The Right Thing to Say

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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The Right Thing to Say

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This thesis is a collection of short stories that are dark in tone, often falling under the category of black humor. Some stories derive humor from depressing, horrifying, or tragic situations, while others portray such situations in a more conventionally serious light. The critical introduction examines the tradition of black humor as a literary device and genre and attempts to explain its appeal and function in literature, drawing from the work of Sherman Alexie, Kurt Vonnegut, and George Saunders.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION: MAKING THE HORRIBLE ABSURD

Black humor offers a very particular pleasure that regular comedy does not—the means and excuse to laugh at the sad, the grotesque, and the horrifying. When I read a line like this one from "And Lead us Not into Penn Station" by Amy Hempel: "Women who are attacked phone a hotline for advice. 'Don't report a rape' the women are told. 'Call it indecent exposure. A guy who takes it out and doesn't do anything with it—cops figure that guy is sick,' " (155) for example, I find myself laughing at the irony of the policeman's statement, his comical ineffectuality as a sworn protector of the people because of the dark implications his advice have about real world gender roles. Hempel evokes the grim reality of sexual assault while simultaneously making a mockery of the modes of thinking that perpetuate it. The reader is left both horrified and amused, conflicting feelings that offer a unique perspective on the subject that can be difficult to express. Mathew Winston, in his essay "Black Humor: to Weep with Laughing," comments on how black humor functions: "With its typical ambivalence, black humor reminds us of the pain and misery beneath what we are laughing at, which are not obviated by the laughter. To this extent it complicates our response to the literature we are reading and to the characters we are reading about" (257). Laughter and horror arise from black humor in codependence. Laughter does not undercut the reality or severity of the pain in the text, but enhances it in a way that offers new meaning. Winston writes: "The literature of black humor frequently depicts horrible events, unhappy people, anarchy, and chaos. It uses language not merely to reproduce that disorder but also to play with it and thereby to structure it" (258). This structuring of the structureless is at once funny and eye opening. Black humor looks for patterns in the entropic, like
senseless acts of violence that appear to many to have no cause or reason other than that old admonition "There are some sick people in this world." In "And Lead us Not into Penn Station," the police officer serves to offer an explanation for the high number of rapes and sexual assaults that are occurring: a male-dominated culture normalizes the act of rape and robs its victims of agency.

"Black humor" is a term that has not been easily defined. In the beginning of his essay "Toward a Definition of Black Humor," Max F. Schulz discusses the people who he claims are responsible for bringing recognition to black humor as a movement in the 1960's:

Conrad Knickerbocker is its theoretician, Bruce Jay Friedman its field commander. Yet neither they nor their fellow partisans can agree on a common article of faith or theater of operations. Black humor is a movement without unity, a group of guerillas who huddle around the same campfire only because they know they are in Indian territory. (14)

Schulz expresses the tenuousness of the movement with a rather dark metaphor. The early proponents of the movement are portrayed here as having nothing in common other than their enemies and banding together only to save their own lives, i.e. relevancy in the literary world. We get the sense that they would stab each other in the back given the opportunity. Strange is Schulz's evocation of early American westward expansion, casting Native Americans as the enemies and the people who ultimately displaced them as the heroes. These early legitimizers of black humor are anti-heroes in Schulz's analogy, just as anti-heroes are a trope in black humor (Billy Pilgrim of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for example). Bruce Jay Friedman, the "field commander" who
Schulz refers to, also brings up the problem of definition with inventive analogies: "It is called 'Black Humor' and I think I would have more luck defining elbow or a corned-beef sandwich. I am not, for one thing, even sure if it is black. It might be fuchsia or eggshell. . . I think some of it is in brown polka dots" (19). The elusive nature of black humor as a term or movement is perhaps frustrating for those who study it. But what better way to deal with frustration than to joke about it?

The lack of a consensus on its meaning characterizes black humor. How do we explain the phenomenon of laughing at the horrible simply, after all? Friedman offers an idea that black humor is the logical successor to satire:

The journalist, who, in the year 1964, must cover the ecumenical debate on whether Jews, on the one hand, are still to be known as Christ-killers, or, on the other hand, are to be let off the hook, is certainly today's satirist. The novelist-satirist, with no real territory of his own to roam, has had to discover new land, invent a new currency, a new set of filters, has had to sail into darker waters somewhere out beyond satire and I think this is what is meant by black humor. (22)

Black humor is a symptom of changing times. When the media industry begins to look like satire itself, where else is there for satirists to go? I am often perplexed by the nature of the media industry today. Politics frustrate me because they are so focused on inane and irrelevant character bashing. The outcome of the controversy behind the arrest of Henry Louis Gates was a "beer summit" that President Obama was forced to participate in for damage control. Consider this June 29, 2009 headline from USA Today:

"Breaking: Obama picks Bud Light for 'beer summit'. " The very first line is a sarcastic
remark about the idiocy of the headline itself: "We guess this qualifies as breaking news" (Jackson). This real journalist has turned to self-parody. Consider also Sarah Palin, a figure who appears to be pulled straight from a satire of American politics. Her public persona is more akin to that of a celebrity than a politician. She was almost vice president of the United States and purportedly did not know that Africa is a continent and not a country (Graham). How do we mock a figure like that? Exaggeration is a tool of the satirist, but this is problematized by people who are known precisely for being over the top exaggerations, people we did not imagine could possibly exist in this realm. The dark admonitions of satire have in some ways come true. Maybe in a hundred years a respected politician will suggest eating infants to curb poverty and hunger.

Critics have attempted to make better sense of black humor by comparing it to existentialism and absurdism and pointing out the key differences. Alan R. Pratt argues that black humor literature is like existentialism "in that it begins with the same assumption—that the world is absurd" (xvii). Bruce Janoff argues that "the existential novel demonstrates a despairing world view which has strong affinities with the grim vision of the black humorists" (28). Both traditions seem to have despair and absurdism in common, but the approaches, as Janoff points out, are different: "although the typical existential novel is often heavily ironic, it does not contain the consistently wry, comic perspective from which the black humorists view the human condition" (28). Similarly, Pratt offers the explanation that "because we now live in an age when the notion of absurdity is more or less taken for granted, writers have had to keep pace, and the aim of the black humorist is significantly different from the existentialist" (xvii). This is reminiscent of Friedman's explanation of black humor progressing from satire. If we
choose to acknowledge that the world or life or human experience are absurd, then literature must accomplish something more than just simply pointing it out. For black humorists, this mission is to make us laugh about it. Pratt writes: "Yes, given the human condition, the world is ridiculous, but rather than stoic resignation or heroic struggle, the black humorist tries to wrest laughter from our cosmic plight" (xvii-xviii). When I first became interested in writing black humor, I found it difficult to describe why exactly I was drawn to it. This is no surprise, considering the lack of cohesion within the movement itself. Looking back, I think I wanted to try to make sense out of absurdity in the best way I could. This is not to say that I write absurdist fiction—I use "absurd" not to describe the literary genre but as its dictionary definition. The world is full of illogic—sometimes this is harmless, others it is catastrophic and horrible, like the illogic of the Westboro Baptist Church who believe God hates America for accepting homosexuality. Black humor makes us laugh at the illogic because there is nothing left—we are already appalled by it. Laughter and ridicule come next.

Sherman Alexie, a writer who has influenced me greatly, explores the function of dark humor in his story "The Approximate Size of my Favorite Tumor" from his collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, about life on a Spokane Indian reservation. In this story, Jimmy Many Horses drives away his wife, Norma, by joking about his terminal cancer. He relates the initial joke that upsets her to his cousin, Simon: "Well, I told her the doctor showed me my X-rays and my favorite tumor was just about the size of a baseball, shaped like one, too. Even had stitch marks" (Alexie 157). The night she leaves, he talks to the imaginary children they will never be able to have: "'And look at the kids,' I said as I patted the heads of imaginary children. 'They've grown
so much. And they have your eyes' " (155). For Jimmy, humor is the only way to cope with his impending death. While this causes Norma to leave him in the beginning of the story, she is eventually won over by his thinking, returning to him after having an affair with a man who is, in her words, "so fucking serious about everything" (170). Black humor functions as a method of coping for Jimmy, but not an escapist one. Joseph L. Coloumbe shares his theory of the function of Jimmy's tumor-as-baseball joke: "The comic treatment is a coping mechanism that borders on denial. He makes light of a serious danger to his life by connecting it to—and reducing it to—a mere game. His humor seems like an effort to hide from the reality of cancer" (98-99). I disagree— consistently telling jokes that are unrelated to his cancer would be escapism or denial. Jimmy's comparison of his tumor to a baseball is a joke that evokes the image of the tumor and thus the seriousness of the cancer itself. While the baseball imagery does serve to "make light" of the cancer, it does so in a way that does not ignore its severity. Obviously, Jimmy does not believe that his tumor is really shaped like a baseball. Cancer is the enemy, and it is always therapeutic or pleasing to embarrass or ridicule one's enemy. He does this instead of wallowing in self-pity or become morosely depressed. Joking about his illness is a healthy albeit morbid coping mechanism that not only works for Jimmy but causes a profound change in Norma.

Throughout *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, Alexie uses black humor to portray the harsh realities of reservation life, including alcoholism, poverty, and oppression. Philip Heldrich argues that in Alexie's fiction, "dark humor and irony, formed partly by such techniques as parody, satire, burlesque, hyperbole, and farce, are an effective strategy to point out historical and present conditions of inequality created by
white hegemony and convey conflicts generated by assimilation" (25). We see this in "Approximate Size" as well. In a flashback to a happy time in Jimmy and Norma's marriage, the two are pulled over and extorted by a white police officer and react by joking instead of becoming outraged. After the cop shakes them down for all the money they have on them, Jimmy gives him an extra "tip" and says to him: "I might just send a letter to your commanding officer. I'll just write that Washington State Patrolman D. Nolan, badge number 13746, was polite, courteous, and above all, legal as an eagle" (166). When the officer threatens to arrest them on bogus charges, Norma takes the lead: "If you do, I'll just tell everyone how respectful you were of our native traditions, how much you understood about the social conditions that lead to the criminal acts of so many Indians. I'll say you were sympathetic, concerned, and intelligent" (166). Alexie evokes very real and serious injustices in an ironic fashion. Norma promising to publicly compliment the officer to his peers on his intelligence and awareness of social issues pertaining to Indians becomes an absurd threat because it is normal for whites to ignore the existence of Indians, to approach American history with a selective memory. Heldrich points out that Alexie's stories "depict absurd circumstances with characters limited in their ability to affect change" (28). In the scene with the policeman, Jimmy and Norma do not have agency besides what they afford themselves with their humor—the solidarity and pleasure that come from ridiculing their oppressor by honing in on the absurdity of his oppressions.

When it comes to black humor, no one is as effective or prolific as Kurt Vonnegut. A man who had seen firsthand unimaginable horror, Vonnegut spent his career as a writer exposing the points of view and institutions we share, accept, or celebrate that
make atrocities possible. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, perhaps his most well known work, Vonnegut examines fatalism with the use of such science fiction elements as aliens and time travel. The main character, Billy Pilgrim, has come "unstuck in time" as the result of an alien abduction, meaning that he no longer experiences time linearly but relives random moments from his life, including his death, over and over again for eternity. The story itself is told nonlinearly to match Billy's unique experience of reality. The climax of the novel—the firebombing of Dresden that kills 135,000 people (which Vonnegut actually survived)—is made known to the reader early on, and when it finally occurs, it is treated with the same attitude as any other random event of Billy's life. This is a war novel with no grand moments, no battles for honor, and, most of all, no heroes.

This is where the black humor comes in—the passivity and fatalism of the protagonist. The Tralfamadorians teach Billy that all events are predetermined and that nothing can be done to counter this, despite the fact that they repeatedly relive the same events again and again. The Tralfamadorians explain to Billy that the end of the universe, which will occur at the hands of one of their own with the press of a button, is inescapable. When Billy asks why not simply prevent him from pressing it, he gets this response: "He has always pressed it, and he always will. We always let him and we always will let him. The moment is structured that way" (Vonnegut 117). The satire here is obvious—humans have the knowledge to prevent suffering but do not, calmly accepting the way the world works instead of questioning why so many people suffer or what can be done to stop it. Billy accepts the Tralfamadorians' philosophies as truth so fully that he doesn't view human suffering as a problem. Martin Coleman explains in his essay "The Meaninglessness of Coming Unstuck in Time": "when Billy Pilgrim adopts
the Tralfamadorian view of time, he aligns himself with a traditional privileging of knowledge, wrongly understood, over concrete human experience" (689). In the same way that it is easy for Billy to disregard suffering because of his unique mindset, it is easy for some to disregard the suffering of people in oppressed societies across the oceans because they are far away. Hearing that dozens of people were killed in an attack in Syria enacted by their own government, for example, is a statistic. When a celebrity dies, we can put a human face on the story, contextualize it with personal feeling toward that person. But stories of things like genocide, modern day slavery, and disease, whether they occur in America or outside, often have no faces. In the history books, at least the history books I have read, the 135,000 people who died in the Dresden firebombing have no faces. Early in the novel, Billy offers his and the Tralfamadorians' view on death in a letter to his local newspaper:

> When a Tralfamarodian sees a corpse, all he thinks is that the dead person is in bad condition in that particular moment, but that the same person is just fine in plenty of other moments. Now, when I myself hear that somebody is dead, I simply shrug and say what the Tralfamadorians say about dead people, which is 'So it goes." (27)

"So it goes" is repeated by the narrator every time someone—or something—dies, ranging from the enormous death toll of the Dresden firebombing to a bottle of champagne that has gone flat. It's quirky and funny while horrible at the same time. The indifference and apathy toward suffering and death in *Slaughterhouse-Five* cause the reader to reflect on their own passivity or the passivity they encounter from others.
The uninterested or unlikeable narrator and/or protagonist is an excellent choice for this type of fiction. But this is difficult to pull off—the writer must make this character uninterested or unlikeable in an interesting way, a way that illuminates the ludicrousness of what this character is either ignoring or directly or indirectly causing.

Ironically, as Kevin Brown observes, critics have often misinterpreted *Slaughterhouse-Five* as advocating a passive or fatalistic view of the world. This seems an impossibly imperceptive viewpoint for a critic, to me. Brown writes: "The reason for this misinterpretation is that critics believe that Billy Pilgrim's attitudes are synonymous with Vonnegut's; however, Vonnegut distances himself from Pilgrim by showing the hazards of Pilgrim's philosophy and by presenting Pilgrim as a questionable, if not unreliable, narrator" (52). Obviously, it is difficult to identify with Billy Pilgrim. His passivity is disgusting. He rarely, if ever, shows any emotion, even toward the death of his own wife. His default reply is "Um." This is the kind of person who drives us crazy in real life. But it is the humor of the fantastical aliens and time travel juxtaposed with all-too-real devastation of war, of Billy's insane fatalistic mindset, that supplies the subtext of the novel, a subtext that anyone who understands irony should be able to see.

In a story of my own, "The Right thing to Say," I purposefully created a protagonist who is rude, coldhearted, and brazenly selfish. Lenny does not understand why people dislike him so much, why his behavior is considered detestable. I wanted to take this character's disillusionment to a dark extreme, so I decided to make him indirectly responsible for the death of a child, an action for which he consistently takes no responsibility. As I wrote the initial draft, I wondered if this was perhaps too dark, if this character was too far beyond the point of forgiveness in the eye of the reader. But I
decided that this was a challenge worth taking up—to make the reader want to read about this awful character, even to identify with him. In writing this story, I had no identifiable message I wanted to relate or subtext to imbue, unlike Vonnegut in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I began crafting the story simply around the character. As I continued to write, however, I was able to better characterize Lenny and contextualize his actions. Lenny constantly makes excuses for his behavior, both to the reader and the other characters. He escapes blame for the death of the child with his own convoluted logic. He observes that people tend to hate him, but believes this to be a problem with everyone except for him. One could compare this to the excuses or spin politicians put on stories of their scandals. Anyone who has been in an argument with someone who will not admit they are wrong despite being presented with facts knows how frustrating this kind of person can be. People naturally hate to be wrong. "The Right Thing to Say" became a meditation on the dangers of people who see the world through a narrow lens of their own creation by presenting a comical exaggeration of it through Lenny.

World War II is the backdrop to another of Vonnegut's novels, *Mother Night*. As far as black humor goes, this is at the end of the spectrum, the entirely black outer layer of a grey-scale rainbow. The protagonist is not the same brand as Billy Pilgrim. He is not deserving of the same contempt—or is he? This is the main question the novel poses. Post World War II, Howard W. Campbell, Jr. finds himself in an Israeli prison and recounts the events of his life that led to it. He is on the run from Israel special services demanding justice and finds himself taking refuge with deplorable racists and Nazi sympathizers. Much of the black humor of the novel comes from the stark irony of the situation, the good guys becoming the threat, the bad guys becoming allies.
Vonnegut prefaces this novel with an interesting admonition: "We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be" (v). This advice is particularly meaningful, I think, to fiction writers. The process of writing fiction is one of imagining, of creating something out of nothing. It is, in a sense, make-believe. But it is also a way of connecting to the reader, of conveying meaning. There is a certain responsibility inherent in that relationship on the part of the writer to be honest, to say something true in the make-believe. *Mother Night* is a novel about a man who pretends to be something he is not to a noble end, but is not honest with himself in the process.

