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# Dreams About Food

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DREAMS ABOUT FOOD

by

Benson Reed Ingram

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

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Approved by

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## ABSTRACT

The stories contained in this collection are entirely fictional, and any resemblance to reality is just your imagination. The source materials for these stories were dreams I had.

Most of my dreams are about food.

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## Critical Introduction

Why do I want to be a writer? I think the primary reason is that I've always had an active, perhaps overactive, imagination. Ever since I was a kid I've lived a sort of double life: half in the normal waking world, other half in a private inner realm. I've always spent the majority of my time alone. As a kid I would build Legos or hold conversations with stuffed animals. I read some, but not voraciously; I didn't develop an interest in literature until high school. Like many people in my generation, I was beguiled by flashier forms of entertainment, such as television and video games, of which I was an avid user. It's hard for books to compete with the dopamine levels of flashing colors and pixelated explosions, especially to a young mind seeking instant gratification. Growing up in Mississippi, my friends and I also spent a lot of time in the woods, made bows and arrows, chunked pieces of dirt at each other, shot BB guns, fished, swam, and got into trouble. I think all these activities, for good or ill, have informed my imagination.

An adverse side-effect of my imagination is that I'm prone to daydreaming, often in class, so I've never been the best student. Even in English class it was hard to reach me, though it wasn't nearly as boring as math. The internet also provided the perfect resources, such as SparkNotes, to be lazy and insubordinate. Still, there were books I remember reading and enjoying, such as *Of Mice and Men*, which was short and easy, and *The Catcher in the Rye*, which interested me because of the controversy surrounding it, though I was disappointed in that regard. Perhaps the prostitution scene was controversial in the Fifties, but compared to, say, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, in which you can pick up a prostitute in your car, pay for sex, and then kill the prostitute to get your money back, *The Catcher in the Rye* hardly seemed controversial. I suppose we've been

desensitized by the newer forms of media, though I don't think anything prepares us for the real horrors of the world like literature does. I had a particularly good English teacher for American Lit who helped grow my appreciation through books like *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby*. It was around this time that I decided to major in English in college, partly because I had heard English was good for law school, which at the time I thought I wanted to do. Around this time I started reading a lot of Kurt Vonnegut. He was very popular in my high school because of a student favorite teacher who was a huge Vonnegut proselytizer. This led me to books like *Catch-22*. Like *Slaughterhouse-Five*, its unconventional narrative structure really opened my eyes to what a novel could do. By senior year my interest had really solidified; I was the most active participant in my British Lit class. I really enjoyed reading *The Hobbit* (which was a bit too easy for a senior class), *Frankenstein*, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I took a creative writing class during my last semester which was a lot of fun, and my teacher seemed to recognize some talent in me, though at this stage I didn't take writing too seriously.

Since starting college I've expanded my reading through authors such as Shakespeare, Joyce, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Cormac McCarthy, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Phillip Roth, Tennessee Williams, Aldous Huxley, Haruki Murakami, Hemingway, Raymond Carver, George Saunders, Dostoyevsky, Sarte, Camus, Sherwood Anderson, Ken Kesey, and others. I still don't consider myself well-read, and often wish I had read more, though I suppose I've read more than most people my age, even if that's not saying much. Sophomore year of college I added a major in philosophy, again because I thought this would help prepare me for law school. Of course by now I have zero interest in law school. It's funny how things change. Studying philosophy definitely

changed the way I think, though I'm not sure it was for the best. Sometimes I think philosophy is a form of insanity. More than changing the way I think, however, philosophy showed me that I'm not nearly as smart as I thought I was; most of it flies right over my head. My favorite philosopher is Heraclitus, probably because I like aphorisms. Outside of fiction the writer that has influenced me the most is probably Carl Jung.

Taking creative writing classes obviously influenced my desire to write, but besides this they were fun and a nice change of pace from ordinary classes. Though I didn't learn anything in a traditional sense; my writing improved and I saw how a writer sees the world. Besides literature and writing classes, I also took several film classes. I've always loved movies, or films, as some say; they've enhanced my imagination at least as much as books have. Directors (I don't really like the word auteur) that have influenced me the most are Scorsese, Kubrick, David Lynch, Spielberg, and many others that I can't recall right now. Several TV shows have also had a big impact on me: *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *South Park*, and even, I must say, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, among many others. Standup comedy has also influenced me. George Carlin, Louis C.K., Bill Hicks, Chris Rock, Patton Oswald, Jim Gaffigan, Aziz Ansari, and Dave Chappelle are among my favorite comedians. Lastly, countless hours of videogames have also scrambled my brain, though I'd rather not recall a list.

Besides having an active imagination, it's hard to say exactly why I want to be a writer. I don't necessarily write because I like to; in fact, in many ways I don't like writing. It causes a lot of stress and sleepless nights. I have both a perfectionist attitude and the propensity to procrastinate. On one hand I'm a strong critic of myself, and on the

other I'm a total amateur. So writing for me is a very tense activity. I'm also very self-conscious about what I write because, though no character in these stories is purely me, they are each extensions of myself and especially the parts that I don't like. Choosing to write has also forced me to self-examine, which isn't always pleasant. Some writers say they write to give order and structure to their experiences, but I don't really know what they're talking about. Writing for me is itself a chaotic experience. So I guess I can only say that because I have an active imagination, I needed a creative outlet, and I picked writing because, as far as creative pursuits go, writing is the one of most solitary, which suits me, because I like to work alone. I've also convinced myself that I have some talent, though this might be just a delusion.

None of this is to say that I hate writing. I certainly feel satisfied finishing a draft of a story. I think the real conflict came when I started asking myself how seriously I wanted to be about this. Because if I'm serious, I've got a lot of work to do. Otherwise I wouldn't have to worry about it. I haven't, to a fault, taken many things in life seriously, but I feel like now is the perfect opportunity and time to start. I think that this is, more than anything, what I've had to learn how to do. But, on the other hand, this new seriousness crippled me, because what I had gained in seriousness, I lost in my sense of humor. I've realized that I have to keep both of these. I've always thought of myself as somewhat paradoxical, and I hope to express that in my stories.

By a Conjunction of Planets

I got both the title and the idea for this story from the passage in *The Sound and the Fury* that I use as an epigraph. I thought it fit because it has my name and like Ben, I'm also an idiot. The themes I try to express are family dysfunction, the decline of southern values, cynicism and hopelessness, drug and alcohol use, science and religion, aging, generational cycles and death. I took several cues from *The Sopranos*, which has great restaurant scenes, and *Horace and Pete's*, Louis C.K.'s new show. The structure of the story is simple, just one scene really. Like my other stories, several of the details, such as the chickadee, were taken from my own life, but otherwise the story is fictional. The family is an upper-middle class Jackson family. The protagonist, Andrew, is a sarcastic, pessimistic, nihilistic, and maniacal college grad working a restaurant job, just enough to get by on his own. Foil to him is Hannah, his younger sister, who is optimistic and headstrong with good prospects for her future. Like many people in his generation, Andrew abuses drugs frequently. I suppose Andrew and Hannah are a reflection of a portion of young men and women coming of age, men apathetic and subdued by a spiritual malaise that they counteract with drugs, and women career-minded and in general optimistic about the future. I stress the physical similarities of Hannah, the mother and Meemaw only to stress their profound differences in outlook and personality. Hannah is ambitious and pursuing a career in science, contrasting with the mother and Meemaw's strong, traditional southern identity. Hannah is moving to Seattle, virtually cutting ties with her southern heritage, while the mother is in a state of constant worry over her aging mother's health and the impending lawsuit. Meemaw is somewhat oblivious and, like Andrew, also high.

I see the conflict as primarily between the mother, Andrew, and Hannah, with Meemaw as a not so lucid observer. Andrew is jealous and resentful of Hannah, and irritated by his mother, who is in a state of constant anxiety over Hannah's departure, Meemaw, and Phil Blanton. Hannah gets to escape all this, leaving Andrew in his mother in this state of conflict, and in a sense the heritage of the South. Hannah actively pursues a brighter future while Andrew passively admits defeat and gives in to a sense of powerlessness. His sardonic outburst in the end is his mockery of abstract ideas such as justice. I do, however, try to suggest rebirth and spiritual transformation, through both the chickadee and the mirror scene.

### The Angel Taxi

The subject of this story is someone with a fragmented psyche. I of course took cues from *Taxi Driver*, a movie I've seen at least ten times, but also Faulkner, O'Conner, and McCarthy. The plot takes place over one night and has two flashbacks. The themes are paranoia, inner conflict, alcohol use, racism and madness. The character is in the midst of a personal crisis, which violently emerges through voices in his head, but the causes are only hinted at, and he in general remains anonymous. Like the other stories, I took many details from actual experiences in my life. All the characters in the cab and the second flashback are based on real people and conversations. Otherwise, the story is fictional. I've found that cab rides in Oxford are some of the best times to observe people. Passengers are drunk, sometimes acting crazy, and cab drivers are always interesting people, I suppose because they have a night job. Anyone with a night job is automatically

more interesting. Through the first flashback I hint that protagonist has been somewhat traumatized through the fraternity process, though it also hints that his problem is somewhat peculiar to himself. The woman is again a foil to the protagonist. She sees the good in the fraternity and he sees the bad. She's the optimist while he's the cynic, and she tells him that he just thinks too much, which he knows is part of his problem. I try to make it apparent that the real conflict is inner.

I based the two backseat characters on stereotypical Jackson natives, where double names beginning with Mary are prolific. The cab driver is stoic. Besides the other people in the story, voices are also characters. There's a paranoid, a violent redneck, perhaps a child and maybe a woman. The voices are the disassociated parts or organs of his mind. I think I based it somewhat on Jung's analytic psychology. The conflict comes through the protagonist's disgust with the other passengers but primarily through the worry that he's as depraved as the people he's witnessed. He is in a sense projecting himself onto the other passengers. The transformation comes at the end, when he quiets his mind, but I try to suggest that his existential worry still lingers.

### Hypnagogia

As the title suggest, with this story I'm trying to blend the mundane with the supernatural. The themes are paranoia, mania, delusions, the supernatural, predestination, aliens, drugs, neglect, circles and spirals, body horror and dreams. For this story I took cues from David Lynch, *The X-Files*, Haruki Murikami, Carl Jung, Sigmund Freud, *South Park* and *The Catcher in the Rye*. This was the only first person story I wrote.

Charlie Wyman is a typical slacker millennial who is irreverent, nihilistic, prone to fantasy, scatter brained and ADD. He's half Eric Cartman, half Holden Caulfield. He operates mostly under the pleasure principle, at the expense of self-development. He is prone to excess in food, drugs, and digital entertainment. As the story progresses, however, I try to make his tone more serious and contemplative. The primary catalyst for this change is his confrontations with the supernatural. I want him to be unreliable, however.

