closed minded.

I'm aware that you're well-versed in the details of French history, professor, but allow me to provide some context for the next act, if only to refresh my own fading memory. At the time there was a cultural battle brewing in France between progressive republicans (Eugénie's clique) and the religious old guard (the enemy). During the French Revolution of the previous century, an anti-clerical zeal had gripped the nation. In September, 1791, a hundred and fifty Carmelite priests were executed in Paris followed by hundreds more who were sentenced in kangaroo court. Thousands of clergy were sent off to New Guinea on "floating bastilles" to perish. In the west of France, where most families were extremely devout, the persecution of Catholics by drowning and torture resulted in the death of roughly a third of the entire population. It is often referred to as a genocide. The century that followed was extremely unkind to French Catholics and public sentiment had slowly reversed and gained momentum in their favour as a result.

If the century following the Revolution was cruel to French Catholics, it was prosperous in equal measures to French Jews, starting with the words "Liberté, Fraternité, Egalité." In this new France, restrictions that had previously burdened Jewish families were lifted and many of them thrived in trade and industry, occupying prominent spaces in society. This network of families came to be seen by many as a Jewish syndicate, looking out for each other's interest and trampling the common Frenchman in turn—so went the popular opinion. A perceived trifecta emerged comprised of Atheists, Protestants and Jews under the banner of the covert Freemason society. Freemasons were widely accused of being immoral and unpatriotic, and sympathetic

to the British Empire.

In 1879, the Prime Minister Jules Ferry banned the clergy from teaching in schools and dissolved hundreds of unauthorized religious orders. There was a great exodus from all points of the nation. France, a country that had been deeply Catholic since its inception, was being de-Catholicized; unrest was building. A decade later the construction of the Panama Canal became the subject of a massive scandal involving hundreds of dead workers, bribes, misappropriated funds and finally the loss of over a billion francs owed to the project's many investors. At the head of this atrocious ponzi scheme was Baron Jacques de Reinach, one of the wealthiest Jews in Paris, a prolific host of lavish parties, a seducer of women, and now, scapegoat to the Catholic right. When the scandal broke, Reinach committed suicide, not realizing that he was but a footnote, a precursor to one of the greatest scapegoats in all of human history: the hapless Alfred Dreyfus.

Dreyfus came from a Jewish family in the borderlands of Alsace who'd made a fortune in the textile business. Despite dalliances with gentile companions, Alfred eventually married a wealthy woman of his own religion called Lucie Hadamard, thereby increasing his fortune considerably. They bought a mansion on the Seine and Dreyfus could often be seen riding expensive horses in the Bois de Boulogne. He joined the army with the hope of obtaining the highest post.

Despite the cultural shifts of the previous century, the military had remained quite French, in the traditional sense. In this uniquely "uncontaminated" sector of French society, Dreyfus, a poster boy for the syndicate, was extremely unpopular. To be fair to his fellow officers, anyone who met Dreyfus would tell you that he often came across as stiff, calculating and condescending. It was not purely racism that prevented him from rising above the rank of

captain: his own individual lack of character certainly played a role. In later years, when the liberal élite had taken up his cause, Eugénie would famously remark: “What a pity we can't choose someone else for our innocent.”

Dreyfus was arrested for the crime of selling military secrets to the Germans. The evidence against him—half truths and forgeries cobbled together by the clandestine Statistical Section—was approved all the way up the line to the President. The evidence would later come apart under scrutiny. It turned out that the secrets (which were quite harmless in any case) had been sold to the roguish German military attaché Maximilienne Schwartzkoppen not by Dreyfus, but by a disgruntled and degenerate Colonel called Esterhazy. However, the falsified tale that depicted Dreyfus as a devious member of the Jewish Syndicate in league with the reptiles beyond the Rhine, took on an outlandish life of its own and over the years, as more false evidence was manufactured and more officers and gentlemen staked their careers on Dreyfus' guilt, the civil unrest in France reached a fever pitch. “Dreyfus is innocent,” became the battle cry of the liberals. It is here that my own life converged with *L'Esprit Du Siécle*.

Alfred Dreyfus had been under lock and key on Devil's Island for two harsh years when Marcel Proust asked if I would act as a second in a duel. Eugénie had married a wealthy lawyer and we'd moved into his mansion in Paris, a stone's throw from the Arc de Triomphe. This lawyer worked primarily for Joseph Reinach, the nephew and son-in-law of Jacques de Reinach. He'd worked hard to escape the shadow of his corrupt uncle and established a strong reputation as a liberal politician who championed social justice. He was an early convert to the Dreyfusard cause.

It was well established that Eugénie had thrown the best parties in Monaco and now society men joked that she'd

have to erect a casino in her living room since there was nowhere decent to dine near Monte Carlo. It was a nightly occurrence for famous writers, painters and politicians to flow in and out of our salon from the cafés and restaurants down the road on the Champs-Élysé. Our new home became the official clubhouse for the blossoming Dreyfusard movement.

I'd taken to writing poetry and had recently released a slim volume of verse inspired by my youth in Tierra Del Fuego. It sold well and garnered generally positive reviews, which raised me above the level of sheer novelty in our social circle and earned me some proper respect. Of the many characters who frequented our salon I became closest with the writer Marcel Proust and his lover in secret, the composer and violinist Reynaldo Hahn. They dressed like dandys and wore svelte little moustaches. Despite the fact that I was incapable of growing any hair at all on my scaly skin they let me into their little club. In the early days of the affair we'd spent many long, happy hours going around to the houses of famous artists, trying to get them to sign a petition for Dreyfus' cause. But things had changed since then.

Proust loved to, as we might say now, talk shit. He was also the most magnetic person I've ever met. When he found a new friend to play with he clung to them possessively; everything depended on whether or not they were pleased with him, and so he was an extremely moody individual. For instance, the previous day he and Reynaldo had broken off their friendship and now he was in a sorry state. I was perched on a cushioned stool sipping champagne. Marcel couldn't stay seated. He kept pacing, his glass of fernet untouched. He called Reynaldo a no talent, second-rate artist, accused him of being a disgusting pederast, a social climber and a snob. I felt bad for Proust, but at the same time I was amused; he knew I was still good friends

with Hahn and that I would probably repeat these insults to him. In fact, he was probably counting on it. Furthermore each insult he uttered could have been applied unto himself far more accurately than to Hahn. Proust was gay, a social climber, the worst snob one could imagine and his first book, *Days and Years*, published a year earlier, had sold very few copies and was reviewed poorly. I was just about ready to point this out to him when something clicked in the little dandy's head. He asked if I knew how to handle a sword.

Proust had already been courting an older man named Michel Saint-Loup behind Reynaldo's back. Saint-Loup was a wealthy patron of the arts who'd helped finance *Days and Years*, he also published a newspaper called *Le Voix de Paris* that supported the Dreyfusard cause. An anti-Dreyfusard by the name of Jean Dubois had recently written an inflammatory article in a rival paper, *La Libre Parole* suggesting that Saint-Loup, in addition to being in the pocket of the Jewish syndicate, was also sleeping with the young men he published.

The word *inverti* was applied to homosexuals at the time, and while some men were fairly lazy about concealing their habits, public denial was the norm. *Invertis* were in the same class as perverts and criminals and the label had to be avoided at all costs. Saint-Loup challenged Dubois to a duel, Dubois accepted. It was to be fought with small swords, but Dubois was a renowned swordsman and a second couldn't be found. That's where I came in. Now, for the record, Marcel had not yet made love to the flamboyant, but possibly heterosexual, Saint-Loup. His logic was that if he helped his patron clear his good name, then he could get him into bed, perhaps because he actually wanted him, or perhaps for the purpose of making Reynaldo jealous. In all the time I knew Marcel I could never decipher his motives, but for some reason he was impossible to say "no" to. I was a fine

swordsman and he'd played to my ego. I agreed.

The duel took place on a brisk winter's day at Île de la Grande Jatte, on the Seine just outside of Paris. There was a great deal of ceremony: the recital of the offence, the polishing of swords. Marcel was there as well, acting as a third. I'd made some inquiries concerning our opponent and did not like what I found. Dubois was the son of a farmer from the Tourenne. He'd fought in the Franco-Prussian war as a teenager, and was twice-captured and twice-escaped. Having moved up the chain of command to Colonel in his twenties, he occupied a desk at the ministry of war for a time before returning to active duty in Tunisia at his own request. In Tunisia there had been some messy incident with the native population, and in the heat of the moment he accidentally delivered a fatal blow to a fellow officer. The whole thing was quieted up and he was honourably discharged.

He made some money writing semi-pornographic romance stories for magazines, and used it to make some spectacular investments before opening a vineyard near his hometown. He was something of a working class hero, and as French as a Frenchman could be. He was stout and stolid, with a fine, thick moustache and puffy cheeks. You could almost see the soil of his country in his pores. I'd never seen anyone who so closely resembled a frog in physiology. You balk at my racism, professor, but have you forgotten that I resemble an overgrown chameleon? The truth is, when I saw Dubois that day, wielding his small sword, that look of hateful defiance on his face, I was disturbed and aroused simultaneously.

Michel Saint-Loup, by contrast, was lean and tall, resembling a grey-hound in his great-coat. I pulled him aside before the duel and made some suggestions. I told him to strike immediately to try and end the thing quickly. "If it goes on too long and he gets enraged, you may lose

your life. If you charge in quick and he wounds you, stay down man. Your honour will be restored all the same.” What I did not understand then was that Dubois was always enraged: his glorious homeland had been trampled by Germans, overrun by Jews and homosexuals and he wanted blood and bloody murder until order was restored.

Saint-Loup charged him and made a good thrust, Dubois batted it aside, dodged to his right and thrust his small sword deep into Saint-Loup's torso, just under his ribs. Dubois held Saint-Loup, doubled over in his arms, a murderous smirk of satisfaction playing on his lips. He stared right at me, held my gaze for ten seconds and let the greyhound drop. Marcel ran to the defeated weeping. Saint-Loup died in the hospital later that day. That night I walked the streets of Paris in a fog bumping into streetlamps and passersby as if I were a simpleton. I could not get my head on straight. Something had changed in me. I was a Dreyfusard chameleon in love with an anti-Dreyfusard frog.

With regards to the issue of homosexuality, professor: even at the time, the disapproval with which invertis were met seemed utterly absurd to me. The sexual labels that humans have come up with to divide different orientations have never made sense to me. I know I am an old man, and you probably don't want to hear this, but I've had sex with people of every colour and creed. I always say, “What turns you on turns you on; the more you can get off on, the wider your world becomes.” At the time I already felt that way, and though I knew enough to keep my affection secret, I was not ashamed of my homosexuality. Mainly I was just ashamed that my affections were directed towards a Catholic.

Through a sleepless winter and spring I saw nothing of Dubois, though he rarely left my thoughts. In that period of time, there were massive developments in the Dreyfus affair. In January, 1898, Émile Zola, the most famous

writer in France, published his incendiary polemic under the melodramatic title *J'Accuse*. The public letter, addressed to the President, identified the military officers responsible for the frame-up, pointed out the flaws in the evidence against Dreyfus, and contained some quite serious accusations in itself. The publication of the letter set off riots in France and abroad. Effigies of Zola and Dreyfus were burned in public and in the African colonies members of the Jewish population were stoned, beaten and murdered. The developed nations of the world were appalled, and public opinion began rolling back against the Catholics.



In June of 1898, I attended the French premiere of *La Bohème* at the Théâtre des Nations with Marcel, his new boyfriend Lucien Daudet, and Eugénie. While my companions were utterly hypnotized by Puccini's beautiful masterpiece, I was pre-occupied with something else entirely. In a box on the opposite side of the theatre sat Jean Dubois, along with his stereotypically pretty French Catholic-wife, the editor-in-chief of *La Libre Parole*, and Mademoiselle Drumont. I spent much of the opera studying the lines of Dubois' face through Eugénie's opera glasses. He looked uncomfortable in formal clothes, he fidgeted interminably, seemingly bored by the spectacle. He wore that same look of anger and defiance that had affected me so on the day he killed Saint-Loup.

As I tried to pick up the opera's thread, I realized that Dubois had a pair of binoculars up to his own face, and he was staring straight at me. I squinted back and he realized he'd been caught, snapped his head towards the stage and took his wife's hand. Through my binoculars I could see he'd turned bright red. When the show was over I intentionally bumped into him in the lobby and slipped a note into

his jacket pocket. Again he turned bright red and rushed to pummel me, but Drumont held him back. "It's not worth it Jean," he said. "It's just Eugénie's gay little lizard boy. We don't need anymore bad press right now."

Drumont's words still stung as I waited by the Grande Cascade in the Bois de Boulogne later that night, where I'd written for Dubois to meet me. I'd already dropped Eugénie off at home and taken the carriage for the night. I told the coachman to wait for me at the park gates. He expressed some concern, as at night the Bois was a dangerous place, frequented by prostitutes and thieves. I showed him the dagger I carried to assuage his worries, and wandered into the park. I waited several desperate, humiliating hours by the waterfall, occasionally hearing moans and rustling from the brush, knife at the ready. I'd never known moments to pass so slowly. I wanted to connect with someone. Somehow I knew that only Dubois could understand. He was equally ill at ease in this world; I'd read it in his eyes. We were meant for each other. When I had just about given up hope I was caught off guard by a dark figure approaching rapidly. I pulled out my dagger, but the man unsheathed his sword swiftly, slapped the weapon from my hand and hit me in the face with his hilt. Blood flowed fast and plentiful from my nostrils. When I'd wiped the blood and tears from my face Dubois was standing in the moonlight sneering at me.

"Do you have any idea the kind of trouble you could have caused me you filthy wretch? Why did you slip this note in my pocket? Imagine if my wife saw? We know what sort of company you keep: sodomites, kikes and republicans," he said, spitting on the ground. "I ought to put you out of your misery right now, you disgusting creature."

"That's not why you came here," I replied calmly. "If you wanted satisfaction you'd have challenged me to a duel already, but I think you're after another kind of satis-

faction.” He raised his hand to strike me but dissolved into tears.

“You have no idea what it's like,” he said, sitting next to me on the grass, “to see the country whose ideals you cherish fall into the hands of the wrong people, to be ashamed and embarrassed, as a rule, day in, day out. History's gone horribly off course and no matter how many blows I strike against our enemies, the former glory of our nation still seems to slip further and further out of reach. And now, these impure thoughts have overtaken me; these demonic urges keep me awake at night. What nature of beast are you? How could a creature like you possibly fit into God's plan?”

“I'm quite sure I couldn't answer that question,” I said. “But I wouldn't be so sure that I don't understand how you feel. My homeland was no paradise, but my people worked hard to survive, cared for each other, loved each other. Then one day settlers from the so called civilized world arrived. They mutilated and slaughtered my people, infected them with a terrible disease. You may think the members of your tribe are out of their minds, but the members of my tribe are dead and buried. All of them. So don't tell me I don't know what it's like. What I know is much worse.”

“I suppose you're right,” he growled. “Our stories are not dissimilar. French Catholics have been slaughtered and persecuted for the past century. This modern thought is a disease that will rot France from the inside out until there is not a true and noble Frenchman in all the land. This nation is falling into the hands of the freemasons, the godless, the immoral. I fear that one of these days I wil wake up and find myself alone; the last member of an otherwise extinct species.”

I looked into his deep brown eyes and for the first time saw something other than hatred, I saw that he was afraid and confused—a gentleman of yesterday who could

not find a foothold in the present. I took his hand in mine. That was the night that I lost my virginity, beneath the man-made waterfall in the soft light of the moon in the Bois de Boulogne. It was awkward and uncomfortable, and we did not get the hang of it until we'd done it a few times. But afterwards, as I lay in his arms in the hour just before sunrise, I had a feeling that everything was right with the world. He had to return to his wife, however, and I to the coachman who probably would have gone to the police if he hadn't fallen asleep. When I shook him awake, he saw the injury I'd sustained and the dirt on my clothes.

"Ah, monsieur," he said. "What did I tell you, you're lucky to be alive."

"Yes, yes," I replied, climbing into the carriage. "I should know better."



Despite the conflicts of the day, the next year passed very happily. Dubois kept an apartment above a butcher's shop in Montmartre that he used as an office, and it was there that we would rendezvous at least once a week. It was a tempestuous affair, and after we made love he would often fly into a rage or start weeping inconsolably. He believed that he was condemning himself to the flames of hell (which were very real to him) by giving in to his unnatural urges. We often argued about Dreyfus. He was so convinced, so confident in his country's military commanders that he was blind to the obvious truth. If the generals said he was guilty, he was guilty. Why would they lie? Why would they manufacture evidence? What did they have to gain through the suffering of this inconsequential Jew? I would refute him for hours, explaining in minute detail the initial errors that had led to Dreyfus' conviction and the subsequent cover up, to save the tails of the military fat cats.

But to him I was reciting a conspiracy carefully crafted by the diabolical freemasons. By this point, the affair was like a teetering tower with a shoddy foundation. It was only a matter of time before the thing came toppling down.

There were those rare afternoons when Jean was calm and we would sit by the window sipping fine wine from his vineyard. The apartment was near the top of the hill, and you could see all of Paris laid out in front of you as if it were in miniature; smoke and steam rising from the bustling mecca. On days like this, I would open up to him about my youth in Tierra Del Fuego, and read him poems I was working on. In return, Jean would tell me about the horrors of the war, of the honourable and upstanding Frenchmen that he'd known who'd died by his side on the field of battle. In those afternoons I learned that although I was an immigrant and possessed visible peculiarities that branded me as such, Jean, a full blooded Frenchman, was far more ill at ease in this land than I. It already seemed clear that he was destined for tragedy, but in that short window of time we had something beautiful, and our mutual sorrow was softened by a deep and complex affection.

Back at the Dreyfusard HQ, the mood was extremely festive. In August a colonel from the Statistical Section by the name of Henry had been arrested and subsequently committed suicide in captivity when it was proven that he'd forged letters that had been used as evidence against Dreyfus. Henry was from the same village as Dubois and he took it very hard indeed, but it was a great victory for the left and converted many people who had been sitting on the fence. Two months later, Lucie Dreyfus' appeal to review her husband's conviction was accepted by the Criminal Chamber, which would mark a shift from military to civilian courts.

In February of the following year, Félix Faure, who was president at the time, died of a cerebral haemorrhage while making love to a beautiful young woman; the daughter

of a Jewish industrialist. Faure had been dead set against the appeal, and while his demise was a cruel tragedy for the anti-Dreyfusards, it seemed a hilarious joke in our salon. Several new governments experienced a failure to launch and a gang of excited nationalists staged an unsuccessful coup. These events paved the way for the presidency of Pierre Waldeck Rousseau, a known Dreyfusard. The appeal to re-open Dreyfus' trial was passed. Any remaining anti-Dreyfusards were either enraged beyond belief or abandoned the cause altogether. Alfred Dreyfus was coming home.



Dreyfus' second court martial was to take place at Rennes, the capital of Brittany and a traditionally Catholic city adorned with gorgeous churches and palaces. In August of 1899, Parisians descended upon Rennes in droves. No one wanted to miss out on what was sure to be history in the making. Joseph Reinach had secured the entire floor of a hotel near the military prison where Dreyfus was being kept and while our entourage kept the champagne flowing at all hours, Reinach and his lawyer (my adoptive father in law) had their hands full developing strategies for Dreyfus' last stand. On the eve of the fateful trial, Marcel and I had far too much to drink and wrestled in my room, playing the roles of Dreyfus and the sinister General de Boisdeffre. The wrestling may have turned into something more than wrestling at one point, but my memory is unclear.

On the first day of the court marshal tensions ran high, the military had deployed what seemed like thousands of soldiers in the streets to intimidate the hoards of Dreyfusards. There were roadblocks in the streets leading to the lycée where the trial was to take place. Apart from the presiding officials and witnesses, only journalists and ticket holders were allowed inside the building. Eugénie's husband

had been kind enough to secure a few tickets for us, so we sat with baited breath amongst a thousand or so fellow spectators to see the man we'd been obsessed with for several years, the same delicious thought drifting through each of our minds: Dreyfus is in the building.

It was with a combination of unanimous disappointment and horror that we perceived the wretched individual who then entered the room. Dreyfus had been ravaged by tropical illness. His eyes were set deep in his head, he had gone completely bald, and he gave one the impression that a skeleton—or perhaps the ghost of Alfred Dreyfus—had donned a military uniform. I was moved to pity by his appearance, but then I heard him speak. Dreyfus' voice was nasal and condescending as he once again declared his innocence. It was easy to see why he'd been convicted all those years earlier; I would have sentenced him right then and there just to silence the man. It was a terribly awkward moment: here we'd been expecting the triumphant return of Odysseus and instead we were presented with this wretched Caliban.

The experience affected me deeply, and gave me an understanding of the randomness of history. Who was this unpleasant nothing of a man? What twisted sense of humour had cast him in the most heroic role of his generation? A national movement had grown beneath this bland, unlikeable careerist. If you stripped away the man, all that was left was the notion of his innocence and the corruption of others—but was that good enough? As an outsider trying to find my place within France, I'd always identified with Dreyfus. His conviction had coincided with my integration into French society, *Le Monde*, and I'd always felt that my fate was tied to his. But like the narrator in Marcel's novel who is overwhelmed with disappointment when he sees the mythological actress Berma in the flesh, I felt as though I'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in some deeply flawed

alternate reality.

I watched the rest of the proceedings that day with my head in the clouds. It was quite clear to everyone in the courtroom that the case against Dreyfus was fabricated, but the lawyers and witnesses went through the motions all the same. At one point I was roused from my distraction by the lively antics of Fernand Labori, one of two lawyer's for the defence:

“Maitre Labori,” the judge said “I would ask you to speak with moderation.”

“I have not uttered a single immoderate word.”

“But your tone is immoderate.”

“I am not in control of my tone.”

“Well, you should be. Everyone is in control of their person.”

“I am in my control of my person but not my tone.”

“I shall withdraw your right to speak.”

“Go ahead and withdraw it.”