Through this character, Vonnegut gets to the heart of the truth in his beginning admonition. Howard is a double agent during the war, secretly spying on Germany for the United States. In order to get the information he needs, he rises high in the ranks under Joseph Goebbels' propaganda division. The problem is that in order to gain this level of Nazi trust, Howard has to be very, very good at what he does, and after the war he is left to ask himself a horrifying question— which side did he help more?

I choose to include this novel in this analysis because it presents a different kind of dark humor that isn't laugh-out-loud funny. Howard is on the run, hiding like any Nazi war criminal for most of the novel because he cannot prove he was working with the United States. He is not a ridiculous or exaggerated character, nor does he ignore the severity of the war and the roles he played. He gains the reader's sympathies as someone who has been wrongfully accused, someone who had always had good intentions despite the outcome. But this moral dilemma with which he is faced is always looming over him. The dark humor here comes from the irony of the situation—a man on the run from "the good guys" who finds protection from horrible people. Once his identity is leaked, he is
befriended by a Nazi sympathizing white supremacist group called Iron Guard of the White Sons of the American Constitution, which includes dentist Dr. Lionel Jones, who uses dental records to prove that Jews are inferior, and, even more bizarrely, Robert Sterling Wilson, a black man known as the "Black Fuehrer of Harlem" who sided with the Japanese, the "colored folks' side" as he says (89). His aspirations are for the "colored folks" to acquire a bomb of their own and drop it on the Chinese, who he claims are not colored. The contradictions inherent in these characters' ideologies show how absurd and unfounded racism is. They are caricatures of people who turn people into caricatures, and while they are in some ways funny, Vonnegut never gives the reader a chance to fully disassociate them from the real horrors of the Holocaust. In fact, the jokes serve to heighten the horror, much like Vonnegut's absurdly euphemistic language in the introduction when he refers to the activities of the Nazis as "monkey business" (v).

Not everything I write can be classified as black humor—sometimes this mode does not fit with what I hope to accomplish in the story. But whether or not my work is humorous, I find myself consistently drawn to dark themes. My story "Children of the Heavenly Hands" is about a young woman in a cult, forced to deal with the impending reality that life in the cult may require her to have a sexual relationship with their prophet and leader. The inspiration for this story came from a National Geographic special about a real cult, the leader of which, who believed himself to be the reincarnation of Christ, consistently had sex with the women of the cult and slept naked with teenagers. For the women, this was supposed to be a profound, religious experience, and it was clear from interviews of cult members that many of them truly believed this. It was terrifying how the children defended him, especially the girls. I wanted to tell a story through the point
of view of a girl just coming of age to be of interest to a cult leader like this, someone manipulative and utterly abhorrent.

I knew when I set out on this project that humor wouldn't be the best method to use. Perhaps this is because the real people I based it on are too vivid in my head. Perhaps I did not think incorporating humor into a story in which someone is molested is something I am capable of doing tastefully. I am of the mind that no subject is off limits for humor—writers should be able to joke about anything, as long as they can manage to do it tastefully. The distinction between what is tasteful and distasteful in black humor is, I think, the distinction between illumination and exploitation. The humor should illuminate the horror, to draw attention to it and contextualize it by making it absurd. For this particular project, the reality was horrifying enough. This is not to say that this story could not be rewritten as a piece of black humor; it just was not my vision for this story. I want to think about these ideas compared to the differences between *Mother Night* and some of Vonnegut's funnier novels, such as *Breakfast of Champions*, *Cat's Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut was very good at choosing the level to which humor would illuminate the horrors about which he wrote. *Mother Night* is pretty light on jokes compared to many of his other novels, and this seems like a conscious, well-informed decision about how to approach the subject matter.

It is easy to look at the work of George Saunders and see the influence of Vonnegut. In his collection *CivilWarLand in Ban Decline*, Saunders crafts a bleak, dystopian world filled with injustice and horror and characterized by desensitization to violence. The stories seem to go further into the future as the collection progresses, until in the final novella, "Bounty," we are in a post apocalyptic world in which eugenics is
encouraged, and a large portion of the population consisting of people deformed from some sort of nuclear fallout are subjugated and made into slaves. Similar to Vonnegut, a lot of the black humor comes from the characters' attitudes toward the horrors they face.

The narrator/protagonist of the title story, which opens the collection, is reminiscent of Vonnegut's Billy Pilgrim. He is the Verisimilitude Inspector of a historical park themed around the Civil War, a park that has fallen on hard times because of increasing gang violence in the area. We are told of the gang violence very early in the story, but it is not until an employee's penis is mutilated that we see just how gruesome it is. The narrator relates the incident with a cold indifference that catches the reader off guard: "I run out and there's Quinn and a few of his men tied to the cannon. The gang guys took Quinn's pants and put some tiny notches in his penis with their knives. I free Quinn and tell him to get over to the Infirmary to guard against infection" (Saunders 9). The lack of emotion or surprise here is chilling, especially given how the narration is constructed. Typically, a present tense, first person narrator is useful to provide the reader with internalization, to show the narrator's internal and external reactions in real time. Here we have only the basic facts, devoid of feeling or emotion. This reversal of expectations adds a comedic aspect to this dark world. It is a depressing, violent place, but the person through whose eyes we see it doesn't seem to have any meaningful reaction to it.

"CivilWarLand in Bad Decline" is an intense story that incorporates escalating action. That is part of the appeal. It has ghosts, a crazed vigilante, escalating violence, the murder and mutilation of children. Events snowball out of control after Samuel, a newly hired employee and Vietnam veteran, snipes off some gang members in order to save a
child. Once Samuel establishes himself the defender of the park, he administers his justice as he sees fit, which includes murdering a boy for stealing candy from the gift shop and taking his hand as a token. The narrator continues to relay these events as if he were describing a long day at work to a friend, and he continuously submits to the will of his selfish, morally repugnant boss Mr. A. His response to finding the hand is cold and mechanical: "I call Mr. A and he says Jesus. Then he tells me to bury the hand in the marsh behind Refreshments. I say shouldn't we call the police. He says we let it pass when it was six dead kids, why should we start getting moralistic now over one stinking hand? I say: But sir, he killed a high-schooler for stealing candy" (18). The narrator tries to be a voice of reason, but he is too passive, too unwilling to assert himself in a dangerous situation. Naturally, he buries the hand. Mr. A. continuously adopts logic to make the tragic events seem less extreme. When Samuel murders three innocent children in a rampage on Halloween, Mr. A. twists the event into something positive, an opportunity to learn a lesson because he is afraid of being implicated for his role in the crimes: "'What I'm primarily saying . . . is that this is a time for knowledge assimilation, not backstabbing. We learned a lesson, you and I. We personally grew. Gratitude for this growth is an appropriate response. Gratitude and being careful never to make the same mistake twice" (18).

The reader barely has time to react to the horrifying events of the story because we experience them through these characters, who are comically out of touch. Saunders blends the violence into the mundane, sets real terror against a place that purports to fake it as realistically as possible. The first time I read this story I was amazed by the way it escalated, how the events seemed to snowball into chaos at an exponential rate. I laughed
throughout. But the comedy has impact, accomplishes more, I think, than drama would have. Imagine this story as a realist piece. Mr. A. would be a more typical, calculating villain. His appeals to the narrator to keep quiet would be based on fear or threats. We've seen this villain time and time again. While reading "CivilWarLand in Bad Decline," the readers are thinking while they're laughing, not overcome with emotion but able to contextualize the role violence plays in American culture and the dangers of our collective ignorance of it because it is heightened to such high extremes.

Not all of Saunders' stories in the collection have this type of narrator. The narrator of "The 400 Pound CEO," Jeffrey, is quite sympathetic. He is principled and religious. He longs for a woman who could not possible have feelings for him. His coworkers and boss (he works for a raccoon extermination company) ridicule him: "They leave hippo refrigerator magnets on my seat. They imply that I'm a despondent virgin, which I'm not" (47). These mean-spirited jokes cut to the core of his sexual frustrations. Jeffrey's addressing of these frustrations is one of many genuine but humorous moments that characterize his sweet nature:

Now for that kind of thing it's the degradation of Larney's Consenting Adult Viewing Center. Before it started getting to me I'd bring bootloads of quarters and a special bottom cushion and watch hours and hours of Scandinavian women romping. It was shameful. Finally last Christmas I said enough is enough, I'd rather be sexless than evil. And since then I have been. Sexless and good, but very very tense. (47)

Jeffrey's shame characterizes him as a person with conviction and a drive to improve himself in a positive way, two qualities which are lacking in many of Saunders'
protagonists. There is humor in this as well—the specificity of his porn and the frequency of which he watched it, the punch line that living without masturbation causes tension. This is heightened by the fact that Jeffrey finds himself alone, a decent man in an ugly world, and wants so badly to be decent that he is willing to abstain from satisfying his own urges.

In another humorous moment, Jeffrey laments that his feelings for Freeda, a woman he knows deep down would never love him back, are returning: "I hear her speaking tenderly on the phone to her little son, Len, and can't help picturing myself sitting on a specially reinforced swing while she fries up some chops and Len digs in the muck" (49). It is hard not to feel for this character, but at the same time there is something humorous in how he is ridiculed, how it leaks into his own fantasies—the swing he pictures himself sitting on in his happy vision of domesticity needs to be reinforced. Instead of seeing an ugly world through the eyes of someone indifferent like in "CivilWarLand," we see an ugly world through the eyes of someone who legitimately wants to make it better, but who is also in turn victimized by it. There is a large disconnect in this story between the principled narrator and the brutally nasty and unforgiving world he lives in.

Things only get worse for Jeffrey. He manages to go out with Freeda, but learns later that not only was it clearly not a date, but that she hated it. When he tells her he enjoyed himself, she responds: " 'God, I didn't. . . . Everyone kept staring at us. It made me feel bad about myself that they thought I was actually with you. Do you know what I mean?'" (52). Freeda's bluntness is insanely cruel, and gives insight into just how ugly this world is. The "Do you know what I mean?" is the worst part; it implies that he should
know this about himself by now, that he should have had the "empathy" to imagine how horrible it is for her to be seen with him. Things get really bad for Jeffrey after he saves a woman from being raped and possibly killed by his boss, Tim, whom Jeffrey kills in the process. Jeffrey tries to use this to his advantage, to help the work conditions of the company. He crafts a fake letter by Tim in which he informs that he's going to Mexico to do missionary work and that Jeffrey is the new CEO. Jeffrey institutes a friendlier work environment based on Christian morals and throws a party. But of course, he is arrested for the murder and sent to prison where he is mocked and raped. This is a character we want to succeed, but we know he will not. The world in which he lives could not possibly allow for it. This is the kind of story that makes us laugh and cry. The ugliness of the world is taken to an extreme, but we all know that people are treated like this in real life, that people often kill themselves or others because of this kind of ridicule.

I am interested in pathetic or rejected characters, sympathetic but made outcasts by the world they inhabit. The title character of my story "The Package Man" is an example of this. Martin "Package Man" Townsend is a man with big aspirations of becoming a magician, so big that he becomes somewhat disconnected from reality. His plan to mail himself from Michigan to California gains him recognition, but not the kind he had hoped for. He is "Youtube famous," well known for being an eccentric weirdo, a disillusioned freak. This is a realization that takes him a while to make, and in the present storyline (which is cut with past events from Martin's life) he has given up, decided to take a train out of town and start fresh. But he cannot escape his "fame," and is antagonized by two creeps who recognize him and want him to say his ridiculous line from a local pizza commercial (the only gig he could get at the time).
I wanted to write a story about the Youtube culture. Many people who gain such fame often become the targets of ridicule and mockery. I wanted to exaggerate this, make these characters comical, continue to make things harder on my protagonist. Unlike "The 400 Pound CEO," I decided to leave my story on a somewhat happy note for Martin, however small. But I hope the story still accomplishes what it needs to. At the end of "The 400 Pound CEO," Jeffrey ponders the existence of a subGod who takes over for God from time to time, and that maybe this is the reason he has had such poor luck. He imagines God chastising the subGod: "Now look. Look at that fat man. What did he ever do to you? Wasn't he humble enough? Didn't he endure enough abuse for a thousand men? Weren't the simplest tasks hard? Didn't you sense him craving affection? Were you unaware that his days unraveled as one long bad dream?" (64). The harsh reality that bad things happen to good people and vice versa is very often explored in art. Injecting black humor into these explorations emphasizes the cruelties and injustice of the real world.

When a writer can make us laugh at something horrible, interesting things can happen to us. Probably the first thoughts that come to most people's minds are "Why am I laughing?" or— "Why is this funny?" It is difficult to pinpoint, both for readers and scholars. Perhaps another question that we might ask is "What the hell is wrong with me?" That is what I am most interested in—the inner-conflict that black humor brings out in us. This is why black humor is so affecting to me. If it is done right, it creates an immediate reaction in the reader, makes the reader ask questions, whether it is questioning the ethics behind bombing Dresden, Germany in World War II and never bringing it up in history books, or the way society is often fueled by violence and hatred. We laugh because the truth is absurd, even if it is terrifying. Black humorists tell the truth
in a subversive and cutting way. We all know that the world can be a dark place, and this often makes us sad. But when an artist makes us laugh at the darkness, we engage it on an emotional and intellectual level, and we see that not only is this darkness depressing, but utterly absurd.
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THE RIGHT THING TO SAY

I used to work in a Tech Town, a giant electronics store connected to the Oakwood Mall in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I worked the floor, a salesman, after two promotions and five years, and I was awesome. Part of my job was to set up displays. I stacked Playstations and DVD Players into pyramids, filled cardboard cutouts of James Bond when a new 007 film came out. One day, I had spent an hour and a half organizing a large bin of discount DVDs we had a surplus of. Good salesmanship is about presentation, I always say. You should have seen it—I stacked rows of comedies into the shape of a hexagon, then filled the inside with westerns and sci-fi flicks. It was absolutely stunning, like a flower waiting for you to pick its delicate and colorful petals. Later, I catch this fat asshole teenager fucking it all up. He kicked the sides, caved it in, dumped a bunch of movies on the floor. And he was laughing about it, like it was the most awesome thing he'd ever done. I approached him.

"Get out," I said, pointing my thumb at the exit. "You think you're funny? Get the hell out of here."

The kid stopped what he was doing and stared at me with a dumb look on his face. He had disgusting curly hair and his gut hung down from beneath his shirt. "You can't tell me what to do," he said.

I pointed to my nametag. Hi, I'm Leonard. "You see this?" I said. "This says I'm an employee of Tech Town, and all employees of Tech Town have the right to kick out unruly customers at their discretion. If you're going to be a little shit, you can just leave. Clearly you're not here to shop."

"You're not my boss." He wiped his nose with the top of his hand.
"In here I am. Come on, fatty, you got to go."

I grabbed the brat by the arm and began to lead him out. "Hey, quit it!" he said.

"You can't do this to me." But I ignored him and led him straight to the exit, which fed into the mall.

"Go," I said. "Don't come back in here."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear it. You're not allowed in Tech Town anymore, asshole."

The next moment was beautiful. The kid started to tear up and then walked away into the mall, looking back over his shoulder from time to time. It was exhilarating to see this punk so humiliated. I was dizzy with adrenaline.

Then it turned out that that fat teenager was actually a really fat nine-year-old. And his mother, who was still shopping in Tech Town, was scared shitless.

Ten minutes later I found myself in a meeting led by my manager Ted with all the floor employees. A wide-eyed woman stood before us taking deep breaths and dabbing her eyes with a tissue. Ted introduced Mrs. Tambourelli and said her third grade son had gone missing. She showed us a picture of him. I cleared my throat and politely mumbled that I had kicked him out for being disruptive. She was furious, started screaming at me about common sense and responsibility. "The kid is huge," I said. "I thought he was a teenager. And he ruined my morning's work." This didn't help anything. I think every customer in the store was staring at us. Ted sent an alert to mall security to be on the lookout for the boy and assured Mrs. Tambourelli that they'd find him.

Long story short—they didn't. Not-so-little Arthur Tambourelli was kidnapped and murdered that day by a lunatic named Carson Ewes.
It took police thirty-one hours to find Arthur. They went off security tapes that showed the boy walking across the parking lot with Ewes and getting into his vehicle, which wasn't, as you were probably guessing, a van, but one of those box-shaped Hondas. The police burst into Ewe's apartment around nine o'clock at night to find him armed, and during the ensuing standoff, a sobbing Ewes shot himself in the head. It was after that that they discovered Arthur's body wrapped in blankets in a spare room. The autopsy would show that Arthur had been smothered.