I see the conflict as an inner struggle between two opposing premises. One, that these supernatural encounters and warnings are real. Two, that these encounters are a product of his imagination or sensory disturbances. He's half skeptic and half believer by the end. At the beginning of the story he's nihilistic and irreverent, assuming life has no inherent meaning, and by the end he worries that it either has far more meaning than he realized, meaning that is mysterious, terrifying and inaccessible, or that he's desperately creating meaning that isn't there and possibly losing his mind. The result of this tension is a deep dread and uncertainty about his mental state and his future. Again I use the female voice for optimism, with the mother at the end assuring everything will be fine, but this can be read ironically as well.

The story takes place over two days and is told chronologically. At the beginning of the story I try to make it apparent that Charlie has an overactive imagination. He's day-dreaming a terrorist attack. I've been told by many of the people who have read this story that they also have thought of this in class. I use a lot of tangents in this story, to reflect his ADD mind and perhaps the internet. I thought the migraine was a good catalyst for conflict, and that his leaving school timed well with the escape plan. I chose the

*Jeopardy!* reference because there actually is a man named Ben Ingram whose been on the show, and because schizophrenic people often think the TV is talking to them. The videogame title *Call to Arms: Advanced Arab Fighter IV* is meant to be a satirical reference to the *Call of Duty* franchise. Sometimes I think these companies are priming us for war. I know for a fact that a large portion of people in the military play videogames, and sometimes I think it's not a coincidence. Again, some of the details from this story are taken from my own life, but otherwise it is fictional.

As a child I was apparently very religious. I can remember a conversation I had with my dad about predestination. He explained to me that certain people were predestined for grace, and that others were not. I thought that seemed unfair, the opposite of a just god. He argued that God knows everything, and therefore knows whether someone is saved or not before it even happens. I thought that if God knew everything, this had to be true. This was the first religious question that confounded me. When I was about fourteen I lost my faith, but after studying philosophy and other ideas, my mind has again turned to questions of the divine or supernatural. I try to convey this in this story.

Then Ben wailed again, hopeless and prolonged. It was nothing. Just sound. It might have been all time and injustice and sorrow become vocal for an instant by a conjunction of planets.

-Faulker, *The Sound and the Fury*

### By a Conjunction of Planets

A pile of half-empty bottles of water with brittle labels loosely hanging on and crushed cans of Coca-Cola and Red Bull bounces off the passenger floor mat as he drives over a pothole. The water sloshes around. His mother always says the sound makes her seasick and begs him to clean it up, but whatever, it doesn't bother him. He usually lets the pile accumulate until trash spills out when someone opens the door. Some people, when sitting shotgun, hover their feet over the pile so as not to touch it. He wonders what this says about them. Others just stomp it with their shoes.

Woods of neatly plotted trees surround both sides of the parkway. A film of hazy cloud obscures the sun. He checks the time on his phone: 12:34, shit he's late. He plugs an aux cord into his phone and plays "Chameleon" by Herbie Hancock, turns the volume just high enough not to rattle the speakers and cans, then picks up a vaporizer from the cup holder and brings it to his mouth. *Concentrate*. He pulls hard with his lungs, holds the smoke at the tip of his diaphragm, cracks open the window and releases a dense fog that gets sucked outside. A bitter wind whips around his face; he rolls the window back up. Easy now, hands on ten and two as he approaches an intersection. No other car there. He stops. A tingling sensation washes over him. He feels lighter. He concentrates his gaze over the steering wheel, his vision now choppy, as if projected onto a screen at a rate lower than twenty-four frames. Hands and feet numb, he drives on.

From the right a bird smacks into the windshield. He curses, screeches to a stop, the pile of trash rattling. He sees it through his side view mirror, seizing in the median. It looks like a chickadee, but he can't really tell. Goddamn suicidal birds, no chance in hell for it. In England, they call chickadees tits. He had read that on Wikipedia. Once, when he was ten, he shot a chickadee with a cheap plastic pump-action pellet gun. With him was his friend Parker who had big buck teeth and bushy brown hair. They were in an empty lot at the end of their street that backed up to the woods. Poised behind a mound of dirt, he took aim at the bird on its perch and fired. It fell on the dirt and flopped around with its wing, stirring dust into the air. They walked over and knelt beside it. He reached his hand toward the bird and it pecked his finger, causing it to bleed. He wanted to help it, but Parker convinced him that it was too late, took the gun, pumped it with air and pointed it at the bird's head. He shot, splitting it open. Its brains looked yellower than he expected. It looked like a cracked egg. They dug a hole with sticks in the ground and buried it, pounding the dirt on top. That was a long time ago.

The music stops. His phone rattles in the cup holder. He picks it up and pulls out the aux cord. It's his mother. "Hello. Yes I'm pulling in now. I don't know, Caesar I guess. Bye." He sets his phone down and turns left into a high end outdoor mall named *The Renaissance*, perhaps because the city is under the impression that they've reached a cultural high point. Past the outskirts of the mall is an Italian restaurant called Colombo's. He pulls into the parking lot, turns off the engine and steps out the car. It's bitter cold outside; he's only wearing a flannel and jeans. He pushes through the door into the waiting room with dark leather benches along the walls, in the shape of a **V**. Cool jazz

came down from the speakers in the ceiling, maybe Miles Davis? A hostess, wearing a white collared dress shirt, stood at the podium, smiling. “How many?”

“I’m meeting my family.” He looks to the left into the bar, spotting them in a booth tucked in the corner. “I see them now.” He walks over. Facing him is his younger sister Hannah. Opposite are his mother and his grandmother whom they call Meemaw. Besides the bartender, they’re the only people in the room. The sun casts beams through the window, illuminating the motes of dust over the cream colored tablecloth. Outside a paper birch sways in the wind. He places his hand on his grandmother’s shoulder. She turns to look at him. She’s wearing a beige turtle neck sweater and a mink coat. She places her bony hand on his, her arm adorned with gold bracelets.

“Well hi, Andrew!” Her voice is high and nasally, almost like she had inhaled helium. “How are you?”

“I’m doing good, Meemaw. How about yourself?”

“Good! I’m doing just fine.” She has a smile on her gaunt, sagging face.

“You’re late,” says Hannah. She’s wearing jeans and a navy sweater.

“Oh gee, I am? I’m terribly sorry. Mind scooting over?”

She slides out of the booth. “You can sit on the inside.”

“But I don’t like the inside.”

“Sucks.” She looks at him cryptically, as if to ask *Are you high?*

“Fine.” He slides in and she after. “But what if I have to go to the bathroom?”

“Then I’ll get up.”

He looks at his mother. She’s wearing a greenish gold turtleneck sweater. “High Mom.”

“Hello Andrew,” her voice raspy.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He had to meet a client.”

“That’s too bad.”

The three of them look very much alike. Slender, with thin noses, brown eyes, and straight brown hair, except for Meemaw’s, who has grey. They would have all been the same height if Meemaw hadn’t shrunk considerably. Their uncanny resemblance has always been a matter of discussion among friends and family. In their house on a wall hang three framed pictures, one of his grandmother, his mother, and his sister, in a row, each taken for high school graduation. They look like time hopping triplets.

“I have some exciting news,” says his mother.

“What?”

“Your sister got into grad school!”

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” says Meemaw.

He turns to Hannah. “Congratulations.”

“Wow, so enthusiastic.”

“What school?”

“University of Washington.”

“My goodness,” says Meemaw. “That’s so far away, practically across the country!”

“I know,” says his mother. “I’m going to miss my girl. I wish she wouldn’t leave us.”

“Cry about it,” he says.

“But God has a plan. She even got scholarships.”

“You are just so smart,” says Meemaw. “What are you going to study all the way over there?”

“Astrophysics.”

“Huh?”

“Speak up,” says his mother. “She can’t hear you.”

“Astrophysics,” a little louder.

“Oh. I don’t think they taught that when I was in school.”

They laughed.

“You should host the next reboot of *Cosmos*,” says Andrew. “That’d be the perfect progression. First a white man, then a black man, then a white woman.”

“Oh yeah? Just like the presidency?”

“Yeah we’ll see about that.”

“Anyway,” says his mother. “It’s a great school. They say it’s a Public Ivy.”

“A Public Ivy?” says Andrew. “That’s just a marketing ploy.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“I’m not saying it’s a bad school. It’s a good school, no doubt. I’m just saying that ‘Public-Ivy’ is a buzzword, like ‘super-food’ or something.”

“He loves to argue,” says his mother. “That’s why he should be a lawyer. But an ethical lawyer, not like Phil Blanton.”

“Do you always have to bring him up?” says Hannah.

“He makes me sick.”

“We know,” says Andrew. “You remind us all the time.”

“I just can’t help it.”

He yawns: the music makes him sleepy. “Has the waiter come for drinks?”

“He did,” says his mother. “We got you a glass of water, right here, and a Caesar salad, but you can get a drink if you want. Just ask the waiter. He’s taking forever though.”

“I don’t know, should I?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“You know what, I think I will.”

The waiter walks up with three empty wine glasses and a bottle of chardonnay. He’s bald and has tattoos covering his arms and crawling up his neck. He says his name is Josh. He’s wearing a white collared shirt and black slacks. He struggles uncorking the wine. Once he’s opened it, he pours a little into the mother’s glass. She drinks it and nods. He pours the rest in the glasses.

“Sorry for the wait,” he says. “I’ll have your salads shortly.”

“That’s okay,” the mother says, insincerely. “Don’t forget the extra dressing.”

“I’m not sure I want a salad,” says Meemaw.

“You need to eat something Momma.”

“Alright.”

“I think I’ll have a beer,” says Andrew.

“What would you like?”

“I’ll have a Sierra Nevada.”

“Okay. I’ll have it all out shortly.” Josh walks away.

“Hipster beer,” says Hannah.

“What? It’s not even that obscure.”

“I don’t like this waiter,” says his mother. “He’s so slow.”

“Huh?”

“The waiter’s so slow,” she says in Meemaw’s ear.

“Oh.”

“Give him a break,” says Andrew. “It might be the kitchen’s fault. You wouldn’t know; you’ve never worked in a restaurant.”

“So what.”

“Y’all chill out,” says Hannah. “He’s probably doing the best he can.”

“He’s probably an idiot,” says his mother.

“I mean you could be right,” says Andrew. “We can’t just rule it out.”

“And his tattoos make him look trashy.”

“I don’t know,” says Andrew. “I think they look pretty gangster.”

“I swear, if you ever get a tattoo.”

“I am. I’m getting my face tattooed on my ass.”

“Don’t be sarcastic.”

“I wish I was.”

“I am not in the mood.”

“Sheesh, I’m just messing. I would never get a tattoo.”

“Why not?” asks Hannah.

“I don’t know, I guess I’ve always figured that whatever I think is cool in one moment, I think is lame in the next. So I would never be able to decide what to indelibly stain into my untainted flesh. My body’s like a temple, right?”