“Sit down.”

“I will sit down, but only because I choose to.”

Labori's performance stole the show that day, the vigour with which he went after the generals even earned him the scorn of Dreyfus' second lawyer, who seemed to agree that Labori's words were immoderate. Labori had defended Zola at his defamation trial in the wake of the J'Accuse debacle and he was perhaps the most hated man amongst the anti-Dreyfusards. As such it is no surprise that he almost ended up a martyr to the cause. A few days after the trial opened, Labori was shot in the back at close range on his way to court. The shooter was chased by Labori's companion, but escaped. The lawyer's luck turned out to be as robust as his temper, though: the bullet missed his spine and caused no serious damage. Unsurprisingly, the shooter was never caught, the sentiments of the region were on his

side.

On the morning of the shooting, while the press were having a field day, I received an anonymous telegram from an inn on the outskirts of town called Le Mouton Noir. It said to come right away and ask for Faustus Legrand, which I took to be a rather comical false name. I snuck away from my hotel amongst the commotion and walked along the river for a good long while until I came to this dilapidated Auberge in the middle of nowhere. After ringing a bell at the inn's front desk for a quarter of an hour, a stout man with a terrible combover emerged, looking rather worse for wear. He seemed confused when I asked for Faustus Legrand and only found the room number once he'd flipped through his records three or four times. From behind the door of room 207 I could hear a man weeping, I knocked. The weeping ceased and the door slowly opened, I entered and it slammed shut. Standing there was my lover, his face stained with tears, his shirt with blood.

It wasn't a lot of blood, but if anyone in town had seen him on that particular morning it would have raised a lot of questions. I told him to strip off his clothes immediately and helped him wash up with cold water from the sink. The pistol was sitting out on his bedside table, so I made a mental note to take it with me on the way out and dispose of it. I had never seen Jean so disconsolate. He lay naked on the bed staring up at the ceiling while I paced the room, my mind racing.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I demanded. "What did you think this would accomplish? If you want Dreyfus condemned this is the last thing that will help you, don't you see? You've only pushed more sympathy onto the side of his defenders. And God knows your camp doesn't have much sympathy left to spare at this point."

There was a long pause, and then, in a whisper that was barely audible, he said:

“He's innocent.”

“What?” I replied, not believing the holes in my head that passed for ears.

“Dreyfus. He's innocent.”



A few days earlier, Dubois had been drinking with an old friend from the army. This friend had escorted Dreyfus to a temporary holding cell in 1894 after his public degradation and claimed that Dreyfus privately confessed to him at that time. Throughout the affair, Dubois had clung to this anecdote as absolute proof of Dreyfus' guilt, for him and this man shared the sacred bond of the battlefield and he trusted his friend absolutely. But, as they became quite drunk, in this late year of 1899, Dubois asked his friend to repeat the story and the man hesitated.

“But Jean, I have a terrible confession,” the man said, laughing. “I made the whole thing up.” Dubois took his friend into an alley next to the bar and beat him to a pulp. He then fetched a pistol from home and boarded the next train to Rennes. Upon his arrival he heard of Labori's defiant performance. He shadowed his target, waited until morning and then fired a shot into his back from near point blank range. If he hadn't been in such an emotionally agitated state he might have killed him, but luckily, his nerves were rattled, his hands were shaky.

I lay on the bed and held him one last time. We didn't talk much; there was nothing to say. I knew he was ruined. He had strayed from his religious values and now his ideals and everything he'd ever believed in proved to be hollow. We were only months away from the new century and the France that Dubois knew and loved was on the verge of vanishing forever, transformed by industrialization, modern beliefs and shifting politics. I wanted to tell

him we could start a new life, that he could change, adapt to the new world. But I knew that it was too late for that, and so I wept. Eventually I left him there, mumbling to himself and staring at the ceiling. I took his pistol with me and his bloodstained clothes. The clothes I burned; the pistol I threw in the river. That was the last time I ever saw him. The following year, Jean took a post with the Dutch army in Africa where they were battling the British in the Second Boer War. At the time, it was a popular gambit for disillusioned French nationalists with a hatred for England. I found out years later that it was amongst this brutal fighting that Jean lost his life.

The case for Dreyfus' innocence, airtight as it was, could not withstand the unpleasantness of his character. The court once again declared him to be guilty, this time with attenuating circumstances. He was sentenced to ten more years in detention. Dreyfus' family would once again appeal, of course, but by this time the game had grown stale and a higher power was to step in and put it to rest. In response to the verdict there were anti-France demonstrations in Milan, London, New York and elsewhere. There was growing concern that the Exposition Universelle that was to be held in Paris the next year would be boycotted by the international community. And so the President, Waldeck-Rousseau, magnanimously pardoned Dreyfus.

To hard-line Dreyfusards it was a compromise because his innocence (which implicated the corruption of the military and certain members of government) would never be proven in court. To the anti-Dreyfusards it was a compromise because it insinuated that Dreyfus was innocent. Dreyfus finally went free but nobody was really happy, not even Dreyfus who'd developed too many infirmities and nervous tics throughout the ordeal to be able to enjoy life.

On the final eve of the 19th century I was at a very

grand party hosted by the Prince of Monaco. I took a bottle of champagne and left the palace to roam the palm-lined streets, with some vague idea about visiting the place where I'd washed ashore. Eugénie caught up with me in the street. She was flush in the face, a bit tipsy, and she took the bottle from my hand and had a sip. She asked me if I was upset about Dreyfus, about the indefinite conclusion of the affair. I couldn't tell her about Dubois, about my broken heart, so I played along.

"Nothing was resolved in the end," I said. "The truth never came to light. Besides, there are people out there for whom the truth bore no relevance, people who cling to their outmoded beliefs like captains to their sinking ships. There's still turmoil in the government, corruption in the military. Even the Dreyfusards have begun quibbling amongst themselves. The movement started out so pure, but now there's just chaos."

"You poor, young idealist," Eugénie replied. "The Dreyfus affair provided us with years of entertainment, but the outcome was never going to change anything. Men will always find reasons to lie and cheat and treat each other poorly. No one ever agrees, nothing ever ends peacefully. That, my dear boy, is the permanent state of the world."

"Dreyfus was just another overly ambitious, pathetic, money-sick Jew. He just happened to get caught up in the cogs of history. To be honest with you, it would all have been the same to me if he'd rotted in his cell on Devil's Island. But we made the most of it, didn't we? So relax, have a drink and forget about it."

At the time she could not have known of the horrible wars that lay on the horizon; wars that would rip Europe to pieces and change the face of the world forever. In any case, she would have the luxury of dying before any of that unpleasantness began. Suffice to say it was not the appropriate moment in history to "relax and have drink."

There'd been a time when I believed Eugénie was my guardian angel, but that little speech she gave turned me against her forever. In her drunk and flippant state, she'd revealed her own small-minded hypocrisy.

The next day I set off on my own with next to nothing. I'd pocketed a number of Fabergé Eggs from the Prince's palace, which I sold to a shady individual for a great deal of money when I reached Firenze. I realized that I could not stay in France. I did not belong there. I was gripped by the belief that I did not belong anywhere, but I was prepared to travel to the ends of the earth to prove myself wrong.

A ROWBOAT AT DUSK

“Connor kissed a blow job mouth!”

“Yeah Connor, did you swallow any of Michael’s sperm when you kissed her? Could you taste it?”

‘Poor Connor,’ Trevor thought as he re-entered the classroom. ‘Glad I never kissed any blow job mouth when I was in high school. Of course there was the poking incident with the boner at semi formal. Never quite lived that one down.’

From what Trevor could tell, Connor was a nice kid: a bit goofy, usually outspoken. Today he was blushing, smiling awkwardly and prone to bursts of ineffective self defense. He overheard that over the weekend Connor had made out with a drunk girl named Jenny Blendenmayer in the laundry room at a kegger *after* she’d given a “blowie” to Michael Andrews in the master bedroom. Trevor wanted to defend Connor, wanted to stand up to the girls attacking him and say:

“I heard Jenny Blendenmayer is totally hot, how

could Connor resist? How could he possibly have known about the blowie? The way I hear it, he'd executed an epic keg stand right before that siren of loose morals seduced him. His judgment was clouded I say! we all make mistakes don't we?" But it really wasn't his place to say all this.

"Girls, girls, that's enough," Mr. Gupta called out. Gupta was plump, wore a large beard and a turban. The sexual banter obviously made him uncomfortable. "Let's get back to winter tires versus all season: can either of you tell me the difference?"

"We still have five minutes left in break Mr. Gupta," said the girl who'd been tormenting Connor. "Besides, this isn't like real school where we can get in lots of trouble or get bad grades, do you really even care if we talk about Connor's blow job breath? All you're responsible for is making sure we learn lots of good safety tips and techniques for driving."

"To be honest Melissa, your behaviour right now is completely unacceptable in any context. It's not civilized to use that sort of language and discuss people's personal lives in public. I know you're better than this, so can we please keep the language clean for the remainder of the break. I'm asking you nicely as one mature person to another."

Melissa and her friend chattered quietly amongst themselves, presumably overturning other items of lewd, unladylike gossip. The way Melissa poked Connor from behind with her pencil and the way she was so fixated on the Jenny Blendenmayer incident after everybody else was clearly sick of talking about it was evidence to Trevor, plain as day, that she was harbouring a secret crush on him.

When class resumed, Trevor turned his focus to a young lady sitting a few seats over from him at the back of the room, a girl he had nicknamed the Teen Dream. She was petite and dark haired, had beautiful brown eyes and always wore a beat up leather jacket over her uniform. Like most

of the kids in the class she went to private school and came straight from real class to driving class. She was usually engrossed in some fantastic looking science fiction novel by Philip K. Dick or Ursula K. Leguin and though it had occurred to Trevor to use his vast familiarity with the realms of science fiction as means of starting a conversation, the valium that he usually took before the two hour sessions always caused him to sink into a complacent haze.

Trevor fit into neither of the two main demographics of driving class: teens who were there to learn to drive, and adults who were there to push their insurance premiums down. He had a knack, unintentional though it was, of drawing attention to himself. On that day in particular he had returned to class with an absurdly huge “Venti” Rooibos tea and nestled in amongst several shopping bags he’d acquired from the upscale Harry Rosen store across the street. He proceeded to hide behind his New Yorker magazine while secretly listening to the teens gossiping. When the lesson resumed he put on his Ray Bans and fell asleep.

When he woke up he was shocked to realize that they were watching videos of grizzly car accidents: bloody crash scenes, footage of crying parents and teary eyed teens talking about how much they missed their dead friends who had stupidly driven drunk or been killed by drunk drivers. The impact, and the sound of crunching metal disturbed him deeply. ‘Christ,’ he thought. ‘No wonder I never learned how to drive.’



After class, Trevor rode the 82 as it snaked through the streets of Rosedale. The bus was too large to occupy the narrow roads in any natural way, often getting stuck between hybrids at intersections, circling the neighborhood

like a fish that had grown too large for its pond. Most Rose-dale residents, who never rode the bus anyway, found the 82 to be a nuisance. In addition to a handful of private school students, it was primarily Filipina nannies working in the neighborhood that took the bus.

It was evening rush hour and there were no seats. Trevor stood by the rear door, facing backwards, grasping a metal pole for support. As the bus turned sharply he felt as though he might be flung out the doors and bouncing backwards down the street. He was a handsome young man with a boyish face and blue eyes. He wore a pea coat, a button down Ralph Lauren shirt, expensive jeans and leather deck shoes. His hair was carefully coiffed, his face freshly shaven. The department store bags he'd accrued hung weightless in his hand, the valium he'd taken earlier had just about worn off.

The car crash footage had set his mind spinning and now he was caught deep in a daydream. The 82 crossed a bridge that hung high over a ravine, tall trees stretched up on either side. It was mid-October, the time of year when darkness descends unexpectedly early. Trevor noticed that the sky was bright pink and colour streaked towards the sunset, but when he turned in the other direction, he faced a dark winter night. Poe to the east, Hemingway to the west. He was reminded of something he'd once read: a scene from a famous German book about a mountain, about a young naïve boy who sat in a rowboat at dusk. He couldn't get that image out of his head. The bus trundled back onto solid ground and he stared out the back window, like a dog in a station wagon.

Trevor Hawthorpe was twenty-three years old. He'd finished University three years earlier, then spent a couple years and change traveling around Europe and Asia on his father's dime. In the months since he'd returned home he'd been doing something he called coasting on the fumes,

which was tantamount to just sort of hanging around. Trevor lived with his father in a large house on Schofield Avenue, across the street from Rosedale Park in Toronto's wealthy, central neighborhood; a place where it was not uncommon for mothers in tennis outfits and teenage girls in private school uniforms to roam the streets.

Trevor had been deprived of regular sex for some time. As a rule he spent part of each day wandering the streets subtly admiring the neighborhood women, oblivious to the fact that he was soon to be romantically entangled with females from either side of the generational barrier. And while we may find our protagonist making some questionable moral decisions over the course of this tale, let me remind you, dear reader, that everybody craves affection and that often matters of the heart are difficult to navigate. With romance, as with the weather, patterns are difficult to predict, and precautions such as carrying an umbrella do not exist. Also, as with weather, in romance one can often employ the common saying that goes: when it rains, it pours.



One month later, Trevor could be found freshly stoned from a wake and bake, strolling the aisles of the Mayflower Market, where chandeliers hung from the ceiling. He wore dark wayfarers and had a scarf wrapped around his neck; a patch of his hairless chest visible owing to the v-neck of his shirt. Margot Keepness had noticed him when he entered the store. She was amused by the way he stumbled around the produce aisle digging through mangos, then avocados, flinging bags of triple washed mixed greens about and puzzling over champagne bottles full of lavender infused carbonated water. Now she cornered Trevor as he dug through the organic milk cartons, tossing them aside

and blocking access to all nature of dairy products.

“What on earth are you doing?” Margot asked. Trevor pulled his head out of the milk to face her.

“Oh, sorry. Am I in your way?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I was just wondering what made you decide to wreak havoc on the organic meadows.”

Trevor grabbed one of the toppled cartons. “This expiration date says November twenty-third, which is like, three days away, but if you look in the back there, you can see the ones marked November twenty-seventh. That’s what I’m trying to get to. Organic milk doesn’t keep for as long as other kinds and I just use a little bit a day. Hot milk. For espresso.”

“You can read the expiration dates back there? Even with those dark sunglasses on?” Trevor instinctively reached for his glasses and pulled them off. “Yeah,” he said. “I’ve got pretty good eyesight, I guess.” Margot smiled and asked him to get her one from the back, with the expiration date on the twenty-seventh. He felt her eyes on his ass as he bent over and reached into the pile of cartons. They kept chatting as they shopped and Trevor exposed Margot to the pleasures of eating a full meal while grocery shopping. They made the rounds of the free sample booths, devouring small portions of pumpkin loaf, fruit, brie with crackers, and washed it down with coffees from a friendly gentleman who was there to promote his fair trade beans.

“Free gourmet snacks,” said Trevor, gobbling up his fourth piece of pumpkin loaf. “Privilege of the privileged.”

Later that afternoon Margot took Trevor back to her house where they had sex. This was not the kind of sex Trevor was used to. Margot knew what she wanted, she knew how to direct him and manipulate her own body in ways that were quite foreign to him. She wanted him to tie her to the head board and take her from behind. “Who am I

to deny her this pleasure?’ Trevor mused. ‘Especially under the circumstance of being a guest in her home?’ He complied and tried his best. She came, just barely, as he did as well.

“Should I go?” Trevor asked a few minutes later.

“Is your husband going to be home soon?”

“No,” replied Margot. “Actually, my husband left me recently.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. We’d been miserable for months. If anything, he did me a favour, moving out after I caught him with that whore. I don’t think she was literally a whore, but it feels good to say that. I don’t know where he is, but I’m happy to have the place to myself. Plus I’m probably going to get to keep it if I can find a decent lawyer.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“No, no kids. We’d stopped using contraceptives and I’m not on the pill or anything, but no luck. Who knows, maybe his semen doesn’t swim properly, or maybe I’m.... I don’t want to say it out loud, you know, knock on wood and all that. Maybe it’s better this way.”

Trevor was uncomfortable with this direction of conversation and sprung suddenly out of bed. “Do you want me to make you a coffee?” he asked. “That was the pretense of you inviting me in. Remember? I was saying how much better espresso tastes with organic milk and you said you didn’t even know how to work your expensive espresso machine, and I was like, ‘Expensive espresso machine: fuck yeah!’ And then you seduced me.”

Margot gave a curt laugh. “That sounds about right. Why don’t you go and make me a nice little macchiato, manservant. I’m going to doze for five minutes. I trust you’ll know how to work the equipment.”

Trevor stared into the glassy surface of the carefully steamed milk, stuck in one of his meditative trances.

Whenever these occurred, his eyebrows gravitated upwards and his vision blurred, producing, in this case, a glimmering image of two criss-crossing white blobs. His mind was hard at work on the aftermath of the afternoon's encounter. He had realized a personal dream; one dating back to the first days of his sexual awakening: to make love to an older woman. The new experience was exhilarating. He felt it was a step towards a state of manhood he had failed to reach upon the advent of losing his virginity.

Something moved in the corner of his eye. A black cat jumped up on the counter. It circled twice and then came slowly towards him, bringing its face right up to his. There was a sudden crackle, a bright light between their noses and a ticklish sting. The cat backed away, surprised, and pawed at its face.

"That was the cutest thing I've ever seen. You two have chemistry." Margot had put on a silk, cream coloured bathrobe and stood in the doorway, watching. "That's so strange. He usually hates everyone, but he came right up to you, didn't you Max?" Margot scooped up her cat and began petting him. In that moment Trevor had the warm feeling that this is what it might feel like to be a happily married adult. All of the ingredients seemed to be present: a beautiful woman, a house in Rosedale with a marble upholstered kitchen, a cat named Max and a quality espresso machine. He finished making the coffees and sat with Margot at the kitchen table, pulling the newspaper apart and trading sections with her. Eventually Trevor had to leave, but a goodbye kiss turned into a fifteen minute make out session, and by the time Trevor left to catch the 82 he was running late for his date with the Teen Dream.

When Trevor ran out of pot, it always seemed to take him by surprise. Since returning from traveling, he'd formulated an evening routine that he stuck to neurotically. Six o'clock was cocktail hour, a ritual that was attended

to with monastic discipline by Trevor and his father. Dinner was at seven, served six nights a week by Rosalinda, the housekeeper his father had kept on full time since his wife had passed. Dinner was traditionally accompanied by a bottle of wine from the cellar. They listened to the CBC jazz program while eating, unless the overly verbose host annoyed them, in which case Trevor would select something from his father's expansive collection of classical compact discs. After dinner Trevor would drink an espresso and eat dessert while watching television. Dessert was followed by a bath with epsom salts and essential oils, during which he would typically read a science fiction or fantasy novel, possibly intended for young adults. After the bath he would roll himself a joint and light up, listening to music and reading, or exploring the internet until he fell asleep.

One night in late October, Trevor emerged from his bath to the realization that his stash was utterly depleted. He threw on some clothes, donned his pea coat and loafers, fetched a six pack of beer out of the fridge and went in search of some teenagers who might get him high. He wandered into Rosedale Park, down the main path alongside the tennis courts and through the children's playground. As he rounded what would soon be an ice rink he smelled the sweet fragrance of good hydroponic marijuana. Trevor ran his hand through his hair. The circle of teenagers sitting on the grass rustled and whispered to each other as the older boy approached.

"Hello," Trevor said, maintaining a safe distance. "I hope this isn't weird, but I live just over there and I ran out of pot. I hate to be a scavenger, but do you mind if join you?" Trevor gestured towards his house, dangling the cans of beer. A handsome, effeminate boy waved Trevor onwards. "Sure, of course," he said in a carefully articulated voice with a subtle lisp. "I know what it feels like to run dry: it sucks. Come sit down, we'll take care of you."

He dissolved into giggles as he finished his sentence, stoned already. Introductions were made, and within the group Trevor recognized the Teen Dream from his driving class. She moved away from a muscular boy in expensive chain store attire that offended Trevor's sensibilities to make room for him. The girl's name was Emily. They shook hands awkwardly.

She eyed him suspiciously, trying to figure out where she knew him from. Simon, the Probably Gay Master of Ceremonies, finished rolling the second of two joints, lit them, and passed them in opposite directions. Trevor dispersed the beers amongst his new underaged friends.

"Oh my god, you're that guy from my driving class!" Emily exclaimed after a couple tokes. "The guy who naps with his glasses on. You're like a legend. How come you never learned to drive when you were younger?"

"I grew up downtown, spent all my time in the city," Trevor replied. "I take public transit everywhere. It's sort of shitty, but I feel like it's important to support a public service like that. Makes me feel connected to the rest of the population."

"I guess I see what you're saying, but then again, I grew up in the city and I take public transit everywhere. I just figured driving's one of those mandatory life skills." There was a brief silence, and then she spoke up again excitedly before Trevor had a chance to defend his position.

"Have you seen those new subway trains that are just like, one huge car where you can see all the way down? They're so awesome and futuristic, like something out of *Metropolis*."

"Holy shit," Trevor replied excitedly. "You like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*?"

"I haven't seen that one." Emily said. "I'm talking about the Japanese animated film *Metropolis*."

"You should watch the original sometime."

“I think I will,” Emily said. Hey, better not tell Mr. Gupta we got high together alright? He might think it was childish or uncivilized or something.”

It was much easier to talk to Emily in this setting, than in driving class: soon he’d successfully coaxed Emily into telling him that her favourite book was *Dune* by Frank Herbert.

“It’s just the most incredible work of speculative fiction,” she gushed. “*Dune*, the hopeless, dried up desert planet. It’s so imaginative and at the same time it presents philosophical ideas that are useful to our society; especially in the face of climate change. He dedicated the book to dry land ecologists you know. It’s a cautionary tale.”

