

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Jonah Unbound

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

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March 2012

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Death,

at the public pool.

Across the pool from the entrance to the Culver City Municipal Plunge, past the children pushing kickboards as their parents throned themselves on long, wicker chairs, Jonah Lefebvre sat on the edge with his legs dangling shin deep in the sunshine warmed water. He was readying himself for what it meant to go into the pool, an action he saw as a moment of decision, one that might very well change the course of his life after nearly a year of inactivity. As he did with everything in his life, he approached the event with considerable hope, with faith that what had started that morning as simply an idea bubbling up out of his subconscious as he lay miserably alone in bed would lead to the return of a stretch of his life that had fallen away behind him. In this case, this was the return of Olivia, now his ex-wife, and not just love, but inspiration.

His plan was simple enough. To him, it felt crafty, ingenuous even, largely because he had never thought of it before, and the ability to satisfy the urge to see Olivia again, something that had receded at a rate that would have been best described as glacial before global warming, overrode any sense of propriety. It was an ambush, a tactless theft of information she had told him when they still shared intimacies of thought and touch, like the feeling of the flesh just above her hipbone or that one Rolling Stones track that always got her dancing. Her enjoying solitary swims when life's pressures called for those moments was now his chance to trap her even while making it appear to be an

unintentional rendezvous. If trapped, he'd have the opportunity to plead his case, to state his proposal: that she should welcome the prodigal husband, who came bearing the gift of the long-awaited second novel of one Samson Lefebvre. She was a literary agent and he was to her a client with whom suffering was born of love and to Jonah a brother with whom hatred was born of fate. The details of this plan were considerably absent, the empty niches instead filled with hope. Hope was both Jonah's will to power and quiet desperation. A perpetual emotion machine, its turbines powered a hundred foolish ideas.

He lied to his best friend, Liben, about how pleasant an afternoon swim in November for two grown men that had never once entered water together would be and Liben, as a best friend should, dutifully believed him, though warily and with one halfhearted attempt at protest.

While Liben changed in the pool bathrooms, Jonah, no longer scanned the crowd, oblivious to the weight of his personal moment, and instead let his head list against his shoulder. He stared at the pool entrance, contemplating if he was ready to seize this opportunity, himself oblivious to the fact that having that initial thought earlier that day meant more than whether he physically entered the pool. Jonah wasn't putting a ball in motion, but was rather about to once again watch the ball roll by, as it did for eternity.

A sincere Catholic, Jonah's take on comprehending the afterlife was that it was shaped conceptually the same as dreaming. At the end of every day, humanity was meant to die a short time after the sunset, and then they entered heaven, where old friends were reunited, the most distant places in time and space were visited, and the strangest things

made complete and total sense. In waking, he once wondered if Lazarus had truly been pleased to be ripped from the ether and brought back to Earth in a body that was still wrapped in its pungent grave-clothes. To open his eyes, brought back by the cave mouth of morning light filtering through his dawn-facing window, meant facing the disappointment of reality.

They had rolled the stone back and Lazarus dropped his chin against the touch of the desert breeze. Just as Jonah would have.

That morning had been different. He woke from dreaming a sort of nightmare, that his brother Samson, the successful writer, whose career made a miserable mockery of Jonah's own, had finally finished his second book, whose completion had been so mysteriously delayed that throughout his three year marriage to Olivia her frustration with the situation appeared to overshadow even the gradual collapse of their relationship. There was nothing that Jonah hated more than even the notion of Samson's book, whose failure had been a guilty pleasure of his ever since his brother's initial success had torn his heart out. The realization was that it seemed to make sense that contributing, somehow, to Olivia's last love might yet rekindle her love for him.

And he needed it. A year of mourning his mornings had shown him that.

Thus, Jonah sat at the rim of the pool, about to go forward with a plan to push himself, in a motion he envisioned as effortless as releasing the rim and allowing himself to cut into the water, both into the future and the past, to somehow reconnect the two over his sundered present.

The difficulty here lay in that Jonah was incapable of seeing clearly these two things that he wanted to manipulate. He was not only an invalid when it came to perception, unable to see the truth beyond his present circumstances, but he was crippled by his inability to recognize this. He was pushing into an unknowable future, hopeful, confident, without even a true grasp of what had happened in the past. The moment he inhabited, seconds away from entering the pool, fueled by the excitement of seeing Olivia again, of finally taking a step towards resolving that last ill in his life, was all he could actually understand.