“Wow, so deep.”

“Yeah I know. The self’s, like, an illusion, man. And attachment to material things corrupts the soul. Besides, most people’s tattoos are so stupid and cliché.”

“Aren’t you judgmental? Maybe they’re just trying to express themselves.”

“What is one expressing with a Pokémon tattoo?”

“Innocence, maybe?”

“You see innocence, I see regression into a childlike state.”

He’s staring at the shelves behind the bar, at the different bottles of liquor, wondering which is the most expensive when the waiter returns with their salads and his beer. He places them on the table, says “Enjoy,” then starts walking away when his mother says, “Excuse me, you forgot the extra dressing.”

“I’m so sorry ma’am. I’ll grab that now.” He walks away.

“I told you,” his mother says.

“Eh? Maybe your right,” says Andrew.

“You should listen to your momma more often.”

“Sure thing,” he says. He stabs some salad with his fork and eats. It’s a little dry.

It needs more dressing. He takes a sip of his beer.

“How’s the hipster beer?” asks Hannah.

“It’s hoppy, with a hint of shut the fuck up.”

“Dammit Andrew. Do you have to use that language in a public place.”

“Chill out. We’re the only people here.”

“What was that?”

“Don’t worry about it Momma.”

“Talk about judgmental. Just let me drink my beer in peace.”

“Cry about it.”

“Haha, very funny.”

“You eat like a pig.”

“Prove it.”

“When was the last time you ate McDonalds?”

“Yesterday.”

“Point proven.”

“Whatever. You with your kale and quinoa bowls. I don’t have to submit to your fascist health standards. You think you’re too good for McDonalds? That’s pure bourgeoisie elitism.”

“You really do eat like a pig, Andrew,” says his mother.

“Yeah I know.”

“Are you still going to law school, Andrew?” asks Meemaw.

“I don’t know. I’m still thinking about it. In the meantime I’ve just been waiting tables at the drive-in.”

“Do you like it there?”

“You know what, it’s not too bad. It keeps me busy, and the tip money’s good. I got plenty to pay my rent and plus some to have fun. I also like the people I work with a lot. They’re really cool.”

“That’s good.”

The waiter walks back with the dressing. “Here you are,” he says. “Again I apologize.”

“That’s okay,” his mother says, smiling. “Thank you.”

He leaves.

“Idiot.”

They take turns pouring dressing over their salads. He takes another bite. It tastes better now.

“I know I’ve probably asked this a thousand times,” says Meemaw, “But how long has it been since you graduated?”

“Three years,” says his mother. “He’ll be twenty-five next month. I still think he should go to law school.”

“I just don’t think I want to. The market’s bad, and besides, most lawyers are miserable people. Why would I want to put myself through that?”

“Okay, how about this: Either you go to law school, or you stay here, get married and have babies.”

“Those are my only options?”

“Yep.”

“Alright, I guess I choose that one.”

“Which one?”

“The one you just mentioned.”

“Stop fooling around. I mean do you really want to wait tables for the rest of your life? Just go to law school. We need a lawyer in the family.”

“Why? Just in case you get sued again?”

“It makes me sick.” She drinks her chardonnay.

“Can we change the subject?” asks Hannah.

“Sure,” he says. “Sorry.” He forks salad into his mouth. “But you know I wouldn’t work pro bono,” mouth full of lettuce.

“Are you dating anyone?” asks Meemaw.

“I was seeing this girl for a while, but I broke it off.”

“I liked her,” says his mother. “I wish you didn’t end it.”

“Eh, I wasn’t feeling it. Besides, I still get the occasional Tinder hookup.”

“That’s so shallow.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s awesome.”

“What’s that?” asks Meemaw.

“It’s something on the Iphone, Momma.”

“Never mind then, don’t bother explaining it. I wouldn’t have a clue.”

The song changes, a trumpet plays its rapid melody. Sunlight falls onto the tablecloth, giving it a warm glow. While he eats his salad he sees another chickadee lands on a branch off the paper birch. At least he assumes it’s a different one. Perhaps the first one is back from the dead. The chickadee tweets while they look at their menus.

“Momma, you’ve hardly touched your salad.”

“I’m just not very hungry.”

“Is the medicine working?”

“What medicine?” asks Andrew.

Hannah turns to him. “They have her taking Marinol.”

“Marinol?”

“Mississippi just legalized it.”

“That’s hilarious.” He turns toward Meemaw. “Can you feel it, Meemaw?”

“Yes. I just take the pill and I feel so happy.”

They laugh.

“That’s awesome,” says Andrew. “I think we could all use some Marinol.”

“I’m sure you use plenty,” says his mother. “Eat more salad, Momma. That medicine’s expensive.”

“I know a guy.”

“Don’t need to know that.” She turns to her mother. “Do you want another glass of wine?”

“I think I do. By the way, who’s taking me home after this?”

“Andrew said he would.”

Meemaw turns to Andrew. “Oh, I hate for you to have to do that.”

“I don’t mind at all.”

“Don’t let me forget,” says his mother. “I have a bottle of wine in my car that I need to give you before you leave. Hide it in her purse so the nurses don’t see it.”

“I can’t believe how strict they are over there.”

“Well, you can’t really blame them. They’re just looking out for her health.”

“Yeah, but she’s an adult. She should have the right to a bottle of wine.”

“Huh?” says Meemaw.

The bird still sits on the branch outside, turning its head this way and that way mechanically. The waiter walks over to take their orders. He orders spaghetti with meat sauce and another beer. Meemaw used to make good spaghetti. She hasn’t cooked in years. Hannah orders the shrimp cannelloni, his mother the lobster fettuccini with extra sauce, and Meemaw the smoked chicken ravioli. Josh takes their menus and assures them that he will have their order up shortly.

“Can you put this salad in a to-go box, please,” says the mother, pointing to Meemaw’s salad.

“Certainly.” He takes their salad plates and walks away.

“You can eat that salad later, Momma.”

“I doubt I will.”

“Just try to.”

Hannah turns to Andrew. “Why’d you get the spaghetti?”

“I don’t know. Why not?”

“It’s just kind of boring, don’t you think?”

“You’re boring.”

“Thanks, bro.”

“Move over; I got to use the bathroom.”

“Thanks for informing me.” She slides out of the booth and he follows. He walks around the bar and into the dining room, which is dimmer than the bar, the only light being the candles that flicker over the round tabletops. Waiters carry round trays holding either steaming entrees or empty plates. The room has its own gravitation. The roar of blended voices bounces off the walls. It reminds him of the beginning of *Sgt. Peppers*. In the hallway leading to the bathrooms hangs a payphone from the wall. He doubts anyone still uses it.

As the bathroom door shuts closed it snips off the sound from the dining room. He can only hear the jazz. It’s just the drum and bass holding on to a steady, perpetual groove. The bathroom smells like lavender soap. He steps in front of the urinal, unzips his pants and starts taking a piss. As he stands his head starts swimming. When he’s done he washes his hands and splashes cold water onto his face, dabbing it dry with a paper towel. There are four mirrors, in the front and back, and to the left and right. Is this what it’s like to be stretched around the world in each cardinal direction?

The surge of voices returns as he pushes through the door. To his surprise the payphone is ringing. What the hell? He picks it up and places it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Congratulations! You’ve won a free trip to the Bahamas.”

He slams the phone onto the receiver.

The food has arrived by the time he comes back. He feels a certain satisfaction for this having happened. Hannah slides out to let him in. Steam rises from the spaghetti. It smells good. He sticks his fork into the middle and spins it around. He takes a bite. It’s good, but not as good as Meemaw’s. He looks out the window. The bird was gone.

Hannah has been trying to explain the process of planetary accretion to Meemaw.

“Save your breath, honey. This is way over my head.”

“That’s not what the bible says happens,” says his mother.

“There’s a lot the bible doesn’t mention,” says Andrew. “For instance, Mary was artificially inseminated by aliens.”

“My gosh,” says Meemaw. “Is that so?”

“Yes, Meemaw. Listen to the Marinol. Let it guide you towards the truth.”

Meemaw’s eyes widen. “I think I get it.”

“Momma please ignore him. Andrew, are you taking your meds?”

“Fuck the meds. They are a poison.”

“Listen to the doctor and take the damn pills. You’re not the only one. I don’t know why you make such a big deal about it.”

“I don’t trust doctors.”

“I bet you don’t trust the government either,” says Hannah.

“You know who else I don’t trust?”

“Who?”

“This waiter. I think he’s giving me the eye.”

“You should be flattered.”

“It’s weird. It makes me uncomfortable.” He takes a big gulp of beer. “I know I look good. I don’t need this dude to ogle me. I feel objectified.”

“I think this is some sort of narcissistic delusion.”

“Dammit. Don’t psychologize on me. That’s not cool.”

“You do that shit all the time.”

“Cause I’m good at it. Stick to your planetary play sets or whatever nerd shit you do.”

“You’re just mad cause you know I’m right.”

“What difference does it make? It’s like all relative, man. And technically, you’re both alive and dead right now, so it sucks to be you.”

“But you’re observing me alive right now.”

“Okay, so if I just close my eyes, and with all my strength imagine you dead...”

“Stop it!”

“What? Are you afraid it will work?”

“Unconscious murder wish!”

“Damn, you’re right. My Bad.” He eats some spaghetti and takes a sip of his beer. He feels better having food in his stomach.

“Well Hannah,” says Meemaw. “You’ll have to visit often.”

“She’s right,” says his mother. “We’re really going to miss you.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” says Andrew, taking a swig of beer. “We are all going to be just destitute without your graceful presence.”

“Do you always have to be such an ass?” asks his mother.

“Don’t worry Mom,” says Hannah. “You still have the babies.”

“You and your dogs.”

“They don’t talk back to me.” She looks at Meemaw. “Momma, you haven’t even touched your food.”

“I’m just not hungry.”

“Please take at least one bite.

Meemaw picks up her fork and knife. Her hands tremble as she cuts off a corner of ravioli and lifts it to her mouth. She chews slowly and swallows.

“Is it good?”

Meemaw nods her head slowly.

“Eat as much as you can.”

Andrew finishes off his spaghetti and takes a long swig of beer. The horns take turns soliloquizing to each other. He feels much better being full. “If she’s not hungry don’t make her eat. She can take it home and eat it later.”

His mother glares at him. She mouths *she needs to eat*. “Take another bite, Momma,” she says.

“In a minute.”

“I want to watch you eat it.”

“Please Lucille. Just give me a moment.”

“Just one bite.”

“For Christ’s sake,” says Andrew. “Give her a break.”

His mother’s face furiously flushing, “Don’t take the Lord’s name in vain!”

“My bad.”

“And don’t be sarcastic with me!”

“Will y’all please just calm the f down,” says Hannah. “The bartender probably thinks we’re insane.”