Naturally, the city was shaken up. People who knew him said that Carson Ewes was an ordinary person, a nice guy even. People wanted to know how something like this could happen in their town. They were angry, needed someone to crucify. And because Ewes killed himself, that person was me.

I was fired from Tech Town that day. In the coming weeks, I was charged with negligence. The prosecutor even wanted to charge me with criminally negligent manslaughter. Fortunately, the judge threw out the case. But the damage had been done. My face was all over the local news. Conviction or not, I was the man who caused Arthur Tambourelli's death. As if Carson Ewes wouldn't have just found some other kid to take home, or if, without Arthur, he would have miraculously realized that he was a psychopath and voluntarily checked into a mental institution for treatment. The world would be a wonderful place where parents could sleep knowing their children were safe if only it weren't for me. The few pseudo friends I had (mostly from Tech Town) stopped talking to me. People scowled at me on the street. I couldn't find a job.

All because some irresponsible woman let her child get fat enough to look like a teenager.
Shortly thereafter I moved about forty-five miles west to Muskegon. I wasn't sure how well the people of Muskegon followed the story, but to be safe I got a buzz cut, grew a patchy brown goatee, and started going by "Lenny" instead of "Leonard." I looked like someone you'd see on a sex offender list, maybe someone who flashed an old lady in a parking lot, but no one recognized me. Or if they did, they didn't care.

Muskegon didn't have the huge downtown of Grand Rapids, didn't have the nightlife, the huge concert arena, the big selection of restaurants. It did have beaches, which were great—the two months of the year Lake Michigan was warm enough for swimming. Summers were alive with annoying beach festivals while winters were long and depressing.

But I did manage to land a job waiting tables at a seafood restaurant called the Marina. It was a huge decrease in pay from my sales job, but there was no way I could use Tech Town as a reference. Ted told me off the day he fired me. "I'm almost glad this happened," he'd said. "Now I have an excuse to kick you out of here for good, you miserable bastard." I told him to get over himself and commented on his man-boobs.

Not making as much money didn't really bother me, though. The Marina was a lot better than Tech Town—it had atmosphere, personality. It overlooked the harbor and there were shark skulls on the walls. The building was made of stone. It had a fireplace. Sure, there was the occasional asshole-customer to deal with, someone who demanded a table with a view of the harbor on our busy nights or thought their crab cakes tasted like imitation crabmeat. But it was nothing compared to the dipshit customers of Tech Town who couldn't tell an LCD screen from a plasma. At the Marina, half the customers didn't
even need to look at the menu. The toughest question I ever got was whether or not something had shellfish.

As much as I loved it, it was only a few weeks before I was the most hated employee of the Marina. And it was bullshit, because once again, I was only doing my job.

One afternoon I was taking a fried shrimp plate to a patron. I had it halfway to the table before I actually looked at it, decided it was unacceptable, and brought it back to the kitchen, which was not just loud to hear but somehow loud to look at, if that makes sense. I think it was the smoke coming from the grill. "Who made this fried shrimp platter?" I asked, yelling over the noise.

"I did," Elaine said without stopping her work. "It's ready to go." Elaine was one of the head chefs, a skinny blonde in her upper twenties I hadn't really talked to before, but I had seen her yelling at the other chefs for getting in her way. I remembered thinking it was kind of sexy.

I told her the shrimp needed to be redone. "What the fuck is wrong with it?" she said, chopping asparagus. "It was Lazy Eye Dianna who sent it back, wasn't it?" Lazy Eye Dianna was a regular patron of The Marina who had a tendency to send back food for not being "authentic" enough. Also, she had a lazy eye. "Just because she can't focus both her eyes on the plate doesn't mean there's something wrong with it. You tell that bitch—"

"It's not Lazy Eye Dianna," I said, cutting her off. "I didn't even bring it to the customer yet. I can't serve this, it looks like shit."
Elaine stopped chopping, her thin wrist remaining posed on the knife handle in chop position. "What did you say?"

"Look at this. The breading is falling off. And it's so greasy. There's no way I could give this to a customer."

This was a moment I had experienced before, where everything went quiet and everyone stared at me. Even the sounds of the tilapia sizzling on the grill and dishes clanking together seemed to dissipate.

"Who the fuck are you? Who is this guy?" she asked no one in particular. She picked up her knife and pointed it at me. "Are you a food critic? Do you get paid to share your opinions on the cuisine of restaurants?"

"Obviously I don't," I said.

"Yes, obviously, because you're wearing a waiter's uniform. I can only assume that your job is to bring people food, not critique it. So why don't you go do that?"

I walked closer and held the plate out so she could see it. "Would you eat this?" I picked up a fistful of shrimp. "Does this look appetizing to you?"

"Jesus, now I have to remake it. You asshole."

"I don't have the luxury of working behind the scenes," I said. "I'm the face of The Marina, and when I bring my customers food that looks like excrement of the animal they're supposed to be eating, it reflects poorly on me."

She repeated my last sentence slowly with a tinge of hateful disbelief, then added "You got to be kidding me."

"Just make it right. My customers are waiting."
"Fuck you." At that, I walked out of the kitchen. Even though I didn't turn back, I could tell she was giving me the finger. People have given me the finger so many times that I swear I'd developed a sixth sense for detecting it.

After that, everyone treated me like shit. Some of the cooks would ask me if their food met my high standards in a real snarky tone. One cook, Steve, would say "Yes sir, massa, right away massa" when I put in an order, which seemed pretty distasteful to me, not to mention it didn't make sense under any context—Steve was white and I wasn't his boss—but no one ever told him that. Cooks stick together, apparently.

One mid-April day, I went outside for a smoke (a habit I'd developed so I could take more breaks) and found Elaine, also on break, vigorously smoking a cigarette the way I imagined a crack addict would smoke a crack cigarette. She stubbed it out and immediately lit a new one. "Jesus Christ," I said. "Take a breath in between."

"Fuck off," she said, turning to me for a moment. She leaned against the side of the building, her right foot propped against it. I took out a cigarette and lit it with a match and puffed lightly three times.

"So. What's up?" I said, not so much because I wanted to strike up a conversation, but because she looked so lost in her thoughts that it freaked me out.

She turned to me again. "What do you want, Lenny?"

"I don't want anything. Just being cordial, or whatever."

"Now you want be cordial."

"I don't really want to be."

She sighed. "Leave me alone." She turned away again and I could see moisture on her cheeks.
"Have you been crying?" I asked.

"God, Lenny, I don't want to talk to you."

"I just lit a cigarette and have to be out here until it's smoked down, and I don't think I can take you chain smoking and crying in silence."

She put her right foot back on the ground, stood up straight. "You smoke like a pansy," she said. Her cigarette was already halfway gone.

"I'm not a smoker, I just saw how many breaks you smokers get and thought I'd cash in. I don't even inhale."

"Who are you, Bill Clinton?"

"I don't get as many blowjobs." At this she smiled, if only for a millisecond.

"Really?" she said. "A charmer like you?"

I took a tiny puff and coughed it out. "Why were you crying?" I asked again.

Elaine sighed. "I said fuck off." She flicked her cigarette and began to head inside.

"Come on," I said, "you didn't even finish your cigarette." She ignored me and walked into the restaurant. I puffed away for three more minutes before heading back inside myself.

I couldn't explain why, but the reason Elaine was crying during her break was something I absolutely needed to know. It's not that I wanted to be a shoulder to cry on. I think it was because seeing her like that was an anomaly. I'd mostly only ever seen her in the kitchen up to that point, chopping and sautéing nonstop for hours at a time, barking orders, yelling at cooks for fucking up, yelling at the wait staff just because she felt like
it, glaring at me and giving me the finger (which I have to say I always found a little erotic). Before I saw her taking her break that day, I couldn't even imagine what she looked like with tears in her eyes. Some people you look at and you can just tell they cry all the time. One of my old neighbors in Grand Rapids always seemed to be on the verge of tears. He had droopy eyes, slumped his shoulders when he walked, barely talked above a whisper. One look at him and you could picture him blubbing in the fetal position on his kitchen floor because his girlfriend dumped him. Not Elaine. There had to be a crazy reason for her to cry. It didn't look like a death or a breakup, I'd seen those kinds of crying before. I knew it wasn't any of my business, but I couldn't let it go.

The rest of the day I lingered a bit in the kitchen every time I had to put in an order or pick up a plate. I tried to flash a concerned or caring face every time I caught Elaine's eye, but I don't think I was doing it right, because four different people, including Elaine, asked me what my problem was.

For the next few days I tried to catch her after work but she always left in a hurry. Finally, a week and a half later, I cornered her after we finished working a slow lunch shift.

"Let's go get a drink," I said.

"Why?"

"Do you not drink?"

"Of course I do."

"Then do you need a reason?"

She ran her hand through her hair and let out an exasperated sigh. "I mean why would we get a drink together?"
"Why the hell not?"

"Lenny, I don't—"

"Is it because you hate me?" She didn't know what to say to this. I was making progress. Almost every woman I've gotten to go out with me was through pity.

"I don't hate you," she finally said. "I just don't get you."

"I don't think there's much to get. All I want is a drink. Who else am I going to drink with?"

"So you only want to get a drink with me because there's no one else?" she said.


"Meet me at Zaps in twenty minutes," she called after me. I stopped and turned around, stared at her a moment, and she said, "Well, are we fucking going?"

Zaps is a dive next to an old pizza place. It's dark and people still smoke inside. To this day the owner still refuses to put in a digital jukebox—he still has one that plays actual CDs in the corner behind the pool tables. And God help you if you want to play anything besides classic rock or country. The bartender that day was an incredibly tall and attractive brunette in short shorts and a tight, black shirt who seemed to know all the patrons—mostly men—by name. Elaine's choice in bar reinforced my idea that she was not a person who cried.

We sat down at the bar. She ordered a vodka tonic and I ordered a whiskey sour. We sat in awkward silence for almost a minute.

"Can I ask you a question?" she said. I told her she could. "Why are you such an asshole sometimes?"
"I don't know," I said. "I guess I don't realize when I'm doing it. Is there a particular event you're referring to?"

She took a sip of her drink. "You know what the hell I'm talking about. The shrimp."

"I would argue that the person who tries to serve a shitty meal to a paying customer is the asshole."

She laughed and shook her head. "I can't tell if you're being serious. I never can."

"Can I ask you a question?" I said.

"No."

I sighed and took a large drink. The whiskey sour was awful, filled with cheap whiskey and way too much sour mix. I made a disgusted face that I hoped the bartender would see, but she wasn't looking.

"You didn't answer my question yet." Elaine turned her stool to face me. "Why are you such an asshole?"

I remained facing forward, playing around with my coaster. "I can't be anything but myself. I know I sound like an after school special or something, but that's the truth. People have hated me my whole life but that doesn't mean I'm going to change. Everyone can go to hell."

She was quiet for a moment, looked contemplative. She turned forward and took another drink. "Can I ask you another question?" she said.

"No. Not until I ask you one."

Elaine sighed. "Fine."

"Why were you crying the other day?"
She traced the edge of her class with her finger. "I wasn't crying."

"Bullshit. I could see it on your face."

"Jesus, Lenny, I said I didn't want to talk about it then and I don't want to talk about it now."

"Why the hell not?" A group of men playing a game of pool simultaneously cheered and groaned after one of the players sunk a shot.

"Why do you even care?" she asked.

"You're always such a hard ass. It was weird seeing you cry."

Elaine slunk down. "It was my birthday," she said to her vodka tonic.

"Seriously?"

She nodded. "Yep."

I laughed. "You were crying because it was your birthday? Aren't you a little young to be terrified of getting older? Doesn't that usually happen to women when they hit forty?"

She punched me in the arm. "No, ass. I was crying because it was my first birthday without my mom." So it was a death. A plain old boring death in the family. I remember feeling a severe disappointment at that moment, similar to the way I felt when I saw the Star Wars prequels.

"I'm sorry," I said. "How'd she die?"

"First of all, that's a tactless thing to ask someone. Second of all, she's not dead. She's in jail."

Jail. I knew it had to be something interesting. "Holy shit," I said. "I mean, I'm sorry. Can I ask what she's in jail for? Or is that tactless?"
Elaine took another drink. "She stabbed a guy."

This was a big deal—this woman's mother stabbed someone, and I got her to tell me. I didn't think it meant she trusted me; she was still guarded and always looked at me with a hint of suspicion in her eyes, like she was trying to figure out my motives. I also didn't think it was something she needed to just "get off her chest." She had looked uncomfortable when she told me, practically sighed the words without even looking at me. Whatever the reason, it was out there, and it was in my court. And for the first time in a long time, I really wanted to say the right thing.

"I'm really sorry," I said. It might have been cliché and boring, but it was safe. It was far from what I wanted to do—ask myriad of questions. Luckily, after an extremely uncomfortable silence, she said.

"My mom's a third grade teacher. She had this nine-year-old boy in her class who always showed up with bruises on his face and arms. She asked the kid about it a few times but he'd always just tell her it was an accident. So she contacted the police. They did an investigation but couldn't prove anything. Turns out the boy's dad was a cop on medical leave. The mother was out of the picture, I guess. He told the police that the kid had gotten the bruises from a recent skiing trip. My mom knew this was bullshit—the kid had fresh bruises every other day. But the cops believed him." Elaine got the bartender's attention and ordered another drink. She waited to resume the story until a fresh vodka tonic sat in front of her.

"One day the kid walked in with a real bad bruise on his neck, so my mom decided to drive over to the kid's house later that night. She wasn't sure what she was going to do. Just knew that she was more pissed off than she'd ever been in her life. So
she goes over there, at nine o'clock, and tells the guy she knows what he's doing and he better stop. And he laughed. Told her to fuck off. She said she'd find someone who cared, and the prick just said good luck. He told her to leave and when she didn't, he shoved her. Then there was an altercation and she ended up grabbing a letter opener off a table and stabbing him in the abdomen. She realized the kid was standing there watching as soon as the blade went in."

"Holy shit, that's awesome," I said, this time without thinking much about it. "Your mom's a vigilante."

"Yeah, it's really fucking awesome that she got sentenced to five years for defending herself. And it's *way* cool that the guy still has custody of his kid."

"I didn't mean it like—"

"They even got the kid to testify against my mom." Tears were forming in Elaine's eyes.

"That's fucked up, Elaine. I'm sorry."

"Yeah," she said. "Fucked up." She took another big drink. "Now I'm going to ask you another question. Are you that guy from the Tech Town in Grand Rapids who kicked that kid out of the store?"

I took a big gulp of my whiskey sour and made another disgusted face. The bartender saw me that time and asked if there was something wrong with it. I shook my head and turned to Elaine. "Yes," I said. "I'm that guy." I took another drink, this time hiding my disgust at the taste. "Do you hate me?"

"No," she said. "I don't like you, but I don't hate you."

"Thank you," I said. "For not hating me."
"You're welcome. I do have one more question though."

"Isn't it my turn?"

"No," she said. "Do you think it was your fault?"

"Do you?" I picked up my whiskey sour but didn't drink from it.

"I don't know. They made you look like a monster on the news but the judge threw out the case, so in the eyes of the law, at least, it wasn't your fault. It's a toss up. I want to get your take on it."

I didn't think it was my fault. Since it happened, I had gone over the reasons why again and again in my head. And I could have given her all those reasons. But for some reason, something told me that that wasn't the right thing to say. So, after careful consideration, I said something else. "Let's kill him."

"What?"

"The guy who beats his kid, do you know his name?"

She said, "Saul Brecht."

"You know where he lives?"

"Yeah."

"So let's go there and fucking kill him."

"Lenny, that isn't funny."

"I'm not joking. You said yourself he still has custody of the kid. That nothing's ever going to change because he's friends with all the police. It's the only way."

"I can't kill someone, Lenny. And I don't think you can either."
"Your mom almost did." She raised an eyebrow at me and I knew I shouldn't have said that. I continued, "What if he kills this kid? One nine-year-old is already dead because of me. This might be my only chance to make up for it."

Elaine placed her hand on my shoulder and smiled at me, which was weird, but nice. "I'll see you at work, Lenny," she said, stood up, and walked out of the bar.

I may have been kidding about feeling guilty, but I was dead serious about killing Saul Brecht. It was an interesting feeling, wanting to kill someone, especially someone I'd never seen before. Even though I would never kill Brecht, even though I knew deep down then that I probably wouldn't, it was incredibly satisfying to want to. More satisfying than kicking that kid out of Tech Town.

I finished the rest of my drink in one gulp, suppressing another disgusted look. I coughed and set the glass on the table. The bottom of the drink was all sour mix. The people playing pool cheered again and I looked over. This tall, weasely looking guy in a wife-beater and an open bowler shirt was yelling, "Fuck yeah" and raising his pool stick over his head. He looked like such an asshole; exactly how I'd imagined Saul Brecht would look. He held out his hand to one of the other players, this real buff, meaty guy with tight short sleeves, and said, "Pay up." It might have been because I had Saul Brecht on my mind, but I had a strong urge to beat the hell out of this guy. I formed an entire backstory for him in my head—mid thirties, in and out of jail for the past ten years. Haunted by gambling debts, made money hustling pool. He had multiple kids with different women, didn't pay child support to any of them, only one of the kids was still in his life because he wanted to keep banging the mom, even though he hit her all the time, often in front of the kid. He was a lowlife piece of shit who never did any good for
anybody. I wanted to grab his pool stick and break it over his torso. I envisioned myself punching him in the face and watching blood gush from his nose. I wanted so badly to teach someone a lesson.