Jonah was about to venture forth in an effort to assume a future that as he envisioned it lacked the nuances and roadblocks that he had never even suspected. Where things could still be fixed, rather than solely learned about. The terror that had engulfed Olivia's soul in the wake of the divorce, driving her into a place well outside of the confines of what she thought herself capable of, a clinic, his actions literally killing something inside her. The way Jonah's belief in the unfairness of Samson's life was predicated on Samson not deserving the attention and accolades of their father, let alone the world, because Jonah had now gone thirty years without ever learning even a taste of the abuse, and its depravity, that Samson had suffered at the hands of that family patriarch.

He let go. The warm water rode up his body until he was completely submerged. The world broke open and for a moment all he saw were underwater motions to stay floating, the children nearby with only their arms and legs visible, kicking and squirming

to keep their heads up. He looked up, the wavering figure of Liben visible past the pool lip.

Returning to the surface, Jonah was surprised to find that Liben had changed not into swimming trunks, but a pearl colored bathrobe split open at the chest to reveal curly strands of Ethiopian hair. The rest of him did little to dispel the image of a South Seas corsair. The dreadlocks, thick and blooming, rose seamlessly out of the end of a considerably more well-kept beard. The face was roguish and inviting in a way that easily disarmed those giants of their initial overbearing intimidation, especially when breaking out into a toothy grin the size of a banana and ending at cheeks like caramel doorknobs. The man was an ice cream sundae rising into the azure sky.

“You okay? You look like you've had a rough day,” were the first words out of his mouth, stunning an incredulous Jonah who suddenly felt like all of his secrets were revealed.

“Oh, yeah,” Jonah lied. He was, of course, in no way okay. He wasn't exactly a starving African orphan, but considering his own perspective on the course of his life, he was in what he figured were highly dire straits. The exact count was two hundred and eighty-five rough days. Jonah knew the accurate amount because, out of a mix of curiosity and boredom, he summed up the total number of mornings that he had woken up alone. He also calculated how much money he had saved by eating meals that came wrapped in plastic and how aggravated his carbon footprint had become now that so much time was devoted to the television, though offset by the fact that the stack of paper

in his printer had not only not been replaced, it had developed a thick coating of dust. These felt productive in the way that depression calculus effectively looped back and strengthened its wellspring.

The truth was, Jonah had managed to spend nearly a year of his life not only not writing, which for so long he had contemplated to be his destiny, his trade, but he had effectively not even been living.

“You're not coming in?” Jonah asked.

Liben looked out over the surface of the pool, his beard dancing with his mouth as he struggled to settle on an expression. His thumbs settled into the white bathrobe belt. “I'll come in. Give me a moment.”

He didn't look back down, instead focusing on a spot in the distance. The expression solidified, a kind of pained and curious recognition, like an adult at a zoo. Jonah, his arms folded above the rim of the pool, turned and followed Liben's expression.

There, sliding inches of brown flesh into the water, she was. She was. She was.

“No shit,” Liben said and pivoted to look down at Jonah in more ways than one. The pursing of one side of his lips, the movement of the bottom half to the right, was enough to communicate an emotion, disbelief. In a way it was a question, roughly in the same way that the question had a clear, but unutterable answer. Instead of engaging with this fact, Jonah took a breath, looked at the lip of the pool that his hands still grasped, and let go.

Jonah was not a good swimmer. In fact, he had swam for an extended period of time maybe on a dozen occasions in his life. Nonetheless, it did not strike him as odd to intend to swim the distance submerged underwater like a water moccasin, bursting out of the water to feign surprise at what was clearly a coincidental, fateful encounter between two former lovers. As soon as he had seen her legs unsheathed below the black swimsuit, the cavalcade of dark ringlets splitting like a wave on the rock of her shoulder, the pulse of possibility had hummed within him. It was exactly for this, the approach, the pure sight of a destination, a goal, a beautiful woman, that Jonah had settled on the subterfuge.

He had considered emailing the proposition or leaving a voicemail, since she certainly never picked up his calls, but he was certain that his presence, their bodies once again separated only by the molecules of the air and their chemistry, would sufficiently electrify the situation, prevent it from being so simple to walk away from.