“This family is insane,” says Andrew.

“Well can we at least act like sane for one meal? I swear sometimes I think I’m the only one in this family who has a fucking grip.”

Andrew finishes off his beer. “So happy for you sis. Thanks for keeping a lid on our dysfunctional family. What would we do without you, our shining star?” He belches.

“Dammit Andrew!” says his mother. “You know I don’t do burps.”

“That’s strange. I happen to love burping.” He burps again.

“I can’t believe you would be this rude in a nice restaurant!”

“I think I need to go to the ladies’ room,” says Meemaw.

“I’ll walk you there,” says Hannah, embarrassed. She slides out of the booth and stands next to Meemaw with her elbow extended. Meemaw wraps her arms around Hannah’s elbow and together, with their combined strength. Meemaw gets out of the booth and steadies her feet on the floor.

“You okay, Meemaw?” asks Hannah.

Meemaw smiles. "I'm doing just fine." Arm in arm, they walk into the dining room.

Andrew and his mother glare at each other. She sips her wine. The waiter walks up and asks, "Can I interest y'all in a dessert?"

His mother goes blank.

Andrew stares Josh in the eyes. "We'll pass," he says. "In fact, why don't you make yourself useful and bring us the check."

"Uh... Yes sir. I'll be right back." He walks away.

"He really is slow, isn't he?"

She says nothing for a while, takes a sip of her wine. "You don't have the right to tell me how to treat my mother. If I say she needs to eat, she needs to eat. I'm trying to see that she makes it to Christmas because this could be her last. One bad fall and she's gone."

"You've said that the past five years. Think about it. Five years worrying, all that time, wasted. And you know it's coming regardless. It could be tomorrow, it could be five more years. There's no point in guessing when it will happen only to have her exceed each estimation. Until, of course, the day it actually happens. You're trapping yourself in a constant cycle of worry which is driving you crazy. Which is driving me fucking crazy."

She drinks the rest of her wine. “You know, maybe you shouldn’t be lawyer. You’re vicious; you just have to pick on somebody, and why’s it always have to be me? Who’s to say you wouldn’t be as vicious as Phil Blanton.”

“Please. You can’t compare me to him. That’s not fair. And you know what? It’s not my fault you gave him the perfect opportunity to sue. You’ve put this whole family in jeopardy.”

“Meredith is my best friend! Do you have any feeling in that cold heart of yours? She was raped by that asshole ex-husband of hers! She said no, he forced her anyway. That’s rape. And then they file for divorce. He tells the court she’s crazy and on meds and claims custody of the children and it’s just not fair the way they treated her! I mean lots of people take meds! You take meds!”

“I haven’t taken any medication for three months, and I’m doing just fine, don’t you think?”

“Is that why you’ve been such an asshole? I bet you don’t even believe Meredith’s story.”

“See, that’s where you’re wrong. I do believe her. And generally I believe he’s as much of an asshole as you say he is. And that’s where I think you fucked up. You were so obsessed for justice that you forgot how vicious he is. I mean this is the type of man who would stop at nothing to gain advantage for himself. Did you think he would just ignore what you spread about him? He has plans to run for office, he wasn’t going to let this get out of hand. He’s going to set the record straight, his record, that is. Again I don’t deny her story; I believe her, I really do, but what you did was you made serious

accusations about him. Criminal accusations. You gave him no choice but to bounce back, and let me tell you what I think's going to happen: you're going to lose. I wish it wasn't like that but you won't be able to prove shit in court. That's just the way it is. You know what he did to her, what made you think he wouldn't do the same to you? And there's nothing any of us can do. I don't know why you figured justice would prevail. This isn't fucking HLN; it's more like a Lifetime movie.”

“Do you think this is funny? Do you even care about this family at all?”

“Sure I do. In fact, I'll tell you what; I'll give you an ultimatum. Either I enter into law school, say Harvard or maybe Yale, yes Yale. They say it's numero uno. So I enter Yale, speed through every class in like one month, passing with flying colors and they're all like holy shit this man's a prodigy. I speak at the commencement address. They award me the highest honors, put me in the revered Hall of Fame, my legacy sealed for all time. Then, I fly into the courtroom to face off against the Evil Phil Blanton. With the almighty power of Truth, Justice, and the Word I force a confession from his cursed lips, winning the lawsuit and saving the day.

“Or, and I want you to really listen to this one, because I think it's good. I feel much more prepared and comfortable with this one. Pretty please pick option B. Being, as you are, obsessed with revenge against Phil Blanton, I assume you know where he lives. I bet you even drive by sometimes. Anyway, you tell me his address and I'll tell you what I'm going to do. I'm going to drive by his house and make sure nobody's home. I'll go sometime after lunch, while the kids are still in school and he's at work. I'm guessing he lives in Jackson, so he probably sets his alarm at night. The afternoon's my

best opportunity. I'll park my truck somewhere close by but not too close so to be inconspicuous. Between my chair and the console is an old rusty hammer. I keep it there in case I ever get robbed. I'll step out of the car and slyly place the hammer into my pants, just under my shirt. I'll walk around to his backyard to see a doggy-door in his back door. I'll hop the fence. A dog will creep out of his doghouse, but he's old, doesn't see too well, barely recognizes that I'm there. I'll squeeze through the doggy-door.

“Once I'm inside, I'll have to decide where to hide. I'll come out around midnight, so I'll need to consider the most unlikely place they would enter. I'll think, of course, the attic. I'll find it through the closet in the master bedroom upstairs, enter and wait. I'll sit Indian style, back straight, mentally preparing myself for hours. The heater's on; the attic's sweltering. Sweat will roll down my forehead, soaking the collar of my shirt. I'll sit there for ten hours straight. By midnight I'll be ready, I'll be purified. I'll take off my shoes, tie the laces together and hang them around my neck. I don't want anyone to hear me. As slowly as I can I'll twist the doorknob and step into his closet. I'll peak through the crack in the doors, see him sound asleep on the right side of his bed, facing up. gingerly step to the side of his bed. At this moment I'll have to decide: blunt end or pointy? And where? Pointy end right through the frontal lobe. That'll do the trick. Then, very quietly, I'll walk out the front door, and toss the hammer somewhere safe where no one will find it. Down the sewer? No, they might check there. Perhaps at the bottom of a lake. I'll work out the details later. I'll have plenty of time to think it through while I'm waiting in the attic. I think this is the surest way to justice. It's much more pragmatic than option A.”

His mother just stares at him for a moment, looking a little concerned. Eventually she says, “Do you want people to think you’re fucked up, or do you just not care anymore?”

“I don’t know, maybe I don’t. Everybody’s always saying you should care all about this and that. You should care about the trees, the breeze, the seas; the birds, the turds, the fucking words you use. And I think, what good does it do? Does it really make a difference? Is it even worth the effort?”

“You have no faith.”

“Not in this world.”

“You need a woman in your life.”

“Sometimes I can barely stand the women already in my life.”

“You can’t blame me for all your problems.”

“I’m not.”

“So what then? Do you want to wait tables for the rest of your life? Is that what you want? To be a loser?”

“We’re all losers. The Phil Blantons of the world won a long time ago.”

“Maybe you’re right. Either way, I don’t really want to talk about it anymore. In fact, why don’t you go wait in your truck? I think Meemaw’s ready to leave.”

“Whatever.” He slides out of the booth and stands up.

“Get in a better mood. Get back on the pills.”

He grins wide, says “Sure thing!” and walks away.

As he’s leaving the hostess smiles and says, “Have a nice day!”

“Thanks! You too.”

He exits the restaurant and steps into his truck, closing the door behind him. He pulls from the vaporizer. “Goddammit Andrew. Why’d you have to say all that?” He looks down at the pile of trash. “Shit,” he says, tossing trash into the backseat.

Silence, healing.

-Heraclitus, *Fragments*

### The Angel Taxi

He stands smoking a cigarette, staring through the glass of an art gallery at a painting of a wizard. A stereotypical wizard, with a blue hat and a matching robe, painted vibrantly, almost cartoonish. He has a long grey beard that hangs below his belt. Swirls of pink and yellow light above and around him. It's late, the bars just closed. The outside air is hot and sticky. His shirt clings to his skin. Wisps of fog surround the rooftops. It looks like it might rain, yet somehow he feels that it won't, that the clouds will refrain. He turns toward the courthouse and starts walking, his left hand tucked into his pants pocket, clutching the lining.

A crowd of people beside the Blind Pig holler at a drunk girl wearing high heels. She flicks them off with both fists then turns around and moons them. The crowd cheers, and the girl stumbles and falls face-down on the sidewalk, some gentleman from the crowd rushing to help her up. A cop on horseback clops around the corner and starts asking questions. There's always something going on. He had had a few beers but he doesn't feel drunk. In fact, he feels more alert than usual, a peculiar tension in his solar plexus, like having a string in his stomach pulled taut, picking up the slightest motions around him. A streetlamp buzzes overhead. Something inside his mind wonders if it's because of him. The thought makes him sick. Who is he? He assumes no set answer. Still like a lamppost, his mind escapes him. At different junctures, different people. He tries to blend in, but he can never be sure that his insides are safe. Do his thoughts boil with

the contents of his stomach? Is a four pronged personality poking through his shirt? He can't be sure of what feeds into his mind.

She was wearing red lipstick to match her dress. What was she saying?

"Where've you been? I haven't seen you in a while." She has pale green eyes.

"I don't know. Around I guess." He was leaning his arm against the rail. Below the balcony flashed police lights. A cop was giving a man a field sobriety test. He didn't stand a chance.

"Hmm... That's not a sketchy answer or anything. Do you still go to the house?"

"No, I dropped."

"What? Why?"

"I guess I just lost interest."

"Just lost interest? What's up with you? You're acting all cagey."

"What do you mean?"

"See that's exactly what I'm talking about. Be upfront with me. Why did you really drop?"

"Well, like I said, I just lost interest. And I guess I started thinking the whole thing was kind of fucked up."

"Fucked up how?"

"Did you ever take Psych 201?"

“Yeah.”

“Do you remember the Stanford prison experiment?”

“Oh please. You can’t be serious.”

“In a way, I am.”

“There are a lot of good guys in that house.”

“There are some really bad ones too. And sometimes I ask myself where I fall on the line.”

“You’re a good guy. I can tell.”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I think I’m the fucking devil.”

“You think too much.”

“You’re probably right.”

He sees a cab on North Lamar and waves at it. It’s a champagne colored minivan, the company Angel Taxi. The driver rolls down the passenger window. He’s bald with deep creases set in his forehead, the expression of a granite statue. “Need a ride?”

“Yeah, mind if I sit shotgun?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Cool.” He flicks his cigarette onto the sidewalk, opens the door and slides in the seat. A guy wearing a camel hair jacket over a navy collared shirt sits behind him, next to a blonde woman wearing a blue sun dress. The cab driver pulls around the courthouse onto South Lamar. “Where am I taking you?”