But for all I knew, he was a regular, nice guy. Maybe he drove his grandma to church every Sunday. Maybe he volunteered. I watched as he mocked this guy for losing. It went on and on. "It's a wonder you sunk any balls with that limp wrist," he said "You're probably more used to sucking on balls than sinking them." He didn't stop with the gay jokes and the small penis jokes, as if sexual orientation and penis size had any influence on one's pool game. The more he did it, the more I pictured him beating his girlfriend and yelling at his son, until I snapped and threw my empty glass of shitty whiskey sour at his head. "What the fuck," he yelled, cupping his palm over his bleeding cheek. I heard the bartender scream behind me. The pool players all stood up straight, banding together for a beat down. I ran out of the bar as fast as I could, got in my car, and drove away. They ran after me throwing beer bottles at my back windshield but they didn't catch up to me. I laughed at them to myself, breathing heavily, heart pumping. It felt great beaming that poor sucker in the face. It wasn't until after the rush wore off that it occurred to me that I'd just committed assault and battery. And if this guy didn't press charges, he sure as shit would want to get to me himself. I sped up, checked my mirror to see if anyone was following me. I wasn't even sure where I was driving. Would I have to leave town, again? It was easy to leave Grand Rapids. That city had betrayed me, painted me as a villain because they needed a good show, someone to blame. Muskegon hadn't done that to me. There, I wasn't a villain, just an asshole. And assholes were a dime a dozen. Also, I got to work with Elaine. So there was that.
Grady Kemp, from his police cruiser parked under a tree, watched a man in his early twenties walking a pit bull puppy. They were on a dirt road on the outskirts of town. The twenty something man stopped and took his dog into a grassy patch. The dog sniffed around for several seconds, walking in circles, until it finally lifted its leg and began to urinate. Grady ran a comb through his hair and glanced at his reflection in the mirror. His blonde mustache was thoroughly trimmed, the sunlight gleamed against his firm cheekbones. He glanced back at the man and the pit bull and saw that the dog was moving into a squat position—it began to defecate. Grady placed his left hand on the door handle. The dog finished its business and his owner began to walk him away. Grady pushed the car door opened, closed it gently, and walked toward the young man. "Excuse me," Grady said. "Yes, you."

The man and his dog stopped and turned around. "Yes officer?" he said. The pit bull let out a high-pitched bark as Grady approached.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The man looked over his shoulder, then back to Grady. "What do you mean?"

"What's your name?"

He said, "Jerry Cramer. I don't understand. Did I do something?"

"It's what you didn't do that concerns me. Do you realize there are laws against not cleaning up after your animals?"

Sunlight reflected off of Grady's badge, causing Jerry to squint his eyes.

"Cleaning up?"
"Shit. You didn't clean up your dog's shit." Grady stepped closer to Jerry and looked down to him. Jerry was almost a foot shorter than Grady. He was skinny, had bushy black hair and wore baggy jeans and green T-shirt.

"What are you talking about, man?" Jerry said.

"I'm talking about breaking the law, man. You are legally obligated to clean up after your dog."

Jerry squinted his eyes and wrinkled his forehead. "Really?"

"Would I be wasting my time talking to you if weren't true?"

Jerry scratched his head. "I didn't know that."

Grady let out a laugh. "You didn't know? Gee, if you didn't know it was against the law then that makes it okay, right? I forgot that in America one's ignorance of the law absolves one of guilt. So many murderers and rapists get off that way."

Jerry tightened his grip on his dog's leash. "I won't do it again. I'll clean it up, too. I'm sorry"

"And that would excuse breaking the law? If you simply cleaned it up?"

Jerry coughed. "In this case it seems like it would."

"Would we let off a murderer if he promised to send a muffin basket to the grieving family of his victim?"

Jerry laughed. "You serious, man? You're comparing dog shit to murder?" He wiped something out of his eye. "Tell me you're fucking with me."

Grady grabbed Jerry's arm, squeezing tightly enough to make Jerry let out a short yell. "It's my job to fuck with criminals," Grady said.

"Jesus man, okay. I'll clean it up, just let me go. You're hurting me."
Grady scoffed and proceeded to pull Jerry up the road, the pit bull stumbling along on its tiny feet and barking. "What are you doing?" Jerry said. They stopped at the pile of dog droppings.

"You see that?" Grady said, pointing to the dog shit. "That's what lawlessness looks like. As a sworn protector of Brockstown, it is my duty to punish criminals whenever and wherever I see them, whether they are murderers or bank robbers or punks who don't value the bottoms of their fellow citizens shoes. Have you ever stepped in dog shit before, Jerry?"

When Jerry didn't respond, Grady said, "Answer me" and tugged Jerry's arm.

Jerry winced. "Yes," he said. "I've stepped in dog shit."

"And was it fun?"

"What?"

Grady twisted his arm again.

"No, it wasn't fun," Jerry said as he sucked air through his teeth and closed his eyes.

"Of course it's not fun. It gets stuck in the traction on your shoes, you can't get it out no matter how hard you try. It smells, ergo you smell for the rest of the day. If you don't notice it maybe you track it inside all over a freshly steamed carpet at work and everyone resents you for it. The cleaning lady hates your guts from then on out, stops taking out your garbage. You get the nickname 'Poop Shoes,' which isn't even a little clever but everyone finds it hilarious anyway."

"Has this happened to you?"
Grady twisted harder. "We're not talking about me. I'm trying to get you to empathize with your potential victims. If you don't want to step in it, then why do you think other people do?"

"I'm sorry, okay? Jesus, I'll clean it up right now, just let go of me."

"But how are you going to clean it up, Jerry? You obviously didn't bring a bag with you." Grady leaned in close to Jerry's face. The dog barked but stood back. "I have an idea. You're going to eat it."

"Fuck you. You can't treat people like this."

"I beg to differ. Eat it before I get mad. Better it be in your stomach than on the bottom of an innocent person's shoe."

Jerry kicked Grady in the leg as hard as he could and tried to pull his arm free, but it was no use. Grady didn't even flinch, and his grip only tightened.

"In addition to failing to clean up after a pet," Grady began, smiling, "we've got assaulting an officer. You're getting in deeper and deeper, Jerry. The penalty is going to be considerably more severe now." Grady let go of Jerry's arm and placed his foot on Jerry's leg. He jabbed his nightstick into Jerry's back to keep him pinned. The dog barked, tried to bite Grady in the hand, but Grady pushed him away. He grabbed the pair of handcuffs from his belt and slapped them on Jerry's wrists.

"You're out of your fucking mind," Jerry said.

"Get up." Grady pulled him to his feet by his collar. "We're going for a ride." He picked up the dog's leash and dragged them to the car.

"This is insane," Jerry said. "You're going to be in a lot of trouble."
Grady sat him into the car, his hand on Jerry's head, like a police officer would any criminal, put the puppy on his lap, and shut the door. He got into the driver's seat and started the engine.

"Look. I learned my lesson, okay? I'll always make sure to clean up after Wilford from now on. I'm reformed, I've seen the error of my ways. Honest to God, man. You don't have to do this. You can just let me go."

Grady turned his head to face Jerry. "Wilford, eh? Good name for a dog," he said and they took off down the road.

#

Grady was silent for a while, despite Jerry's persistent yelling. Wilford paced back and forth in the back seat, occasionally stepping over Jerry's lap and barking. Jerry wasn't sure where they were going. "This isn't the way to the police station," he said. "Officer. Where are you taking me?" They drove down a two-lane road Jerry didn't recognize, but he knew they were driving away from downtown. "Hello?" Grady just cleared his throat and scratched his chin. Jerry sighed and leaned back. "Psychopath," he said under his breath.

After about fifteen minutes, they pulled into the parking lot of a sports bar called Louie's. "What the fuck are we doing here?" Jerry said. Grady parked, turned off the ignition and got out of the car. He opened the door to the backseat and pulled Jerry out by his arm. He grabbed Wilford's leash and pulled him out too. "Why are we here?" Jerry said. "Are you even a real cop?"

"Come on," Grady said and marched Jerry and Wilford into the bar.
Louie's was dark on the inside, despite it being a sunny day. The building was empty except for a portly bartender who stared at them when they walked in. "Grady," said the bartender, a hello.

"Dennis," Grady said. Grady walked Jerry up to the bar and told him to sit down on a stool.

"Help," Jerry said to the bartender. "This man is kidnapping me. I think he's impersonating a cop."

Dennis sighed. "Jesus, Grady. I thought you were done with this."

Grady sat down on the school next to Jerry. "I know," he said, lightly pounding his head on the bar. "I fucked up."

"I thought the chief was going to have your badge."

Grady sighed. "Yeah, That's what he said."

"Then why are you pulling this same shit? I thought you were getting help, seeing somebody."

Grady combed through his hair nervously with his fingers. "I am, I am. Give me a scotch, will you? I need to think."

"Does someone want to tell me what the fuck is going on?" Jerry said. Grady and Dennis jumped, as if they had forgotten Jerry was there. Dennis looked at Jerry, then to Grady.

"I don't know what to say, kid," Grady began. "I was trying to play a joke. I didn't mean to take it this far."

"Bullshit," Jerry yelled. "No one goes this crazy for a joke."

"I do. It's a problem I'm working on."
"Then why the fuck am I still in these handcuffs?"

"Shit. Sorry." Grady fumbled around a big chain of keys for a few seconds before finding the right one and slipped off the cuffs. "I forgot about those." Jerry rubbed his wrists, which had become red. Jerry jumped at a thud sound in front of him, which turned out to be Dennis slamming Grady's scotch onto the bar.

"What'll it be, kid?" Dennis said to Jerry.

"I don't want a drink, I want to get the hell out of here."

"Get a drink," Grady said. "Please, I'm buying."

"Fuck you." Jerry turned to Dennis. "Please, call the police. This man is deranged and violent."

"Just let him buy you a drink."

Jerry ran his hands through his hair. "For fuck sake. Fine. Give me a gin and tonic."

Dennis filled a glass with ice and pulled a bottle of gin off the shelf. He poured the glass more than two thirds full, sprayed a dash of tonic from the soda gun, and stuck in a couple lime wedges. "Here you go," he said, slamming the drink on the bar.

"Look, Jerry," Grady began. "I'm really sorry that I did that to you. When I saw you waling your pup it seemed like a good chance to play a practical joke. It got a little out of hand."

"I thought you were going to kill me," Jerry said. "That's more than a little out of hand."

"You're right. What I did was horrible. Inexcusable. I had no right to do that to you." Grady took a swig of his scotch. "People in the department play jokes on civilians
all the time. My captain once wrote a guy a pretend four hundred dollar ticket for jay walking." Grady laughed. "The judge laughed at him when he went in to dispute it. It's what police do in a boring place like Brockstown. I'm just not good at knowing when to stop."

Jerry downed half of his gin and tonic in one gulp. "Maybe you should stop before you've got your victim pinned to the ground with your nightstick, psycho."

Grady slammed his fist on the bar. Jerry jumped. "I'm not a psycho, goddamn it." Grady ran his hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. I get called a psycho a lot, it's starting to get to me. But you have every right to call me that. I sure acted like one."

"You shouldn't be a cop," Jerry said.

Dennis, who had been hanging back behind the bar, stepped up close. "The man's trying to make amends, kid," he said. "I know this probably doesn't mean anything to you but I've known Grady a long time. He might be a little fucked up in the head but he's an excellent cop. Seven years ago he saved a little kid from a hostage situation."

"Dennis," Grady said. "It's okay."

"This sicko was stalking this woman, decided to abduct her kid from a friend's house to intimidate her, scare her into being with him. Grady here broke into the house he was keeping him, undetected, and incapacitated the prick. Took a bullet to the thigh, too."

Jerry took another sip of his gin and tonic. "Why should I believe anything you say?"

"I don't care what you believe," Dennis said. "Just don't tell this man he shouldn't be a cop in my bar. He's paid his dues. He might go a little crazy sometimes but he's a damn fine officer of the law."
Jerry finished his drink. "Fine. You're a stellar cop, Grady. Top notch. They should give you a medal."

Grady put his head down and swirled his drink around in his hand. He looked like a child who'd been reprimanded in front of his classroom. "Please don't press any charges," he said. "The chief hates me. He's looking for any excuse to take my badge."

"Have you considered that maybe it's about time to retire?" Jerry said. "If you can't control this, maybe it's best to end your career before you kill someone."

"I'd never kill someone." Grady finished his drink and motioned for another. "You need another?"

Jerry said "No."

"No, fuck that." Grady said. "Dennis, we'll both have a glass of the 18 year."

Dennis got to work. Jerry sighed and picked up Wilford and placed him in his lap.

"I'm nowhere near being able to retire," Grady went on. "And what would I be if I did? Just some asshole with nothing to do all day. My whole problem stems from boredom. Take my job and what effect do you think that'll have?"

Jerry jumped once again as Dennis slammed the drinks in front of them.

"Look," said Grady. "I'm in therapy. I'm doing everything I can to get to the root of my problem. I was an asshole to you, and I accept that." Grady swirled his scotch in his hand, then watched the legs trickle down the sides of the lowball glass. "I'm not going to threaten or intimidate you. If you want to report me or press charges, fine. I won't stop you. I'll drive you to the station myself. But I'm asking you, from the bottom of my heart, not to. Doesn't a seasoned cop deserve a second chance?" Grady's eyes were red.
Jerry scratched Wilford behind the ear and Wilford pawed at the air. Jerry took a sip of his scotch. "Fuck, that's good," he said.

"It's almost as old as you are," said Grady. "And think about this too. I know I took it too far, but when you really stop to think about it, getting arrested and almost assaulted for not cleaning up your dog's shit is kind of funny, isn't it? I mean, come on. If you weren't afraid for your life, you would've been laughing, right?" Grady took a sip of his scotch and let out a sigh of contentment.

"That story about tracking shit through the precinct," Jerry began, "was that true? Did people actually call you 'Poop Shoes'?"

"Nah, I made that up on the spot. Did you like it?"

"That was the one time I doubted your credibility. Seemed a little too ridiculous."

Grady took another sip of scotch and smiled. "I wanted to give some sort of backstory as to why I hated dog shit so much, give my character some depth."

"I appreciate that. But it was stupid."

Grady scoffed. "You think you could do better? I've been trying to master the art of pranking for years and I still don't have it down. What kind of funny shit would you pull?"

Jerry thought for a moment, sipping his scotch and petting Wilford. "Arrest someone for murder. Act like you recognize him, like you've almost got him before but he keeps eluding capture. Accuse him of killing like a dozen people. Women and children included. So you blindfold him and put him in the car, tell him you're not arresting him after all but administering your own justice. Drive him out to a field and put him on his knees. Stick your gun to his head. Ask him if he has any last words, and as he's pleading..."
for his life, take off the blindfold. First thing he sees is a picnic. Have sandwiches, nice cheeses, expensive wine all arrayed on the blanket."

Grady laughed. "Goddamn, kid. I've been pulling this kind of bullshit for years and I've never thought of anything like that."

"It's really got to be classy," Jerry went on. "Carefully pair the wine with the cheese. You might need to do some research. Have a vase of fresh flowers on the blanket. Grapes." He snapped his fingers. "Get someone to play violin. In a tuxedo. You should change into a tuxedo too before you take the blindfold off. Then tell the guy to join you for a lovely picnic. He won't know what to do. It'll be great."

Grady held up his glass. "You should've been a cop, kid. You're a natural at this stuff."

"I don't think you should be filling this guy's head with any more ideas," Dennis said to Jerry, sounding like a concerned parent.

"Relax," Grady said. "This one's a little too crazy, even for me."

"The joke's not even over," Jerry said. "He may or may not join you willingly, but either way, make sure he eats some of the food and drinks some of the wine. After a while, tell him it was poisoned. Make him think you're the serial killer. This is your M.O., pretending to be a cop." Jerry took a big drink of scotch. Grady was laughing.

"Or how about this," Grady said. "I actually drug the wine, or the cheese, so he passes out. Then I take him to some shed, strip him, and tie him to a chair. I'll have a table full of scary tools, knives and stuff, in plain view. And then I say that he better tell me where his victims are. That I'm not fucking around."

"Jesus," Dennis said. "How is therapy going, Grady?"
"If he asks you about the picnic," Jerry said, "say, 'What picnic?'"

Grady and Jerry both let out long, heavy laughs. Dennis even joined in, shaking his head. "Psychos," he said. Grady and Jerry clinked glasses.

Once the laughter wore down, Jerry said, "Of course, you'll have to kill him afterward. There's no way you could convince him to keep quiet after that."