Under the water, he began struggling almost immediately. Though it was warming against his skin like the embrace of an arriving winter guest, it seemed to draw strength out of his limbs surprisingly quickly. He broke for air, in as stealthy of a manner as a drowning man could achieve, and pushed onward. Halfway there, his destination lost in the shifting forest of swimmer's legs, he found himself disoriented, confused. Turning around under water just created turbulence, obfuscating his surroundings further, with the effort trapping his vision in whirls and eddies like the suck of quicksand. Any tears of frustration were lost to the pool.

Floating halfway down, he forced his eyes open and looked around. The lithe form that he had hoped to intercept was gone, missing in all directions. He panicked, flailing. As he retreated back the way he had come, he noticed two familiar legs ending in calves like tan, beating hearts as the owner kept herself afloat.

When he came out of the water, he saw her. There were two Olivias that Jonah remembered and missed, the siren and the girl. The siren was hard, dedicated, with a hand on her hip in a sensual, carefree pose. She was who came to his father's funeral. The girl, seen in photographs with friends or when the lights were dim or when the clothes were off, was a mystery to him since the divorce. It was very much the siren that leaned on the pool lip by Liben's side, an eyebrow raised, disappointed understanding sending her into a slight slouch as she looked back over her shoulder.

Liben had to turn slightly to follow her sight line, but the look on his face clearly stated that he was explicitly shamed enough for the both of them. There was an additional heartbreak in how Liben was reacting, his eyebrows teepeeing above his broad nose. Jonah conceived the scene as suddenly changing the channel and getting something unexpected and foreign, an Asian gun ballet already in the midst of some tense standoff.

This scenario was unexpected to the point of being emotionally crippling. Jonah swam forward unsure of what was waiting, though it was no doubt going to be at least as severe as the expressions that remained locked on him.

Olivia spoke first, just as Jonah opened his mouth. "That's low. Really low. Even for you."

“Hello. Even for me?”

She looked furious, which was an all too familiar sensation for Jonah. No matter the amount of blissful moments that had eventually lead to their decision to tie their lives together, to live as husband and wife until one of them clicked their heels together three times and said, 'divorce,' it was difficult to associate the free-floating concept of Olivia with anything earlier than the rows of their last days, the meetings with the lawyers present. Those days filled the background of other memories like street scene gawkers, unwanted and distorted expressions over their shoulders. Even looking at Olivia in that pose robbed Jonah's image of her amidst the free-spirited nature of the situation, the exposed skin, the wet shine of the black bathing suit.

On her skin and pajama top, lemon glow of the kitchen lights while it was pitch darkness outside.

“You have the dullest demons,” she said, tone bored and defeated.

“That's not true.” The chill of the tiles under his bare feet began to spread into the rest of him.

She snorted. “Which part?”

“If I have demons. If. If I have demons, they're not dull. You're just being cruel.”

“Then it's me. Then it must be me.” She sighed and let her chin fall against her collarbone, eyes sweeping aimlessly around the kitchen floor. “I swear, with your father gone you just needed someone else to blame.”

“That's ridiculous. It's nothing like that and you're nothing like him.” And most importantly, Jonah knew in his heart that he had not relinquished an ounce of blame from Donald. Jonah's hands bent against themselves as he tried to explain.

He was unable to twist into reasonable words what he felt was the truth, that having Donald for a father meant wrestling with the physical presence of a cruel and uncaring God, one that sat on the couch with his feet up in the a living room across from his mother's shrine to a diverse collection of canonized saints.

Her sigh mixed in with exertion as she used it to help push herself out of the water, the breath becoming a grunt as her lower back and derriere slipped out into the visible world. It was impossible for Jonah to not follow the arc of their movement, a momentary distraction that gave Olivia the opportunity to simply pivot and begin walking away.

“Olivia, hold on.”

“You knew damn well I didn't want to see you,” she threw back at him.

“Dude,” Liben rumbled.

Jonah considered getting out and following her on foot, wet and ridiculous, but the sight of her body, toned despite the pull of age, a little more curved in places he unfortunately had let himself go, made him feel self-conscious. That they were both aging, separately, only made the sound of the clock's ticking louder. Re-energized, he pushed his aching body further, awkwardly splashing about in an effort to keep up with

her walking. Obstacles came up immediately, as little heads kept afloat by neon colored water wings arrived to form an unexpected minefield.

“God damn it, children,” Jonah forced out past mouthfuls of water as he tried to navigate through them. Shrieking screams as they bobbed in his wake.

“We don't have anything to say to each other,” she said.