“Forty-two Aspen Loop.”

“Alright, I’m gonna drop these people off first, then I’ll take you there.”

“Sounds good.”

“I still can’t believe we have to pay ten extra dollars,” says the blonde. You can smell the booze on her breath.

“Y’all are outside city limits.”

“By like two miles. Give us a break.”

“Can’t, company policy.” He pulls into the chevron with the chicken on a stick. “I gotta get some gas.” He parks next to the pump and steps outside to go pay at the register.

“It’s fucking bullshit. These companies have a fucking monopoly on this town and set all these stupid rules.”

“Look, I got it covered.” said the guy. “You don’t have to worry.”

“Still, he could cut us some slack if he wanted to. Ugghh...whatever. He’s a fucking nigger.”

“Will you just relax?”

“Ugghh!” She crosses her arms. The cab driver walks out the station and to the car, unscrews the gas cap and puts in the pump. The passenger sits quietly in shotgun listening to the gas surge into the tank. He has nothing to say. He never does during a cab ride; he prefers to listen. Cab conversations are always interesting. Under the cover of darkness and drink people tend to transform into a baser self. The last time he rode in a cab there was this marine sitting up front with a pudgy female driver wearing a shirt that was a little too small, so that her sides bulged out of it. She talked of how she wanted to join the Army, how she had scored in the 98<sup>th</sup> percentile on the ASVAB, but when they asked why she wanted to join, she said, “I just want to kill people.” Hmm, she’s surely on some list, he thinks. You’re not supposed to want to do that until after basic. There’s an order of operations for these things. The marine, however, was charmed. He placed his hand on hers, which clutched the gearshift. “Can I be honest with you,” he said. “I think I like you.” It was almost endearing.

They pull out of the gas station onto University and turn at S 9<sup>th</sup> Street. “I wish I had bigger boobs,” says the girl, unprompted. The passenger sneaks a glance. They look alright to him. The driver has to stop and wait for the people walking across the streets. Some of the pedestrians stumble as they walked, others shout at each other. Presently, they drive on. They are turning onto Jackson when two guys, a fat, dumpy looking one and slender one with a shrewd face and dark hair, both wearing black Vanderbilt game-day shirts and black, lizard-skin cowboy boots, walk into the street, holding up their hands. “I think these people need a ride,” says the girl. The driver stops the car and rolls down the window. “I can take y’all home after these folks, if y’all need a ride.”

“Sounds good,” says the slender one, sliding open the door and stepping inside to the backseat, the fat one after him.

“Hi! I’m Mary Claire, this is Braxton.”

“I’m Jeff,” says the fat one.

“I’m Robby,” says the other. “Nice to meet y’all.” They all shake hands. The passenger watches them from the corner of his eye, but in the darkness can’t quite make them out. He doesn’t want to exchange information. They turn onto College Hill.

“Where’re y’all from?” asks Robby.

“Jackson,” says Braxton. “What about y’all?”

“From Miami,” says Jeff. “But we go to Vandy.”

“Hell of a game,” says Braxton.

“Yeah, well half of our line was injured,” says Robby. “If we didn’t have those turnovers we could have won. Mistakes were made.”

“Too much football talk,” says Mary Claire.

“What else would we talk about? It was a great game. You were there, you saw it.”

“I’ve had enough of football for today. Let’s talk about something else. So what are y’all studying?”

“Risk management,” says Jeff.

“I’m double majoring,” said Robby, “psychology and economics.”

“Cool!” said Mary Claire. “You must be really smart. What do you want to do with that?”

“Business Management. Learning the markets and the mind.”

“Hey man,” says Braxton. “You learn how to get inside peoples’ heads and you can get them to do whatever you want.”

“It’s all it takes.”

*Don’t let him inside your head.* Oh no, here comes the noise again, entering through the back of his mind, faint at first but growing in intensity. The clamor of a bar at maximum capacity, a myriad maze of voices talking over voices. Individual voices fade in and out of perception as if governed by the Doppler Effect. He can’t silence them; they have a will of their own. The string in his stomach tightens. *He’s staring at the back of your head. Quick! Hide! He’s watching you.* The passenger glances behind. In his periphery the faces meld with the darkness; their distinctiveness dissolves. *Shhh! They can hear us.*

*They can’t hear shit.*

*Robby’s has ESP, telepathy. Don’t ask me how I know this, I just know. I can tell.*

*I’m scared. He’s watching us.*

*He’s a CIA operative with a chip in his brain. He’s running mind control experiments on unsuspecting students. He’s the one drugging the water. I just know.*

*Crazy fucking loon. Ain't nobody drugging the water. Shit, he's the one getting inside their heads, listening in to their conversation like a fucking creep.*

*Shhh!*

They turn into a neighborhood with cookie cutter houses, all identical except for the colors, and pull into one of the driveways. Over the doorway hangs a Confederate battle flag. “Alright, that’ll be thirty dollars.”

“Thirty dollars!” says Mary Claire. “That’s fucking horseshit!”

*This bitch complains a lot.*

*Yeah but I love her shoes.*

“How many times do I have to tell you I got it covered,” says Braxton.

*Henpecked boyfriend*

“I explained this when I picked y’all up,” says the driver. “Ten per person, plus ten extra because y’all outside city limits. That’s the rules, sorry.”

“It’s fucking exploitation, that’s what it is,” says Mary Claire.

With a sullen look, Braxton pulls out his wallet and hands the driver a twenty and a ten. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“It was so nice meeting y’all!” says Mary Claire. “I hope y’all enjoy Oxford. Have a good night!”

“The pleasure was ours,” says Robby. “Hope to see y’all again.”

“Likewise,” says Mary Claire, flashing a big smile. Braxton, distraught, slides open the door and they step outside and walk toward the house, Mary Claire holding on to Braxton’s arm, stumbling. They turn around to wave as the car drives away.

*Oh no, now we’re cornered.*

“Nice people,” says Robby. “So, where do you live?”

*Don’t invite him inside. He can’t enter if you don’t invite him inside.*

*You better lock your door ‘cause I think this fag wants to fuck you.*

“You’re about to find out,” says the passenger.

*Good job genius. Now they think you’re a fucking weirdo.*

“Alright then,” says Robby, slightly bemused. “Say, what’s the deal with the bars closing so early around here?”

“That’s just the way we do it in Oxford,” says the driver. “Plus folks got church in the morning.”

“Yeah, well in Miami the clubs stay open till five AM.”

*Fuck Miami. Miami’s for fags.*

“This ain’t Miami,” says the passenger.

“We maintain a certain order around here,” says the driver.

“Yeah, whatever,” says Robby. “Shit is weak compared to Miami. I bet you’ve never been to Miami.”

*He’s baiting you. This is all part of a test. He’s trying to elicit a response from you but don’t let him. Just keep quiet.*

“Sure haven’t,” says the passenger, crossing his arms.

“Aren’t you the life of the party?”

*Tell him to mind his own fucking business.*

“Just tired, that’s all.”

“Tired? It’s not even one o’clock.”

*That’s past my bedtime.*

“You’re tired,” asks Robby, “Wow. In Miami we...”

“Look man I don’t give a fuck what y’all do in Miami.”

*You shouldn’t have said that. That’s exactly the kind of response he wanted.*

*Yeah you should be careful ‘cause this dude could beat the living shit outta you.*

*Shit shit shit. Now they think you’re fucking crazy.*

“What the fucks your problem?” asks Robby, bulking up. “You know what? Fuck this town and all you dumb hicks in it. Hospitality my ass. You think you’re something? You’re not worth shit.”

“Hey!” yells the driver. “That’s enough! They’ll be no fighting in my cab.”

*No fuck this guy! I know you got a pocketknife. Stick it in his fucking gut. That’ll show him. You can’t let this asshole talk shit like that. Teach him a fucking lesson.*

*He’s a government agent! They’ll lock him up for life!*

*He ain’t shit. Fuck him.*

They stay quiet for the length of College Hill, and then turn onto Anchorage, which is abysmally black from the lack of streetlights. “I don’t like this,” says Jeff, a slight tremor in his voice. “Can we turn on the radio or roll down the window or something?” The driver pushes the knob on the radio. It plays “Soak Up the Sun” by Sheryl Crow.

“That better?” asks the driver.

“I guess,” says Jeff.

*This song sucks.*

*I told you he can hear us. Shhh, be quiet!*

Something skitters across the street. “Was that an armadillo?” asks the passenger.

“Sure was,” says the driver.

*Oh man I wish I had my gun.*

They drive on, the headlights carving cones out of the darkness. He's almost home but the string in his stomach tightens more, the noise in his head grows louder. He can't concentrate.

"How much longer is this going to take?" says Jeff.

*This dude's getting on my last fucking nerves shhh he can hear us don't invite him inside he can't enter if you don't invite him inside drugging the water quick hide they think you're fucking crazy why can't you just act cool they can hear us shhh he's working for the government on mind control experiments you crazy fucking loon shhh! they're listening! What's he so freaked out for? Stab him in the neck and rip out his throat I'm tired of hearing him whine just do it!*

The string snaps. The passenger jerks around and stares into the darkness of the cab. "Shut the fuck up! Shut the fuck up!"

Robby and Jeff stare, mouths agape. The cab driver turns toward him. "Hey! Calm down man. Please just calm down."

The words enter his mind with a convening clarity. He takes a deep breath. The noise dies down. He senses Robby and Jeff bulking up in the back. They're bigger than him. He couldn't take one of them, let alone two. Calm down, calm down. He sits perfectly still, takes another deep breath. They turn into his neighborhood. "It's this salmon colored one on the right." The driver pulls over. His expression stays the same.

"That'll be ten dollars."

In the back Robby and Jeff repeatedly jerk the door handles. “Why won’t this door open?”

The passenger takes out his wallet and hands the driver a ten and two ones. “Appreciate the ride.” He steps out of the car, walks to his door, takes his keys out of his pocket and inserts it into the lock. He can feel them leering at him. Inside his dog barks. He opens the door and shuts it behind him, locking it. His dog continues to growl. “It’s just me,” he says. “It’s alright.” The dog jumps onto the couch to peer out the blinds. Its ears are pulled back as it growls. It’s a mutt, but it looks much like a fawn. He sits down on the couch and pulls the dog towards him. “It’s okay, stop growling.” He strokes its belly and takes a deep breath. “I’m not like that,” he says. “I’m not like that.”