"There's the flaw in the plan," Grady said.

"Is it a flaw?" Jerry said. "Wouldn't that be ideal? You get to do whatever you want, no holding back. No witnesses, no one to call the police. It's a win-win." Jerry finished his scotch in a gulp. "Can I have another one of these, Dennis?" Dennis just stared.

"Come on, kid, I don't want to hurt anybody," Grady said.

"Of course you do. The only reason I'm alive is because you haven't admitted that to yourself yet." Jerry leaned in close to Grady. "I'd be willing to bet I'm not the worst you've ever hurt a person during one of your pranks, am I?"

Grady was silent.

"You can't stop a prank because you don't want to. When you had me pinned on the ground completely helpless, it was all you could do not to beat me to death, wasn't it?"

"What the fuck is this," Grady said. "I thought we were getting somewhere, you and me. Why're you so morbid all of a sudden?"

"I'm trying to help you. That was more than just a prank for you today. You felt alive when I thought I was going to die. It took all the constraint you could muster not to pound that nightstick into my skull until it went soft."
"That's enough," Dennis said. "I already told you I won't have you badmouthing this man in my bar. He's a goddamn hero."

"Who's badmouthing?" Jerry said. "I'm trying to offer some therapy Grady could actually use." He turned to Grady. "Am I wrong? Did you not want to kill me?"

"Jesus," Grady said. "I'm not a monster."

"Picture it again. You throw me on the ground, knock the wind out of me. Now you twist my arm until it's almost out of its socket. I'm terrified, pleading for my life. You tell me to literally eat shit. My face is so close to it I can smell it and I honestly think you'll kill me if I don't do what you say. You're in complete control. You could end my life right then and there if you wanted to. I'm little, not very strong. No way I'd put up much of a fight. Imagine yourself right there in that moment. How you felt. Deep down, didn't you want to take it further? Didn't you want to watch me suffer for as long as you could?"

"Good lord," Dennis said, his arms folded. "Grady, is that what really happened?"

Grady had his head down, slouched over the bar. He was breathing heavily.

Jerry put Wilford on the floor, stood up, and grabbed the dog's leash. "That's what I thought," he said. "Thanks for the scotch." Jerry walked toward the door, limping a little on his left leg.

"Wait," Grady called after him. "Jerry." Jerry didn't turn around. He left through the squeaky double doors, Wilford trailing along with tiny, quick footsteps.
Christine held her arms in the air, palms open, just like everyone else in the meal room while Michael gave the Morning Prayer. He had been talking for some time, and Christine's arms were beginning to tire. Her elbows shook; a bead of sweat ran down her forehead. She couldn't focus on anything. "And we thank you," Michael said, "Heavenly Father, for sending Joshua to lead us in this earthly realm, to teach us your will, and to bring us into your heavenly arms." Michael said these same words towards the end of every mealtime prayer. Joshua, Michael's father, took over the prayer at the mention of his name.

"Thank you, Michael," he said, placing his hand on his son's shoulder. "You're a wonderful speaker." Michael smiled, put his hand on top of his father's. "We have something very special to thank God for today. Christine, who has been a Child with us since she was nine, is sixteen today." Everyone turned to face Christine, smiles on their faces. Christine felt her heartbeat quicken as she found herself the center of attention. She realized she had let her arms drop and immediately put them back up, pulling her lips into a wide smile to match her fellow Children.

"Tonight she begins the journey so many of you have already taken," Joshua went on. "I hope that you will all guide her as she enters into her teachings, to the path to adulthood." He stopped for a second and let out a laugh. "It's funny to hear myself saying that. Christine will always be that bright-eyed little girl in a red summer dress two sizes too big that she kept tripping over." There were a few kind laughs throughout the room at this. "Never had I seen anyone with such an enthusiasm to learn the true will of God. And the fact that her skin is brown amidst a sea of white didn't discourage her. 'It just makes
me special,' she'd said. You certainly are special, Christine. Tonight, you begin a 
journey to enlightenment, and we pray that God guides you every step of the way. Eat, 
Children, so that you may begin the day in service to our Lord. Amen."

All three dozen or so of the people in the cafeteria said "Amen," put their arms 
down and took their seats. Christine stared at her porridge for a moment before taking a 
small bite. All of the Children of the Heavenly Hands sat at one long table consisting of 
many foldout tables covered in a cheap white cloth, Joshua sitting at the end with 
Michael at his right-hand side. Even though Joshua and Michael were father and son, it 
was striking how alike the two looked. They were both over six feet tall and skinny. Both 
had wide beards that hung about four inches from their chins. The only real differences 
seemed to be that Michael's beard was straight black where Joshua's was greying and 
Joshua's skin was becoming elastic, lines forming below his eyes. Christine noticed that 
Joshua always ate slowly and methodically at meals. They always ate porridge for 
breakfast, and Joshua always dipped his spoon, held it in front of his face for a second or 
two, placed the spoon in his mouth, pulled the spoon out, smacked his lips lightly three or 
four times, slowed, and repeated until his bowl was gone. Once in a while, Christine 
would catch Michael trying to eat his food the same way, but he would usually give up 
after only a few bites.

Christine was quiet during meals. Joshua insisted on assigned seating at the meal 
table, purposely dividing the children from one another so that they might learn a thing or 
two from their elders. She didn't think it was too much to ask to be able to sit next to her 
best friend, Jennifer, who sat to Joshua's left, across from Michael. Jennifer hadn't been a 
Child of the Heavenly Hands as long as Christine, but Jennifer was more than a year and
six months older, and thus began her private teachings with Joshua sooner. All Children of the Heavenly Hands began their biweekly private teachings with Joshua when they turned sixteen, and once they finished two years later, were officially adults in the eyes of the church. Christine had been excited for Jennifer when she began. "You're going to be so wise, just like Joshua," she said the day before Jennifer's birthday as they sat by the man-made pond.

Jennifer twisted a lock of her messy blonde hair in her fingers. "I could never be like Joshua," she said. "No one can. He talks to God."

"Isn't that what he's going to teach you? How to talk to God?"

"That's what prayer is, Christine. We all talk to God everyday. Joshua talks to God in a different way." Jennifer said this with a smug smile, closed her eyes as she said "different way."

"Then what are the teachings about?" Christine said, picking a stone off the ground and tossing it overhand.

"Beats me. But all the old people say it's like nothing else. Tammy told me she imagines it was like how the disciples felt when they learned from Jesus."

Christine said, "Wow," and the two were silent for a moment. Christine coughed. "We're still going to hang out, right?"

Jennifer stopped twirling her hair. "What?"

"You're an adult. Starting tonight. I'm still a kid. Are we going to be able to hang out?"

"Of course," Jennifer said, laughing a little. "The teachings are only twice a week. We'll still have plenty of time."
"I know. But will you still want to hang out with a kid like me? What if these teachings change you?"

"They're supposed to change me. I want them to change me. But that doesn't mean I'm going to just turn my back on you. Who am I going to hang out with, Paula and Jeff?"

Paula and Jeff were a married couple in their thirties who did everything together and got a reputation among the younger Children of being horrible bores.

Christine stood up and asked Jennifer if she wanted to play basketball.

"I can't right now. Have to get ready for tonight. But we'll play tomorrow."

Jennifer gave her a hug and walked off.

And things didn't change, for a while. But about three months into her teachings, Jennifer became quiet, removed. She was always busy. Sometimes it was a meeting with other adults in the church, other times it was private meditation. Christine knew Jennifer would eventually have more responsibilities around the compound, knew she'd have less time to play, and Christine accepted that. But lately Jennifer seemed so sad. Christine watched her in the cafeteria, pushing her porridge around in her bowl and staring off into space. Jennifer wore a long, grey skirt and a navy blue T-shirt. Her blonde hair was in a giant, greasy braid that hung over the back of her chair. She looked tired, Christine noticed, exhausted even. Joshua said something to her, and he had to yell "Jennifer" a couple seconds later to get her attention. She immediately straightened her back, looked to him and smiled. Christine couldn't hear their conversation. Suddenly, she heard her own name.
"So Christine, excited about the big day?" It was Maurine, a fifty-year-old ex-high school guidance counselor who had been a Child of the Heavenly Hands for nearly a decade.

"Hmm?" Christine said, although she realized what Maurine was talking about as the "Hmm" came out of her mouth.

"Are you excited? You must be."

"Oh, yes. I am."

Maurine smiled and tilted her head. This reminded Christine of Daisy, the pug she had when she was seven. "I'm so excited for you," Maurine said. "What a wonderful journey you're going to start."

Christine smiled, poked at her porridge some more. "Thanks. I'm excited too."

"Obviously, I didn't begin my lessons until much later in my life," Maurine said. "I didn't find Joshua until I was in my forties. You're so lucky you met him as a child, get to start your teachings at the proper age."

Christine smiled and nodded. "I never really thought of that. You're right." She looked over to Joshua at the head of the table, still talking to Jennifer. He caught Christine's eye and smiled at her. Christine smiled and looked away, went back to her porridge.

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After the meal, Christine did the dishes with Skyler and Tom, a couple in their twenties who had been married by Joshua, as it was their turn in the rotation. Then she wandered around the compound, taking in the scorching New Mexico sun. The Children of the Heavenly Hands lived on about five square acres in the desert. They slept in white
cabins that Joshua and Michael had begun to build in the late 80's with the first
generation of Children, and were expanded and kept up over the years by many hands.
There was a unisex restroom equipped with seven stalls and four showers, each a thin
wooden box with a drain on the floor. Both sexes shared a bathroom because the Children
of the Heavenly Hands weren't about shame—they were about acceptance and the beauty
of God's work. Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness and they fell from God's
graces, Joshua explained. There were benches and spots for meditation. A man-made
pond. A humble, white house of worship, which contained a sanctuary and Joshua's
personal office and school. Designated recreation areas with games. Paths of white
marble stones guided the Children anywhere they needed to go.

At the moment, Christine didn't need to go anywhere. It was rare that this was the
case. Usually there was something going on, or someone around who wanted her to play
a game or join in song. Michael could usually be found midday with his guitar. But
perhaps today people were tired or wanted privacy. Maybe they were steering clear of
Christine so she could mentally prepare for her teachings. Birthdays were great
celebrations in the compound. Extra time was set aside for games and singing, Joshua
offered his personal blessing, which was a great honor. Some of the older women even
baked cakes. But sixteenth birthdays were quiet, subdued. No celebration could match the
pleasure of beginning one's teachings, a journey that will bring one closer to God, as
close, in fact, as any human could possibly be. Christine used this quietness to her
advantage as she wandered around, hoping to run into Jennifer. Eventually, she did.
Jennifer sat on a wooden swing overlooking a small vegetable garden with carrots, onions, lettuce, and beets. She stared at the ground as she pushed the swing back and forth with her bare feet.

"Can I talk to you?" Christine said.

Jennifer looked up. "Not right now," she said. "I'm meditating."

"You're always meditating." Christine sat down next to her.

Jennifer sighed. "Joshua says it's important. He actually told me after the meal to spend the afternoon meditating. I don't want to disappoint him."

"I really need to talk to you. About tonight."

"You know we can't talk about the teachings. You're starting tonight, you can't wait a few more hours?"

"I don't want to know all the secrets, I don't care. Listen to me. I'm having second thoughts about it."

Jennifer stopped swinging her feet. "What do you mean?"

"I'm scared and I don't think I want to go through with it."

Jennifer looked to the ground and spoke softly. "Why not?"

"It's Joshua. I know I shouldn't be having these thoughts. I'm ashamed of my blaspheming. But lately he just makes me feel . . . uneasy."

"Don't you know how lucky we are?" Jennifer turned her head a little toward Christine but her eyes were still on the ground. "Out of all the people in the world we were selected. Joshua has a direct line to God, and you want to throw that away because you feel uneasy?"
"You're not the same person any more, Jennie. You never want to have fun any more, all you do is whatever Joshua tells you."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"I know, I know, he's so wise. And I'm not questioning that. But you're not yourself, you seem so sad. I don't know if you're really sad or if this is all just part of becoming an adult, I just want to ask—is it worth it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is it worth changing this much to learn what he has to teach?"

Jennifer looked up and looked back down. A cloud drifted and sent a bright ray of sunshine into her eyes, causing her to squint. "What does it matter if it's worth it? You have to do it. Everyone does." She stood up. Christine did too. "I need to go meditate."

As Jennifer began to walk away, the two heard Michael's guitar playing. Sure enough, Joshua and Michael were walking toward them on the path accompanied by Anthony, a fifty-year old who used to work in a grocery store before Joshua found him, and three children—girls, one boy.

They stopped singing as they approached, but Michael continued to strum his guitar, an upbeat but simple melody. "Hello girls," Joshua said. "Enjoying the beautiful day?"

They both nodded. "I'm sorry," Jennifer said. "I was about to go meditate. Christine just wanted to talk to me about something."

"No reason to be sorry," Joshua said, placing his hand on her shoulder. "One should always make time for a friend." He turned to Christine. "And how are you, my dear? Where are you headed?"
"I'm fine," Christine said, her voice squeaking. "Not headed anywhere in particular."

"That's very wise," said Joshua. "God offers me some of my most profound revelations when I'm not sure where I'm headed."

"Oh. Thank you."

"We should always keep our hearts open and our hands up, as I like to say. Are you excited for tonight?"

Christine nodded. "Of course."

"I'm truly happy to teach you, Christine. It's going to be a joy."

"I'm jealous," said the girl to Joshua's left. "I want to start my teachings, be an adult. I'm a devout follower."

"You certainly are," Joshua said. "But childhood is a wonderful thing. Why do you think God makes us children for so long?" The girl shrugged. "Christine is about to make an important change tonight, but as of right now, she's still a child, just as you are, and she absolutely cherishes it. Don't you, Christine?"

"Sure do," she said. Joshua smiled. "I'm going to keep wandering. If that's okay."

"Of course. Enjoy this beautiful day God has decided to grant us." Joshua gave Christine a nod, then gave one to Jennifer. He walked away with his gang. Michael's guitar playing grew louder and they started singing again.

***

Christine's first teaching was to begin at sundown. Michael had instructed her to arrive at the worship house, where Joshua's private quarters were, wearing a ceremonial white dress. The dress lay on her bed, she wasn't sure who put it there. She picked it up
and held it by the shoulders. It was wide, looked more like an acolyte robe than a dress. She tried it on. It looked strange, but it was comfortable. Served to hide her small paunch. She put her long, black hair into a ponytail. Felt it was more reverent, for some reason, and sat down on her bed. The crickets were starting to chirp, making the cabin seem very peaceful. She glanced over to a framed picture on top of her dresser of her and Jennifer, when they were eleven and twelve, with their arms around one another in front of the pond. Jennifer's wide smile revealed two missing teeth. They'd gone swimming that day, Christine remembered, and refused to get out of the water for hours until Michael insisted it was time for nightly worship, where they drank cocoa and sang in front of a campfire.

As she listened to the chirping crickets, Christine went outside and looked around. No one. There were no services, no scheduled activities. They were probably around the pond, relaxing, maybe with a campfire. She could leave if she wanted. The gates to the compound weren't far, and if everyone were at the pond, she wouldn't walk past them. But where would she go? She had been there so long, arrived as a child. How could she possibly navigate the desert? She knew Albuquerque was somewhere within a hundred miles. If she left in the middle of the night she might not make it, get hopelessly lost, attacked by an animal, starve. Could she just not show up at Michael's tonight? How would she explain it? This was supposed to be the biggest night for any of the Children of the Heavenly Hands. They'd look down on her, think something was wrong with her. It would be humiliating. What was she even afraid of? So many people had told her that Joshua's private teachings were life-changing.

Suddenly, Michael strolled by wearing jeans cut off at the lower calves and sandals. "Christine," he said. "I was stopping by. Just thought I'd see you to my father's."
"Oh," Christine said. "Thank you. I think I'd like to walk myself, though."

"The sun's down, better get going."

"Yes," she said. "I'll see you around, Michael." She began to walk away.

"Happy birthday," Michael called after.

She yelled, "Thank you," without turning around and headed to the church.

As Christine walked in, she saw that worship room was illuminated only by a series of tall candles. Joshua was sitting on a pew facing forward when she came in. He turned around.

"Christine," he said, standing up. He wore an orange sweater with the collar of a white button-up shirt underneath poking out the top and grey khakis. "Please come in. I was just saying a short prayer for you. Come, sit down." He led her to the lone pew and sat down next to her. The pew faced a six-foot wooden cross with carved hands in the middle—the Children of the Heavenly Hands insignia.

"It's very nice in here," Christine said.

Joshua smiled. "Let's begin with prayer." Christine bowed her head. "Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Christine to me so that I may teach her your divine will. You have chosen me as the embodiment of yourself on earth, and I shall answer this call with every inch of my being. Tonight, I answer this call by leading Christine through her journey into womanhood. I will instruct her in your ways and craft her into an even finer disciple of the Heavenly Hands. She is a beautiful follower, already have I seen her grow in faith and love and already have I taught her so much. Please prepare me now to teach her more, and prepare Christine to be an open vessel, ready to receive my instruction and cement her place in the celestial realm. Amen."
"Amen," Christine said. She opened her eyes. Joshua looked down to her.