“Yeah,” Trevor agreed lazily. “Plus the sand monsters are super cool. That scene where Paul rides the giant-ass worm using hooks to prove to the natives that he’s worthy of them so he can become the Muad Dib? So awesome. It’s too bad they made that shitty eighties movie where Sting wears a thong.”

“Totally,” Emily said, extremely stoned and wondering who the hell Sting was.



The following week, after driving class, Emily and Trevor rode the 82 back up into Rosedale together.

“Autumn is for sure my favourite season,” Emily said. “I love the colours and the transitional weather; you start pulling out old sweaters and don’t get too hot when you bike.”

“Autumn’s definitely my favourite,” Trevor agreed. “I have an insane sweater collection. This one has this cool Scandinavian scarf collar deal on it, see? I bought it in Copenhagen.”

“Wow. So you’re really into sweaters. That’s cool, I guess. Hey, you’re looking sort of rough today. What’d you get up to last night?”

“I am so hungover,” Trevor said. “I went to a rock show at Rancho Relaxo. I snuck in some whiskey in my underpants, and then I made friends with the bartender who taught me this wild turkey dance and kept giving me free shots. I can’t remember anything else. I woke up smelling like shawarma and there were sauce stains all over my pants. I rolled this joint before class to feel better.” Trevor produced a small carefully rolled joint from behind his ear.

“Want to smoke it with me?”

“Sure. Does that really make you feel better?” Emily asked. “Seems like pot would make you sick if you were hungover, but I don’t really get hungover.”

Trevor smiled enviously. “Is it because you’re such a champ?”

“Yeah, it’s ‘cause I’m such a champ,” she replied, and administered unto him an affectionate noogy. “Learn to love it, old man.”

They got off the bus at Rosedale Park and found a wide open patch of grass to lay on. Oak and maple trees hemmed in the park. Most of the leaves were a bright blood orange and as they got high the biological wonders of nature became all the more enchanting. Emily playfully propped her head up on Trevor’s torso. Trevor, especially sensitive when hung over, helplessly monitored the progress of an erection as it rearranged the crotch of his pants. Emily turned around, slid up his body and started kissing him. She was wearing a sweet lip gloss of the kind that teenage girls often wear, and Trevor was transported momentarily back to the time of the aforementioned poking incident. Some pretty heavy petting came into play as they rolled around in the well-kept grass. Trevor halted occasionally, gulping down water to curb the combined effects of the hangover

and the joint. In the midst of this, he sneezed violently four times in a row.

“Excuse me.” he said, recovering. “There’s a lot of mould in the air and on the ground this time of year and I have really bad allergies.” His eyes were red and watering, seeming to corroborate his story. “I’m really sorry. I should go home and take some allergy medicine and get in the shower.”

“Oh, poor baby. Hey, how about I come with you?” Emily asked. Trevor coughed loudly and nodded. They walked together, nervously, back towards his house.



It was one month later, a month in which Trevor and Emily had spent a lot of time together in pre-arranged after school liaisons, that they met at a coffee shop in Kensington Market. It was, as it happened, the same day he met Margot Keepness at The Mayflower Market. The weather was mild and grey. It was raining a little bit, almost winter now, but still too warm to snow. Trevor rode an old rickety streetcar down Spadina. The anachronistic red and white vehicle glided on the metal tracks like some made up deep sea feline and evoked in Trevor a feeling of nostalgia for an older city that he had never known. On the crowded streetcar, he was pressed up behind a pretty blonde university student that he had noticed reading *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* back at the station. On the streetcar he could not help inhaling the fruity aroma of the girl’s freshly washed hair. This, hard though it may be to believe, was unintentional. On public transit, in that sort of traffic, you are going to inhale the scent of *somebody’s* hair. Better a cute, well-read girl than a hobo with garbage caked dreadlocks, Trevor rationalized.

He got off at the wrong stop, partly because he was daydreaming and partly because he couldn't push through the dense crowd of passengers in time. Kensington Market, to Trevor, was an autonomous and lawless patch of the city. Whenever he visited, his internal compass would always malfunction. He walked up Kensington Avenue where high school kids and entry-level hipsters bought generic clothes that smelled of lavender and patchouli from the vintage meccas that lined the street. Further up he passed the Jamaican gift shop where a Rastafarian with blood shot eyes bobbed his head to deafening reggae that flooded the street from storefront speakers. Winding around the busier streets he looked into the bakery that employed cute girls to work the counter and the cheese shop next door with its hunky male equivalents. Local residents and visitors weaved about on skateboards and bicycles. People walked freely in the streets, cursing the motorists who dared to enter this pedestrian's paradise.

After a few wrong turns Trevor finally found his way to Nassau street; a place his younger self had thought to be the epicenter of hip. The street's patios and storefronts were constantly strewn with trendy looking musicians, artists and hippy layabouts, drinking beer and coffee, or smoking joints.

Trevor approached the hole in the wall coffee shop where he was supposed to meet Emily. She was seated on one of several plastic chairs that surrounded a circular wooden table, smoking a cigarette. She held a floral patterned umbrella and wore rainboots, tights, and a light blue jacket with a fake fur collar and stitching on the side that attempted to imitate Inuit design.

She was being lectured at by a close-talking, dapperly dressed older gentleman who wore a goatee, bowling shirt, fedora and flip-flops with no socks, despite the season. Trevor paused before making himself known and

though he couldn't quite make out everything that was being said (the man was leaning in to Emily and needn't speak loudly) he vaguely made out the following words and phrases: "fettered," "chains," "means of production," "industrial revolution," "North Korea" and "glasnost." As the older man came to the end of his diatribe, he leaned back and sighed.

"But you're so young and pretty," he said. "You don't need to become jaded and cynical like me quite yet. Not until your parents pay to send you to some fancy university where you will learn about Karl Marx and boy trouble. So now, tell me, have you ever considered—"

Trevor emerged onto the makeshift patio at this point, putting an end to an interaction that made him uneasy, even though he also found it slightly amusing.

"Hi Trevor" Emily said, smiling. "Sorry Franco, this is the friend I'm meeting. I'll see you later though, okay?"

"Okay, sweetheart, take care. And seriously, you should come to my zen meditation practice next week," Franco offered. "I host it at my apartment. It's pay what you can and there's free tea. You can find a flyer inside with my address."

"Can I come too?" asked Trevor. Franco paused for a second, caught off guard and not happy about it. "Of course," he recovered gracefully. "Everyone is welcome."

"Who was that creepy old dude?" Trevor asked as they climbed the steps to inside.

"Franco? Oh come on, he's not creepy, he's sort of sweet. Well, okay. I guess he is a bit creepy. What's it to you pal? Jealous?"

"No, not at all. It's just that as a more mature, world-wizened figure in your life, I feel it's my responsibility to make sure you're not hanging around with old weird dudes who want you to come over to their apartment to drink hallucinogenic tea with your bare feet exposed."

“You are *so* jealous. Stop trying to rationalize your jealousy. It’s okay. Really. I think it’s sweet.”

“What jealous? The guy’s lecturing you about communism, but he’s got the same name as a former fascist dictator. He probably fought for the dictator Franco in the Spanish civil war he’s so old. You know what? I’ll bet that’s the dude that shot George Orwell. Fuck that guy!”

Trevor was gesturing wildly as he said all this and though Emily appeared to be annoyed, she secretly found Trevor’s speech very funny. As they came through the door, laughing and making jokes about poor George Orwell, the mood of the hole in the wall café brightened.

“I’ll take a pound of espresso beans and a cappuccino to stay please,” Trevor told the barista.

“Sure thing, man,” he replied. “Hey, I like your shirt. That’s a good dressy winter shirt. It looks warm, where’d you get it?”

“Oh, why thank you,” Trevor said, sincerely flattered. “I like your beard. I got it in London. At Zap, actually.”

“Oh man, I love that company. I just saw their new line in this magazine called Fresh Rust; have you ever heard of it? It’s this amazing biannual men’s fashion magazine. Wait, maybe not biannual, like six times a year, what would that be called?”

“Sex-annual I think?”

“No way.”

“Yeah way. Like a sextet right? That’s a jazz band with six dudes in it. Sex.”

“I don’t care how many times you say sex, I’m not having sex with you.”

“Well, maybe I’ll try again in a sexnight.” Trevor bantered back.

“What is that, like a fortnight joke? I don’t get it.”

“Oh, gross,” Emily cut in. “First of all, it would be

bi-monthly, you morons. Secondly, should I leave? Are you two going to blow each other right here?”

“Sorry. Em,” the barista said.

Trevor and Emily settled in with their coffees on a padded bench by the large front window. Blurry figures passed by outside in brightly coloured rain jackets that popped against the dull November sidewalk. There was no one else in the nook they occupied. Trevor put his arm around Emily. They nuzzled, talking casually about driving class and sci-fi, laughing intermittently and annoying the hell out of any single customers that came in.

As they left the café it started to rain harder. They huddled together under Emily’s umbrella. She wanted to stop in at a few shops on Kensington Ave, so they retraced Trevor’s earlier route. Next they walked back towards Spadina and were suddenly overcome by a wave of people.

“Chinatown with an umbrella is suicide,” Emily quipped.

They waited on an island in the middle of the busy street for the northbound streetcar that would shield them from the rain and the overrun sidewalks and the sight of skinned animals in the windows of the noodle houses. When it finally came, they sat at the back and looked out the window at the passing scenery: the festive traffic lights green, yellow and red. They came around the side of a roundabout that Emily offhandedly referred to as the Spadina Vagina.

“Most vaginas don’t have historical gothic university buildings planted in them,” Trevor pointed out, referring to the marooned University of Toronto arts building. He recalled then that he had once heard somewhere that the building had been a hospital early in the past century, and that Amelia Earhart had once worked there as a nurse.

“But look, there’s even a little concrete clitoris on this side,” Emily said, as they came back into a straightaway. Trevor had to admit, from a bird’s eye view the Spadina

roundabout would look like a vulgar act of coded architecture: a disembodied concrete case pushing up stone and gothic spires.

School was getting out when Trevor and Emily arrived back in Rosedale. As they got off the bus they were met with a deluge of wild children, emitting a kind of savage white noise. They fought against the tide, climbing the winding, recently rebuilt pedestrian bridge that passed over the train tracks, connecting Rosedale to Moore Park, where Emily lived.

“Hey, didn’t this bridge used to be orange?” said Trevor, stopping suddenly. He looked confused, his mouth twitched.

Emily laughed. “Trevor, what the fuck? They knocked the old bridge down last May and spent all summer building this new one.” Trevor stared at her blankly.

“It’s a block from your house and you didn’t notice? I liked the old one. You could sit up on those concrete ledges and get stoned and watch the trains go by. And there was weird cryptic graffiti all over, it’s kind of sad that it’s gone. This new one’s a lot nicer though. I feel like a sellout for saying it, but honestly that old orange bridge was such an eyesore with its wires sticking out everywhere. This new bridge is better lit at night too; way safer.”

Trevor was still visibly confused, but had by now regained his power of speech. “I can’t believe they knocked down the orange bridge,” he said. “This bridge is fucking blue. I don’t know why, but it’s really freaking me out. I used to walk across that old bridge to and from school every day in elementary. It’s so ingrained in my personal mythology, my childhood. It’s like that Greek saying, about how you can never cross the same bridge twice. Who said that? Parmenides?”

“First of all, I’m pretty sure this bridge is more like a forest green and secondly it’s Heraclitus you’re thinking of,

Trevor. I studied him in Intro Philosophy. The quotation is about how you can't step in the same river twice. There's no bridge. Didn't you major in philosophy? I don't understand how you possibly could've graduated."

"Damn," He said, brushing off the insult. "I feel really old all of a sudden."

"Are you kidding? You are definitely old, you graduated from elementary school school sixteen years ago; the year after I was born. I can't believe you've lived in Rosedale your whole life, more or less. It's such a fantasy land down there: your own personal Neverland." Trevor scowled at her. "Poor little rich boy with his first world problems," she said mockingly. "Don't worry, you'll grow up and be a real boy one day. I just know it! Hey, my parents aren't home until six. Want to come over and play house?"

They had reached the other side of the bridge now and Trevor enacted a bit of physical comedy, hovering over the crack that separated the bridge from the first square of pavement on the other side. He was up on his tip toes, leaning over the edge, hands flailing.

"I can't leave Neverland!" he joked, bitterly. "My aging process will accelerate like the villain at the end of *Last Crusade* and I'll shrivel up and die."

"Come on, don't be weird, Trevor," Emily said. "I didn't mean to offend you. I was just kidding around. Don't be so sensitive."

"No really, I should go," he said, serious now. "My dad doesn't like to admit it but he gets lonely and I haven't been around much the past couple days."

Emily sighed. "Alright, whatever," she said. "Text me when you feel like hanging out."

Trevor watched for a minute as she disappeared up the hill, then turned back towards his own home.



Everything that day had happened so quickly. He'd been in bed with Margot less than six hours ago, and suddenly the day's indulgences caught up with him. He stopped overhead the train tracks and grasped the chain link barrier without realizing it. He was oversexed. He felt sticky and emotional. His brain felt heavy. He opened his eyes; up went the eyebrows. 'It is like Neverland isn't it?' He realized he'd been living as if he had all the time in the world. He wasn't young anymore; not young enough to be doing what he was, anyway. Coasting on the fumes. He was old enough to be a young professional, or a grad student, an artist. At least an unsuccessful musician. But he wasn't really anything. It was so easy to waste time, to simply exist if one had the means. But that was no formula for happiness; it was just a method of temporary contentment.

He'd read somewhere that the younger generation was being heralded as one of heroes, charged with the task of saving the world from war, pollution and corruption. They understood computers better and knew about recycling and alternative energy sources. They were equipped to apply creative solutions to the world's most severe problems. Sometimes he wished he had a clear-cut purpose, but he knew this was not a fair wish. One had to find a purpose, and Trevor had difficulty finding anything that wasn't placed immediately in front of him. A freight train bearing the stamp *Maritime-Ontario* blasted along beneath Trevor, bringing him back to his surroundings. His feet moved, one in front of the other, leading him back down into Rosedale. The bodies, lips and words of the two women he'd been with that day swirled through his mind. A beautiful brunette in spandex jogged by and Trevor didn't even flinch, nor did he notice the pretty schoolgirls getting off the bus. His usual powers of lusty observation were suspended. He lurched home on autopilot, climbed the stairs to his bed-

room and fell into a deep sleep.

When he awoke it was dark. He took a shower and dressed for dinner. Trevor's father, William, was sitting in the living room at the front of the house, sifting through a stack of magazines and sipping three fingers of scotch.

William had been living in solitude for many years now, with the exception of those times that his children came home to visit. It'd been some time in the week approaching Christmas a decade earlier that his wife had been killed by a speeding vehicle while crossing the street amidst a blotchy snowstorm, arms full of department store bags. Trevor had been thirteen, his sister Sarah, eleven.

The renovated living room, a semi circle that jutted out the front of the house, had been designed by the famous architect Frank Gehry, who, as it happened, was an old friend of William's. The bookshelves had been custom made to follow the curvature of the walls. There was a row of windows looking out on Rosedale Park and a piano that Sarah knew how to play quite well. The smell of garlic and onions sautéing in olive oil wafted in from the kitchen where Rosalinda was no doubt preparing a masterful dinner.

"Trevor, my boy," William greeted him, with that stubborn English accent that wouldn't fade after all these years. "I was wondering where you'd got off to. Sleeping by the looks of it. Always sleeping you young men these days. Don't drink enough coffee, mucking about on the internet, no work ethic. Go on then, pour yourself a drink." Trevor was already splashing a healthy serving of fourteen year old scotch into a tumbler. He sighed and sat down heavily in a soft armchair.

"What is it, boy? What's troubling you? You look a bit down at the dumps. Can't imagine why though; the life you lead."

"Just a bit groggy. Napped for too long I think," Trevor said.

“Are you sure there’s nothing wrong? You can talk to me, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, dad. Seriously, I’m alright. How are you? How was your day?”

“It was okay I guess. Played a good round of squash at the gym. Back’s been feeling better, so that’s a relief. Markets were shit, but that seems to be the way of it these days. Knocked off early to check out the Renaissance exhibit at the gallery and that was really something. You should go before it closes. I’ll lend you my membership.”

“Sounds good. I’d like that. Saw in the paper that the Premier is resigning. Pretty big news. What do you make of it?”

If Trevor intentionally avoided discussing personal matters with his father, it was because they lay outside of the comfortable bubble that their interactions inhabited. In the bubble, art, politics, global affairs and masculine humour reigned supreme. Over time Trevor had learned that if he ever breached the topic of real, serious feelings (an impulse that rarely came over him, in any case), his father grew uncomfortable and taciturn. That night their conversation remained on familiar grounds, for which Trevor found himself extremely grateful.

“No, no, I just drank a double. We’re having wine with dinner, aren’t we? Take it easy, old man.” Trevor protested as his father poured him another drink.

“What are you worried about? A hangover? You know in the seventies there wasn’t such a thing as a hangover. People smoked on airplanes, drank fifteen cups of coffee a day and there was no AIDS either, so you didn’t have to wear a condom. Girls were on the pill and it was just rock ‘n roll baby!”

“Aw, dad. Gross. All right,” Trevor exclaimed, terrified. “I’ll have another drink, just please don’t ever make me think about your sex life in the seventies ever again, please.”

After dinner, as Trevor lay in the bath reading *A Wizard of Earthsea*, his phone buzzed from on top of the toilet. It was Margot, and she wanted him to come over. It was a cool, clear night and Trevor savoured the fresh air on the short walk. As he approached Margot's place, he noticed the modern architecture job: clean lines, lots of big windows. The house sat between two ivy covered behemoths that had stood there for the better part of a century. The Keepness abode, by contrast, looked like a failed transplant. If what was going on inside the house was any indication, then this diagnosis was accurate: a rich, young couple that couldn't hack it as a family, living in a soulless house.

Margot had been crying. She led Trevor inside and made some tea. They sat on a white sofa in the living room while Trevor tried to comfort her as best he could.

"This house is just so big. I get so lonely. All of Kevin's stuff is here: his suits, his records, his stupid business strategy books," Margot said. "During the day I have tons of energy and get excited about all the possibilities that have opened up now that I'm free. But at night I get depressed and feel numb. Our lives were so easy before we got married; everything felt natural. But then came the fighting and the sex stopped and I was tempted to cheat but I thought we'd just get through it.

"My yoga class was cancelled one day and I came home early. Kevin had some fucking young bitch in the jacuzzi bathtub. I couldn't figure out what was going on at first because the bathroom door was locked, all I could hear was a bunch of splashing and whispering. Eventually the girl decided to make a run for it, she put on her slutty little dress and bolted, ran right by me. Scented candles, bubble bath, and there was Kevin, putting on his robe. There were bath oils lying out and a razor. He'd been shaving her fucking pussy, can you believe it? A married man acting out this cheesy porno fantasy in the bathroom connected to his

master bedroom. He fucked himself into a corner. I think he must've wanted to get caught."

They talked for a long time, sipping tea and kissing beneath a blanket. Max the cat curled up with them. In those hours, Trevor effectively cheered Margot up. Margot, for her part, gave Trevor a sense of purpose. The emotional exchange provided a great deal of comfort, for one night, to a boy who had long been avoiding the stresses of maturity, and a grown woman who had use for a proper man in her life.

After a long session of foreplay on the couch, Margot led Trevor back up to the bedroom where, this time buffered by alcohol and more accustomed to the idea of living out his fantasy, he stripped Margot and made love to her in a series of positions and with a rough tenderness and skill that surprised even him. When they had completely finished they were both sweaty and exhausted. As Trevor wavered between reality and sleep his thoughts became confused. He wanted Max to like him, needed him to like him. He imagined taking the cat to baseball games and going to the aquarium with him; helping Max to reach his paws into the tanks and eat rare fishes when the security guard wasn't looking. He could look after the cat when Margot wasn't around. He would be a good father.



On the other end of a murky night's sleep, Trevor found himself back in the aquarium. This time he was alone. He heard thumping, there were sharks, ferocious little sharks battering the windows. Thousands of tiny cracks shot out from the points of impact. The glass shattered, and he saw the vicious rows of teeth. He couldn't move. The water swept over him.

He opened his eyes. Margot wasn't in bed with him. It was bright outside. The smashing noises had not stopped. Someone bellowed from downstairs. A man's voice:

“What the Fuck? Margot! Where are you? Is this some kind of fucking joke?” Footsteps. Loud. Tramping up the stairs.

Trevor jumped out of bed, barely had time to pull his underpants on before he saw the man standing in the doorway. The first thing Trevor noticed was that the man was impeccably dressed. He wondered what make that suit was. It looked really expensive. He was dazzled by how well the shirt matched the tie, which dangled at just the right length. The second thing he noticed was that the man's handsome features were screwed up into a terrible grimace; his eyes crazy with rage. Finally he noticed a note that the man was holding in his right hand for Trevor to see as if it bore some great relevance. The man was Kevin Keepness. The note, which Trevor would never see, read:

Dear Trevor,

Thanks for last night. I haven't come like that since college. You are a lovely young man and a formidable lay. Let's do that again tonight and every night after for as long as you can keep it up. Had to run some errands this morning. There's cereal in the cupboard up and to the right of the stove. xo,

- Margot

Kevin charged at Trevor, knocking him down. Trevor reflexively blocked a punch and managed to push his assailant off of him, hurling him into the wall. In the brief moment that he'd purchased, Trevor grabbed his wadded up clothes and made for the front door. Kevin gathered himself and pursued, jumping from halfway down the staircase, landing on Trevor from behind. The two men fell with a thud in the front hallway and began to wrestle. Kevin

successfully landed a couple of punches on Trevor, who was mostly just trying to neutralize his opponent with some maneuvers he half remembered from grade ten judo class. After ten or fifteen minutes of this juvenile wrestling display carried out by men who simply did not know how to fight, the two of them lay panting in the living room, Trevor in his underpants, Kevin in his sweat-stained two piece.