## Hypnagogia

I was sitting in English class thinking of escape routes in the case of a terrorist attack. This felt more urgent than the discussion of our summer reading. It seems like every week another incident pops up on the news. How can I be so sure that it won't happen here? The truth, of course, is I can't. You got to prepare for all possibilities. In terms of probability, there's got to be at least one motherfucker in this school that has made a list of all the people he wants to kill, like that greasy kid with chains and zippers on his pants that sits in the back of class drawing pictures of samurai or ninjas or some other shit. He seems like the kind of guy that pulls wings off flies for fun. You know what, that's not fair, I've done that too. But I felt kind of bad afterwards

Where were we? My mind tends to wander. Right, English class. It was the first block of the first day of school, a Wednesday, and my head was still groggy. Outside was dark and overcast. It looked like rain was coming. Mrs. Wilcheck and the class discussed *Brave New World*. I didn't read it, but I read the SparkNotes. I wasn't going to read a book assigned to me. That takes out all the fun. And this was assigned over my summer break, no less. Although, this book did seem pretty interesting. Kevin, my friend sitting to my right, mentioned something about "orgy porgy gives release." I'm not sure what that means, but I must admit; I'm intrigued. Suddenly, the thought came to me: What if a terrorist in a black ski mask and a Kevlar vest and wielding an AK-47 blasted down the door and barged in. I happen to sit closest to the door, so I'd have to act, if for no other reason than he'd probably shoot me first. What would I do? I know no form of martial arts. I could try to jab a pencil in his neck or eye, but the lead would probably break, or else I'd miss. So I decided I'd knee him right in the nuts. Do terrorists wear athletic cups?

I hope not. Under normal circumstances, I would never hit somebody in the nuts, on principle. But this was the exception. Charlie Wyman's theorem: You may kick someone in the balls if and only if (*If Fuh Fuh*) that person is a terrorist.

That's the thing about balls: they're weak. I learned all about the reproductive system last year in Human A&P. We even watched a live birth. The woman had this big black bush, and all this green goo squeezed out with the baby. I could never think of Nickelodeon slime the same way again. I didn't know babies popped that fast. Of course, I wouldn't know; I was born by C-section. That's why I don't get why some men say women are the weaker sex. Are you crazy? That pregnancy shit takes balls; excuse me, ovaries. Ovaries come fully loaded, straight from birth. Balls start out all shriveled up like two little peas in a pod.

Ovaries: I'm gonna make you bleed, and when I'm through with you, I'm gonna make you think it's hot all the time.

Balls: I'm really sensitive, so please be careful with me. Push me higher on the swing, Mommy. *Weeeeeee!*

Charlie's paradox: Balls are basically big pussies.

Anyway, I would knee the terrorist in the balls, wrestle his gun away from him, and shoot him in the face, spraying blood and brains on the white walls. I wouldn't normally be the hero, but like I said, I have no choice here. How could I muster the courage? I opened my heart and asked for strength from a higher power, when I had a vision... I found myself in the Oval Office. Behind the desk stood George W. Bush,

wearing a ten gallon hat, a vest and riding chaps, with a six shooter strapped to his side. His right hand laid flat on a bible.

“Son,” he said. “You have a duty to kick that terrorist right in the balls. Do it for your country. Do it for America.”

I saluted him. “Sir, yes sir!”

“Charlie,” he said. “I love you.”

“Thank you, Mr. President.”

“Remember the Alamo.”

I would then have to decide which way to escape: to the left down the stairs towards the foyer and out the main entrance? or to the right down the hall, down the stairs, and out back through the library. The latter seemed like the better option: they would probably be guarding the main entrance, but might overlook the library. Having solved this conundrum, a sense of relief fell over me.

That’s when it started. Just to the left of the center of my field of vision, a small orange dot, the size of a pea, appeared. This is not to say that it appeared out in front of me. It appeared in my perception, and it followed with the motion of my eyes. Its edges were jagged and morphing in a swimming motion. The colors bled out through the center. It was like watching a soap bubble through light. Dizziness wrapped around me, and I felt a tension build in the middle of my forehead that pulsed through my fillings. Slowly, the dot grew bigger, wrapping around the entire left side of my vision. Zigzags bounced

around the edges. My ears were ringing. Outside the window the wind thrashed around a plastic grocery bag. The buzz of the florescent lights seemed to intensify. I felt terribly thirsty and wanted to puke. And then the colors faded away.

That's when the headache began. It was the worst pounding headache I'd ever experienced, and I felt sure I was about to puke. I couldn't have focused on class if I wanted to. It hurt to keep my eyes open. It didn't take long to determine that I was unfit for school. But how could I leave? I couldn't call home sick on the first day of school; no one would believe me. Then it occurred to me that I had just planned a route. I raised my hand and asked to go to the restroom and Mrs. Wilcheck handed me the pass. I stepped outside and closed the door behind me. I could barely stand straight; my head was swimming. I looked left, right and then left again, checking for assistant principals roaming the halls with their walkie-talkies. All was clear. I proceeded down the right and stepped down the stairs. My only exit was through the library, but I was certain the librarian would be sitting at the counter. I didn't have a note, only the bathroom pass, which was useless, so I threw it away. Just keep it cool, I told myself, and she won't suspect a thing. I pushed through the door.

Mrs. Finnegan, the librarian, stared at me from behind the counter to the left. She had on a bright yellow blouse that, in my present state, gave off a glare. "Hello Mr. Wyman," she said. How did she know my name? I never go to the fucking library. "Do you have a note?"

I walked towards the counter. She continued to stare me down. She had glasses that hung to the cliff of her nose. Is that some kind of universal librarian code of conduct? I placed my hands on the counter. “No,” I said.

She crossed her fingers together. “Why not?”

“My teacher...she uh...forgot, I guess. I didn’t even notice. Careless mistake.”

“Who’s your teacher?”

“Mrs. Wilcheck.”

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders. I find it hard to believe.”

“Well, you know, she’s good and all, but far from perfect. Wait. I mean. Everybody makes mistakes, right?”

She let a ruthlessly awkward moment of silence pass. “I’ll tell you what. You wait right here, and I’ll go right into my office and give her a call. Don’t worry; we’ll clear this right up.” She stood up and walked into her office, leaving the door open. I heard her take the phone off the receiver and punch the buttons. She leaned back and peered at me from the threshold. I flashed an awkward smile. As soon as she left the doorway I heard her say, “Hello. Mrs. Wilcheck?”

I booked it. As I walk walking through the door, I thought I heard my name called. I glanced back. There was a group of people, probably freshman (at least no one I knew) sitting at a table. They all stared at me looking puzzled. My mind must have been fucking with me. I pushed through the door. Although it looked like it was going to rain, the sun happened to be right between the clouds, beaming at me with all its brilliance.

The intensity dazed me. I shut my eyes, but it had burned an impression that subsided for several seconds. I felt something crawl up my throat and then bolted over, heaving. It took several dry heaves before anything came up. The vomit came out my nose and dribbled down my mouth. Spattered against the pavement, it looked like a spicy brown mustard milkshake. I turned around to check if anyone had come after me. Up above the door was a white camera, pointing right at me. Shit. I hobbled down the parking lot, leaning forward, arms dangling, gasping for air. I came to my car, a black 2001 Jeep Cherokee, unlocked the door, and slung myself in the seat. I checked my face in the rear view mirror. Bile hung from my nostrils and the corners of my mouth, and red dots circled around my eyes. I had popped blood vessels from straining too hard. I wiped my face on my shirt and started the engine.

Luckily my neighborhood was right next to my high school. I took a right onto the parkway. I drove slowly, desperately trying not to stir my stomach. I blasted the AC. The radio played nothing; I couldn't tolerate sound. I turned right at the sign that said **Welcome to Citrus Lake**. I stopped at the gate. It seemed to pulse, which nauseated me. I rolled down the window to punch in the code: 5555. The outside wind pumped into my car, rustling loose receipts, stray hairs and dust around my car. Perhaps it was the change in air pressure that caused my affliction. I rolled up my window as fast as I could while the gate began its sluggish motion. I remembered that the week they installed the gates, my friend, with his brand new car, barreled through it, leaving a massive dent. He had dropped his phone, and while bending over to pick it up, failed to notice the gate's defiance. Luckily, they never caught him.

Unfortunately, my house is at the very end of the neighborhood, past the lake. I rolled past all the stop signs, and in my stupor, failed to observe the speed bump, launching my skull into the ceiling. I swerved into the median and plowed into one of the new maple saplings they had recently planted. I think I lost consciousness for about five seconds. I really hate those fucking speed bumps. They're another one of the Neighborhood's latest projects. These are no ordinary, yellow speed bumps. These are obnoxious mounds built of red brick to match the fucking houses. They're so bad, my mother, who drives a Nissan Maxima, bottoms out every time she goes over them. Speed bumps really piss me off.

See, I have this theory: speed bumps have both an *explicit function* and an *implicit function*. The explicit function is to slow down the dutiful, observant driver, drawing his attention to his speed and surroundings in order to protect the innocent children whom we all love so dearly. The implicit function is to trick the absent minded, reckless driver like me (You know, I never understood the phrase *reckless driver*. It would seem to me that that would be a good thing) into thinking he just ran over one of those children. You're just driving along, not a care in the world, when suddenly you find the top of your head unfortunately close to the roof of your car. Before your mind has time to catch up and assess the situation, in that split second of despair before reason kicks in, you're thinking: Oh my God, I just killed someone, my life is over; I gotta skip town, scrounge my savings, swap identities. I'll never see my family and friends again. An eternity of fear is crammed into that little moment and you solemnly swear to God that you will never disregard the road again until you realize: Oh, it was just a speed bump.

When I pulled into the driveway the garage door was down. Hopefully no one was home. I sat in my car with the engine running, mulling it over. I must have dozed off for a second when I heard the check gauges light beep on. Something smelled like sulfur. Steam was pouring out of the hood when I heard a loud *pop!* and a thick fog formed over my car. Shit, I think my pipes busted. I don't know a damn thing about cars, so I figured I'd just ask my dad about it later and forget about it for now. I turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. I punched in the code: 7777. Why were all these codes so repetitive? The garage door slowly lifted in a loud clamor that reverberated through my head. Thankfully, no one was home. I closed the garage door behind me. Behind the back door the dogs barked and clawed. I pushed them away as I opened the door. They immediately took to jumping at my legs. "Get down," I said, shoving them with my knee. Luckily, they weren't big dogs. There was Zoe, a black Yorkshire terrier-poodle mix, or *Yorkie-Poo*; and Daisy, a white golden retriever-poodle mix, or, as my mom calls it, a miniature teddy bear golden doodle; which, in my opinion, is way too many fucking words. I mean which is it? A bear? A poodle named Teddy? I don't know; it's stupid. And is the word "miniature" necessary? Doesn't teddy bear imply that already? I mean Jesus Christ, people. From now all dog breeds have a two word maximum, end of session.

The TV was playing in the kitchen. I think we have at least nine TV's in our house. Probably too many. My mom leaves the TV on for the pets when she leaves. She thinks it comforts them or something moronic like that. I keep telling her, they don't give a shit about the TV; but whatever. I'm not paying the bill; what do I care? Actually, come to think of it, my friend Mark has a pit bull named Sage who loves TV and will watch it

with the most intense concentration, sometimes even jumping up on the counter to get closer. It's awesome. I wish my dogs did that.