"Do you know why you're special?" he said.

This was an easy one. "Because I'm a Child of the Heavenly Hands."

Joshua smiled. "Very good. But what does that mean? Why is it special to be a Child?"

Christine scratched her nose. "Because I get to follow you. And you're God."

Joshua stood up, began to pace in front of her. "You're a very intelligent young woman. The Jews think they're God's chosen people. But this isn't true. God's chosen people are right here in this compound. This is something for which we must rejoice everyday. Of all the billions of people in the world, God's chosen are right here on these five acres. Even the Protestants and the Catholics have it wrong. Do you understand just how lucky you are?"

Christine nodded. "I do."

"God sent me to gather a new group of chosen people. He sent me to deliver new teachings, a new Gospel. Jesus had his disciples, and I have all of you. This is a new chapter of human history, and you are a part of it. God brought you to me, just as he brought me to you." He stopped here and looked down lovingly at Christine, a smile on his face and his hand on her shoulder.

She flashed a smile and wrung her hands together. She was quiet for a moment, trying to come up with something to say. "Thank you. For finding me."

"We didn't just find one another, Christine. God brought us together." He took his hand off her shoulder. "You're probably wondering what these private meetings entail."

Christine nodded.
"You're sixteen now, which in the Church of the Heavenly Hands makes you an adult." He stood up and began to pace around the room, gesturing with his arms as he spoke. "Adults are wiser. They're trusted with more decisions. They have responsibilities. They give back to their community. For sixteen years your mere presence here was enough responsibility." He stopped pacing turned to face her. "You were an innocent child who brightened the compound with your love. You still do. But now more is asked of you. You will take a spiritual journey that will help ensure the success of the compound. Are you ready for this?"

Christine nodded. "Yes."

Joshua sat down next to her once again. He placed his hand on her chest. "This is the hand of God. Feel it against your heart. It makes you whole, for without God's love, no one is whole. Do you feel it?"

"Yes."

"Close your eyes. Envision yourself walking on a path of solid light. All around you is darkness. You look to the end of the path and you see arms of light. There are arms held in position to cradle a baby, but they are empty. You walk toward the arms, slowly. As they get closer they get brighter and brighter, you begin to hear the faint sound of trumpets." He paused for a moment. Christine could hear him breathing. "You get closer still. The trumpets are louder—they play a song of jubilation. The arms are so bright that the darkness is almost completely gone. Now, you're right in front of them. They're glorious. One of the hands comes down and gently picks you up, it puts you into the cradle of arms. All of a sudden you have no body. No weight. You are floating in the
ether, and all at once you see everything that ever was or ever will be. You are one with God.

"You can open your eyes now." Christine did. "Did you picture it? Did it move you?"

"It was amazing."

"That is what it's like to follow me. I'm going to transcend this body, Christine, very soon. This is a secret that I don't tell to the children because I'm afraid they won't understand. I am going to transcend this body and ascend to heaven, and I'm going to take all of us with me. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Yes." Christine pulled at her ponytail. "Very wonderful."

"But I can't do it alone. This is what I meant by taking on new responsibilities. Everyone must help me achieve this through daily prayer and meditation. Are you willing to do this?"

Christine nodded, looking up into his eyes.

"Follow me."

The two walked into the next room, Joshua's bedroom, also lit by candlelight and there was a full-sized bed with white sheets and pillows in the corner. Joshua sat at the foot of it. "Do you like affection?" he said.

"What?"

Joshua laughed. "You're confused by my question, perhaps because it's so obvious. Of course you like affection. We all do. It's part of being human. We all want to be loved and have others to love us." Christine folded her arms. "You know that I love you, don't you?"
"Of course I do, Joshua."

"And do you love me? And all the other Children of the Heavenly Hands?"

"Yes."

"I want to teach how to achieve closeness and understanding with another person. Come here." Christine took a few short steps forward. Joshua pulled off his sweater and began to unbutton his shirt.

"We are going to share a meaningful embrace, during which we will meditate and pray and both feel God's love surround us. For this, we need to be focused and in our purest forms." He pulled off his shirt. "Please take off your dress."

"My dress?"

"What purpose do clothes serve but to protect us from the elements and hide our bodies? There are no elements that threaten us here, and our bodies are just a vessel for the soul, certainly nothing to be ashamed of or to hide." Joshua unbuckled his belt and began to take off his pants. "We're going to hold one another for a short time, without speaking, and clear our minds. Let God talk to us. Can you do this?"

"Joshua, I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"Of course you are. You're an adult now. Don't you want to help me and the rest of God's chosen people reach heaven?" Joshua slipped off his pants. Now he was only wearing a pair of flannel boxer shorts. His skin was wrinkly, his chest full of wispy grey hairs. "Please, Christine. All I want is to hold you. Remember when you envisioned being cradled in God's arms? It will be just like that."

Christine sighed, turned around, and slid the shoulder straps off her dress. She took several deep breaths as she slid the dress off. She turned around, her arms wrapped
around her chest, to see Joshua, completely naked. Christine had never seen a naked man before. She made sure to avoid looking at his privates. She stared up to his face. "You're a beautiful child of God, Christine." He got into the bed and bade her to join him. She felt cold all of a sudden. Being naked in front of another person, let alone Joshua, felt like an unsettling dream. She stepped over to the bed, grabbed the covers, and slid her body underneath them. Joshua put his arms around her and placed her arm over his torso. He stared directly into her eyes.

"How long do we have to do this?" she said.

"You mustn't speak. We have to keep our ears open to God. It will take as long as it needs to."

Christine rested her head on her pillow, Joshua's nipples at her eye level. The hair on his chest scratched her body. Christine shut her eyes, tried not to focus on Joshua's breathing. She didn't have many fond memories from before her life as a Child of the Heavenly Hands, but one came to her then. She was camping on a beach with her mother, her aunt, and several cousins—she couldn't remember how many or what their names were. The sun was setting and she waded in the water wearing inflatable floaties with her mom. She was probably five or six. Do you want to swim to me? her mom asked. Her mom was a beautiful woman—had long, straight black hair. Christine paddled furiously toward her mother but wasn't moving hardly at all. Mom! Help! Her mother said, You have the floaties, you won't sink, but Christine continued to flail her arms and scream. Her mother, laughing, grabbed her into her arms and held her. You're okay. See? Momma's got you.
They returned to the shore and everyone roasted hotdogs and made s'mores over a fire as the pink sun finally sunk below the water. Afterward it was time for bed. Christine shared a tent with her mom. They both had warm flannel sleeping bags. Her mom asked her if she had fun today. Christine said, *You bet.* Her mother said, *We have a whole day here tomorrow too.*

*Mom, can you teach me to swim tomorrow? But you have to be right there in case I need you.* Her mother laughed and said of course, said she'd always be there when she needed her. Christine snuggled up in her sleeping bag, placed her arm around her mother's waste, and slowly fell asleep to the sound of chirping crickets.

Christine opened her eyes. She wondered for a second if this memory was the revelation from God Joshua had talked about. She heard chirping crickets, but this time they didn't lull her to sleep. This time they sounded foreign, menacing even. It was as if they were mocking her, telling her how things should be.
Katie’s parents yelled at each other in the kitchen. It was breakfast on a Saturday morning, and Katie sat at the table, trying to cut her waffles. She couldn’t tell why her parents were arguing. Something about money. They yell a lot, she thought. She dug her fork sloppily into her waffles in two places, finally freeing a small piece, and then dunked it into the pile of syrup on her plate.

“You don’t need a new car right now,” Katie’s mother said. She was still making pancakes. “There’s absolutely nothing wrong with the one you have.”

“The heat doesn’t work for starters,” Katie’s father said. “You want me to drive around with no heat when winter comes?” He sat at the table with Katie.

“So fix the damn heat, you don’t need a whole new car. There’s no money for it. You just want something flashier to drive around in.”

“I want a safe car that’s not going to break down every couple hundred miles. I don’t think that’s too much to ask. And there’s plenty of money.”

She stopped flipping the pancakes. “How come there’s always plenty of money when you want something, but when I want something funds are tight?”

He sighed. “This isn’t something I want, it’s something I need.”

“It’s something you want. Your engine’s fine, your transmission’s fine. Suck it up.”

He grinned and raised his eyebrows simultaneously. The grin erupted into a sarcastic laugh. “Suck it up?” he said.

“I wanted new windows. Something we actually need considering the ones we have now are twenty years old and horribly insulated. New windows would save us
money over time, and wouldn’t cost nearly as much as a new car, but where was the money for those?”

The two continued to yell. Katie finished about half of her waffles and decided she was full. She asked to be excused. “Yeah sweetie, go ahead,” her father said and she climbed out of her chair and walked upstairs to her room.

When Katie got to her room she began to play with her stuffed animals. They were mostly an army of bears—male and female, grown-up and little, all kinds of colors and materials. The more important ones had names, like Reginald Bear, the British aristocrat with the monocle who got rich exploiting farmers, or Suzy Mae Bear, the teenage southern debutant in a pink frilly dress who was hiding a pregnancy from Momma and Papa bear, hoping to hold out long enough to raise the money for an abortion. The bear that knocked her up, Billy Reese Bear, had told her he don’t wanna be with no bearsluts and that if she ever told anyone that that baby was his he’d kill her in her sleep. Billy Reese Bear was a bit unbalanced; Katie didn’t like playing with him very much. And then there was Esmeralda Bear—Katie’s favorite. Esmeralda Bear was big and wore a long, elegant dark-purple dress that went way down past her feet. Her eyes had crystals on them that shimmered the entire color spectrum when underneath the light. Esmeralda Bear always had the scoop on the lives of all the other bears. She was the one who told Katie everyone’s stories—like Boris Bear, the Russian immigrant who eagerly brought his family to America only to have his hand ripped off by a thresher in a “chicken” processing factory and have his family turned out on the streets (his two-year-old son later died of pneumonia), or Chester Bear, the owner of the shabby, run-down
house that he rented to Boris Bear’s family for an exorbitant fee, and many, many like it. Esmeralda knew everything about everyone. Nothing in Bearland ever escaped her.

The class division in Bearland was very noticeable. The aristocrat bears, who were outnumbered five-to-one, stayed on the bed and had tea parties and balls, while the working class bears stayed on the floor and, if they were older than four, toiled in the factories for 17 hours a day. After work, the Momma bears would take the little bears home while the Papa bears went to the bars and drank and drank and spent their family’s hard earned wages. During the day some of the aristocrat husband bears would come down to the floor and oversee the worker bears while their wives stayed at home with the baby bears and their maid bears. If one of the working class bears was doing his job inefficiently or complained about the dangerous conditions, the aristocrat bear overseeing him would dock his pay. Almost every day it seemed a worker bear would get maimed or lose a limb (there were bear appendages and stuffing all over Katie’s floor that usually got swept up and put into the vats to become Splunkard’s Famous Bear Feed).

The classes rarely interacted with another on a personal level. They had absolutely nothing in common except for one thing—they both feared Esmeralda. Esmeralda was the only bear in all Bearland that had magical powers. She could change the fortunes of any who lived in Bearland for the better or worse. With a wave of her hand a working class bear could lose his job/limbs/house/family or get rich quick in the oil business and move up to the bed, while the aristocrat bears could put their competitors out of business and double their wealth or lose everything in bad investments and end up among the working class bears on the hooked rug, who after having been treated so harshly show them no sympathy. It was a completely random process. She had no
loyalties to or sympathy for anyone. Esmeralda wasn’t merely a bear; she was the decider of fates, the overseer of the overseers. Many resented and abhored her. Others loved and praised her for her kindness. Katie loved to play with her the most. Condemning or rewarding other bears was more fun than tea parties and mass assembly lines.

Esmeralda was on the bed. The aristocrat bears were having a social gathering at the Montgomery Bear residence. They drank port from tiny little cups and discussed the economy. They were suddenly silent as they spotted Esmeralda. She walked around them slowly, Katie’s arms at her sides moving her around the crowd in quick, bouncy steps. Esmeralda circled the group several times, getting faster as she went. The bears didn’t look at each other, just sat completely motionless. Their apprehension grew with each step she took. Esmeralda kept circling and circling until Katie finally got tired and stopped on Samantha Bear. “You,” Katie said emphatically for Esmeralda, making her stubby arm point at the unlucky bear. “Your husband has found out about your affair and is divorcing you. You must leave the premises and are entitled to nothing.”

“No, please,” said the bear in Katie’s most high-pitched screaming. “I’m sorry, he meant nothing. Don’t do this to me, please.”

Katie swatted Samantha Bear down onto the floor. She sat her up at her new post in the Splunkard’s Famous Bear Feed factory assembly line, slicing the skin off the chickens. Fifteen minutes in (in bear time, approximately thirty-one seconds in human time) she cut off a third of her left paw (she had had no experience with a cleaver whatsoever). Katie grabbed a pair of scissors from her school crafts box and cut off the
proper material. “Oh God it hurts!” she screamed. Katie sent her back home for the day and went back up on the bed to consult with Esmeralda.

“What should we do now?” she said. She stared at the bear’s crystal eyes, shimmering beautifully under the sunlight pouring in through her window. Esmeralda had some new ideas for playtime. The bears had begun to bore her. They were such weak, undeserving creatures. “You want me to grab Rusty Gowan Bear?” Katie said before flushing him out of the pile of bears on the floor. Rusty Gowan Bear had knocked up his girlfriend, Cynthia Tomlinson Bear, but was kicked out of her life after years of alcohol and drug abuse culminated in persistent outbursts of violence. She found someone else and he never even got to meet his kid. Rusty Gowan Bear wore tattered rags and had purple marker drawn in under his eyes. “What should I do with Rusty?”

Katie went back downstairs with the unfortunate looking bear. Her parents were still shouting in the kitchen. They were louder than they had been before. Back and forth and back and forth without skipping a beat. “Mommy,” Katie said. Neither of them heard her. “Mommy,” she said again a little louder. “Mommy!”

The two stopped their argument and focused on Katie. “What is it, sweetie?” her mother said.

“Where’s Daddy?”

Her parents looked at each other and back to Katie. “What are you talking about, Pumpkin?” her father said. “I’m right over here.”

“You’re not Daddy. Where is he, Mommy?”

“Sweetie, I don’t understand. Your daddy’s right over—”

“My real daddy.”
Her father stared accusingly at her mother. “What did you tell her?”

“Nothing, I don’t know where she’s getting this. Katie, what—”

“Rusty Gowan.” Her mother froze.

“Oh my God,” he said. “Why would you fucking tell her? You didn’t think we had enough problems? Haven’t I been a good dad?”

“I didn’t tell her anything. This doesn’t make sense; why would I want—Katie who told you this?”

“Esmeralda Bear.”

“It was the bear, Cynthia. That’s who told her. Not you. The goddamned bear.”

He stood up and walked out of the kitchen.

“Scott, please. I didn’t.” She turned to Katie. “Katie you have to tell me who really told you—” She saw the bear in Katie’s arm, broken and dilapidated—a sad, ugly bear. She snatched it from her. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s Rusty Gowan Bear,” Katie said. “He’s had a sad life. Now he’s homeless and real sick. He’ll die soon. You can throw him away. The other bears hate him.”

Her mother was horrified. She simply stood unmoving, staring at the little face, memories flooding back.

“I’m gonna go play some more,” Katie said and ran back upstairs. She accidentally tripped over the working class bears and kicked them out of her way. She got back on the bed where Esmeralda lay and picked her up. The eyes still shimmered seductively in the sunlight, ornate and pristine like fine jewelry. Katie kept her gaze on them, ready to play another game.
It was a Tuesday evening deep into winter, the year she was diagnosed, and we were strolling through the snow-covered park downtown. Beyond a couple rows of trees where the wooden Nativity scene with plastic figures stood, we saw red and blue flashing lights. We hurried over to see, snow scattering under our frantic footsteps. There were four police officers standing around. The figures of the Nativity scene were disheveled, maimed, defaced. Nipples were crudely drawn on the Virgin Mary, cows and sheep were arranged in grossly immature sexual positions. Angels were missing wings, wise men heads, the baby Jesus was missing altogether, and in his place was a slaughtered border collie. I turned my head to see her reaction. She placed her hand over her mouth. As disgusted as I was, for the first time in eight months I had the urge to draw, so I grabbed a coffee shop napkin and a pen from my pocket and started to sketch—a macabre Christmas card I figured I’d throw away the next time I saw it.