“Yes, we do!” Jonah gargled. “Well, I have something to say. About Samson. I want to help you.”

“No, I'm going to leave. I should have never told you I come here.”

“Was it a secret for five years? Did I glean that with my ninja powers?”

“You're a prick.”

The level of spite was disorienting. At worst, Jonah had assumed she'd be dismissive, a shake of the head, a wave, a quick exit. Even at their vilest, when even the minor tiffs meant she went to pointedly went to bed without him and he sneaked in after hours of television to awkwardly try to claim a part of the blanket, she never acted like every word was one more turn of the gears on the rack. Even Liben, who for a moment was reveling in the absurdity of the situation, flinched. Nothing about the moment made sense and adrenaline pushed its way into Jonah's brain chemicals, as useless and exhilarating as the jolt of energy before the car hit an unexpected brick wall. He pumped his aching arms harder. People around the pool began to stand up and watch. Entire families were learning to get out of the way as he swam.

“Jesus, Olivia...” Jonah said, the words hanging like an unoccupied hook.

She stopped, picked up her towel from a nearby chair, and stabbed a finger at him. “Don't you dare use the Lord's name in vain. Even your idiot brother doesn't curse.”

It took a moment to register. She had spent so many years as the silver-plated champion of Samson's genius that she might as well have denounced the Pope. Something of the structure of Jonah's reality buckled, a steel girder shaking under the load of her statement. It meant he, after all, did have a chance.

“That's what I want to talk to you about. His book. I'm gonna get it for you.”

“Why the hell would he give it to you?” she said, hands spread.

And it was true, in the sense that Jonah had spent his life attempting to disprove the fallacy that he was his brother's keeper. Cain had been long envied in the Lefebvre house, though Jonah's awareness of God's watchful eye did mean that he, even through his tortured adolescent years, never resorted to murder.

She looked at him. An hour before, it was everything he could have hoped for, those perfect, black eyes lining up with his own green, but now it came with the tolling of large, cast iron bells and the nagging feeling that he was, at best, an insect.

“Just leave me alone.” And then, softly, “okay?”

“Well...” he said, and he had nothing with which to riposte. Suddenly, Jonah felt embarrassed not for himself, but for her. For a transient, vulnerable moment, Olivia the girl was visible, from the hesitant stance of her feet to the pace of her lips' meeting, dragged out by the pace of her thoughts, meeting only when the deepest depths had been plumbed, a slow drift ratcheted up as some Stygian fury birthed itself across her features.

While she might have stood there as just a girl, the wind gently pushing droplets of water across her body, he felt stripped of anything that could console them. The pain she evidenced was more than he could properly deal with, more than he thought he had an answer for. Except for the book.

She turned, wrapped the towel around herself, picked up her purse, and proceeded out into the parking lot.

“Fuck,” Jonah said loudly enough to be met with immediately disapproving glares from the surrounding parents.

Pulling himself out of the pool, he began a hobbled run towards the gates, the swim trunks clinging to his thighs, what seemed to be his penis flapping in the faces of anyone at waist level. Bursting out, the slide onto the concrete tearing into his bare feet, he swung around until he could see her BMW pulling out of its parking spot and heading down the street.

Wrapped in the towel, both hands gripping the steering wheel, she gunned the car straight at him.

Hoping for the best, he simply walked out into its path, believing quite firmly that not only would she not run him over, but she had enough time to hit the brakes. He was just barely correct, if only because the royalties from Samson's first novel had afforded a high performance vehicle.

As the car came to a full stop, Jonah put his hands up and yelled, “But if I did? If I got you the book he's been working on?”

It was meant to be as powerful as promising her the return of a lost child. For years she had carried Samson's banner, had been his ambassador. She had spent nights praying to a God that Samson refused to believe in that his next book would be finally gifted to the world. That Samson had instead retreated even further into the cloister of his childhood home was a source of never ending heartbreak, not just on her own part but out of sympathy for a world deprived of his art.

Revulsion at this attitude lived in Jonah's gut like a tapeworm, feeding on his day-to-day. It was also what he had to push past as he saw that while he leaned forward onto the hood of her car, fighting for enough breath to explain, she softened. The fatigue of maintaining a level of venom for so long, seconds passing like the minutes of a swinging brawl, seemed to break free. She hugged herself, her head tilting, then rolled down her window.

“How?”