My cat was sitting in a box atop the marble island, next to the sink. His name's Mr. Krinkle. He's an orange tabby with white splotches. He's old; his skin sags, exposing his brittle bones. He's on a special diet for his kidneys, and every morning my dad crams a couple pills down his mouth. He's got the bite marks to show for it. Lately, Mr. Krinkle has taken to wailing, usually in the early morning. I can hear it from my room upstairs, especially if the door's open. I give him six months, tops. I stroked him a couple times, then turned on the sink just slightly so it leaked out in a clear stream. Mr. Krinkle likes to drink from the sink. This reminded me how terribly thirsty I was. I grabbed a cup from the cabinet and filled it with ice and water. I had just taken a sip when I heard something. For the second time, I swear I heard my name being called. I thought, surely my head was just messing with me again. I mean, it's a pretty common phenomenon for people to hear their name being called when it's not. A sort of glitch hardwired into our brains. Yet this time I was certain I heard it. It was coming from the TV.

The channel was tuned to CBS. They were reviewing the results of a recent *Jeopardy!* tournament. And the winner was a guy named Charlie Wyman. He didn't look a damn thing like me, but we had the same name, spelled the same too. That's interesting, I thought. Staring at the TV, however, reminded how bad my head was hurting, and I felt my stomach squeeze. I opened the drawer to find some Advil, swallowed two pills, then drank down the rest of my water and turned off the TV. I went upstairs into my room, turned on the white noise machine, stripped off my clothes, turned off the lights and climbed into bed. I felt better being in the cool, dark room, though I was still woozy. It

was like when you go to the beach for a day, and then later when you lie down to go to sleep that night, you still feel like you're floating. Eventually, I sank into a dreamless sleep.

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I woke up deep in a thought. It was about hearing my name on the TV, but also all the events leading up to that moment. It all struck me as too coincidental. Now I know there are probably a million other jerk offs named Charlie Wyman saying, "Look honey! I'm on TV!" but that's not what's bothering me. It was the timing. I had walked in at just the right moment to hear it. If I came in just a minute earlier, or a minute later, I probably would have missed it. I definitely would have missed it if I never left school. I would have never left school that day if I didn't have that headache. And the TV just happened to be on that particular channel. I don't even watch *Jeopardy!* It wasn't the name itself that bothered me; it was the sum of all the coincidences. That's the thought I had: that somehow these events were all connected. It started vague, like looking at minnows through a murky creek, slipping in and out of perception. But eventually I was able to grasp ahold of it. It was also evident that the thought had started before I awoke, essentially before I was aware I was even thinking. Which also bothers me: Who's doing the thinking here? I guess I assumed that during sleep my thoughts were a sort of blank slate, but not anymore. Now, I'm not normally superstitious, but since these events had left this impression on me, I had to consider: If this is a sign or whatever, then what does it mean? Two things of a contradictory nature immediately popped out at me. On the one hand, it seems, I'm a winner, yay! On the other, I'm in jeopardy. Fuck. I scared myself

looking too deeply at it. I figured this whole sequence started with another random, unprompted thought: that of a terrorist attack. That certainly fit in with this jeopardy theme. I could no longer find humor in such a situation. I thought, could this signify some future attack?

It was at this moment that I realized I had seriously overthought the whole thing. I mean terrorists, really? I'm sure everyone, on some level, fears being obliterated without a moment's notice. This is the post-Nuclear, post 9/11 era. It's a perfectly natural, normal response. And weird coincidences happen to people all the time; it doesn't mean they mean anything. Besides, it's dangerous to make connections that aren't there. That's how delusions unravel. I decided to put the matter to rest.

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By the time I got out of bed, I realized I felt much better; sleep had worked its miracles. I checked the time on my phone; it was just past noon. I'd slept for about two hours. The throbbing headache was gone, but I still felt a little dizzy and foggy, and every time I coughed, a shock of pain went through my head, which was a problem, because I'm a chronic cougher. The best way I can describe how I felt is like the morning after a tequila bender. Not the worst feeling, but not great either. So I decided to do what I always do when I'm hung-over: smoke marijuana. I put on some sweat pants and a navy T-shirt, went into my bathroom, opened a drawer and took out a pill bottle, a white lighter, and a cigarette bat. I opened the bottle, pinched off a bit of bud, and carefully placed it at the end of the bat. I turned on the air vent and took the splroof out of the

drawer. If you don't know what a sploof is, it's pretty simple. You take an empty roll of toilet paper, stuff it with dryer sheets, and put a sock over it. Of course, this is just the way I made it; there are others. You blow the smoke through the roll to absorb the stank. It works pretty well I guess. Not that it really matters; my parents practically never come upstairs. I lit the end of the bat and pulled the smoke into my lungs, holding it for a few seconds until I blew it through the sploof. The coughing fit that came after was almost unbearable, but after a while I felt a lot better, or at least higher.

It wasn't long before I was struck with an intense, mind consuming hunger. I hadn't eaten all day. I hardly ever eat breakfast; I'd rather hit snooze five times, and today was no exception. Of course, I didn't eat when I got home; I probably would have chucked it up. But now that I felt better, and what with the weed and all, I could think of nothing else but food. Not just any food; I needed sugar. And then the image entered my mind: blueberry Toaster Strudel. I must have blueberry Toaster Strudel or nothing at all. Please God, let there be blueberry Toaster Strudel. I went downstairs into the kitchen and opened the freezer. In the shelf on the door was an unopened box of blueberry Toaster Strudels. Thank you Jesus; you've answered my prayers! Our God is an awesome God he rains from heaven above with wisdom power and love our God is an awesome God. Our God is an awesome God. I popped the strudels into the toaster and sat down at the breakfast bar. To pass the time, I decided to research my recent condition on my iPhone. I had to make sure I didn't suffer from an aneurysm, or a tumor, or a brain parasite. I have a somewhat obsessive fear of brain damage. Though, we're probably all a little brain damaged, right? It didn't take me long to discover I had suffered a migraine, with the added benefit of a preceding visual aura, which occur only twenty percent of the time, so

lucky me. I had suspected this; I'm pretty sure migraines run in my family. Anyway, the internet assured me that this was not a life-threatening condition, so I could rest easy.

The strudels sprung up from the toaster. I got up, got out a paper plate and placed them on it. I squeezed icing in winding paths on top of the strudels. I must have still been a little wobbly, because when I grabbed the plate off the counter the strudels slid off onto the floor, one falling icing up on the floor, the other landing icing down onto my socked right foot. Normally if this happened I would throw them away and start over, but at this point I didn't really give a shit. I picked them up and gobbled them down. I even wiped the icing off my sock and licked my finger. Afterwards, I was still hungry, so I put two more strudels in the toaster, and once they were done I gobbled them down. After that, I was still hungry, so I decided to eat two more. Having eaten the entire box, I finally felt satisfied, but this feeling was soon replaced by a sense of remorse. Did I really just eat an entire box of Toaster Strudel? I mean what the fuck is wrong with me? Do I have any restraint? This is a typical state of affairs for me. Excessive indulgence followed by shame and guilt. Just that constant struggle between my favorite comic book characters, the Id and the Super-Ego. The Id's like: you should jerk off, then binge eat pizza while you binge watch *The Wire*. Super-Ego: What the fuck is wrong with you? Do you have any dignity? You are not worthy of the life you've been given! Super-Ego's the real asshole; at least Id lets you have fun. You know, people say that Freud's theories are unscientific, and that they've been disproven, but whatever, I think they're funny; besides, what do people know anyway? Also, considering that there's a whole genre of porn dedicated to motherfucking, I'm starting to think he had a point.

To assuage the guilt I decided to take the dogs for a walk. I called the dogs from the kitchen but got no response. I walked into the den to find them asleep on the couch. They like to sit on top of the cushions, crushing them. "Get up!" I yelled. They craned their heads towards me. "We're going on a walk." That gained their interest. They jumped off the couch and scurried to the backdoor. I opened the door, took the leashes of the hooks, latched the leashes to the dogs and opened the garage door. The wind whipped through the cypress trees that lined the edge the driveway. We planted them there to block the view from our neighbor's garage, which happens to face ours. Up above dark clouds drifted across the sky. I'd better make this walk quick to not get caught in the rain. We set out, Zoe to my left, Daisy to my right. We started down the sidewalk and took a right at the corner before the cul-de-sac. Daisy suddenly stopped, causing me to jerk the leash. She was hunched over, taking a shit on the sidewalk. "Dammit Daisy, can't you go in the grass?" The shit was bright green and goopy. We strode off before anyone could notice. At the next corner, before I could take another right, Zoe stopped and lifted her hind leg to piss. Zoe's the type of dog that'll stop every ten yards to leave her mark. Luckily, she's a teeny dog, so if I keep a pace she has no choice but to walk as fast as her little legs let her. Again we set out.

We reached the footpath that wraps around the lake. The wind was stirring the water. The circumference of the lake is about a mile. The lake was manmade to fit with the rest of the artificial ecosystem in which I dwell. I'm not sure why they call it Citrus Lake; probably because it's acidic from run-off. The lake drains into a concrete dam near where the main road meets the water. Empty Gatorade bottles and other trash often collect there. From here it flows under the street into a sloped waterfall made of cement

and large rocks. The water runs into a pool with a drain in its center. Basketballs often get stuck in its vortex. I've always wondered if it's strong enough to suck down a person.

Probably not.

About half way around the lake was a black man sitting on a white bucket at the edge of the water, casting a rod and reel. He was wearing a blue trucker hat and chewing on a toothpick. He had a scraggily goatee. "Catch anything?" I asked.

"Nothing man."

"That sucks. Probably the weather."

"Yeah. Yesterday I caught two brims and a bass."

"Nice." I looked to my right where the gym and pool were. It looked like it was closed. All the lights were off. To the right of the Gym is a field. In the center was a black dot of crows. It was like they were holding a council meeting. *On Thursday, we will shit over the BMW dealership. All in favor say Aye.* I turned back towards the man.

"Good luck, dude."

"Appreciate it."