But it’s not the vandalized Nativity that sticks most in my mind, even though it put the entire town in an uproar. It is nothing compared to her face that night, the sheer hopelessness of it, the anger that blossomed beneath the red-gloved hand over her mouth. I soon abandon the Virgin Mary and my tiny sketch becomes her horror stricken face. She’s wearing the red and black-checkered hat with fuzzy ear flaps that I had bought her the other day in a thrift store as we walked around downtown looking for Christmas presents, when I notice how pink her ears were. She’s wearing a thin but deceivingly warm brown winter coat that stops at her waist, where her jeans, the sizes of which are getting smaller and smaller as the months go by, begin. The weight she has lost since March must be in the upper twenties—I noticed once as she was getting out of the shower
that I could see her ribs. She keeps her black hair short, just long enough to get a hint of its curliness. Tears run down her cheeks, she’s outraged. Although later, studying her face in the sketch, as crude a drawing as it is, I’ll notice something else going on there, beneath the anguished look. Her eyes are crying but her brows are furled incredulously, as if everything is trivial. She seems to be asking, *What’s even the point in crying?* She doesn’t know quite what to do with her face—she contorts it section by section, trying to find the right position to express what she wants to express. Maybe she’s feeling too much—maybe it’s scrambling her brain. But by the time I finish this sketch, she’s staring at me with curiosity, watching each stroke of the pencil I make. I don’t know what to say; I’m afraid of what she thinks this says about me.

The police tell us to back away. She holds me close, slightly above my waist, and buries her face in my chest. She whispers to me that she’ll never let me go. Says that no matter what else, there will always be us. The napkin sketch has since become a painting of her—that slender frame, those short curls of hair that poke just barely beneath her checkered hat, the gloved hand over her mouth, that agonizing, beautiful look in her eyes. It hangs in my house, on the wall above the green reclining chair on which she used to sit, a reminder of a time when we’d be together forever.
THE PACKAGE MAN

The cramp in Martin's right calf was becoming unbearable. He couldn't stretch out his leg like he normally did, just kicked the side of his box with his left leg repeatedly, hoping somehow that this would help. In all his training stuffed into cardboard boxes for hours at a time, he had never gotten a leg cramp, so he didn't even think of it as a possibility. Now, it was always dark. Cal had warned him not to leave the reading light on when he wasn't using it. He'd also warned him to ration his food properly, not to eat more than the three allotted meals a day, advice Martin promptly ignored at the first signs of hunger. Martin wasn't even sure how many days it had been at this point, stopped keeping track after day two. But he figured he was close. Had to be. Sometimes he would try to count the seconds and try to keep track of hours, but either his mind would wander and he'd forget what he was doing or he'd just get bored. Sometimes he whistled. Sometimes he rolled from side to side, what he figured was the box equivalent of pacing around a room. But after the first day or so the excitement of his adventure wore off and there was little he could do or think about to keep his mind off of time. That is, until the leg cramp. Martin was in major pain, but at least he wasn't counting seconds.

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Seated on an uncomfortable train station bench, Martin clutches his black duffle bag against his chest. The train station is lively for 9:00 at night. A gang of college aged women sit facing each other, laughing about something. An exhausted couple sits sprawled out on a bench, their luggage resting at their feet, while their young son paces around them, jabbering incessantly. Several lone travelers and duos are situated all over the lobby. Martin keeps his head down and repeatedly taps the floor with his foot. People
keep glancing his way, turning their heads sharply as soon as Martin meets their eyes. Martin sighs, tries to hide his face as best as he can by looking down. All he wants is to get to Indianapolis in peace, meet up with his cousin and start working in his grocery store. He wants something to go smoothly for once, but an overweight man in a blue sweatshirt and jeans has been staring at him for a while, laughing to his friend, until he finally stands. *Please don't come over here, please don't come over here,* Martin thinks. The man slowly makes his way over, grinning and swinging his arms like a gorilla as he walks. He stands over Martin and stares down at him. "You're that guy, aren't you?" he says.

"Excuse me?" Martin only glances up at the man for a second, then continues to stare at the floor.

"You're that guy who mailed himself in a box. From the pizza commercial. My buddy over there said there was no way it was you, but I told him he was a dumbass."

"You're mistaken."

"Come on, man, it's obviously you. You're super tall, got those weird horse teeth. I've seen your face dozens of times, man." Martin just shook his head. "Can you just look over to my friend Mike over there and wave so he knows it's you?" He points to a man across the lobby who is staring intently at them.

"Absolutely not. Please leave me alone."

"Just wave at my friend. It'll take two seconds out of your day."

"I'm not the Package Man, " Martin says, looking up. "You're wasting your time."
The man gets out his phone and presses a few buttons. He waves his hand a few times at the phone, trying to hurry it along. "Aha," he finally says. He shoves the phone in Martin's face. It's a video. "Tell me this isn't you."

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Being recognized is now a semi-frequent occurrence for Martin, but three years ago it happened all the time, right after he decided to mail himself from Michigan to California in a box, just to see if he could do it. It began with a short snippet of news on WOXP TV 7, the local news station in Saughton. "Local Man Mails Himself in Crate to California, Arrested in Nevada," the headline read. Harold Simonson, WOXP news anchor, told the story. "Local man Martin Townsend was arrested in Nevada today after being discovered by a UPS worker inside a large crate that had been mailed from the UPS office right here in Saughton," he began, a serious intensity in his eyes. "Townsend was en route to Los Angeles, California. He had been traveling inside the box, which was equipped with nearly a week supply of food and water and a makeshift lavatory, for five days. Townsend was arrested in Nevada and charged with reckless endangerment and mail fraud. His motives are unknown." His co-anchor, Julie Heinecke, laughed.

"I guess it still beats flying, right Harold?"

Harold nodded. "I suppose it does," he said, still without a smile, and continued to report. "In other news. . . ."

The station was flooded with emails and letters about the story. Some people wondered if it was a practical joke, but most wanted to see an interview. Saughton was thirsty to find out why the hell anyone would do something like that. Someone from town put the clip of the newscast on the Internet, and after a couple days it had been viewed by
15,000 people. The station immediately set out to hunt Martin down, and as soon as his legal troubles were sorted out (just a small fine) and he was back in Saughton, they called him for an interview. He accepted.

Silvia Stallworth, a short, cheery reporter with a great figure, conducted the interview outside of Martin's home, a beige trailer in a park off of the western most end of Simonson Street. Martin wore a cheap looking brown suit and had his hair slicked back with grease. Silvia thanked Martin for being there. "Martin," she said, "what possible reason could you have had for mailing yourself in a box all that way? You know there are other methods of travel available." She smiled.

"It wasn't about money or convenience, Sylvia," he said, crossing his legs. "It was a challenge. David Blaine froze himself in a block of ice for 63 hours, stood 90 feet up above New York City for 36 hours, stayed submerged in water for eight days and nights before trying to break the world record for holding his breath. I mailed myself to Los Angeles."

Silvia asked him what it was like in the box.

"Dark, cramped, mind-numbingly boring," Martin said. "Those five days pushed me to the brink of insanity. After a while I couldn't tell the difference between being awake and being asleep. Sometimes the motion of whatever vehicle I was in made me nauseous for hours on end. At one point I was dropped. It was incredibly taxing, Silvia, both mentally and physically. But I persevered, overcame the challenge with willpower alone."

Silvia stared at Martin for a moment, a wide smile plastered to her face. "Amazing." She shuffled the cards in her hands without looking at them. "So there was a
reason you picked Los Angeles in particular? What would you have done there, had you made it?"

"I thought it would be a great place to kick off my career, what with all the stars and producers."

"You want to be an actor?"

"A magician!" Martin reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a deck of cards. "There's a video of David Blaine doing this trick on his website. I’m going to show you all the cards in the deck real fast, and I want you to focus on one that you see." Before Silvia could say anything, Martin held the deck in one hand and pulled his other thumb over the top of it.

"Did you get one?" he asked. Silvia said she did.

Martin pulled out the ace of hearts. "Now, \textit{this—is not your card.}" He flicked it with his finger. Nothing happened. "Hold on." He flicked it several more times. "Shoot. It was supposed to turn into the jack of spades. The jack of spades was your card, right?"

"Ah, yes! It was."

Martin smiled, leaned back in his chair. "Magic."

Silvia asked more specifics about the box: how much it cost to mail a person through UPS, his legal trouble, who mailed him. Martin wasn't interested in discussing the minutia, though. Every time Silvia asked a question, Martin brought it back to his magic, how surviving the box was just like some of the other tricks he had done, like escaping from a water tank in handcuffs or escaping from a coffin. Everything in the interview went back to his magic, about how incredibly talented he was. He expressed his intentions to contact Guinness World Records about his mail stunt. He did a couple more
card tricks for Silvia, simpler ones that he actually got right. "I'm also available for private parties and other venues. Martin Townsend, call 297-343-5020," he said at the end.

Silvia thanked him for being there. "You're certainly a noteworthy person in this town, and I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot more of you."

The video of the interview made it to the Internet and reached 500,000 viewers in less than a week. To Martin's dismay, it eventually came up when you did a search with the words "crazy," "insane," "idiot," and "moron." The video, which was originally titled "Package Man," was shared under different titles, such as "Crazy Moron Mails Himself in Box" or "Hilarious bad magician." Martin didn't let this get to him. Any publicity is good publicity. And for a while, it worked. He got a few gigs here and there, mostly for drunk crowds in their twenties instead of children's birthday parties (although there were a few). Martin took this to mean that he was edgier, more extreme than most young magicians. He invested money in increasingly complicated and expensive tricks, usually things to escape out of or that suggested violence, like a trick guillotine. But Martin would screw them up, get stuck in something and have to have his audience rescue him. He did a show once for a college party. Everyone was drunk, thought everything he did and said was hilarious. Martin attempted to make himself disappear in a large, ornate box with a phoenix etched into it, and succeeded, but couldn't get back out of the panel hidden inside. "Guys," he said, his voice muffled by the layers of wood, "I'm stuck. I need some help." This was met with uproarious laughter. "Steve told me he'd get stuck!" someone said. "This is so awesome!" They tipped the box over, causing Martin to hit his nose; blood gushed from it. "Let's fucking mail him somewhere!"
After the novelty of Martin's act wore off, he found himself in severe credit card debt, not getting any jobs and unable to pay off his magic tricks. Also, he finally got a letter back from Guinness, who said they wouldn't recognize his record because it was an illegal act. They did write, however, that if he wanted to break the world record for living in an enclosed space, he'd have to devote nine months to it.

***

All the other kids were playing football in Scotty Newhart's massive backyard, where Martin found himself on a Saturday afternoon he would've rather spent reading comic books. He was doing a good job of avoiding them all until Scotty's mom approached him. "Why are you sitting around by yourself?" she asked, placing her hand on his shoulder. "Go have fun with everyone."

"I'm fine," Martin mumbled. She yelled Scotty's name. Scotty looked back to her, the game of soccer he was playing paused. "What, Mom?" he said.

"Martin wants to come play football. Find him a spot on one of the teams." Scotty sighed and scrunched his face.

Martin had not been looking forward to Scotty Newhart's birthday party. Martin was an awkward third grader—he was squirrelly looking, his teeth went over his bottom lip when his mouth was closed, he wore glasses that covered a quarter of his face, his clothes were hand-me-downs that never quite fit right from an older cousin. Martin mumbled when he talked, always kept his head down. Kids made fun of him—especially Scotty Newhart. That's how Martin knew Scotty's mom made him invite Martin. Martin's mom, likewise, made him go. "It's weird for a boy your age to always be by himself,"
she'd said. Despite his protests, there he was in Scotty's backyard, forced to play a contact sport with tougher, stronger kids who ridiculed him for a hobby. Martin trailed behind everyone during most of the game, no matter which way they were running. When he was in the middle of the action, kids from his own team yelled at him to get out of the way while the other team tried to trip or push him. At one point Scotty chucked the football as hard as he could into Martin's stomach, which everyone thought was hilarious.

After the football, Scotty's mom herded everyone to rows of folding chairs sitting on the lawn for "a special surprise." Martin immediately sought out a chair in the back corner and slumped down, waiting for whatever was coming next to be over with. When everyone was seated, Scotty's mom announced: "And now, introducing the Great Gizzepo!" A man in a black cape came running from inside the house, a large carrying case and a magic wand in his hands. He set the carrying case on the ground, then waved his wand, which turned into a bouquet of flowers.

"Hi, kids!" he said. "I'm the Amazing Gizzepo!" He shot Scotty's mom an annoyed look when he said "amazing." He opened up the case and pulled out another wand. "Who wants to see some magic?" Everyone cheered except Martin. He sat back, his arms folded. He had not been impressed by the wand-flowers. But although he had resigned himself to being miserable, as the Amazing Gizzepo went on, Martin perked up, sat up until he was at the edge of his seat. Gizzepo started with the usuals, splitting rings that were bound together, pulling a rabbit out of his hat. But he moved on to more complex tricks. To Martin's horror, he crushed a cage of two parakeets underneath a cloth, and, to Martin's relief and joy, built the cage back up to once again reveal the birds. The birds had distinct patterns and colors, one yellow and white, the other blue and
white—they were indisputably the same parakeets. Gizzepo pulled what had to be a mile of scarves from his mouth. He poured a pitcher of grape juice on a white tablecloth, stuffed it into an empty box, and pulled it back out, the stain eradicated. He even made one of the kids at the party disappear in a giant box. Martin couldn't get enough. He clapped and cheered, tried to piece together the steps of the illusions. When it was over Gizzepo thanked them and wished Scotty a happy birthday. The kids went off to play some more inside. Martin approached Gizzepo as he put away his tricks.

"Can you show me how you did those tricks?" Martin asked.

"Afraid I can't do that, kid," Gizzepo said, still putting things away. "It's the magician's code. Never reveal your tricks."

"Oh." Martin began to walk away, but stopped. "Then how does anyone ever become a magician if they never teach their tricks?"

Gizzepo stopped putting things away and stared at Martin. "Well, I mean—"

"How did you learn your tricks? Did you study magic in college?"

Gizzepo laughed. "Yeah, I majored in magic at Harvard."

"Really?"

"Ah, no. Look kid, I gotta get going here. I have another gig in thirty minutes."

Martin looked down and sighed. "But I tell you what." Gizzepo bent over and rummaged around the case for a minute, and finally pulled out a small, thin, rectangular piece of plastic with a hole in the middle. "This is the disappearing coin trick. You can probably figure it out if you play around with it a little. Want it?"

"You mean I can have it?"
"Yeah, why not." He handed Martin the trick. "Enjoy, kid. Show your little friends in there." Gizzepo went back to putting things away.

"Thanks so much," Martin said and ran inside.

***

Martin watches the first ten seconds of his WOXP interview on the man's phone before he turns away. "All right," he says. "It's me. You caught me. Congratulations."

"I fucking knew it!" the man says. "Hey Mike!" he yells across the station. "It's him!"

"No, come on, I don't want. . . ." It's too late; Mike has approached.

"This is Mike. My name's Greg."

"Holy shit, it is him," says Mike, a tall man with a greasy blond mullet wearing an orange and green flannel shirt. "You still mail yourself places?"

"Obviously not, I'm in a train station."

"Hey," Greg says, "can we get a picture with you?"

"Guys, please, I just want to wait for my train in peace." Greg has his phone out again and is already taking a picture. People are staring at them.

"Dude," Greg begins, "You got to say the line from the pizza commercial."

"I don't got to do anything," Martin replies.

"What was it again?" Mike asks. "I had to come in the mail to eat pizza! or something?"

Greg readies his phone to record Martin. "Come on, man," he says. "Please say the line." He looks to Mike. "Benny's going to lose his shit when he sees this."

"I'm not saying anything into your phone."
"You just did, man," Greg says, pointing to the phone. "See? It's already rolling. Just say the line. Come on." When Martin says nothing, Greg says, "Man, why you got to be like that? Just say it and we'll leave you alone."

Martin stands. "I'm not fucking saying it." Greg and Mike look to each other and laugh.

"Well I guess he's not fucking saying it," says Mike. "Did you get that?"

"Yeah I got it. "Jesus, man," he says to Martin. "What the hell is your problem?"

He pushes a button on his phone and shoves it in his pocket. The two walk back to where they were sitting, laughing the whole way.

***

The day Cal Templeton was expelled from Jefferson Elementary, Martin was nestled in his fourth grade classroom in the east wing of the school, unaware of the chaos that was taking place in the west wing. Martin figured the fire alarm was just another drill and walked calmly outside with his class. In the west wing, people were panicking. The entire hall was engulfed in a thick haze of smoke. Children and teachers alike thought they were surrounded by fire. Teachers tried their best to control the children, but they had never had to wrangle them through actual smoke before. They frantically blurted out commands like "To the floor!" and "Watch your faces!" The panic was for nothing; there was no fire. All the smoke could be traced back to a single classroom, to a single boy's science project.

Cal had hoped to make a fog machine, like the one he saw in the party store where he bought dry ice for a different project. But he had no sense of the difference between fog and smoke, and built the biggest smoke bomb anyone had ever seen. The principal,
Mr. Davies, expelled Cal for 180 days. Martin hated him for it. 180 days for a little smoke? It wasn't like there was an actual fire. The way Martin saw it, Jefferson Elementary lost their smartest student. And Martin lost his only friend.