Trevor propped himself up on his elbows and beheld the scene of carnage that Mr. Keepness had created: one of the house's three large front windows had been smashed in with a tire iron that now lay on the ground (Trevor mentally thanked Jesus that it had not been used on him as a weapon); beyond the window, in the parkette across the street that formed an isosceles triangle, Mr. Keepness' Audi sat smoking where he had crashed into a tree. The dark circles under Kevin's eyes and the strong scent of whiskey on his breath explained a lot.

Kevin had been out drinking all night and decided it was time he came home. When he found that Margot had changed the locks he became enraged and busted the window. That's when he found the note. The fighting seemed to have sobered him up a bit and now he was looking upon his damaged property with an expression of bewilderment.

"Holy shit," Trevor said. "Look what you did."

"I just wanted my Springsteen records," Kevin said in an angry whisper.

"Isn't this your house? Don't you have a key or at least know a secret way in or something? Tire iron to the window seems kind of dramatic for just wanting to get your Springsteen records. The gesture is kind of badass in a way; sort of a Cusack eighties thing meets *Die Hard*. High praise, but still."

"Shut the fuck up. My head is killing me. I think I broke a rib when we fell down the stairs."

Kevin hauled himself up, disappeared for a mo-

ment and returned carrying a bottle of Stella. Trevor had just finished dressing himself and was headed out the door. Kevin popped a couple Aspirin in his mouth, took a swig of beer and placed a hand on Trevor's shoulder from behind. "Sit the fuck down, kid. You've got some explaining to do," he said. Trevor explained.

"Let me get this straight," said Kevin once he'd heard Trevor's side of the story. "You're twenty three, you live with your dad, you don't have a job or any job training. What, do you just hang around all day looking to fuck married women? Jesus, when I was your age I was working fifteen hour days, barely sleeping. I'd heard your generation was lazy, but you? You're the *crème de la crème*: the laziest shit nugget in the shit kingdom."

"Wow, wow, wow. Hold on a second. I appreciate that you've got a strong work ethic and obviously you've done quite well for yourself, but let's not forget that you broke the holy bond of matrimony. I'm no expert on fucking around, but come on, you cheated on your wife in your conjugal bathtub while she was out for like an hour. So before you criticize me..."

"Have you ever been married kid? No, wait, have you ever been in a relationship that lasted more than a fucking year?"

Trevor had to admit, this guy was pretty good at calling him on his shit. Forget about a year; he'd never even made it to six months before. His face conveyed this information to Kevin.

"That's what I thought. Well let me tell you kid, it's not fucking easy. Marriage is one god damn complicated endeavour; way more complicated than making money. You have no idea the kind of strain we were under as a married couple. Pressure to have kids, problems with each other's families, trouble communicating. So, sure I responded poorly, became a workaholic, then an alcoholic and then a

pussyholic. You think I don't feel bad? But did you ever ask Margot how she reacted when things got tough? She's like the Michael Jordan of passive aggressive, I swear to God. And now she went and fucked some retarded twenty three year old.

"Let me tell you something else, kid: you got fucking played. I was calling, sending texts all day yesterday saying I wanted to come home. She wanted me to find out like this. If this wasn't a revenge fuck then I'm the king of Singapore." Kevin halted, visibly holding back tears. "Twenty-three. Hell, even I never went that young. You know, I still love her, even through all this. I even stopped cheating on her after she threw me out. Fucking Christ, I don't why I'm telling you all this."

"Wait, she threw you out? She told me you left." Trevor said.

"Kid, what am I telling you? She's the queen, we're just pawns. Why don't you go find a broad that isn't married? Maybe enrol in community college. Get yourself a job, huh? Quit getting mixed up in other people's affairs." Trevor saw a police car approaching slowly in the distance and stood up to leave. "Oh, and if I ever see you again I'm going to beat your head in with that tire iron. I'm fucking serious, all right?" At that Trevor turned and trotted down the street.

He was dazed by the turn of events and the blows to his face. On the walk home he found his trusty one-hitter in his pocket, crushed some pot into the tip and lit up. His lungs filled and the hot metal burnt his lips. He held the smoke for as long as he could manage so that by the time he exhaled there was just a thin wisp streaming from his mouth.

Thoughts shifted and clicked together in Trevor's head like Tetris bricks. He had to consider the possibility that Kevin was lying in order to get him out of the pic-

ture. But in retrospect it did seem odd that this mature, gorgeous woman should have picked up a complete stranger at a grocery store. Trevor shook his head without realizing it. The world could be a place of incredible, serendipitous encounters. In all the countries and all the languages the world over, there had to be innumerable scenes each day resembling a Cary Grant/Doris Day meet-cute.

Still, the encounter with Kevin had cast a dark shadow over something that was so obviously too good to be true. However broken the relationship between Margot and her husband was, there were complex, unresolved issues that Trevor could not fix. He felt like an actor playing a small but essential role in a much greater drama; though he only had a few lines, the advancement of the plot was impossible without him. His thoughts turned to Emily. Emily, who was funny, intelligent and beautiful. Whose favourite book was *Dune*. What more could he ask for? He'd been unfair to her and he felt rotten about it. It was, after all, pathetic that he'd never been truly committed to a relationship. He had to set things right.

Moments later he was riding his dad's old yellow racing bike furiously across St. Clair, wearing no helmet, blowing through red lights. West of Yonge the parked cars and dedicated streetcar tracks squeezed traffic into a single lane. As he swerved suddenly into that lane, a chorus of furious horns bellowed angrily. He stood, driving the pedals hard, hands gripping the bottoms of the curled-under handlebars wrapped in grip tape. As he approached his destination he swung a leg over the middle of the bike so that he was standing on the left pedal with his right leg crossed over it and jumped off while the bike was still moving, leaving it to ghost ride and topple in front of Emily's school.

His swollen left eye and sweaty brow, combined with the fact that he was running, taking the school's front steps two at a time, gave him an air of madness. At the same time

he was wearing his fashionable Danish scarf-collar sweater, expensive pants and deck shoes. So really, he looked like an upstanding young man in distress more so than a madman. He quickly found the school's office. A young, plain looking blonde woman sat behind the secretary's desk wearing horn rimmed glasses and a helpful smile. She greeted Trevor:

"Hello there sir, how may I help you today?" "Hi," said Trevor. "My sister, Emily Adler, goes here and I need to see her right away. It's a family emergency. I really need to see her right away."

"Oh, you're Emily's brother! I can see the family resemblance; that's so odd."

"Yeah, we get that all time. So listen, I don't want to waste your time. If you can just tell me what classroom she's in I can go get her."

"Let's see, well I believe she's in Modern Western Civilizations with Miss McKenna at the moment. That's in room 12B on the second floor, but we'll have to send someone to—"

"Thanks," yelled Trevor, as he disappeared down the hallway.

He ran up the stairs to the second floor where he quickly found 12B. The classroom door had a little window on it at eye level. Trevor looked in and saw several rows of girls sporting navy blue kilts and jackets, white shirts and tartan ties, studiously taking notes. In a minute, Emily pushed the door open violently, hitting Trevor in the face.

"Ouch, fuck!" said Trevor. "My god damn face."

"Fuck your face," hissed Emily. "What are you doing here, you creep? I could get in a lot of trouble." She paused. "What the fuck happened to your face?"

"Em, just listen to me, just hear me out for a second. I had sex with an older woman yesterday. Not just once but a bunch of times. Her husband, who she kind of split up with, broke into their house this morning and we

beat the shit out of each other and I got this black eye, and I'm pretty sure he broke a rib, but that's not the point. I didn't think that we could be together because of the age difference thing, but the dude whose wife I had sex with helped me realize that that doesn't matter: if you love someone then you just have to try and make it work, even if it's not easy.

"I've been living my life as if I had all the time in the world, but I don't have all the time in the world. I have to focus and try harder. You came into my life and I took you for granted. I mean, I know we're not officially going out or anything, but I feel like I cheated on you, and that's not okay. I hope you'll forgive me. I'm telling you all this because I love you Emily. I think I love you. I want to be with you, meet your parents, all that stuff. Let's do it. What do you think?"

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Emily demanded, angrily. "You think you can just show up, tell me you're ready to be with me and that you fucked someone else and I'm supposed to melt in your arms?"

"No!" Trevor said. "Not really, I just needed to get all that shit off my chest, take your time processing it. Plus I thought you'd like the grand emotional gesture, like Dustin Hoffman at the end of *The Graduate* kind of thing, or Cusack in *Say Anything*. With the stereo?"

"You are ridiculous, Trevor," Emily said. "Nobody my age has seen those stupid fucking movies you always talk about. Nobody cares. I watched Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and you know what? It was fucking boring. You're so lost in your own little world. It's fucked up. Go do something useful for once in your stupid life. Go build schools in Africa or something, just get the fuck away from me. I don't want you anymore."

"You don't mean that. Come on. I'm sorry. Let's talk about this."

“Trevor, I’m seeing someone.”

“What? What are you talking about? Who? It’s that creepy old guy from the coffee shop isn’t it? The fucking fascist, I knew it,” Trevor said, going cold.

“No, Trevor, gross, not in a million years.”

“The kid from the park then, that Abercrombie and Fitch wearing lacrosse bro.”

“No, Trevor!” She said, angry again. “He’s no one you’ve met. He’s just a normal guy my age; he goes to public school. Look, I’m sorry Trevor, I thought I maybe loved you for a bit, but this was destined to fail. You’re seven years older than me, and you have so much shit to figure out for yourself, I don’t even know where to begin. Look, I’m sorry. This just wasn’t meant to be.”

The bell rang and the hallway flooded with loud, cheerful girls carrying binders and textbooks. Trevor and Emily hugged amicably and for a moment became invisible, protected by some unseen force. Trevor reached inside of himself to try and find something, feel something. He wanted to cry but couldn’t. The the tangible barrier between his empty life and the life that pulsed purposefully around him sapped his energy, depressed him terribly. It was over. His gesture had failed.



The next day Emily didn’t show up to driving class. Connor sat in her place with Melissa next to him. They held hands underneath the table and started kissing during the break.

‘Don’t mind the blow job mouth so much now, eh?’ Trevor thought, immediately regretting it. He couldn’t even bring himself to take notes and there was a quiz at the end of class that he’d forgotten to study for that he mostly just

drew doodles on. What was the point of all this? Why had he even signed up for this stupid course? So he was twenty three and couldn't drive, so what? Fuck point of no return. Fuck blind spots and yield signs and high beams. Fuck turn signals. Fuck all season tires. Fuck it all. He was seriously considering dropping out of driving school.

He had biked to class on a whim and on his way home, as he reached the Glen road bridge, something compelled him to dismount and walk. When he was halfway across his phone buzzed in his pocket, surprising him. It was Margot.

"Hi Margot," Trevor said flatly.

"Hi Trevor," she said, in a gentle, friendly voice.

"How are you?"

"I'm okay."

"Okay. That's good," she paused awkwardly. "Trevor, I heard what happened yesterday and I'm so sorry. I never meant for you to—"

"Look, it's okay. I understand. I got between a man and his wife, and there's a certain hazard that goes along with that. I'll live. As far as anything else goes—" he paused, painfully aware that the second half of this sentence was irrelevant. "You don't have to explain. I get it."

On the other end the phone Margot was silent. Trevor paused at the center of the bridge, and nestled into one of the concrete recesses designed for valley gazers. He tried to think of something funny and final to say, realizing that this was probably the last time he'd ever speak to her.

"Hey, don't ever pass up a free meal at Mayflower Market," he said. "And never accept the first expiration date you see." He regretted his words as soon as he had spoken them, realizing these were really corny things to say.

"Goodbye Trevor," said Margot.

"Bye," said Trevor, and then: "Keep that boy of yours in line, all right." But she'd already hung up.

The sky overhead was homogeneously grey now, there was no distinguishing between the eastern and western horizons. It started to snow lightly; the first snowfall of the year.

Trevor stood there for a while, not really thinking about anything in particular. Then he started thinking about the German book with the young man in the rowboat. The young man had been stuck way up on this crazy mountain in Switzerland for a long time. He'd learned about love and philosophy, science, music, all kinds of things. He'd been sent up to a higher altitude because of his health.

Trevor began imagining a world with a different kind of physics, a world in which there was no impact when objects collided. If two cars crashed head on at high speeds they would harmlessly glance off of one another. If you dropped a stack of dishes they would bounce up and down gently on the ground and then come to rest unharmed. In this alternate world Trevor's mother was alive. She'd been sent soaring like a beach ball when the car had hit her.

He looked over the edge of the bridge and imagined throwing himself off. In his new physics he would float instead of falling. For a long time he concentrated on this idea until finally he was lifted skyward. He was hoisted over the lip of the bridge in a soft arc and propelled down towards the ravine below. The snow fell lazily, but still faster than him. He stretched out his limbs, like a starfish, staring into the stiff muddy path that lay between the trees.

He closed his eyes and imagined he was swimming through a sea of bluebells like the ones that grew in his backyard. He had a childhood memory, probably just a dream, in which he'd dove beneath the surface of the flowers and discovered a whole new world. Like Hans Castorp. Ha! That was the German boy's name. The boy who'd discovered dual realities from the rowboat at dusk. Trevor kept his eyes closed and imagined that he was floating in the water

beneath the rowboat, beneath the surface of a twilight that divided reality. A place of profound metamorphosis. It felt like he was sinking for a long time, deeper and deeper into the dream water, where it became murky. He dug himself into a bed of sand as the warm current pawed at him and lulled him to sleep.

He awoke hours later on the cold mud of the ravine path, dusted with snow. The full weight of his body had returned.

THE GHOST OF STALINGRAD

I was born on July 1st, 1917 in the farmland just outside of Smolensk to a Christian, landowning family. My two older brothers, Slavik and Iurii, were twins. They were big and strong and dumb as bricks. You could absolutely not tell them apart, not even me. 1917, I don't know if you know, was a year that my country was in the throes of a great revolution. By October of that year, when I was just a little squirming, shiny baby, the Bolsheviks had taken to the streets, won the support of the workers and soldiers and jailed the Tsar, Nicholas II, and the remaining Romanovs.

You must understand that my parents were simple, God fearing citizens, they were not political people, but to live in Russia and to avoid politics at that time was impossible. My parents supported the Soviet Bolsheviks in a passive kind of a way. Publicly they were forced to suppress their religious beliefs. They could see the tide of history in our country turning. In reality my father cared as much for politics as he cared for a rancid turnip. To him it was just

a bunch of puffed up men in golden epaulettes on the one hand, or in shoddy work shirts with philosophy books on the other saluting and battling and arguing and masturbating each other like a bunch of wild monkeys. For him what mattered were the animals, the crop, the efficiency of the farm, the happiness of his family, but above all the Holy Trinity. This is what was in his heart when he went to bed late every night and rose at the freezing crack of dawn to scrub his face with cold water.

For a while after I was born, everything was okay. I have very fond memories of growing up: of playing tag and running through the fields with my brother; of carriage rides and hunting butterflies in the summer, and drinking hot chocolate in the winter. But this happiness was not to be a lasting thing. Like anything good in life I did not truly appreciate it until it was snatched away from me.

When I was six my parents had a baby girl, my sister Katya. From the earliest age I can remember she was the most pleasant, pure and bright little girl you'd ever see. When I was a baby I would scream and cry and run around and smash vases but Katya was just so quiet and well behaved. When I misbehaved she would give me this look, not condescending, but a sad look because she wanted us to behave and get along, and find peace in the presence of God. She was very Christian from an early age as well, not like Slavik and Iurii and me who would make faces at each other when mother read to us from the bible.

By the time Lenin died our family was already struggling with massive inflation rates and our farm was technically owned by the State. In the years following Lenin's death things seemed to take a turn for the worse. Workers from the bureau of agriculture would come around taking more and more of our crops, kidnapping our animals until we had almost nothing to eat for ourselves. This is what really got my father's blood boiling. He was ashamed that he

could not do better for us.

*

So my father's hair starts to turn grey and fall out and he is heard murmuring negative things about the Party. In the town, people start to talk; there are people who think he has treated them unfairly in business. How was he to know that one of the goats he sold to Yakov would die within the year? There are envious farmers who would gain very much if my father were to disappear. Somebody passes along some information to the government and the next thing you know the chekists are stopping by to ask him some questions.

So his hair falls out some more and he is always counting his rosary beads and praying in his room.

Shortly after this, father tells me he has hidden a thick package of roubles in a hollowed out space behind the pickle jars in the cellar. He says to me:

“Alyosha, you are getting to be a young man now. One of these days they might take me away. They’ll take me and maybe your mother and you might not see us again. Don’t cry. You need to brave.

“Now listen to me: if this happens you’ll need to take this money and get to Moscow. Hire one of the loyal God fearing muzhiks, maybe Vladimir, to take you and your sister there by carriage. Find your uncle Pyotr Grigorovich; he is a good man with many connections. I’ve included his address. You can start fresh there. In this land our name has been blackened by lies. We’ve already lost our land; there’s nothing for you here. Your brothers, God bless their souls, are as dumb as a couple of those oxen you see swatting flies with their tails out in the field. They will remain here. They know nothing but the farm.”

At this point tears started streaming down my cheeks shamelessly, easily. My brothers were my best

friends, my only friends. We'd grown up wrestling, pulling apart frogs and throwing rocks at birds. We were very close.

"Your brothers will be fine," my father reassured me. "God smiles on simpletons... and the love of Jesus shines in your soul, young one. God's will is not for us mortals to see in its totality but if you trust in Him and embrace His divine love, He will show you the path."

It was a good thing he gave me this talk when he did, because a few weeks later, just after my thirteenth birthday, the checkists came and arrested my parents. They smashed up the house and called us kulaks, which was a bad word for rich peasants. They said that father was unfair and greedy in his business; that he was religious and that you couldn't be religious anymore. They told our parents they were going to put us children to work on the state run kolkhoz; that we would work alongside our fellow Russians as equals until the soil was thick with our sweat and the blood.

"This is not what God intended for our country!" my father screamed. "This is a corruption of all that is holy!"

"There is no more God in Russia," the arresting officer replied. "There is only the Party."

I was in a state of shock. It was not until much later, after I made it to Moscow that I was able to mourn my parents' fate. My father, as I understood it, was sent to the gulag to do hard labour as penance for his supposed crimes against the Party. My mother was sent to a special work camp for women where they were treated a little better and given more feminine work: sewing military uniforms and such.

We were under house arrest until further notice. The Party sent an officer from the bureau of agriculture to live in our house and oversee the transition, he carried with him at all times a pistol that I suspect he kept tucked under his pillow at night. He was a horrible man called Roghozin

with bad skin and always smelling of sour cabbage. Then the kolkhozniks moved in. They were smelly, dirty and crude. They tramped all over the carpets in their filthy boots and spit into the vases. They fucked their wives loudly, with the doors open so that I had to clamp my hands over Katya's ears and sing songs loudly. This was supposed to be a Russia where every man was equal, but these kolkhozniks were pigs who couldn't even be bothered to wipe the shit from their cracks.

I was full of anger and adrenaline and eager to fulfill my father's wishes for Katya and me. I had to explain to her what father had explained to me and this was very difficult. She being so much younger, her reaction to the disappearance of her parents was much more immediate. She would not stop sobbing and yelling aloud:

"Why God, why have you taken my mommy and daddy?"

I tried to explain: "Katya, it is not God who has taken mother and father: it is the Party." I thought carefully about what I was saying for a moment and changed my tone. "But much like with God we cannot question the will of the Party. We do not always understand why things happen but it is not us who know best. You must not question the Party; never a bad word against the Party. Promise me Katya!" I hissed at her. All this of course I delivered in a whisper, trembling as I spoke. I needed her to understand this new reality worse than anything.

"Who knows," I said. "Maybe one day the Party will let us have our parents back. When God takes someone away they never come back. At least mama and papa are alive somewhere."

This I did not think was false hope. I believed they might be released eventually. The politics in Russia were shifting as fast as the weather, and who knew how one's luck could change? But we never saw our parents again.

It was the crooked nosed muzhik named Vladimir who took us to Moscow in the end. He was a crusty old man, but he had a young and mischievous soul. He liked to whistle and sing as he drove the carriage. Father had been kind to him and he in turn showed us a great kindness. We told no one we were leaving, the twins were already beginning to tow the Party line and make friends with the kolkhozniks, telling them where to find the ripest watermelons and catch the biggest fish. They could not be trusted.

It was very late on a clear night in the spring when we arranged for Vladimir to meet us around the side of the house. Roghozin was staying in a room at the front of the house. His great big wolf of a dog, Pushkin, who would bark loudly if you so much as breathed near him, blocked the main entrance as he slept. The back doorway had been sealed off after they arrested my parents, so out the window was our only choice. I'd given the twins a huge bottle of Vodka I found in the cellar when I went to retrieve the package of roubles and they had sung themselves to sleep. The coast was clear.

There was a tall pile of hay in back of the carriage for us to jump onto. I made Katya go first to make sure she was safe before I tumbled down after. She was a good sport and didn't make a peep. She landed smack in the middle of the hay. I threw down a little bag that contained the roubles and some other odds and ends, but when it was my turn to jump, I really made a mess of things. Just outside the window was a hook to hang the lantern from and as I jumped, I realized that my pants were caught on it. Instead of falling down I swung around and hit the side of the house with a great thud. When Katya saw me hanging in the air like that she screamed loudly. Once I'd caught my breath, I reached up and ripped my pants from where they hung. Good old Vladimir had the carriage backed up just in time to catch me, but by then we could hear Pushkin barking and knew

we had a big problem. Vladimir started the horses galloping, but before we had moved ten paces, Roghozin and Pushkin had materialized out of nowhere. I wasn't thinking straight but I grabbed the nearest thing to me, which was a scythe that Vladimir, like an idiot, had left lying in the hay. I lifted it up just in time to see the flash of Roghozin's pistol. The bullet ricocheted off the blade next to Katya's head.