I walked on. To the right of the pool, above the woods and against the clouds, flowed a steady stream of blackbirds. Their combined voices filled the air. I couldn't see where they came from, but they seemed to be endless. Through the woods is a winding path. I don't know why, maybe it was the birds, but I felt compelled to walk it. The wind was swaying the branches of the trees. Once I stepped into the woods the air around me darkened. Cigarette butts, broken beer bottles and crushed beer cans cluttered the forest

floor, their labels faded by time. To the left of the path is a gully lined with smooth sandy mud where water sometimes flows. Our feet crunched the leaves beneath us, each with a distinct timbre and rhythm from the difference in our weight and steps. The sound of the blackbirds overhead grew to a roaring pitch. As I was walking down the path I was thinking: you know what, I've never seen a snake back here, when out of the corner of my eye I caught something curled up and squirming, causing me to jump forward, jerking the dogs with me, and let out a screech for which I became embarrassed afterwards. I looked back to see a speckled king snake. They say king snakes are good snakes because they eat other snakes; but doesn't that make them cannibals? Whatever, it was leaving me alone, so it can't be too bad. I continued walking. At the end of the path I came across the strangest sight. In the soft mud of the gully stood an old man, barefoot with his khakis rolled up to his knees. He had a thin tuft of white hair and liver spots that adorned his skull. He was just standing there, arms hanging from his side, staring into the middle-distance with an expression of pure befuddlement. I said "Sir, are you okay?" and he slowly turned his head towards me, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. He could produce no sound. "Uh, well, you have a nice day." I turned around and walked back to the road.

When I got back the streets smelled like rain. The fisherman had left. Over the lake swirled a massive, billowing cloud, deep blue in color. Against the reflection in the water it looked like a bowl of ice cream with whipped cream. Dammit, why do I always think about food. I picked up my pace. Thunder rumbled in the sky. Still the blackbirds carried on. How many could there possibly be?

As I turned the corner to my street rain began to fall in big gobs. I started running but by the time I got to the garage I was soaked. To make it worse, my mom's car was parked in the garage. I checked my phone for the time: 2:37; I'm not supposed to be home for another hour. I was stuck, my car broke down, and the rain was coming down hard. I unleashed the dogs, hung the leashes on the hooks, and walked through the door.

She was sitting at the breakfast bar, drinking a Diet Coke. She was watching the weather segment of the local news. When she saw me she put down her Coke and stared me down. "The school called. You've been suspended."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Oh gee. That's too bad."

"On the first day of school! Really?"

"I was sick, I swear to God. I had a migraine. I even puked; look at my eyes, I popped the vessels."

"Ugh, I don't want to know about that. Why didn't you go to the office and call me?"

"On the first day of school? Who would believe me? Besides, I didn't want to look like a huge puss."

"Don't say that word. I hope you know you are not to leave the house for the duration."

"Doesn't matter anyway; my car broke down."

"What happened?"

“I think the pipes burst, but I don’t know; I was going to ask Dad about it. How long am I suspended for?”

“Two days. You go back Monday.”

“Nice, extra-long weekend.”

“Charlie! This is not funny. Thanks for walking the dogs.”

“Yeah no problem.”

“They’re saying on TV that the tropical storm in the gulf has increased to a class three hurricane, and shows no sign of stopping. School might get canceled.”

“Lucky me. What’s its name?”

“Leroy.”

“Leroy? Have they run out of the good ones?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, anyway, let me know if we need to take shelter.”

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With nothing to do, I went in my room, turned on my Xbox and played *Call to Arms: Advanced Arab Fighter IV* for about six hours. Six hours of pixelated death and rebirth, a virtual eternal recurrence of war. I then realized how much time had passed. It’s

so easy to lose track of time while playing videogames. It hit me; I'd just spent six hours in a mindless violence simulation. I know it's not real, but started feeling bad for enjoying it. I mean what does this say about me? I was at my friend Kevin's house the other day. He was watching videos from the camera feed of an AC 130 gunship on YouTube. You could hear the airmen talking to each other, commanding fire on the targets bellow. Since the footage was in negative, the targets were white, anonymous silhouettes. I thought: this looks just like the videogame. I felt kind of sick.

“Wanna watch ISIS beheadings?” he asked.

“No thanks.”

“Why not? This is some real shit.”

“I don't care,” I said. I left after that.

So I turned off the Xbox and settled for a more enlightened form of entertainment, television. I turned on my Apple TV and selected Netflix. I decided to watch *Mad Men*. It was only five minutes in when I started craving a cigarette. That's the problem with *Mad Men*: I can't watch it without wanting a shot of whiskey and a cigarette. I looked outside the window to see that it had stopped raining. Hopefully I could slip out without my parents noticing; they don't like me smoking. I grabbed my pack and went downstairs. I could hear the news playing in the den. I walked in to find both parents passed out on the recliners. They each had stemless glasses of red wine resting on their stomachs, just about tilting out of their hands. The sight was strange; usually one of them falls asleep while the other nags them to wake up. But they were both out cold, mouths open, snoring. Well, I figured, now they definitely won't notice me slipping out. Outside I could hear the

cicadas singing their ethereal tone. Fog rose from the road into the dark clouds that covered the sky. I leaned against the trunk of my car and lit a cigarette. As the flame extinguished I noticed something just below the clouds, in between my neighbors' houses across the street. Three orange lights in a triangle formation, just hovering there. The sky seemed to bend around it, like it was made of mirrors. It emitted a faint hum. I just stared at it. What the fuck? Is it some kind of craft? After about a minute it glided away to the east, barely producing a sound. I took a puff of my cigarette. I thought, why didn't I take a picture of it with my iPhone? It just didn't occur to me. In fact it was like my mind went blank. I felt nothing. I finished my cigarette and went back inside. When I was in my room I noticed how tired I was. I took off my clothes, turned off the lights and fell asleep in bed.

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That night I had a strange sequence of dreams. I found myself in front of a bank with faux classical columns that my city favors so much. Except wrapped around this bank were red and blue McDonald's PlayPlace tunnels. I stepped inside, the doors closing with a thud behind me. A bank teller in a burgundy uniform stood in front of a winding red velvet rope line. "Applying for loans?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

"Excellent!" she said, extending her arm behind her. "Please wait patiently in line." There was no one in line. At the end was the entrance to two tunnels, a blue one on the left with a **Subsidized** sign and a red one to the right with an **Unsubsidized** sign. To

the left was a measuring stick with a **You must be this tall for subsidized loans** sign. My head came just below it. I started up the red tunnel when I noticed that behind me, at the mouth of the tunnel, stood an anachronistic grimacing greaser wearing a black leather jacket and jeans, holding a switch blade. "I'm gonna cut your balls off and feed 'em to my dog!" he said, crawling in after me. I squirmed my way up and down through the tunnel. At one point he grabbed my ankle, but I kicked him in the face with my other foot. "You're fucked now, motherfucker!" he said. I kept crawling until I came to the exit. I tumbled down into a ball pit with red and blue balls. The greaser laughed at me from the exit. "Looks like you're shit out of luck." The balls started swirling around me. My legs were being dragged from under. I struggled to stay at the top, but eventually I gave up and was sucked down below.

The next thing I knew I was on a deserted beach at night. A massive vortex of black clouds swirled ominously in front of me, lightning illuminating the waterspouts that lined the horizon. Behind me were three high-rise condos, their windows shattered, no lights on. Piles of trash and debris covered the beach: smashed TVs, molded couches, refrigerators, washers and dryers, microwaves, toaster ovens, coffee pots, trash cans, broken bottles, Styrofoam coolers, beach chairs and big umbrellas, damp newspapers, wet magazines, tables, desks, computers and computer chairs, lamps, paints, statues, pill bottles, syringes, wheelchairs, books, clothes, towels, and every other miscellaneous item. Above flew a red biplane with a sign trailing its tail that read: **EAT MOR CHIKIN.**

When I awoke I couldn't move. A sense of dread overwhelmed me. My eyes stayed shut. An electric shock sensation swelled through my forehead, sending shills

through my teeth. I felt what I can only describe as a presence move around my room. I felt for sure that if I looked something bad would happen. Then it stopped.

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All day torrents of rain have battered the roof. I've been pacing back and forth upstairs, replaying yesterday's events over and over in my head. Something inside me has changed. It all started with that migraine. Now there's a tension in the middle of my forehead that pulses outward through my teeth, and a persistent ringing in my left ear, and a sense of dread gnawing my insides. My reels are spinning out of control. What was that thing? This morning I noticed a strange indentation in my forehead starting at the top and curving down to my right eyebrow. Is this just a natural formation of my skull? Has it always been there? Or did They open me up and pick at my brain and implant some device? Have I been tagged? And what does Chick-fil-A have to do with it?

It all started with the migraine. Was that when they entered my mind? Or is it the other way around: that's when my perceptions became faulty. Shit, maybe I should stop smoking weed. I just read the other day that smoking decreases the white matter in the corpus callosum and other parts of the brain. The corpus callosum connects the two hemispheres. Perhaps this is my problem. Either way, I feel like I've been split in half. Half of me is saying this is nothing to worry about, it was just a visual fluke. Just clear your head and this will all blow over shortly. But the other half says no, you've got to figure this out. Hidden in the sequence of yesterday is a latent, cryptic meaning. The TV,

the thing in the sky, the dreams, what are they, a warning? From what? The events of yesterday seem somehow predetermined. Has my life always been guided by mysterious forces, or is this a recent development? Are my thoughts safe? Can I even be sure my thoughts are my own?

Once, when I was little, I had a bad dream. I can only remember the end of it. I was grabbed by something, I don't know, what do little kids dream about, monsters? My skin crawled. I woke up shaking, terrified. I thought I heard my name called. I walked to the edge of the stairs and called out for my dad. He appeared at the foot of the stairs in a white undershirt tucked into his whitey tighties. He told me that everything was okay and to go back to sleep. And I did, I trusted him, but now I don't know who to trust. I can't tell this to anybody; they'll think I've lost my fucking mind. I can't even trust my own senses.

That night I couldn't sleep, so I took two Benadryl, a melatonin tablet, and some valerian root capsules. I climbed into bed I tried focusing on my breath. After a while, a funny sensation came to me. I wasn't quite asleep, I was still in my room, yet I felt as though I were floating on my back in the ocean. I heard a stream of chromatic piano tones. It made me feel strange, so I shook myself out of it, and tried to go back to sleep. But again I fell into the same state, except this time, I heard what sounded like a female voice speaking through an intercom, yet I couldn't make out the words. I checked the time, 1:23, got out of bed and went to the bathroom, switched on the lights. I turned on the faucet and splashed cold water on my face. In the mirror my reflection looked grotesque, unreal. My eyelids sagged and my eyes seemed out of place, crooked. My hair

was stitched on, my face claylike, mushy. An itch crawled down my back. I couldn't stand to look at myself.

I went downstairs to find my mom still awake. "Can't sleep?" she asked.

"No. What are you still doing awake?"

"I'm cleaning the kitchen." Piled in and around the sink were all sorts of dirty dishes. She hadn't gotten far. "It stopped raining," she said. "Must be the quiet before the storm."

I went out back. In the woods behind my house the cicadas sounded. Above was a thin veil of clouds. The full moon hung in the sky, casting a brilliant aura through the clouds that created the impression of a hole. I stared at it.

My mom came outside and looked up with me. "Oh my goodness," she said, stunned. "It's a miracle!"

"Uh...yeah."

She smiled warmly. "God is good. We're going to be okay."