Mr. and Ms. Templeton were flower children, even in the late 70s. They didn't take away Cal's supplies for his projects after the smoke bomb because they didn't want to stifle his creativity. He wasn't grounded, wasn't punished in anyway. And being expelled didn't faze Cal at all. The day after it happened, he gave Martin a call. "Hey," Cal began, "Want to come over? I've got something to show you."

"Cal, when can you come back to school?" Martin said. "Is there anything I can do? I can start a petition or something."

"Nah, I'm done there. I'm going to have to go to some private school. You should come over."

"There's got to be something."

"Just come over, you got to see this." Martin sighed, agreed, and headed over.

When Martin arrived, they walked straight up to Cal's room. Last time Martin had been in there it was a mess. Spare parts from machines he didn't recognize, various-sized pieces of wood, scrap metal, rubber, tools all over the floors and shelves. Now, everything was organized neatly, placed into boxes and shelves with labels.

"What is it you want to show me?" Martin asked. He collapsed into a denim beanbag chair on the floor.

Cal opened his closet and took out a small birdcage about a foot wide and two feet long with a thick, long base at the bottom. "What the hell is it?" Martin asked.
"Remember how you were telling me you wanted something that'll make shit disappear? For one of your magic tricks?" Martin nodded. "Check this out." Cal opened the door and placed a baseball inside. He draped a velvet cloth over the top, left it for a few seconds, and snapped it off. The baseball was gone.

Martin immediately sat up. "Dude," he said, "how the hell did you do that?"

Cal explained that there was a magnet on the cloth and a piece of metal on the bottom. "You have to align the magnet with the metal and it'll pull open a trap door right here," he said. He pointed at the bottom. "The rock is right here, beneath the cage."

Martin marveled at the contraption for a few seconds, studied its parts. "It's badass," he said. "The best thing you've ever made."

"You should've seen the fog machine."

Martin took his eyes off the trick and focused them on Cal. "Smoke bomb," Martin said.

"Smoke bomb, whatever. It was pretty fucking cool."

"Was it worth being expelled? Having to find another school?"

Cal shrugged. "Every school's the same."

Martin picked up the outside casing of an old radio. "You have to make new friends."

Cal shrugged once again in response to this. He picked up a stool. "I'm thinking about sawing this down and turning it into a grappling hook."

Martin placed the radio casing on the floor. "I got to go," he said.

"But you just got here."
"I have to study for a math test tomorrow. I still go to school." He began to walk away.

"Since when do you study? At least take the trick, I made it for you." Martin stopped, turned around and grabbed it. He thanked Cal, told him he'd see him later, and left. As he walked home, Martin pictured himself sitting alone in the cafeteria, huddled over a bologna sandwich. Pictured himself at recess, alone, trying to appear like he's doing something interesting or having fun. The anxiety that comes from being a loner, from desperately wanting what should be fun breaks to end so people will stop staring at him, was an experience all too familiar to Martin, and with Cal gone, he knew those days would return.

***

Martin looks at his watch and remembers it had stopped the night before at 3:14. He wonders why he’s still wearing it, but doesn’t take it off. People have been staring at him off and on since his outburst. The college women laugh and turn away every time Martin catches them. The little boy stares every so often until his parents tell him to stop (although Marin catches the two of them staring every once in a while too). Luckily, Greg and Mike were waiting outside, their train likely about to arrive. Martin all of a sudden has to piss, which is unfortunate, because train station restrooms are notoriously disgusting, especially this one. He stands, his duffle bag draped over his shoulder, and calmly makes his way to the restroom.

The tile on the floor is wet—he can’t tell if it’s urine or not because the floor's been painted yellow. He walks to a urinal, his shoes making a spongy noise every time he
steps. The urinal is filled with yellow water; he flushes it but it doesn’t work. As he readies himself, the door opens with a short burst. "Hey, look who it is." It's Greg.

"Jesus Christ, did you follow me in here?" Martin says.

"I'm not allowed to piss at the same time as the Package Man?" Greg walks over to a urinal two away from Martin. Martin sighs. Greg begins to piss. "Hey, you still do magic tricks?" he says. "Can I book you for a party?"

"No."

"Come on, I heard you were hilarious. A cousin of mine had a friend who hired you a while back. Said you hurt your hand real bad trying to make a rabbit cage disappear, then you played it off like it was part of the trick." He begins to laugh. "But you didn't use that hand for anything the rest of the show."

"I remember that party. Thank you for reminding me of it, it brought me great joy."

"My best friend's getting married in like a month and I need something for the bachelor party. You would be hilarious. I'd make him think you were the only act, and he'd be all pissed that there was no stripper. And then he'd be really pissed because you aren't even a good magician. Then we bring out the stripper." Greg finishes urinating and flushes the toilet. "What do you say?"

"I said I don't do that shit anymore. Please, leave me alone so I can take a leak."

"What the hell else you got better to do? Where the fuck are you even going tonight?"

"None of your goddamn business." Martin finally begins to piss. The man goes to a sink and washes his hands.
"I always thought you'd be this super nice guy, doing tricks for people and shit. You're kind of an asshole."

"I'm an asshole?"

"You wouldn't say the line. Wouldn't even tell us who you are. Like you're fucking better than me or something."

"Maybe I am."

Greg finishes washing his hands. "Excuse me?"

"At least I've got better things to do than bug people who just want to go about their day. Do you enjoy fucking with me? Am I entertainment to you? Does it make you feel big to make fun of me? You're fucking pathetic." A wad of wet paper towel hits Martin in the face. "Hey!"

"Who are you calling pathetic?" All of a sudden Greg is right next to him.

"Leave me alone, asshole."

"Take it back right now." Greg shoves Martin.

"Knock it off! I'm trying to piss here."

He shoves Martin again. "Take it back."

"All right, I take it back, just leave me the hell alone!"

Greg laughs. "Call me pathetic. I thought the whole point of your stunt was to be famous. So when someone's actually excited to meet the Package Man, you tell him to fuck off? Like you're too good? I got a newsflash: anyone can sit in a box." Greg went on about how sitting in a box is not an accomplishment but a whorish cry for attention. He continues even after Martin stops peeing and washes his hands.

Finally, Martin says, "I bet you couldn't do it."
Greg laughs. "Why the fuck would I want to?"

"You don't know what it takes. You can't move, it's dark, boring. You'd start to cry after ten minutes." Martin regrets this as soon as he says it, knows he shouldn't antagonize this man, but stands firmly, puffs up his chest to look intimidating and strong.

Greg laughs even harder. "All right. Show me, right now. Why don't you get in the garbage can and see how long you can stay in it." Martin shakes his head and begins to walk away, but Greg grabs him.

"Hey!" Martin says. Greg wrestles him to the ground and pulls him over to the garbage. Martin screams at him to stop and squirms, but Greg is too strong. Suddenly the door opens. Martin's hopes at a rescue are dashed when he sees Mike walking into the bathroom.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" Mike says. "Our train is here."

"The Package Man is about to showcase his only ability. Help me get him in the can." Mike sighs and quickly joins his friend.

"Seriously," Martin says, "This shit isn't funny. Fucking assholes." Greg knocks the trashcan on its side and the two try to push Martin in. Martin kicks and flails his arms. Mike pushes down on his legs while Greg holds his torso. Martin sits up like he's doing crunches and Mike jerks his legs up, causing Martin to fall backwards and slam his head on the floor.

Greg stops and says "Jesus, man, I think his head is bleeding. Cut it out."

Mike lets go of his legs. "Fuck," he says. "Hey, can you hear me? You okay?" Martin is still conscious, but he's not responding, just stares. "We better get out of here."
"Good idea." Their voices sound distant to Martin, ethereal, like the voices of angels. The room is spotty and dark. He hears the door slam shut and the slam reverberates in his mind.

***

On a hot July day, Martin found himself once again scrunched inside a box. It had to be 90 degrees outside, probably 110 in the box. Martin had been in it for almost five minutes. He was wondering what was going on outside. Finally, the lid was torn off the top. Martin jumped up to see Crazy Bill, local restaurant owner, dressed in his signature flannel and cowboy hat, and a Happy's Pizza employee standing next to him. "Hey Crazy Bill," Martin said. "I had to come all the way here in the mail to eat your pizza. Let's—"

Bill stomped his foot. "God damn it, son!" he yelled. "That's not the line. We've been over this again and again."

"Sorry, Bill." Martin's hair and shirt were soaked with sweat.

"Don't apologize just get it right. Jesus Christ we've done this eleven times." The Happy's employee, a skinny 18-year-old boy, sighed, massaged his temple with his thumb and index finger.

"It's really hot in the box," Martin said. "Makes it hard to think."

"If you want to get paid you better be thinking about the one line you have. 'Hey Crazy Bill, I had to come here in a mail truck to satisfy my hunger. Let's eat some pizza!' That's it! All you have to say, god damn it."

Martin repeated the line in a monotone voice. "I'll get it right, I promise."

"I'd like to go home someday," Bill said. "We've got three more scenes to film. Are you going to fuck up this bad throughout all of them?"
"I'll get it, I'll get it. Let's do it again."

"Shit, not with you looking like that." He turned to the small crew. "We're going to need to get him a new shirt and wash his fucking hair. And reapply his makeup." He turned back to Martin and shook his head.

"Well I'm sorry but it's really fucking hot inside that box. Besides, looking like I do is more realistic. It's how I looked when they caught me in Nevada. You try living in a cramped space for a week and see if you look like a million bucks when you come out."

"Son, I'm not trying for realism, here. You're mailing yourself to a goddamn pizza place because your car is out of gas. No one gives a flying fuck what you looked like when you actually came out of the box. I don't want people associating my pizza with a sweaty, disgusting slob."

Martin said nothing, just wiped the sweat from his eyes. Bill sent him back to makeup and wardrobe, which were both located in a small tent in the Happy's Pizza parking lot. This was the second to last scene in the commercial, but the first to be filmed on what was supposed to be a three-day shooting schedule. After a half-day's work, they had no usable footage of Martin. As a woman applied white makeup to his cheeks, Martin saw Bill smoking a cigar and rubbing his temples.

After the makeup was finished and Martin changed his clothes, he was back in the box. The top popped off, his cue. "Hey Crazy Bill! I came here in a mail truck because I'm so hungry for your pizza! Let's eat!"

Bill threw his cowboy hat on the ground. "God damn it!"

***
It had been a day and a half. As far as Martin could tell, he was on a truck. The ride was smooth; the sound of wheels on pavement was subtly audible inside the box, and it provided Martin a calming white noise. He had the reading light on, still marveling at the craftsmanship and ingenuity that Cal had put into building his temporary home. The entire inside was lined with thick but lightweight foam padding, so was the bottom of the lid, in case Martin sat up too suddenly upon waking and bumped his head.

The water reservoir was a work of pure genius—it was plastic, only an inch thick, and covered the surface area of an entire side of the box. "This is going to save a great deal of space," Cal had said. A thin tube with a valve hung off the end like a tail for easy access. Cal had even marked the reservoir in increments to ration his daily water intake. The food supply, a trail mix of sorts (Cal's own recipe) was contained in a long, metal tube with a spout on the bottom, a lever attached to it. Whenever Martin pressed the lever, a perfectly rationed meal poured down into a bowl. "Remember," Cal had told him, "there's enough for three meals a day for five days. Don't overdue it."

Probably the greatest achievement of all was the area designated for "waste management." It was a box made of tin, the bulkiest thing Cal had to include. The small compartment on the top slid out, revealing it to be a bedpan. "This is where you're going to shit for the next week," Cal had said. After Martin did his business, he would slide it back into place, lock it in, and turn a nob that would drop his shit to the bottom of the bin. Similarly, there was an altered water bottle with a funnel top connected to the other side of the mechanism for liquid waste. It even had some of that blue liquid they put in porta-potties to deal with the smell. Yeah, relieving himself was still a hassle. But it was a lot better than it could have been.
As he rubbed his hand along the water reservoir, Martin thought back to the day Cal first showed him the box. After a week and a half of work, Cal had called him and said the box was finally ready. When Martin came over, Cal escorted him to his basement workshop, a pristine area with polished mechanical saws against the wall and tools kept neatly in various toolboxes. It reminded Martin of Cal's childhood bedroom. After Cal explained the features of the box to him in great detail, Martin couldn't speak. All he had asked Cal to do was to design something comfortable, something manageable. He figured it would be a box filled with wood chips and granola bars, figured he'd have to piss in empty water bottles as he drank them. Didn't even think of where he'd be shitting. "Cal. I don't know what to say."

"I'm really proud of her." Cal said. "If I had to travel in a four-by-three box, this is what I'd want to travel in." He folded his arms and ran his hand through his beard.

"How much did the parts cost?"

"Don't worry about the extra costs. Consider it your going away present."

Martin placed his hand on Cal's back. "Thanks man. This means a lot."

Cal smiled. "You gave me a better gift than I did you, trust me. I got some ideas from this project. I'm going to try and get into the miniature living space market. Maybe finally get a patent. I bet the army could use something like this." These days Cal made his money as a repairman and an entrepreneur, selling contraptions he designed out of his home and on the Internet. He was always looking for the product that would put his name on the map.
After marveling at the box a little more, the two headed upstairs. Cal poured them each a glass of bourbon. "Jesus. Los Angeles, California. You've never even been to a city half that size before."

"First time for everything. At least I'll arrive in style." The two clinked glasses.

"Maybe you'll finally get a tan, too." Cal took a drink and asked him what he was going to do when he got there.

"I'm kind of planning on everything just falling into place," Martin said with confidence. "No doubt I'll be on the news, which'll get some major attention from Hollywood."

"So it's going to work out just like that?"

Martin stared at him. "No one's ever done this before. Not even David Blaine. That's got to be worth something."

"I'm sure it is, Marty. I just think you should be careful. With everything." He took another large sip of bourbon. "This isn't exactly safe, for Christ's sake. And I know that that's the point, that David Blaine wouldn't care if it's safe. Just be careful. Countless people go to Hollywood looking for fame and end up waiters or fluffers in a porno or something."

"I'm not going to suck anyone's dick," Martin said.

"That's not what I'm saying. I'm sorry. I just—feel free to call if you need me to wire the money for a Greyhound or something. You know I've got your back, buddy, no matter what."
"You know I've been training? Every morning for the past month I've been spending an hour of my day in a cardboard box. To get used to it. Same way David Blaine practiced holding his breath everyday for months before he attempted the record."

"Have you taken a shit inside it?" Cal asked. Martin sighed, looked to the ground. He set his drink on the table and ran his hand through his hair. "I didn't mean to upset you. That is impressive, man. I think you can do whatever you want." Cal raised his glass. "To Martin Townsend. The world's next great magician."

Martin smiled and picked up his glass. "To California and the box that'll get me there."

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Martin holds an icepack to his face as two police officers fire questions at him. "Can you describe your attackers?" "How did the altercation begin?" "Was anything stolen?" The questions whirled around in Martin's head, echoed. His answered them by reflex, not really thinking about his response. "One was fat. The other had a mullet." "I was trying to piss and they beat the piss out of me." "No."

"Anything else you can tell us, Mr. Townsend?" asks the older of the two. He has greying hair and a mustache. Martin coughs. "No."

"We'll do our best to catch them," the younger policeman says. By now, Martin has missed his train. Everyone is staring at him. He places the icepack back on his head. "You should really get to the hospital," says the older officer. "Head injuries can be pretty serious."

"I don't have health insurance."
"Well, still," he says. "It's a good idea."

After a while they have everything they need. "We'll call if we make any progress," says the first officer. They begin to walk away. The same officer turns around. "Hey," he says. "Don't let this turn you off of conventional methods of travel. Statistically the train is still a lot safer than the box."

Martin breathes deeply and says nothing. He glares at him. The officer, visually embarrassed, tells him to take care and sulks away, his partner following behind him.

Martin sits down on a bench. People are still staring at him and whispering, but they're not laughing anymore. The group of young women all have shocked looks on their faces. Everyone is mortified. It's a new experience for Martin, being stared at for a reason other than his infamous past in the spotlight. Being the object of pity instead of ridicule. The room is dead quiet. The young boy stares at him from about 20 feet away. Martin, still half in a daze, reaches into his pocket and pulls out a deck of cards. "You want to see a magic trick, kid?" he says. The kid is quiet, looks to his parents. More people are staring at him now, not trying at all to hide it. Martin shuffles the deck.

"Gather round if you want to see a trick," he says to everyone. The kid approaches, his parents following nervously behind. "I'm going to show you all the cards in this deck and I want you to focus on one." Martin flips through the deck very carefully, then does it again in case the kid missed it. He pulls out the seven of hearts. "Is this your card?" The kid shakes his head. "Of course it isn't." Martin flicks the card three times with his index finger, and on the third flick it turns into the jack of spades.

"Whoa!" says the kid. More people begin to gather around.
"That was it, right?" The kid nods, a look of excitement on his face. Martin shuffles the deck again, smirking. "Anyone else want to see a trick? I've got all night."