My hands burned with pain, but more importantly my blood boiled with rage. Very quickly, without thinking, I reached into my bag, stood up and lobbed a jar of pickled herring with all my strength. Before Roghozin had a chance to fire again the jar smashed on his face, which immediately began gushing blood as he cried out in pain and fell to the ground. All the time my brothers and I spent throwing rocks at crows in the fields may have saved my life. My aim had become very good. I had to switch very quickly back to the scythe because Pushkin was snapping at our heels. As he flung himself at us with his teeth bared I whacked him in the head with the flat side of the blade and he tumbled back down yelping and whining. I felt a little bad, to be honest, that I hit Pushkin. He was just a big dumb animal. Then again, he probably gobbled up all that pickled herring that lay on the ground, so maybe we're even. Vladimir drove that carriage as fast he could into the night and didn't slow down until morning. I never saw the farm again.



A couple days later we rode into Moscow along the River Moskva, hidden beneath a blanket amidst a shipment of potatoes. Eventually I poked my head out. There were bridges all in a row as far as the eye could see. We rode past the palaces in Red Square that rose up against the morning sky like giant candies in fancy wrappers. There were men and women in spectacular outfits strolling on the river

banks, filthy street urchins hustling about and a great flow of carriages in the streets that carried us along the banks of the river. Once I again I wept. All this life was so strange and so beautiful. I knew that I had to be a man now- that the innocent time of childhood was lost. I was responsible for Katya and needed to be strong for the two of us. We arrived at the address my father had given me and I paid Ivan the five hundred roubles we had agreed upon, plus an extra hundred because of the danger we'd put him in.

Pyotr Grigorovich was my Aunt Yulia's husband on my mother's side, and he was a very interesting character indeed. Like so many citizens in Moscow at the time, he lived with a false identity, except that he had been wearing a mask for much longer than most; since before it had become fashionable. His real name was Waclaw Dudek, he had been a soldier in the Polish army and participated in the invasion of Ukraine in the spring a decade earlier. The Polish army had joined with the Ukrainian resistance to liberate the country from the grip of Soviet rule. They succeeded in capturing Kiev. It was Lenin's idea, however, that if Poland could be defeated via Ukraine, then a bridge could be built to bring communism to western Europe. The Soviet counter offensive was fast and powerful, and the Poles quickly arranged a tactical retreat.

As my uncle fled, he was struck in the leg by shrapnel from a mortar. In the chaos of a quick retreat he was left behind. He crawled on his hands and knees towards the nearby bridge that crossed over the Dnieper River only to watch it explode and dissolve into the water. Knowing, as he did, that the Poles had been portrayed as monstrous demons in Soviet propaganda, he realized that to be captured meant certain death. When he reached the edge of the river he discovered a set of stairs descending to a small, concrete plateau. On this plateau lay the corpse of a Russian soldier that must have fallen down when they took Kiev.

Waclaw half fell and half climbed down the stairs in agony. When he reached the body, sobbing because of the pain, he stripped himself and the dead soldier of their clothes and managed to get himself into the Russian uniform. He rolled the naked Russian into the water and watched him float downstream with the debris from the falling bridge as the world around him went black. His leg oozed pus and blood.

When he awoke, the leg was gone. Despite this loss two more miraculous strokes of luck followed. I know it seems unlikely, but I swear it's all true. The first stroke was that he could speak Russian very well. His father, Bazyli Dudek, had a rich Russian ancestry and the language came to him most naturally. Dudek senior was a man of letters, a professor at the university in Warsaw; the kind of man who obsessed over Marx, Hegel, Lenin and finally the question of communism and the possibility of human progress in history. He saw his country passed back and forth between the two great powers on either side and dreamed of an independent Poland and a good future for his boy. Bazyli cultivated the Russian language in his children from a very young age as well as German and some French. He thought the languages might come in handy some day. As fate would have it, Waclaw was now delivered back to the country his forefathers had abandoned, as if settling an outstanding debt.

He woke up in a Russian hospital and put his knowledge of the language to use. He adopted the name Pyotr Grigorovich. The second stroke of luck was that my mother's sister, Yulia, was the nurse that tended to him at the hospital in Kiev. Yulia was as beautiful as Waclaw was handsome and the two flirted constantly. They quickly fell in love. One night Yulia heard Waclaw mumbling to himself in Polish while he slept. She heard Lenin's name and then Stalin's. He switched to Russian and said something about

a parade. It sounded like nonsense. She quickly shook him awake, but then, in a semi delirious state he continued to chatter on in Polish, calling her an angel and professing his love for her loudly. Understanding none of this, she looked at him, wide eyed with terror. Waclaw, realizing his mistake, said to her in Russian, so that she understood: "No one can know my secret, you must protect me. If you would consent to be my wife, I'd give anything. I'd give anything. There's no price, no sacrifice I wouldn't make, sweet girl." They kissed passionately, Yulia trying in vain not to agitate his leg.

In August of 1921 Yulia Ivanovna married Pyotr Grigorovich and they moved to Moscow where, over time, Pyotr became one of the most talented and well respected shoe makers in the city. All of this, my uncle would recount to me in great detail years later, smiling warmly, over a glass of vodka in our tiny, rat-infested apartment.

By this time Stalin had risen to the head of the party, insulating himself within a terrifying political cult. In his new economic program there was no room for independent craftsmen, for makers of clothes and shoes and furniture and all of the other things that I had taken for granted in my youth. The State could do it better, they said. Always, the State could do it better. So much better that thousands froze or starved to death, spit on Stalin's rat shit grave.

They took away Waclaw's shop and then they took away his apartment on the Moskva. It became the property of the State, probably given to some high up official. Pyotr and Yulia were assigned to a communal apartment in a bad part of town. I lived in this communal apartment for about five years and never, not even during the war that was to come, did I experience such discomfort, such lack of privacy, embarrassment and rage. I was a teenage boy: all I wanted to do was pull on my cucumber, but here I'm sleeping in a bed with my little sister, my uncle Waclaw with his peg leg and old Yulia snoring a few feet away, the cold

coming in from outside and drunks and gamblers yelling in the next room. It was impossible!

Over the years we were able to improve our situation through great effort and cunning. I gave what was left of our package of roubles to Waclaw and he was able to acquire, in the black market, and from the kolkhoznik's market also, materials for shoes. He had managed to sneak some of his old lasts with him to the new apartment and here he set to work with great focus. Waclaw took a risk and contacted some old clients, a few wealthy ladies and gentlemen that he thought would be willing to sidestep the law in order to obtain superior footwear, and the gamble paid off. The shoes fetched a great price whether in ration credits or for barter in the underground market and we were able to buy more materials to make more shoes. Eventually Waclaw began teaching me his techniques, and I became his apprentice. I greatly enjoyed the work. I was very good at it, a real natural.

This operation only lasted for so long. One day a drunkard from next door came barging in on a tear looking for liquor and saw what we were doing. The making and selling of goods outside of the state system was a great crime that could have landed us all in the gulag, so to keep the drunkard from going to the police we had to bribe him with all kinds of wine, bread, honey, coffee, meats and, of course good boots. After that, Waclaw thought it was too risky and so we stopped.

It was only natural at this point that I get a proper job working for the State. First of all Waclaw had to get false papers for Katya and me. This was no trouble with all of his connections. Again this was very good timing, because around this time the Party made up a mandatory passport system and the police started knocking on doors and stopping people in the street. If we had been caught without papers we could have been thrown in jail, worse yet if our true identities were discovered we would have been

branded enemies of the state and this would have had terrible consequences. Fortunately the corruption of the State was extremely reliable. Waclaw told me that all he had to do was share a bottle of vodka with a local official, make some repairs to his shoes, compliment his ugly sister, and the official would produce two fake passports with state headings.

I was able to get a job working on the floor at a great big shoe making factory. The object was to pump out as many shoes as possible in sixteen hours, with no thought for quality whatsoever. People were desperate for good shoes because often the ones the factory provided fell apart the first time you wore them and you'd have to try and nail them back together or else go about barefoot. Very quickly I became a popular worker at the factory. I worked hard, I could do all the jobs on the line perfectly and faster than anyone else, and I never felt the need to sleep. I had only the best things to say about the Party, about the ideology of communism and so forth. Of course, this was all a lie.



The backwards nature of the government was that those who truly believed in Stalin were at a greater risk than those who were only very good actors. Nobody wanted to deal with a stick in the mud factory manager who was careful with inventory, hard on workers and pretentious in manner. Better to tow the Party line publicly and reap the benefits of widespread corruption in private. At that time everyone was corrupt. You'd have been an idiot not to be crooked: it was like refusing to speak the native language of your country. But some small-minded, beady-eyed, pasty-skinned men took great pleasure in enforcing the random rules of the Party.

At my factory, two of the managers were corrupt, and two were of the type I just described: real sticklers. It was upon these latter individuals that I set my sights. You

could easily tell easily who the corrupt bosses were because they wore elegant clothes, showed up late, sometimes with vodka on their breath, always had good tobacco and laughed heartily, joking about sexual encounters with their mistresses. The straight arrow bosses, Andrei and Mikhail, never joked, never drank to excess, always wore the same shabby suits and their tobacco stank. I always thought how horrible it must be to abstain from drunkenness and immoral behaviour in general when you don't even believe in God.

The crooked bosses were often walking on pins and needles around Andrei and Mikhail and would tense up immediately when one of them entered the room, cutting short a dirty story and trying to look busy. I figured if I helped get rid of these undesirable characters it would raise me up in the eyes of the remaining bosses and clear the way for corrupt practices, which in turn would improve my overall quality of life.

It was very easy to get a fellow citizen in trouble at the time: all one needed to do was drop a well-placed word into the proper ears. To get rid of Mikhail, a fellow worker and I coordinated a false story about him, claiming that under the Tsarist regime he had workers flogged and arrested and that his true loyalties lay elsewhere. We went separately to the crooked bosses, saying we knew we could trust them and in the end I helped them draft a letter to the police using alarming language along the lines of: "this sinister enemy of the state hides in plain sight while lurking in the shadows; his true motives must be unmasked!" Shortly after this Mikhail disappeared and only Andrei remained.

I didn't want to use the same trick twice for fear of crying wolf, as the saying goes, so I slipped a heavy dose of vodka into Andrei's tea, which he did not notice for all the sugar he used. Once he had drained his cup I sat with him, and he became very loose lipped, unaccustomed as he was

to drinking alcohol. He revealed to me a great number of boring facts but also disclosed that his father was a priest in the countryside (a fact he had gone to great lengths to hide) and he began weeping saying that he had dishonoured his family. This piece of information found its way into the hands of the corrupt bosses and once it had been verified by the police: poof. Andrei disappeared as well. It was a bizarre sort of black magic that the NKVD practiced.

Andrei and Mikhail were replaced by a couple of really hardworking, patriotic citizens. I say this very sarcastically because actually the new factory managers were lazier, flashier and even less moral than the other remaining bosses. Entire deliveries would disappear mysteriously, vanish from the records and all kinds of other goods would arrive instead: meat, champagne, overcoats, anything. If you were well connected with the bosses, as I of course was by this point, you could get in on the action. Well made shoes were solid gold on the underground market, and with the many acquaintances I had made through Waclaw on his bottle sharing outings I had no problem finding like minded citizens to do business with. Sausage, pies, fresh cucumbers, tomatoes, watermelon, herring, pants, pencils, vodka, cheese, baskets, samovars, hats, nails, sheepskin coats, lamps, kettles, paint, milk; you name it! I could get any of these things because just about everybody walks one-two, one-two, through life on their fleshy pegs, and everybody needs to put shoes on the butts of their fleshy pegs.

By 1936 I had so many connections, so much *blat*, as we called it, that I was able to have us placed at the top of a waiting list to live in a good building. When one family was ousted on the charge of “sympathizing with the cause of certain fascist governments,” we inherited their apartment. For me, the next few years were very peaceful and very happy. I had many friends, drank every night, ate good food, and spent many hours telling stories and talking non-

sense with Waclaw, Yulia and Katya. Waclaw even had an impressive collection of contraband literature that I consumed hungrily and this led to many late nights of passionate argument.

While I was settling into a routine in our little corner of the world, great changes were taking place elsewhere. The fascist government that the family preceding us had been sympathetic towards was almost certainly Franco's fascists on the other side of Europe. In Moscow, there were rumours that we were sending grain and other supplies to the communist army in Spain to aid their cause, thus depriving the starving population of our homeland much-needed bread in the act. If there was ill will towards the Spanish communists, it was tied up with feelings of resentment towards our own shortsighted Papa Stalin. In Germany Adolf Hitler had been in power for a few years now, and though Stalin viewed this man with suspicion, the citizens of Russia generally admired his boldness and intelligence.

In the winters of 1936 and '37 there were horrible grain shortages. Although the Party reported quite different news, it was known even in the cities that thousands were starving in the country. We saw this as a great failing- a terrible, tragic weakness. It was natural to look to different styles of government for inspiration. Stalin had promised to make things better and in fact had only succeeded in making things far, far worse. At that moment, Hitler, by contrast, seemed a great leader.

Up until the war nothing very interesting happened. Katya got a job as a nurse at a state hospital with some help from Yulia and I went on working long days at the shoe factory and making deals on the side. The state had relaxed its policy against craftspeople and Waclaw was happily back to work designing and building the finest shoes in Russia.

When I look back now, I feel bad for the factory bosses whose lives I destroyed, who were so loyal to the

Party. I feel bad for the family who got kicked out of their apartment for saying bad things about Spanish communists. I feel guilty that my parents were imprisoned and I was left free; that thousands of my countrymen were left to starve in the wild and beggars froze in the street while I ate the finest breads and drank the finest vodka in my warm slippers that Waclaw made for me. I even still feel bad for that stupid mutt Pushkin who I hit in the face with Vladimir's Scythe. It was a difficult time, and you had to do the best for yourself and your family. But still I feel guilty.

The Great Patriotic War began in late June of 1941. For me it is difficult to say what day exactly because that coward Stalin refused to recognize the reality of the situation until well into the Nazi invasion. For a man so well versed in murder, trickery and betrayal, Stalin was shockingly naïve. So when Hitler broke this Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, and smashed down our door, Stalin was completely surprised. He could not believe it. He would not believe it. He hid like they say the ostrich does, with his head in the sand, at his dacha in Kuntsevo and gave no orders, and over the radio the reports said "Productivity is up, efficiency is up, long live Stalin and the Party" while at the same time the Germans marched into our country burning farms, slaughtering everyone, destroying our war planes.

Of course, once the news of the invasion got out, there was rioting in the streets. The police were ordered to shoot people who were mongering fear, it was very frightening. Of course being young and able, Katya and I signed up for the war. There was great need for trained nurses and so off she went to the front to care for the wounded just as Yulia had done so many years earlier. I joined the army, not out of any great loyalty to Stalin (in fact I felt great hatred towards our jolly communist grandpapa), but out of a sense that we were all in it together, my comrades and I. Regardless of the great purges and the starvation and the

lies the Party had wrought on our country, we simply had to knock these German bastards back where they came from. I had to assume that my brothers were going to be killed and tortured in Smolensk, as it had already been captured, and this ripped me up inside. I had this guilt eating at me and I wanted to do something good, something brave: I wanted to die for Russia, to kill for Russia.



By October, the Germans were getting deep into our country and had their eyes on the great prize of Moscow, but the *rasputitsa*, the autumn mud and rain, was good to us and slowed their tanks and other vehicles. Still, by late in the month they were closing in and again there were riots and people flooding the train stations trying to evacuate, but old Papa Stalin had some tricks up his sleeve. Against his cowardly nature, he remained in Moscow and announced that the annual parade in Red Square on November 9 would take place to celebrate the great Revolution, despite the war. On the day of the parade he marched fresh troops through Red Square, past Lenin's tomb, then straight off to meet the enemy. He yelled out, good and loud for everyone to hear, that if it was a war of extermination that Hitler wanted, then extermination he would get. Maybe just for this one moment, I think Stalin was a smart leader.

Once winter fell (and this winter of 1941 was especially harsh) we were very much in our element. All kinds of Siberian shock troops and ski troops fell upon the Germans in white camouflage and hammered them into retreat, snuck behind their lines and cut off their supplies, inspired great fear and horror into the Nazis so that it is said that many of them shot themselves on sentry instead of facing their ferocious opponents. How stupid do you have to be to take a campaign deep into Russia in the winter anyway? Hitler

was no great strategist, that much is clear to me.

I should say, it was not like eating cake this fighting. We lost thousands on our part; civilian soldiers were sent out without proper training and blown to bits by the terrible panzer armies. Stalin thoughtlessly ordered all shelters, farms and food stores captured behind enemy lines to be burned on the spot. With this order he brutally murdered hundreds of innocents, women and children alike in that cold, passive way that was his trademark.

These great events were recounted to me much later, by various soldiers, after I wound up in Stalingrad. I did not participate in the battle at Moscow, you see. That winter, while all of this suffering and drama was occurring in the western part of the country I was reduced to a state of extreme boredom on the Mongolian Steppe.

Stalin had left several divisions stationed in Mongolia after the border clashes and the battle of Nomonhan two years earlier in which the Red Army had won a great victory over the Japanese. Now that Germany had declared war, he needed the more experienced troops on the Moscow front. At the same time, he couldn't leave the far east undefended: there were submarine bases in the Pacific, railways and supply lines to be considered. We had struck an uneasy truce with the Japanese, but they were in bed with the Germans and it goes without saying they had no love for us Soviets. The best solution was to divert some of the superior troops from the dormant border and replace them with fresh, inexperienced troops like me. I had signed up for the army to kill Germans; but instead I was sent to the end of the earth to sit around.

It is funny when the most important events of your lifetime that will alter the face of your country are occurring, and you are in a place where everything is still, quiet and peaceful. It was cold on the steppe in winter, but not unbearable, it was crisp and white and grey. If the world

truly is God's creation than this was the part he forgot to decorate. It was completely desolate and depressing. In December we got word that the Japanese had attacked America, so there was no way they were going to come at us now. A few more regiments were dispatched to the front while I was left to stew in my sadness for the remainder of the winter.

In the spring the steppe came alive, and I started watching through a pair of broken binoculars that had been thrown out by an officer, watching the pheasants, the goofy marmots, the grey wolves and the gazelles tramping around the flat land. I began hunting the few creatures our geography offered, partly for something to do but also to eat, since the food at the barracks was predictably awful. This was difficult because wildlife was scarce and also because there was no cover, nothing to hide behind. I'd sneak around the steppe for hours with my rifle until I saw some creature in the distance. Then it was delicious pheasant for dinner, or gazelle, or wolf, or the dreaded marmot whose meat I never recommend eating unless it's a matter of life or death.

My superiors took notice of this skill, they were amazed at how easily I could snipe animals out on the fields with my standard infantry rifle which shouldn't have even been effective at those ranges. My hands were steady and I understood my rifle. I knew how it would send the bullet, so I would compensate to hit my mark. I always hit my mark, the poor pheasants. They told me that a man like me could be useful at the front, that there was a great need for talented snipers. "Alexei," my commanding officer told me. "Killing a man and killing a marmot are very different things. Your hands are steady and you have great skill, but when you are faced with your German opponents, will you be able to pull the trigger, drop the hammer, and end his life? You need to think about this."

"I've had lots of time to think about it," I replied.

And then, quoting the poet Simonov, I said: "Send me to the front, and when I see a German, I promise you I'll kill him every time."

So they gave me my papers and off I went, away from that dreadful steppe to join the great fight.



Although I didn't realize it at the time, snipers were wildly popular. Much like with jazz dancing, parachute jumping and arctic exploration, there was also a cult surrounding the sniper. Part of this was on account of the fact that many successful snipers were women, and part of it was that our forces were on the defensive, and snipers were crucial in stemming the flow of incoming Germans, preventing them from reaching their targets. In the summer, I was sent to Siberia where I was trained and indoctrinated into the ranks of sharpshooters who were already bravely guarding the front lines.

From Siberia I travelled with several brigades of sailors from the eastern fleet by train to join the fighting on the more central Kalmyk Steppe. It seemed I'd been pigeon holed as an expert in open, expansive lands. A German general called Hoth was leading an army of Panzer tanks through the steppe to attack Stalingrad from the south. I fought alongside the infantry under the command of a young, determined officer with a girlish face called Lev Lazarev. We held the line on the open steppe, firing artillery as the German tanks approached. I positioned myself on the shoulder of a T-34 tank and started picking off German infantry. I was overwhelmed by a rush of adrenaline: these were my first kills and I was excited to finally get a taste of the fighting. As it happened, this battle could easily have been the end of my fighting as well. Casualties were very high and the Panzer tanks were many. Their movements

were well co-ordinated, with the advantage of air support. Our strategy was simply to fight ferociously to the last man. When the T-34 I rode upon was cornered by Panzers, I slipped off covertly and fell back to a better position, but there was no hope, across the field of battle T-34s burned and our marine infantry was blown to pieces. There was no cover to retreat to. In that no man's land between Asia and Russia, I watched thousands of my countrymen die.

Fortunately for me Lev Lazarev had commandeered a jeep and told me to jump in.

“Won't we be executed for deserting?” I inquired.

“Who exactly would we be deserting!?” Lev shouted above the din of the battle, blood and dirt on his face and uniform. “My entire battalion's been wiped out. We're specialized troops: you're a sniper, I'm an officer. We'll be more useful alive than spattered in the tracks of one of these death machines.” Something exploded behind me and a piece of shrapnel grazed my shoulder. In that instant, I saw Lev's logic. As we drove off, the Germans broke through the last of our defences, firing random shots at the jeep. I fired back, hammering them one after the other, right between the eyes. A Stuka from the Luftwaffe screamed above, strafing at us and missing. When it came around for a second pass I hit the pilot through the windshield with a well placed shot. He crashed down upon his own troops with a sickening, satisfying thud.

“Lenin's ghost,” Lev yelled. “That's the craziest thing I've ever seen!”