He had no idea. Just getting to this point felt like victory. It was clearly the only way to win her back, and he felt confident that it was possible. If it was the only way to fix things, then he would find a way. Or make one. He was certain that life owed him the opportunity.

“You'll see.”

“If you did, it wouldn't change anything. You know that, right?”

In fact, Jonah was sure that it would change everything. Just seeing her again had changed everything.

“I’ll get you the book. I promise.”

She nodded without looking at him, then reached down to shift the car into drive. When she turned back to him, he stepped out of the way. Her lips parted, the beginnings of words born and dying on them. Once those false starts were buried, she nodded once more and drove off.

The world had no other sound as he watched the car go down the street and turn off, so Liben seemed to materialize beside him, already changed back into his clothes. Though his body language suggested an urge to reach out and comfort, he said, “Thanks for inviting me to watch that.”

Jonah nodded, rubbing at his body for warmth. “I don’t know why she’s so angry. It wasn’t supposed to go like that.”

“Unlike the previous four years?”

“That was harsh.”

“Was it though?”

It was enough to make Jonah smile slightly.

“Guy, look at me,” Liben said and waited until Jonah did. “What now?”

“I have to come up with how to convince my crazy brother to hand over his book of secrets.”

“Mmm,” Liben said. “Well, at least you’re out and about in the world again, finally.”

The wind blew and Jonah, no longer moving quickly in terms of either body or thought, felt the chill roll over his wet skin. “Yeah. Good to be back.”

in the bedroom.

The novel *Impetus Lost* ended with a series of funerals, of the family and friends of the protagonist before the one for the protagonist himself, and, though Jonah pontificated at every opportunity that he had never made it past the dedication page, it was one of the things that aggravated him the most about it. Jonah knew that funerals were for the living, and thus had nothing to do with anything ending, but rather served as beginnings – of mourning, of loss, of struggling with a new, lessened reality that would persevere forever. The soul of the dearly departed was wherever it was sent by God, milliseconds after slipping free of the consigned flesh of mortal existence, while those on Earth ventured forth to live their parallel lives under the gaze of their loved ones and the saints.

That is, if they were Catholic.

As soon as he heard from his cousin, who had heard from his aunt, that his father, Donald, had died from a heart attack he immediately wondered if the old man was blessed or burning. One felt unjustified, the other felt unrealistic, and Jonah prayed for purgatory later that night in his westside apartment, in no hurry to make the trip twenty miles north to the family home that his father's body had been rolled out of on a gurney.

The general effect was different than when his mother, Rosemary, had died a few years earlier. That had been a long, protracted illness ending with a ghostly rocket ship sendoff to the heavens while a Rosary was still gripped between her fingers. That side of

the family had descended on Los Angeles from every corner of Christendom, driving clear across the country from Boston, flying in from missionary trips in the nearly pagan stretches of Eastern Europe. For a weekend, while Samson cowered in his room and Jonah navigated through the brackish morass of grieving but unfamiliar relatives, stopping to have his head grabbed and pulled down into the shoulder of yet another aunt's gaudily perfumed sweater, the house that the brothers had grown up in was invaded by all of the familial cornerstones of Rosemary's faith and life. There were no skeletons in her closet, only bats, scattering out to knock against the walls and each other in a frenzy of mourning that matched in equal amounts joyful reunion and head-shaking remembrance.

It all went as could be hoped for right up until they were putting the casket into the ground, the black-clad Irish clan standing together like an oil slick around a sinkhole, when Jonah looked up from the Bible still clutched in his hands to see that his work-suited father and Samson, easily recognizable from the street clothes he wore to the mass, were practically at the cemetery's edge, their body language evoking a confrontation even through the headstone strewn distance. One man's wife, the other's mother, was being laid to rest in the confines of the Earth and they had found the necessity, as they occasionally did, to find some point of contention nearly alien to those around them, to stare each other down with a Sphinx's gaze as if they were the sole sentinels over whatever esoteric riddle they had come to wrestle between each other.

When it was Jonah's turn to throw a handful of dirt down, they were still out there, grabbing at their own hair, waving their hands as if patting out the flames of the

other's argument off their bodies. They weren't loud, their voices didn't carry, but the Punch and Judy show of their miniaturized forms began to grab the attention of the funeral posse. Their glances became progressively more sustained as the casket became buried without the presence of either husband or son at the grave lip. Jonah nodded and waved to a few heretofore unknown relations and made his way towards the remnants of the family that he did recognize as his own, even if that was the extent of it.