The next day we arrived at Lake Sarpa just south of Stalingrad where the 91st Rifle Division was recovering from battle. Hoth's Panzers had just passed through on their way to Kalmyk, and decided on the fly that it would be easier to go around the 91st and cut straight up the steppe. From the looks of it, they had fared much better than us. Lev tried to paint us in a sympathetic light when he told our

story to the head officers at the lake, but Stalin had just created a new military law known simply as “no one step back” which stated in the harshest and simplest language that any soldier who abandoned the line, no matter how grim the situation, was to be executed on sight or otherwise placed in one of the penal companies that was assigned suicidal missions. The penal company attached to the 91st Rifles had, in fact, been instrumental in repelling Hoth’s panzers days earlier. And so it was in a more jovial and celebratory mood than usual that we found these losers and criminals when we came to join their ranks.

In the penal company it was best to assume that one’s journey had come to an end. We were serving a sentence of purgatory in the space between the living and the dead. We were fed almost nothing. We watched our fellow prisoners explode into unrecognizable bits as we removed hundreds of mines laid down by either side. But after a week of this I was mysteriously pardoned and removed from the company. I was brought back to life.

The thing about Russia under Stalin, is that the rules of law were quite arbitrary. To live under Stalin was to live without any real choice. There was no detectable logic in government, and the military laws were chaotic. You could fight the Germans and get blown to bits or turn to run and get shot through the face by some commissar. I was equally guilty of abandoning my comrades on the Kalmyk steppe as Lev was and yet, once word got back to Moscow that a sniper, a former stakhanovite from a shoe factory, had shot down a fleet of Stukas (of course the real story was exaggerated), the Department of Propaganda had a field day. They spun it so that Lev was the villain, said that he had forced me to abandon the battlefield, and that I had wept to be deprived of the chance to spill my blood for Mother Russia. My picture was taken and placed in the newspapers, I was given an even better rifle, and poor Lev was left to

clear mines in front of T-34s and was probably blown to bits. Or else he was shot through the face by a commissar. So I had a little bit more guilt.

From Sarpa I travelled with the 91st Rifles straight north. We built a great pontoon bridge in order to cross to the east bank of the Volga and then continued further north to meet up with the 62nd army encampment across the river from the city of Stalingrad, which was quickly becoming a deadly battleground. When I first laid eyes on Stalingrad, from a distance, it took me a few moments to understand what I was looking at. Then the horror set in: what appeared on the horizon was a smouldering mess. Packs of Stukas swarmed unopposed overhead like deadly insects, dropping bombs on everything. Huge fires blazed, black smoke filled the air. It was in this moment that the scale of the war came into focus in my mind: the death and destruction, the impossible tragedy that had struck our nation, the gloomy hellishness of it all. I held back my tears so as not appear weak, but my soul wept inconsolably.



In the days before I joined the fighting, I spent some desperate hours on the banks of the Volga watching the city burn and monitoring the progress of our transport boats. Apparently the Germans couldn't tell the civilians from the soldiers; either that or they simply didn't care. They fired artillery at all the boats without discrimination. The transportation of women and children had been delayed intentionally because Stalin wanted to raise the stakes for the infantry on the west bank, issuing slogans such as "If you don't kill the Germans they'll rape our women then throw them under the tanks!" and so forth. Now, boats of refugees were coming across daily, but the Germans had established themselves within the city and could easily lob

shots at them as they crossed.

On my second evening at Stalingrad, I watched in horror as one such boat was struck by a heavy shell and started to sink when it had almost made it all the way to safety. Soldiers were begging permission to take out pontoon boats to rescue the drowning civilians, but the chief officers would not put further lives at stake, saying the Germans fought a dirty war and would simply gun them down, too. I could not stand it. I lost control of myself and dove into the frigid water. I swam out to a couple of young children, a boy and a girl, who were clinging to a piece of the boat. I told them to climb onto my back and hold tight around my neck. They were screaming and crying and could barely move, bullets from the city whizzed by us. Finally they attached themselves to me and I dove down through the water. Temporarily blessed, it would seem, with super-human strength, I made it to the east bank and lay panting on the ground, holding the screaming children like some wild animal protecting its young. I coughed up lots of water and everything went dark.

In the field hospital I was not given a bed because in the relative scheme of things I did not have a real injury or illness. The nurses simply piled blankets on me as I lay there shivering and mumbling to myself. Being of a very strong constitution, it was not long before I was up and walking again. The legend that I had shot down a dozen stukas with a rifle had been compounded with this new legend that I had saved two dozen children from a sinking transport ship and so now, at Stalingrad during wartime, as in Moscow during peacetime, I was becoming a very popular man.

When I was feeling better I went to visit the young children I had saved, in the hospital. They were called Natasha and Josef and they were lovely little darlings. They had left their parents on the other side of the river and then lost

their grandmother to the Volga in the crossing so it was a very hard time for them, but the nurses lavished affection on them and I did some funny dances and talked in a silly voice to cheer them up. It made me feel really good seeing these kids. The children put me in such a good mood that I decided to walk around the hospital and talk to people, ask about their lives, try and cheer them up as well.

From the wounded I gathered the details of the attack on Stalingrad. The unrelenting carpet bombing had started in late August. Everywhere there was blood, death and sorrow. The screams of the soldiers and civilians were joined by a thousand Luftwaffe aircrafts screaming overhead. The incendiary bombs burned thousands of wooden houses in the south western part of the city, creating horrific firestorms. The water works and the telephone exchange were destroyed. Everything was reduced to rubble. Even the city's main hospital was bombed: nothing was sacred. Those who were lucky enough to make it to the east bank of the Volga were part of a provisional community. Those left behind in the city occupied that treacherous territory between the living and the dead.

That night I was ordered to join the 91st Rifles in crossing the Volga. We made the crossing in a strange combination of gunboats and commandeered civilian crafts. I ended up in a little fishing boat that teetered dangerously with too many soldiers. I sat thinking of my sister and my parents and my brothers as I was rowed towards the fire. A popular army slogan at the time was "For soldiers of the Red Army fighting at Stalingrad the east bank of the Volga does not exist." As I uselessly prayed that we would not be blown up I imagined that the land and the water behind me was falling away and disappearing into nothingness. The noise of battle became a hum in the background and as I approached certain death I spent a few very peaceful moments in a trance, allowing myself to drift away; my guilt

and anger and memories slipping down into the corpse filled river below and into the burning skies above.

When we reached the other side the Germans were waiting for us. Grenades exploded, shots rang out and my comrades fell around me as we sprinted up the bank. I quickly parted with my company, managed to find a good position on the second floor of a shelled-out apartment building and helped clear a path so that the infantry could secure a perimeter. In the morning, when the street fighting had died down (the daylight hours belonged to the Luftwaffe), I looked around the abandoned apartment. I found a book of geometry with scraps of half finished homework next to it, a doll and a teddy bear with half their faces burnt off. I found some tinned cabbage hiding at the back of a high shelf and gobbled it down. There was a cup of coffee that miraculously hadn't spilled, probably a month old, at least. I drank it down anyhow while reading a volume of Gogol that I found on the bookshelf. There was a film of ice and grime on the surface of the coffee, the previous night had brought the first frosts of the coming season.

In Stalingrad I became a ghost. I know you do not believe me, but it's true. Nothing else could explain the fact that I survived the fighting, the bloodiest fighting our country had ever seen. I heard later that of the ten thousand men who crossed the Volga with me that night in September, only three hundred lived at the end of the battle. I made the industrial north end of the city (that playground of towering half exploded buildings) my hunting grounds. Those freezing nights I would change my position, sneaking from an apartment building to a silo or a shelled out factory. I would watch where the brave sappers laid their mines for the Germans and often triggered them myself with a bullet when they were sidestepped. I spoke to almost no one during those first months.

There were, of course, the children. Thousands

of orphaned children had been left behind and proved to be more resourceful than you could imagine. To them, one needed to speak in order to survive. The children would run food and water for the soldiers if we protected them and shared with them. They moved quickly and hid well; they were little targets, hard to hit. If I saw that a child was taking water or food to a German camp, I would shoot them dead. I would make it quick and painless. I killed children, and I never even felt that bad about it, because in those days it seemed like there was almost no difference between life and death. I killed children to starve Germans, in that cold, passive way. Just like Papa Stalin taught me.

One day as I was getting some sleep underneath a bed on the third story of a building occupied by Red Army soldiers I was awakened by a great explosion and cautiously moved to the window, rifle in hand. In the street below, a Panzer was advancing on our stronghold. It was about to start blasting away at us when a lone Russian soldier emerged holding two petrol bombs. Before the soldier had a chance to throw either of them a bullet from the covering fire smashed into his right hand and suddenly he was completely on fire. In a final act of valour he threw himself against the tank in a ball of flames as a Katyusha rocket from our side slammed into the Panzer at the same time. The Germans got off one good shot into the building, which grumbled and tilted, but did not crumble. Part of the ceiling above me collapsed and a very large nail from one of the beams lodged itself deep in my leg. This wound, which gave way to a limp, I accepted as a tribute to my uncle Wacław. It was the only serious injury I incurred in the fighting. Crying out in a great deal of pain I picked off the tank crew as they emerged from their incinerated vehicle. For them it was 'burn to death' or 'catch a bullet,'- a classic Stalingrad decision.

By November it was too cold to sleep in shelled-

out buildings, so I would find shelter in the underground barracks that were created in the rubble on our side of the line. It was here that I met many like-minded Russians, some of whom had also been displaced by collectivized farming and some who were angry with the Party's bungling of everything from production and economy to the widespread purges, and the ongoing war. It was here that I heard stories from the battle of Moscow, sitting around a fire eating rancid horse meat and boiled grains, and drinking a little vodka, or more often, industrial anti-freeze filtered through a gas mask.

As we drank more and more, the arguments always came down to the same thing. There was this man Hitler who was addicted to power and he wanted to enslave our nation and pilfer our resources. And then there was this man Stalin who was also addicted to power, who would place his people in harm's way as if they were a thick, fleshy shield, and happily watch them perish if it meant beating this man Hitler. We were trapped in a psychopath's war. It was not for Stalin or against Hitler that we fought, and certainly not for communism or against fascism. It was for the idea of Russia that we fought; for the protection of our brothers and sisters and the memories of our mothers and fathers. It may surprise you to hear that we talked so openly about these things at the front, but at this stage of the war the only real crime was failing to kill Germans. We felt we had earned, with our blood and with the piles of Germans bodies that each of us had produced, a right to speak openly about Stalin's tricks and lies.

Once again, the winter was a friend to the Russian soldiers and the Germans grew visibly weaker by Christmas. Their supply had all but dried up and reinforcements were dwindling. It was also a great relief when the layers of rotting corpses froze and stopped smelling. Outside the death and carnage was accentuated by streaks and smatterings of

red and brown blood on the snow and frost. I was issued white camouflage and spent many happy afternoons sneaking up into buildings and killing Germans. Word was getting around of some operation called Uranus, a deep raid on the enemy's rear. There were hushed, excited conversations, about Soviet reserves moving in from every direction. It was said that the Germans were encircled and nearly beaten. It was just a matter of time now.

Most of the fighting leading up to our victory, so I'm told, happened outside of Stalingrad on the frozen steppe, with mortars bouncing off the ice, exploding in every direction. I heard of entire regiments of skinny, downtrodden Germans with hands too frostbitten to fit their fingers through the trigger guards, fighting only with bayonets as the great General Rokossovsky's troops showered Katyusha rockets on them. I heard it was a merciless, ferocious and total victory for the Red Army. And this I heard from reliable sources, not just through Government channels, you understand.

The hour of victory, which is generally thought to have fallen in the first days of February, 1943, I spent rolling around, drenched in sweat and crying out like an animal. A couple of weeks passed like this; I'd been stricken by some variety of water or food poisoning. In the early days of the fighting I had gotten by on my strong constitution, but I had been weakened by months of bad eating and now the germs were crawling around inside of me wreaking havoc. When the doctors came across the Volga, after the Germans were all dead or imprisoned, they said my leg had become infected and it had to come off. They couldn't spare any strong drugs so they doused my wound with alcohol and poured vodka down my throat and gagged me so I wouldn't scream and bite my tongue off. I will spare you a description of what it's like to feel a saw cutting clean through your bone, but suffice it to say the amputation was a success and I was

parted from my leg; a final tip of the hat to uncle Waclaw.

As I recovered, back on the east bank of the Volga, I saw many hundreds of men slowly dying around me. It was especially awful because when a man died you could actually see the lice leave him in search of a living host. We had won the battle but it did not seem like a very celebratory time. Where there had once been a city there was now a layer cake of death and rubble. The news came in slowly that we were reversing the attack that we were soon going to be invading Germany. I wanted to be happy but this brought me little joy.

The war had changed me. I felt I could not return to normal life. The things I had seen, the things I'd done were too horrible. My thoughts started slipping, I could not grasp basic ideas. I slid back down into that space I described, between the living and the dead. People would speak to me but I could not understand the meaning of the words. I was moved to a different hospital and kept alive but I was not living. Sometimes I would howl for hours at nothing. There was a little window in the room where they kept me and every night I would watch the sun set. But I did not know what it meant anymore. I just saw random shapes and colours. And then one evening there was a terrible rain storm and thunder crashing all around. I howled and howled until I was sucked out the little window and into the clouds.

PARADES

The first time I met Stan Burdock he had a massive erection. I was praying in my room and he barged in, drunk as a sailor, wearing a tiny silk kimono, his penis protruding from the flap.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Praying,” I answered. I’d been in a deep meditative trance and was quite taken aback.

“That’s funny,” he said. He fell to his knees and vomited in my wastepaper basket. He lay unconscious for a moment, got up, grabbed an Oreo off my desk and ate it, then disappeared down the hall singing “Onward Christian Soldiers” at the top of his voice. I washed out my wastepaper basket, trying not to begrudge the culprit. I returned to praying but couldn’t quite pick up the thread.

The next day he came back, well groomed and sober. The erection was gone. He explained what had transpired: the previous night had been the birthday of the campus bar, The Submarine, which is traditionally the most

hedonistic night at the college. At the start of the evening, beers are the same price they were in 1979 when the bar first opened. The prices go up over the course of the night, encouraging patrons to “race the clock.” The details were fuzzy but somehow Stan ended up in a threesome. At some point the women he was with became more interested in exploring each other than fooling around with Stan, so he donned the kimono and struck out into the halls of the dormitory.

“I’m no expert on the art of ménage,” I said. “But why would you leave?”

Stan stared at the floor and just shook his head. “Look, I’m really sorry I puked in your room and messed up your prayers. To be honest I feel pretty bad about it. I wanted to stop by and offer you my services. How about a bag of pot, on the house.”

“No thanks,” I said. “I don’t take drugs.”

“It’s not drugs, it’s just pot. Probably help you get closer to God.”

“Sure, take a shot at the religious guy, real nice. Listen, I’m here on scholarship and I can’t afford to jeopardize that. I need to stay sharp.”

“I wasn’t taking a shot at you. Seriously, I respect that you’re dedicated to a higher power. If you don’t smoke pot I can write a paper for you, take the pressure off a bit. Trust me I’m a total pro. I do this for a living.”

“Are you crazy? No way would I ever agree to that. What are you doing writing papers for kids anyways? That’s sort of shitty. You’re letting kids with money coast through. Don’t you think these rich Toronto kids have it easy enough without you giving them the option to buy their degree with daddy’s money?”

“I come here to make amends, to offer you my excellent services, and you insult me?” Stan stood up, getting angry. “That’s not very Christian, Fred.”

“Hey, sit down. You’re right, I’m sorry.” I offered him an Oreo, he ate it and sat. “Just look at it from my perspective: I come from a family that doesn’t have a lot of money. Even with my scholarship I have to work at the bookstore three days a week and on top of that I have to work my ass off to keep my grades up. These Toronto private school kids get drunk every night and behave like animals and then outsource their homework to you? You can see how this would piss me off, no?”

Stan shrugged in passive agreement.

“Fine,” I said. “If you really want to make it up to me, I’ll smoke some weed. But only once all my midterm papers are finished next week. But you have to look out for me. Make sure I don’t jump off a cliff or anything crazy; I don’t want to get that much closer to God.”

“Yeah, that’s not really how weed works,” Stan mumbled.

The truth was, we’d been growing distant recently. God and I. There was no dramatic event linked to the crisis of faith. It was a gradual shift, like falling out of love. When I was younger, I used to pray for hours, and at times it felt like I was deeply connected to a higher spiritual power. For some reason, after I moved to Halifax, the connection weakened. I could recapture brief traces at times, but it seemed like something was blocking the channel. Nevertheless, I continued to attend church services at the college chapel and pray regularly, hoping that something would jilt the blockage free. But for some time I’d been performing these rituals in vain.

The following Friday, having delivered several midterm papers to the office, I met up with Stan and we walked down to a secluded dock on a small inlet, across from the historic Dingle Tower. Abel Grand was there by coincidence, sitting by himself reading *Stranger In a Strange Land*. He joined us as Stan pulled out a huge joint and lit it.

I couldn't even figure out how to inhale the first few rounds, but when I finally did, it felt like I'd been punched in the lungs. I coughed for about five minutes. And then I felt amazing.

A beautiful sunset lit up the tower. We sat talking for hours into the night about girls, film and literature, religion, music. I brought up the paper writing thing again, trying to convince Stan that it was an immoral practice, but he countered me vehemently. He said that if he didn't write the papers and cash in someone else would, said that people just do what they want no matter what and if they're lazy and immoral by nature there's no help for it. We smoked again and for about half an hour I just stared at the sky lying flat on my back. For the first time I saw the stars as part of a three dimensional canopy, as if they were raining down, rather than stuck to the ceiling. Perhaps the universe was random and endless rather than finite and orderly. Perhaps it was more exciting that way.

The three of us continued to meet up at the dock every Friday for the rest of the year. We became good friends. By the time I headed back home for the summer I had stopped praying and going to church. I never gave up on spirituality completely, but I ceased to believe that God existed in the Christian sense. I came to believe that when one died, that was simply the end, that nothing came after. In a way it was a great relief. In the past, whenever I'd read about earthquakes, floods, terrorist attacks and other tragedies, it had been so stressful reconciling those events with God's will.

Now I perceived the world as a cruel and random place. If I were to develop terminal cancer or get hit by a car, I could simply chalk it up to the arbitrary rules of earth. There would be no blame or turmoil or wondering about the afterlife, just grudging acceptance. For some reason my cynical new worldview made me a calmer, happier person.

For a short time, that is.

The summer between first and second year I went home to stay with my parents in the miniscule town of Val Marie, Saskatchewan. Think grain elevators, nodding donkeys, fields of golden wheat and rapeseed as far the eye can see. I haven't traveled much, but to me Val Marie is the prettiest place in the world. She's like a beautiful girl in a simple summer dress. I ended up landing a job at a secondhand book store in town. It had been opened by the intellectually curious heir to a vast wheat empire. As a business venture it was a clear cut failure, but the owner felt it was important to have a literary hub in a town that was so isolated from the world at large.

I spent my long lonely shifts reading, devouring books whole. Since I no longer believed in the seven day creation myth I became curious about evolutionary theory, and Charles Darwin by proxy. It wasn't just his famous book *The Origin of Species* that fascinated me. There were a couple of Darwin biographies lying around the shop that depicted a man who lived an adventurous life, facing many dramatic conflicts from within and without. Soon enough I was spending my days working on a passion project: a play I called *Young Darwin*. At the start of the play Darwin is a carefree young man preparing for a life in the clergy. After his unexpected adventure on the HMS Beagle he settles into the role of serious scientist and family man. The play ends with him turning his back on Christianity after the death of his ten year old daughter, just as he is preparing to write the very work that will effectively bury the notion of God.

Full disclosure: I took a few artistic liberties. From a historical standpoint the play was not a hundred percent accurate. I was working through my own issues. It was therapeutic to write a character whose departure from Christianity was so loaded with meaning. My boss didn't seem to mind that I was writing on the job. He felt like he was

sponsoring a budding artist. Besides, we had virtually no customers. I didn't get much sun or exercise that summer, but my mind was crackling with fresh, optimistic energy as I headed back to school.

In September I submitted *Young Darwin* to the college's theatrical society and it was accepted. I brought in Abel as stage manager, and I approached Stan about playing the role of a Tierra Del Fuegan who forms a bond with Darwin, but he was caught up in his entrepreneurial activities and head over heels for a freshman girl. At the same time I found myself ensnared by the charms of a girl who was way out of my league. Sarah Hawthorne was cast in the role of Fanny Owen, Darwin's first girlfriend whom he abandoned when he joined the crew of the *Beagle*. She was a total knockout: the crown jewel of the Toronto private school set. She stood for everything I hated and I fell madly in love with her.

The play was well received. Even Professor Paisley, our resident Darwin expert pulled me aside afterwards to tell me how much he enjoyed it. He also wanted to make sure that I was aware of the revisionist history I'd employed. On the walk up to the party to celebrate the final performance, Sarah and I lagged behind the rest of the group, passing a bottle of Cava back and forth. The triumph of staging a successful play had morphed into a strong sexual energy and we started kissing passionately right there in the street. We never made it to the party.

This next part is difficult for me to talk about, even now. I was utterly naïve when it came to love and I let my guard down completely. Sarah became everything to me. The casual drinking and pot smoking that I'd begun the year before got a little out of hand. I started snorting cocaine on weekends, getting drunk with the despised Toronto private school kids every night. I slept in and started skipping classes. I wrote loads of poetry for Sarah. I was beginning

to let slide everything I'd held so dear, but every night of getting fucked up and then going home and making love to Sarah was a slice of heaven. Somehow I believed it could go on forever.

After a few months she broke it off cold turkey. It's all too clear in retrospect: I was a poor, unworldly nerd from rural Saskatchewan. I never stood a chance. Worst of all, I was blindsided. I never saw my first breakup coming. I was completely destroyed. I'd never experienced anything remotely resembling that kind of pain before. I was surprised by the physical nature of it. I couldn't eat; I was racked with anxiety; I sobbed until I dry heaved and I laid in bed tossing and turning, replaying every episode of our relationship, searching for answers.

At first I tried to drown my woes with liquor. I drank a bottle of whiskey a day and when that wasn't enough I started taking painkillers as well. I knew this kid named Chip who had a bunch of percocet left over from an operation to reduce the size of his elephantine left testicle. He sold me some at a good price. I read Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. I fell asleep with my clothes on listening to Beethoven. I developed a funny habit of going to the cemetery with bundles of flowers and laying them on all the especially sad looking graves where you could barely read the names anymore. Even when I'd been infatuated with Sarah I'd managed to hand in my assignments on time to keep my grades up, but now that too faltered and I lost my scholarship. It was disgraceful.

Before the school year was even over I hightailed it without saying goodbye to anybody. I felt like I had no choice, even the simplest tasks and interactions had become excruciating for me. I couldn't be anywhere near Sarah. I hitchhiked west and stopped in Montreal. I got a dishwashing job at restaurant called *Le Petit Cochon* where most of the staff spoke only French. I found a grubbily furnished,

dirt-cheap bachelor apartment off Mont Royal near St. Denis and moved in. I was obsessed with George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* and, looking back now, I can see that I was trying to imitate his experience. I stopped smoking pot but went even harder on the drinking. In my sober hours I would read history and philosophy. I was trying to write a new play, but I was cursed with a crushing case of writer's block. My wastepaper basket was full of false starts.

When I'd abandoned religion the previous year it had been liberating, but now living without the reassurance of God was proving difficult. I tried praying a couple of times but I could feel that the channel had been permanently sealed. The scenarios I'd imagined (cancer, car crash) had not befallen me. Instead it was heartbreak. I felt silly that something so trivial had sent me into this disastrous tailspin. Now as I read about the wounds of the world, the terrorist attacks and earthquakes and floods, I went through cycles of anger and depression. What kind of a world was this? What was the point of existence? To suffer and die? Acceptance was not coming easily.

I spent an entire year living in this depraved state. I gave up on writing. I worked six days a week at Le Petit Cochon and spent most of my free time in a drunken stupor. I grew shockingly comfortable in my lethargy. It was a very dangerous place: I hovered on the verge of sinking permanently into a life of alcoholism and indifference, and indeed this may have been the case if it hadn't been for someone who came to me at a crucial moment. Someone I'm not entirely sure ever really existed.

It was on a fresh spring day that my visitor arrived. I'd worked a brunch shift and gotten an early start on the drinking. On my way home the sky darkened. Plump raindrops fell and thunder bellowed. I ducked into an SAQ to grab a bottle of Cutty Sark. When the storm didn't let up I

ran home through the rain. The second I arrived home the rain subsided. The sun came out and shone brighter than it had in weeks. Just my luck. I pulled the windows all the way open, inviting the warm, sweet air into my stale apartment. I put a few ice cubes in a tall glass and filled it half full with the whiskey. I stripped off my wet clothes and took a long hot shower, downing the booze as I washed up.

When I emerged from the shower, there was a disheveled man in a military uniform standing in my living room. Maybe it's because I was drunk, or maybe it's because I felt like I had nothing to lose, but I was neither surprised nor frightened. I quickly noticed that he was almost a complete facsimile of Abel Grand (though slightly taller), which put me at ease. He seemed disoriented. He was groping his left leg.

"My leg!" he cried.

"What about your leg?" I inquired.

"I lost my leg in the war, but here it is, returned to me!" he said in a thick Eastern European accent.

I pulled on some underpants beneath the towel that was wrapped around my waist and threw on jeans and a t-shirt.

"That's lucky about your leg. Say, how'd you get in here?" I asked.

"I came in with storm. The lightning, I mean. I was trapped in the lightning."

I made my way to the kitchen and set myself up with another Cutty Sark, and offered my visitor a glass. He nodded enthusiastically. I started up Coltrane's classic *Blue Train* album on my shitty Dell laptop. I gave the man my comfortable armchair that I used for reading and sat in the stiff wooden desk chair that I occupied when I wrote. As the afternoon turned to dusk and dusk to night time, my visitor spoke continuously. He'd lived through some pretty traumatic events and had a lot to get off his chest. We be-

came drunk as he told me his life story. By the time he was finished we'd wound through Sonny Rollins' *Way Out West*, a pair of live Bill Evans recordings from the Village Vanguard and Duke Ellington's *Yale Concert*.

My visitor's name was Alexei (Alyosha in the diminutive) and he claimed to be from the past. He'd fought in the Second World War, and while he'd been a composed and efficient killer during the fighting, his mind had fallen to pieces under the strain of what he'd seen and done once the dust settled. Travelling more than half a century into the future to the other side of the world seemed to have restored his sanity and awarded him a new leg as well as the inexplicable ability to speak English.

When he was finished talking I embarked on my own life story. It was much shorter and far less tragic. As I went to bed that night I was reminded of a scene in *The Brothers Karamazov*, where Ivan is visited by a mild-mannered apparition of Satan. Visitations by obviously fictitious beings would traditionally indicate the onset of brain fever, as was the case for poor Ivan. But even after this initial exchange with Alexei, things started sliding into perspective for me. Comparing our life stories had had a sobering effect on the mind (despite the fact that we were very drunk on blended scotch). My visitor had helped me to realize how hungry I was for conversation and I couldn't help but to hope he would not vanish in the night.

A different voice in my head, though, was anxious to see Alexei disappear back to wherever he'd come from. I was living a disgusting and lonely life, sure, but I valued my sanity above all else and had no great wish to part with it. For some reason, my predicament reminded of one of Stan's quirks. Burdock went for more STD tests than anyone I'd ever met. Each month he'd have unprotected sex with a new partner against his better judgment and then convince himself that he'd picked up a disease. He claimed

that he always got this weird tingling feeling in his penis that wouldn't go away until a doctor told him unequivocally that he was clean. Every night he'd go to sleep hoping the tingling feeling would just go away, but it never would, not until he got a call from the clinic. He'd never had an STD in his life.

When I woke up in the morning, Alexei was still there. We walked from my apartment to Mont Royal, the giant hill in the middle of the city where half the city congregates on Sunday to smoke weed and play frisbee. We lay on the grass eating mustard-slathered smoked meat sandwiches and drinking Heineken out of brown paper bags. Below us an archipelago of drum circles thumped arrhythmically. Above, a medieval role-playing club battled with foam lances and duct tape armour. It was the first really hot weekend of the season and everyone was peeling off layers, exposing bare skin. There was a group of girls a few yards away from us spinning hula hoops in a variety of hypnotic patterns.

"The babe parade, the babe parade, it ruins and makes my every day," I said in a sing-song voice after we'd been for awhile.

"What is 'babe parade'?" Alexei asked.

"The babe parade is a term for the never ending stream of women I see on a daily basis. I say that it ruins and makes my every day because on the one hand women are beautiful, but on the other hand I get so stressed because I can't work up the courage to talk to them and then I spend the rest of the day thinking about what I could have said and worrying that I missed out on the girl of my dreams. Does that make sense?"

"No!" Alexei almost yelled. "That doesn't make any sense at all. You are too much of a romantic. I had a friend like you that worked at the shoe factory. He loved this girl and he was always taking her sweets and flowers and I would tell him, 'Ilya, this girl does not respect you, you are

wasting your time and money. She goes around with Dmitry besides, don't you know?' But you romantics are stubborn and don't listen. So one day he goes by her flat and finds Dmitry in bed with her and what a terrible shock this is for him. Romantics are dramatic as well, so he runs down to the street and throws himself in front of a speeding carriage. The problem is, in his excitement, Ilya jumps too far and the carriage wheels break both his legs. I had to take the fool soup for weeks while he was recovering!"

"Did he try to kill himself again?" I asked. "What about the girl, what happened to the girl?"

"Frederick, you're missing the point of my story. Actually come to think of it, the girl was so impressed by Ilya's gesture that she ended up marrying him and never spoke to Dmitry again. But you're still missing my point. You shouldn't let these thoughts run wild in your brain and take up all that space. Like this Sarah girl that you say ruined your life and drove you away from your education."

"It's difficult, though! She's the first girl I ever slept with. The first girl I ever loved. I had no concept of how consuming romantic love could be. I'd read books and seen movies and everything, but that doesn't prepare you for the reality. She chewed me up and swallowed me down, what's left is just fragments."

I tried to drink down an entire Heineken in one sip. The beer was getting warm, so it was a race against time. Alexei stuffed half a sandwich in his mouth, getting mustard all over his face. He was almost finished chewing when he started speaking again:

"You loved the first girl that you slept with?" a chunk of rye bread flew out of his mouth. "No wonder you are so badly wounded. My uncle Waclaw took me to a prostitute when I was fifteen. I drank some vodka, had a few tries at firing my little rocket. The girl was so sweet about it, and it was fun because it didn't matter. This is how the first

time should be: just getting it out of the way. You are a fully grown adult, you should have had many women by now.”

“Alexei, I was raised Catholic. I come from a family with very high moral standards. My parents and my church taught me that you should wait until you’re in love to have sex. To wait until you’re married even.”

“I was raised Catholic as well, Frederick, but I always approached the Catholic church the same way I approached the Communist Party. The church says ‘Live like this,’ and you say ‘Yes father, nudge-nudge, wink-wink,’ and then you go out and gamble and do carnal acts and cheat your neighbour. As long as you show up on Sunday and confess your sins, say your Our Fathers and your Hail Marys and throw a few kopecks in the basket then you’ll be all right. That’s the whole point isn’t it?”

“So you’re a cynic. That’s fine but don’t try and tell me that there weren’t Russians who genuinely tried to be good Christians. Or citizens that weren’t genuine believers in the Communist cause after religion was banned.”

“Of course there were. But they were the minority and for the most part we scoffed at them. People who need to commit themselves to a higher power have always seemed weak to me. I’ll make an exception for my father, rest his soul.”

This last remark wounded me. I got up to take a piss behind a tree, past the hula hoop girls who seemed as though they were part of a different world and through the cosplay battle field where a duct tape knight hopping on one leg almost ran me over. When I returned to our spot, I saw that Alexei had opened up his shirt. I followed suit, exposing my pasty white torso to the sun. I cracked a fresh beer, which was actually hot by this point, and took a sip.

“So I take it you were never in love,” I said.

“No. I had many women. Some prostitutes and some who just liked me I guess. But I was committed to

life and life was complicated. I was always looking over my shoulder expecting the government to discover that my sister Katya and I came from a kulak family. I had to work very hard at the factory and then when war came I had to fight very hard. A woman is the same as a religion or an idealistic belief: something you think you need to be complete. I always feel complete. Maybe that's a lie, but I never had a free second to think about whether or not I was complete. I will admit I had this dream in the back of my mind that maybe after the war, when there was time, I would have a beautiful wife and build a dacha in the country and have a hundred little ones. But of course that's impossible now."

Billows of secondhand smoke wafted up from the drum circle archipelago. Between the contact high, the sun and the warm beer, I was starting to feel pretty messed up. The vision of Alexei's idyllic dacha was stuck in my head like a song on repeat. For all his cynicism, I could see now that there was a romantic buried somewhere under there. And he was right about one thing: I'd always felt like an incomplete human in need of a crutch to lean on. I'd swapped religion for romance and now I was empty. But maybe there was hope yet.

'The furniture in my soul just needs some repositioning,' I thought. 'Perhaps Alexei is my Feng Shui guru.' We headed back to my apartment in time for me to grab a nap before my shift.

At work that night I was in a better mood than usual, despite the fact that it hurt to submerge my sunburnt arms in the hot dishwater. My work consisted of several small tasks: drying and organizing the dishes as they emerged from the steaming Hobart, tossing fries in salt, crumbling cheese and nuts into salads, drizzling chocolate from a squeeze bottle onto slices of cake, and debearding mussels. I was the kitchen lackey. By eleven o'clock we'd sent out the last of the food and it was time to wipe eve-

rything down and mop the floor. By eleven o'clock I was usually on my third or fourth pint. I'd switch the radio over to the jazz station and dance slightly drunk with the mop to Brubeck or Goodman or whatever was playing.

I felt satisfied with my hard work as I walked up St. Denis towards my place, sweat cooling in the night air. I could feel a measure of life returning to me. I stopped into a *dépanneur* and grabbed more beer. Alexei was waiting at home and we stayed up until sunrise listening to music and talking nonsense.

Monday was my day off. When we awoke, in the early afternoon, there was a sense of freedom and luxury. I took a long shower, ate some toast, made a pot of tea and sat in my big armchair reading Mann's *Buddenbrooks* for a while. Alexei pulled the window open and sat unmoving on the ledge, like a gargoyle, watching the traffic outside.

By the time we finally left the apartment it was six o'clock. We zigzagged through one way streets up to Café Olimpico, a European style sports bar that serves chocolate dusted cappuccinos, and sat on the labyrinthine wooden patio amongst the chain smoking Mile End hipsters and mothers with gargantuan strollers. We walked north on Du Parc and picked up some pastries at a bakery run by Hasidic Jews. Alexei stared wide-eyed at the girl behind the counter. He seemed taken aback by the many Hasidic families out for post-dinner strolls as we sat on a public bench cramming our faces with cream horns and chocolate squares.

"Frederick, these Jews, are they from the past as well? I swear I recognize some of them from my village. From before the police sent them to the gulags. There! That one! His name is Milosh, he worked at the post office."

"That's strange" I said. "Maybe it's because their community is relatively isolated: they've preserved their genealogy to the point where these people we see today appear almost identical to their forebears from the old world. Tur-

thfully, I always thought there was something kind of sexy about the modesty of Hasidic women; something beautiful and sculpture-like in their faces. What do you think?"

"I have the opposite opinion Frederick. This whole day I've been observing the women of this city, of all different colours and shapes, who are so free in what they wear and how they behave. Your babe parade brings me great happiness. These women make me sad. They remind me of home, of the farm, of my parents and everyone else who was sent to die in the labour camps for nothing." Alexei handed me the final cream horn, unable to stomach it and stood up looking dazed.

We grabbed some beers from a dep nearby and continued north through the underpass, until we were in Park Extension on the other side of the train tracks. The buildings were low-lying and ugly but the sun had just set so the light was beautiful. That time of day always makes me think of the Terrence Malick film *Days of Heaven*. I heard Malick's director of photography would only film outdoor scenes during a twenty minute period directly after the sunset. No small feat considering half the movie was set outdoors and the cinematographer was losing his sight during the shoot in a tragedy akin to Beethoven's loss of hearing. Half the crew ended up quitting. The whole thing sounds like a nightmare, but they came out of it with one of the best looking movies of all time. But then it was shot in the prairies, so of course it speaks to me.

As we wandered through Park Ex the last of the day's light dissipated as the streetlamps were coming on. People started coming out of their houses carrying pots and pans, ladles and egg beaters. We'd been walking in the middle of the street drinking our beers in silence and then, suddenly, we were joined by a procession of utensil-wielding citizens. A slow din started up as people banged on the pots and pans. It was a shy banging at first but quickly it

grew louder and faster. Alexei looked about in wonderment. Somehow I'd completely forgotten about the nightly demonstrations.

There'd been a student strike that winter and into the spring, in reaction to a proposed tuition hike. The strike had gained a great deal of support from worker's unions and everyday citizens. There had been massive marches, violence (one protester had lost an eye) and very little progress. Now, at eight p.m. each night, thousands of Montrealers took to their porches and to the streets, banging kitchenware in solidarity with the strikers. I explained this to Alexei.

"These people are protesting the government?" he asked. "But it is so peaceful. Where are the police? They don't come and arrest them or shoot them?"

"What these people are doing is perfectly legal. In the larger marches there have been some clashes with the police and people have been hurt on either side. If someone gets out of hand they have to arrest them but the police would never outright kill a protester. There'd be hell to pay."

"I think your government is smart, for letting these people bang their pots in peace. My father was a teenager the year that the imperial guard opened fire on thousands of innocent protesters in Petersburg. He told me that it changed everything, that the events that day brought about the revolution."

"1905, right? I learned about that in high school. Bloody Sunday. Remind me what happened," I said.

"Workers banded together under the leadership of the priests. These were hardworking, God-fearing Russians mind you, who believed in their government and trusted the Tsar. The working conditions and wages in the city were atrocious, so they thought to appeal to Nicholas II, whose God-appointed duty it was to protect and serve the people. Nicholas fled the Winter Palace when he found out about the protest and so the city was left to police forces. The

protesters carried religious icons and sang ‘God Save the Tsar.’ There were women and children for Christ’s sake. But the imperial guard was overwhelmed by their numbers and started firing into the crowds. Thousands of innocents, even random citizens who were just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time were massacred. Nothing was the same after that.

“These protesters were not revolutionaries. They were, in effect, on the side of the Tsarist regime; they just wanted help, to have a better quality of life. But the real revolutionaries at the time scoffed at them because of their gentle methods. Well, once this massacre occurred the general population started to turn against the Tsar and then the revolutionaries who wanted to overturn the regime with violence were able to get some traction. It was a gradual process, this change of popular opinion, but my father said that that singular event shifted the view of the common worker from seeing the Tsar as a protector, to seeing him as just another ruthless bureaucrat. That year of 1905 there were hundreds of workers strikes, mass hangings, shootings. Social deviants were exiled en masse. The social contract was broken.”

Hearing Alexei talk about Bloody Sunday like that gave me a greater appreciation of the demonstration that was going on. There were parents out with their kids exercising their right to peacefully protest, laughing and dancing. Even if these people weren’t all particularly involved in politics, the way they came together seemed to give strength and meaning to the community. And what could be better than that? I guess some people think that kind of thing is cheesy, protesting I mean. I suppose it’s because it’s such an earnest and emotional activity. Most of the kids I knew back at University were too clever and ironic for that sort of thing. I could see Abel and Stan scoffing at the demonstrators. Not to say I’m better than them; I’d never have the courage to

stand up for a cause I believed in. The only cause I'd been interested in the past year was seeing how fast I could make it the bottom of a bottle of booze.

I had a sudden urge to ride the subway, so we peeled away from the demonstrators, found our way to the nearest metro station and headed underground. It was an especially grimy station, towards the end of the line. It seemed as though it had fallen into neglect by virtue of being out on the fringes. We waited for what felt like an eternity for the train, which, when it emerged, was coated in a deep film of dirt. We were close to the end of the line and no train had passed in either direction for a good twenty minutes, so one had to assume that this old fossil of a beast had just sputtered to life at random and resumed its tiresome rounds.

We climbed aboard and sat down on the decrepit plastic orange seats. On one end of the car, a group of francophone men sat in work clothes covered in plaster and drywall drinking discount beer out of a cardboard box. There were a couple of kids down the other end listening to hip-hop on cell phone speakers, performing elaborate dance moves and hanging upside down from the metal grips. Halfway between stops a disheveled old man came in through the rickety doorway that connects the train cars. He took out a clarinet and gently started up a tune. Against all odds I actually recognized it. It was a song titled, simply and appropriately, "Clarinet Polka." My father had owned an old '45 of it that he used to play on repeat, nearly causing my mother and I to go insane. It was a short composition, based around a tuneful eight-note arpeggio, but the old man repeated it over and over, embellishing where he saw fit.

"Hey I know that song!" Alexei said. The old man nodded warmly. "They used to perform it sometimes in the bars around Moscow. How wonderful to hear it again."

I laughed. "Strange, I know it too," I said. "I hated this song as a kid but I haven't heard it in so many years,

it's sort of nice to encounter it again so unexpectedly." I produced a plastic mickey of Canadian Club from the inner breast pocket of my jacket, Alexei and I passed it back and forth a few times.

"It's pretty mind-blowing, the transformation that Russia underwent between that 1905 massacre and the rise of Stalin," I said. "Throw World War One into the mix, and Jesus, it's just about inconceivable. I've been thinking about what you said the other night, about how Stalin marched the Soviet troops past Lenin's tomb in Red Square before they went off to battle. That sort of thing really helps you understand the cunning that kept Stalin in power for so long and then propagated the Soviet party afterwards. I mean, even after Stalin was dead the other guys were pulling plays right out of his book I'm sure.

"I heard when Lenin died, he left an official statement saying he disapproved of Stalin's heavy-handed, bullying tactics. The statement was suppressed and Stalin made Lenin out to be a great hero, milking his mythological reputation for all it was worth. The erection of a mausoleum to house his embalmed body is just so perfect, it creates a physical, theoretically everlasting representation of the Party ideals. People need physical representations. Ideas are thin.

"But on the foundation of that mausoleum, Stalin built a horrific empire that duped revolutionaries the world over into thinking there was a true to life holy land for their cause and simultaneously scared the bejesus out of American politicians for the better part of a century. But it was mostly a hall of mirrors, right? No one was safe or happy in the USSR: who could honestly thrive in that environment?

"I read that in 1970 the KGB ran a top secret mission where they dug up Hitler's body, burned it and threw the ashes in a river. All that remained afterwards was his skull. The Russian government later released a statement

that they were afraid Hitler's burial grounds might have become a site of worship for occult, fascist fanatics looking to bring forth the Nazi renaissance. Objects are powerful. Even just the skull seems terrifying. I don't think I could bring myself to look at Hitler's skull. Makes me ill just thinking about it." I took a long pull of whiskey.

"You're just giving in to superstition," Alexei said, taking the whiskey from me. The subway train rattled onwards and a few more people got on. "If Hitler is dead, who cares about a skull? A skull cannot be used for any evil. Be realistic. And with Lenin, who even knows if it was really his body in that shrine. It could have been a fake for all we know. I don't actually think it was a fake, but for argument's sake let's imagine it were: the fake would be just as compelling. Physical objects don't hold any real power beyond their basic use. If humans place their own meaning in an object, or, for example, a corpse, then that's just a meaning that lives in the mind, which after all, is just another object."

"Exactly! That's exactly my point. See, I used used to embrace the Hegelian-Christian viewpoint that there's this collective energy within humanity that's greater than our individual minds guiding us towards paradise or some ultimate end. Like if we just do our best and try hard and maintain our honour and dignity, some invisible hand will guide us along, but that's bullshit. There's no Spirit, no invisible hand. Humanity isn't owed anything. There's no cryptic will of God bullshit behind tragedy: there's just tragedy. War and pollution and natural disasters are just stepping stones to the apocalypse. After that there's nothing."

"Frederick, you sound like a fucking asshole. It's true, humans are not kind. I've read my history and seen how it always goes with the great empires; the Romans, the Mongols, especially the Soviets. Empires are built in the name of honour, god, socialism, whatever, but eventually, a few generations into the endeavour, people lose sight of

why they started conquering in the first place, self interest takes over, power splinters and the giant machine collapses.

“The pattern that emerges is not very glamorous. And yes, there is probably no god and no afterlife, and that’s tough medicine to swallow also. There’s a lot of shit to wallow in if that’s what you want to do, but you have a choice.

“You got broken up with by a girl you love and now you are having a crisis and you think your chance at happiness might be gone forever. It’s not true, though. You were born into a family with a decent amount of money in a time of peace in a country where the government offers you almost total freedom. You’re not physically deformed. In fact, I’d say you’re decently handsome and you’ve obviously got a pretty good head on your shoulders. I believe you have the capacity for happiness, but you have some ill-founded guilt because you haven’t had to make any great self-sacrifice. But what use is your life drinking and scrubbing dishes? You’ve convinced yourself that it’s noble to suffer, though you suffer for nothing but your own satisfaction. That’s a very self-ish life, wouldn’t you agree?”

The clarinet polka finally drew to a close. I reached into my pocket and pulled out a crumpled five dollar bill to hand to the man. He shuffled over and took it. His eyes were fixed on the rye so I handed it to him. He took a swig, chuckled, gestured incoherently and handed it back. He continued out the back door, exposing us momentarily to a blast of musty air from the tunnel outside.

I was temporarily speechless. An unrecognizable sensation was building in my chest, like drugs kicking in. A sliver of energy slipping through an unrecognized channel, tugging me upward. I stood suddenly in tandem with Alexei.

“Did you feel that?” he asked. I gave him a startled look. We got off at the next stop because we’d overshot my

neighborhood by several stops and came out way downtown, at Bonaventure, a stone's throw from Gare Centrale. The low-lying district was virtually deserted this late on a Monday. The cathedrals and financial buildings stretched above us menacingly as we strode towards the mountain.

Something very strange was happening: an invigorating force was linking us, driving us up the steep streets. Whatever level of drunkenness we had achieved was washed away and replaced with an immaculate sobriety. The soft glow of streetlights took on a celestial air; inverted fish-hooks pulling us towards our destination.

Eventually we reached Des Pins; the lip of the hill. We skirted around and wound our way up a street adorned with great stone mansions. I'd lost track of time but it must have been pretty late by now. The night suddenly felt very dry. The sky was clear and windless. The air was flat, neither warm nor cold, as if weather as an entity had given up altogether. It struck me that we hadn't encountered another human since we got off the train. I had the feeling we'd been swept into a vacuum.

Then I noticed the moon above. It was dangerously close, looking as though it might fall on us. Even stranger, it was coloured a deep, cranberry red. The words "Blood Moon" escaped my lips.

"I've never seen anything like that," Alexei said, looking up. "What does it mean?"

"Scientifically speaking it means the earth is directly between the sun and the moon. Light from the sun is refracting through the earth's atmosphere and casting red against the moon. But then there's the biblical meaning to consider."

"Biblical meaning?" Alexei looked panicked.

"In Book of Acts, there's a passage that reads 'And I will show wonders in Heaven above and signs in the Earth beneath, the sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon

into blood before the coming of the great and awesome day of the lord.’” Alexei’s look of panic evolved. “We’re pretty sure there’s no God, though, right?” I said. “I mean, it’s pretty well established. That there’s no God. Yes?”

“I’m fairly certain, yes, but something put me in that lightning bolt and fired me into the future. Something is pulling us towards the top of this great hill and something just turned that gigantic moon red. I’m not afraid of God. I’m afraid of whatever it is that’s orchestrating all of this black mischief.”

As he spoke we hustled, one foot in front of the other, to the top of the row of luxury homes. We pulled ourselves up onto a low stone wall and jumped into the brush that lay beyond. From here it was a steep climb and we crawled in a frenzy over rocks and fallen trees, absorbing the dirt of the forest. We were both panting and sweating under the oppressive moon that seemed to monitor our movements like Big Brother.

After a long climb the ground levelled out. We were still walking through the forest when we caught the glow of the cross in the distance. By the time we reached the clearing where it stood, the wind had kicked up and it had started to rain. The sky clouded over in a matter of seconds, and the air grew slightly frigid. The weather had returned.

We stared up at the huge cross, drinking in its bright, white aura. “What is this doing here?” Alexei asked.

“There was a flood just after the city was established back in the seventeenth century,” I said. I’d been astonished by the electric cross that stood a hundred feet tall atop the mountain when I’d arrived in Montreal and researched its history. “The first French settlers had recently arrived and there were only a handful of people living here on the island, really. It was a struggle just to survive. Then one year in December there was tons of precipitation and the Saint Lawrence Seaway was on the verge of swallow-

ing up the small settler community. Paul de Chomeday, who pretty much founded the city, prayed to the Virgin Mary and vowed to erect a cross on the hill if the island could be saved. Mary co-operated and in the new year a wooden cross went up. Eventually it was replaced by this giant electric ornament.”

We were climbing the rough, wiry fence set around the cross to deter vandals as I spoke. It was not an easy fence to climb. Fumbling over the top Alexei cut his hands quite badly. The wire ripped my pants and shredded my left leg. We fell onto the muddy grass beneath the cross, swearing and bleeding. It was raining hard now, thunder boomed in the distance.

By the time we'd caught our breath we were soaked to the bone and coated in mud. We started scaling the metal beams that made up the holy structure. I counted the seconds between the thunderclaps and the flashes of lightning and found that the gaps were decreasing rapidly as we climbed higher. Despite the danger, we climbed on, seeking destruction against our will.

It was only once we'd reached the top that our bodies were allowed to rest. We sat on the head of the cross. The rain was pounding down on us in great sheets, the thunder was deafening.

“All of this reminds me of a poem,” Alexei said, surveying the entire city. “Everything we've been talking about: the war, this cross, this mountain. I was going through your books and there were these lines I remember perfectly: ‘The beauty of modern man is not in the persons, but in the disastrous rhythm, the heavy and mobile masses, the dance of the dream-led masses down the dark mountain.’ Those lines are the perfect summary of everything you fear.”

“We're sitting on a giant electric cross in a storm of biblical proportions at the apex of a dark mountain, and you

want to invoke Robinson fucking Jeffers?" I yelled. What in the hell is wrong with you? We could die up here you know, I'd rather not go out analyzing depressing poetry. For fuck's sake, you were supposed to be my Feng Shui guru."

"There's another way," Alexei yelled back. He pointed at the sky. "We don't have to go down the mountain. There's something up there. We can go up, you see, up."

"Alexei, this is as high as we can go, there's nothing up there. Unless you believe in God, that is."

"No! Not God. Something though, there's something up there. It's not rational, it's not orderly: it's a living thing that contains the future and the past within it, but it doesn't think, it just acts, like an animal. It's the one thing that's more powerful than the human race. It's why we came up here, you see?" I didn't see at all. And I didn't hear the sound of the lightning that struck us. All I remember is the white light and the searing pain.

The channel that I spoke of earlier? Through which I'd believed God spoke to me? The one that had been sealed and paved over so that I couldn't even locate it if I wanted to? Inside the light a different channel opened up in a corner of my mind that I didn't even know existed. Pain poured through it like molten metal. The pain was like nothing I'd ever felt, it was like my mind and body were simultaneously being stretched on a torture rack. At the same time, the pain seemed to be releasing powerful endorphins so that I was joyous and desperate all at once. There was the light and there was a steady hum and they grew brighter and louder as I was drawn up and away, until the pain and the joy and everything else proved too intense and I blacked out. And then there was nothing.

I awoke in the morning on the ground beside the cross to a black lab enthusiastically licking my face. I batted him away. He barked loudly and retreated into the trees.

The sun was blinding and my leg was killing me. I was filthy, covered head to toe in muck, and my clothes were torn and singed. My entire body ached. I descended the mountain slowly, hobbling like an old man. Alexei was gone. It wasn't just that he was absent: I knew with certainty that he was gone, that he'd burned off into the atmosphere. Whatever happened up there, and I'm still not even sure now, had completely redistributed my inner landscape. If Alyosha had in fact dissolved, he'd been pulled through me like a sieve. I slowly realized that I now retained all of his memories and feelings. As I came to the bottom of the hill and made my way through city streets, attracting odd looks from passersby, I flipped through the memories and impressions. It was necessary to do this in a slow, methodical manner. If I'd let it all free at once it would have been psychologically crippling.

I made it home, threw my clothes in the waste bin, took three ibuprofen tablets and ran a hot shower. I was still in shock from the events of the previous night, trying to distinguish dream from reality. I tried to analyze what it meant to carry the essential life of another human within me. This new development had not assuaged my anxieties or cured my depression, but soon I discovered a growing desire to return to life: an asymmetrical inversion of the compulsion that had ruled me for the past twelve months. I dried off, dressed and cleaned the apartment thoroughly. Priorities came into focus, plans were snapping into place. The chapter of my life set in this city was coming to a close, but I had one last thing to do.

I went to the drug store across the street, bought a fresh notebook and a box of pens, then stopped by the trendy espresso bar next door for coffee and a muffin. I returned to the freshly cleaned apartment, sat down at my writing desk and didn't get up for several hours.

By the time I vacated the apartment the following

HATE LETTERS FROM BUDDHISTS

week there was a completed manuscript lying on the table. I left it there for whomever chanced upon it. Most likely it ended up unread in the trash bin like the rest of my writing from that period. The opening line went like this: I was born on July 1st, 1917 in the farmland just outside of Smolensk to a Christian, landowning family.

FRIENDS AT A FUNERAL

Abel awoke at the hospital in the middle of the night. He could feel immediately that something was different. He was no longer dreaming the world: he was in it. It was as though he'd tumbled down a well and come out the other side into reality. He knew instinctively that something had been subtracted from the world, and that something had been added also. He immediately fell back into an untroubled, dreamless sleep. Later on he did not remember waking up in the night. It wasn't until he was back at his apartment making coffee on the stovetop and reading comics the next day that he heard the news:

“Despite a barrage of police warnings, tragedy struck last night in the Halifax Commons when a young man was beaten to death by multiple assailants. While this was not the first attack of this nature, it is the first to result in a death. While the young man's identity has not been released to the public we do know that he was a student at King's College University.”

Seconds later he received a text from Sebastopol. Frederick had guessed the victim's identity when Stan had failed to meet him for Dim Sum that morning. Seconds after that there was a knock on his door. It was the police, and they were extremely confused. There were many accounts, including from paramedics at the hospital, stating that shortly before his murder, the victim had descended towards the hospital entrance "as if levitating," with Abel in his arms. Unfortunately Abel was just as confused as they were. The truth was that he'd been unconscious when Stan rescued him and had remained unconscious at the time of his friend's death. He couldn't explain how he'd nearly drowned. He knew about fugue states from the radio, from popular television shows. He assumed he'd had some sort of stress-induced breakdown. He remembered the massive wave and the feeling of elation that had grasped him as it crushed him to pieces. He was sure he'd died and been re-born into a different world. He told none of this to the police. He said he tripped and fell in the ocean. They left scratching their heads.

The funeral fell on an incredibly cold, incredibly bright day. The sun's warmth seemed trapped in the celestial jelly that holds the planets in orbit. Specks of snow darted through the air. Frederick Sebastopol and Abel Grand stood together at the tip of the isosceles park across from Rosedale United, a few blocks away from where Stan Burdock had grown up. They were dressed in ill-fitting black suits, shivering and passing a flask of Famous Grouse back and forth. The service was widely attended as is most often the case when the deceased is so young. It seemed like half of the college had flown in from Halifax to be there. Stan Burdock had been hated by one half of the student body and loved by the other. His nonsensical code of ethics had bred no small amount of enmity amongst his peers. On the other hand he was always a soft touch if you needed a bag

of grass. And if you couldn't afford to pay him to write your paper, he'd usually sit down and talk you through the finer points of Heidegger on the house. Students and staff swapped stories along these lines, milling about outside the church, a revolving mass of beautiful, fucked up academics.

Sebastopol had returned to the college that September. A simple phone call to the dean, paired with the lobbying of a few professors had been enough to get him re-admitted, scholarship intact. Technically he was on academic probation, but it was temporary and would not affect his permanent record. He took a healthy swig from the flask and resumed his interrogation of Abel Grand concerning a recent date he'd been on:

"This is Kirsten, yes? From your Woolf seminar? You were saying it went well? Or no, it didn't go well. Which was it?"

"Both, actually," Abel replied uneasily. "I was way over caffeinated but I think I was speaking intelligently. Eventually I insisted we switch to beer so I could calm down. She seemed really cool. She loves Pavement so that's a plus and she can talk sci-fi for sure. We ended up hanging out for like six hours though, which was too long. I drank too much, the conversation lagged and then we had this horribly awkward hug at the end where I kind of went in for the kiss but then bailed. So yeah I think it went badly in the end."

"Have you heard from her?" Sebastopol asked.

"Yeah. She texted right after to acknowledge the awkwardness. Said she had a good time."

"Well how can that be bad? I think you're probably fine. Have you texted her back?"

"Yeah, I was messaging with her for a while just now."

"In the service, you were texting her?"

"Don't get all judgmental, that was a really boring

service.”

“Abel it’s not X-Men. It wasn’t meant to entertain you. You didn’t mention to her that you were at the funeral did you?”

“Shit, I don’t think so, let me check.” Abel fumbled with his phone. “Ah fuck, I deleted the history. I’m gonna be stressed about this all day now. Come on, let’s hit the refreshment area, I wouldn’t mind crushing a couple nanaimo bars. Then again, eating at a funeral is so undignified. And we’d have to talk to people. Better just stay put. Hey, isn’t that that guy?”

Trevor Hawthorpe sidled up next to them. He wore a pink oxford, a pea coat and blue jeans. It was hardly an appropriate outfit for the occasion.

“Fuck’s going on?” He asked. “Some sort of goth-themed wedding?”

“It’s Stan Burdock’s funeral, asshole, show a little respect,” Abel blurted out.

“Holy shit, Stan Burdock’s dead? That’s fucked up,” Trevor said.

“How do you not know about this? It’s been all over the news, the University sent out a mass email to students and alum- ah, never mind,” said Frederick, bewildered. “What are you doing here anyway, If you didn’t know about the funeral?”

“Coincidence. I just live around the corner,” Trevor gestured randomly towards his house, “I came out for a walk to smoke this joint. You guys want some?” He produced a pinner from behind his ear and lit it.

“Isn’t that kind of disrespectful?” Frederick asked. “Seeing as we’re at a funeral?”

“Fuck that,” Trevor retorted, exhaling. “You guys are drinking. Why is one form of intoxication more appropriate than the next?”

“I’m siding with him on this one,” Abel said, trad-

ing Trevor the flask for the joint.

“Hey, is my sister here?” Trevor asked.

Sebastopol looked around as if a gunshot had gone off. “I fucking hope not,” he said.

“Ah yeah, she fucked you up too huh? No offence, but it’s kinda hard to keep track. You know Stan Burdock was patient zero in that respect. I think he was the first guy she ever slept with. Cut her teeth on the poor fucker.”

Sebastopol was hitting the joint pretty hard. “I can’t believe he never told me that. Shit, that kind of hurts.”

“Would you really have wanted to know?” came a fourth voice. The ghost of Stan Burdock strolled across the park and joined the circle. You could tell he was a ghost because he was all black and white like he’d stepped straight out of a Frank Capra film. He grabbed the joint from Sebastopol, smoked it to the filter and tossed it on the ground.

“Hey, I barely even hit that,” Abel whined.

“It’s cool. I’ve got a dugout,” Trevor said. He pulled out his one-hitter and offered it to Abel.

“Trevor fuckin’ Hawthorpe, always unawares, never unprepared,” said the ghost, laughing. “I just came up with that on the spot, not bad, huh? You know the first time I ever smoked weed was with you, down at the brickworks, before they cleaned it up and made it into a bespoke, pop-up, community garden and organic farmer’s market or whatever.”

“Oh yeah, I remember that night. We were up on that hill where you can see the city skyline perfectly, and the Bloor- Danforth aqueduct with the subway running underneath it like a robotic caterpillar. We had a fire going and we’d scored a bunch of beer. We were with some girls from Saint Matilda’s. You wandered up randomly and we fed you beer and weed ‘til you were so high you couldn’t even speak. I went off into the bushes and got to third base for the first time. I forgot about old Sally Shmaltz,” Trevor said, wist-

fully.

“What are you doing back in the neighbourhood anyway?” asked the ghost. “I know you didn’t wear a pink shirt to my funeral on purpose, so this must be a coincidence.”

“First of all, this shirt is salmon. Secondly, I got a job washing dishes at the Summerhill Diner. It’s not much but my dad’s just happy that I’m bringing home a paycheck. I can’t keep it up much longer though: those kitchen guys party pretty hard and I’ve been getting cranked at work on the regular. I don’t even go out on my nights off, I’m usually way too hungover. Thinking about doing some work with my dad down on Bay street, learning the family racket. Or maybe grad school. I don’t know.”

There was a pause in the dialogue.

“Hey asshole, can we talk about you and Sarah for a second?” Said Sebastopol. “If you think I’m going to let you off the hook just because you’re dead, you’ve got another thing coming. I confided in you and you lied to me. What kind of a way is that to treat a friend?”

“Fred, if I’d told you about me and Sarah it would have ruined our friendship. You were too much of a wreck to hear about it before you went to Montreal and you were doing way too well after you got back. I know you’re still sensitive about it, but me and Sarah were basically children when we got together. Besides, she curb-stomped my heart same as you. Same as the others. She’s just weird that way. Anyway, that kind of suffering strengthens the soul once you’re through it. Don’t try and tell me you’re not a better person having come through that experience, I can fucking see it, you’re a more complete human being, holy shit, speak of the devil.”

A taxi had pulled up in front of the church. Sarah Hawthorpe climbed out. The ambient chatter stopped, the funeral party seemed transfixed. A young man got out the

other side of the cab and put his arm around her for comfort.

“Who’s she with?” Abel asked, standing on his toes, trying to see.

“It’s Cameron,” said Sebastopol bitterly.

“Fuck that guy,” Abel said, in solidarity.

“Well I’ll be damned,” said the ghost. “Either she still cares about me or she didn’t want to miss the social event of the season.”

At the same time, a beautiful woman was walking across the isosceles park with a young golden retriever in tow. She wore Sorels, insulated yoga pants, a Canada Goose parka and a big Russian looking hat. She seemed overly prepared for the coming of winter.

“Hey Margot,” Trevor called out. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” she replied smiling. “Just out for a walk with Clarence. What’s going on here? That’s quite a crowd.”

“It’s my buddy’s funeral,” Trevor said, gesturing towards the ghost. As it happens, the ghost was not visible to Margot. Also, Trevor was holding the flask of grouse and visibly stoned. Her impression of him at that moment was not favourable.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to wear pink to a funeral,” Margot said, laughing a bit, “You know, for next time.” She continued on out of the park, the young retriever bounding towards home.

“It’s fucking salmon!” Trevor yelled after a long delay, but Margot was already up her steps and out of hearing.

“How do you know her?” Abel asked.

“We had a thing last year, but then she got back together with her husband. It was kind of a bummer.”

Abel stared at the sleek modern house she’d disappeared into. “I’ll bet they’ve got one of those special corks you put in a bottle of wine when you don’t finish it that it keeps it fresh forever,” he said.

“Why would you open a bottle of wine if you weren’t going to finish it?” Trevor asked, disgusted.

“Hey Stan, what’s it like being dead?” Abel asked. Sebastopol smacked him on the shoulder with the back of his hand.

“How about a little tact, his body isn’t even in the ground yet.”

“No, it’s cool, I don’t mind talking about it,” said the ghost. “I feel relieved, relaxed. It’s sort of like that moment right before you fall asleep, when you’re already submerged in the dream world but the tip of your brain still knows you’re awake. I’m already gone, but there’s this brief echo that’s allowing me to stand here and talk to you idiots for a minute.”

“Hey it’s sort of like the Dixie Flatline, McCoy, in Gibson’s *Neuromancer*?” Trevor said. “He’s this dead console cowboy who’s stored in a ROM construct. He helps the main character hack through all kinds of high profile ICE so he can infiltrate *The Spindle*.”

“It is literally nothing like that!” Abel yelled.

“Dude, I understood about three words that you just said, but yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s not like that at all,” the ghost agreed. “But I will say, it’s not bad. There’s really nothing to be afraid of. Dying’s really helped me let go of all my anxiety. I feel kind of silly now for being so stressed out when I was alive. Somebody told me right before I kicked to let go of all my petty concerns and anger, to embrace something called the Great Eastern Sun which I think is a metaphor for pure goodness. It sounds like new age bullshit, I know, but I think I might have reached some sort of pseudo enlightenment right before death. Hey, since you guys are all still around, could you do me a favour and cheer up? I know none of you are really all that happy. Try to simplify: let go of the bullshit, remember to breathe, maybe lay off the sauce a little. Hypocritical advice coming from me, I

know.” The ghost drained the flask of grouse and tossed it to Abel. “Fuck, what do I know. Anyway, that’s it for me, I gotta run.”

The ghost walked towards the base of the isosceles park. Black and white apparitions of Alexei and the Lizard Man were waiting for him. Three men stood at the top of the triangle, three at the bottom, divided by a line of living. They all stared at each other for a moment as if looking into a distorted mirror and then the ghosts dissipated into the air.

“That was so fucking *Return of the Jedi*,” Trevor said. Frederick and Abel nodded their agreement. Slowly the funeral-goers dispersed. The trio headed around the corner to the Hawthorpe mansion. It was nearly cocktail hour.