When he was one headstone short of entering their battlefield, both his father and Samson looked over at him in silence, as if he had simply walked in on a card game rather than a battle of wills. Jonah could see no sign of who was the affronted party or who had the upper hand. Both seemed to consider him an intrusion, an ambassador from the mass of oversized crows lingering around Rosemary's grave like it had been lined with feed.

“What's going on?” Jonah asked, one hand letting him lightly lean against a headstone.

“Don't worry about it,” his father rumbled out. “Go back to your mother's people.”

Unsure of how to reply, Jonah turned to Samson, who looked away ashamed.

“Why aren't you with us?” Jonah asked his father.

“Because I buried her already, boy.”

Jonah was twenty-two. It wasn't the first time Jonah had felt pained enough to wish death on his father, but as always the feeling came convoluted around the need to

revenge a finger prodded into the stitches of a wounded heart. You old bastard, he thought. Not even today can you let go of my throat.

Unable, or unwilling, he himself wasn't quite sure, Jonah didn't move away. He stood his hallowed ground and watched his father and Samson get increasingly uncomfortable.

"I'll go back," Jonah finally said to no one in particular. "But you should too. They're wondering why you're out here."

"Tell those micks to go fuck themselves," his father replied, deadpan. "I don't know a face in that crowd, but they've been tearing apart my house. You know what one of them said?"

Jonah shrugged.

"Said she's looking down on me from Heaven now. Not at me, down on me. Your mother never had a bad word to say about anyone, let alone me. I let her raise you however she damn well pleased, didn't I?"

"Dad, settle down," Samson said.

It was a rare gesture from his brother and Jonah looked over to find that they were in a Mexican standoff of stare downs, with Samson uncharacteristically pleading with their father, Jonah's pride unable to contain the surprise he had with Samson, and Donald boring down on Jonah in a manner that typically resulted in a drawn belt and a few lashes. A hundred paces behind Jonah, his mother's grave begun to be covered. The woman that had been the one stabilizing influence on these three men, the white bearded

physicist with the visage of a mendicant and his two sons, the hermit and the 'writer,' was now passed into eternal silence of the stardust nature. There on Earth, the remains of her life now found themselves without a mutual love or understanding. Father and sons faced each other down equally pained by their inability to recognize themselves in the other.

Still, Donald turned to Samson and said, "Let's go somewhere and talk."

Samson nodded and the two, without saying good bye, converged together and headed towards the wrought iron gate fence at the end of the cemetery.

Six days before his father's heart exploded, Jonah got word that he was being published for the first time. It was an article destined to be buried in Sports Illustrated. No mention of it on the cover, ten size font in the table of contents. It was his heartfelt attempt to be relevant, writing an entire essay on whether America, the home of the free, land of the brave, more resembled the NFL's profit sharing system where every year bred nearly equal competition or whether it was more like the MLB's case where rich teams bought advantages and the smaller the market the smaller the chances from day one. It was, in effect, a highly unambitious piece of work masquerading as a point of insight and though it got published Jonah could not escape the fact that he had said relatively little, if anything, about the subject matter he had intended to assault with the first words on the page, a banner-waving statement that became lost in the overall simile. Like most, if not all, of his work, it had been drained of any real relevance by the vampire of surreptitious idealism. Basically, it was amateur and Jonah chose not to bring it up with his father.

When he heard the news, Liben, a friend that Jonah would give the monicker of both 'oldest' and 'truest', in all of his Ethiopian Jewishness had recommended both hash and sitting Shiva, but Jonah instead found himself simply waiting out the minutes between the phone call and the eventual funeral. He requested that Liben attend with him instead, an act that Liben agreed to with only a respectably slight hesitation. His aunt in Colorado, Donald's older sister, had agreed to cover the cost of the ceremony and the plot, next to Rosemary's at a church that Donald never attended, though she seemed vague whether she herself would attend – lots of other family business to deal with and all that. Some co-worker from his father's lab managed to rally up a few people, though Jonah did not know any of their names. Samson came, in sweat pants, flip-flops with socks, and a faded, green t-shirt. He had stayed quite close to the old man, never moving out of his childhood bedroom, and it was assumed that he was thus inheriting the house.

The funeral itself ended up sparsely attended, so Olivia was that much more obvious as she tried to blend in.

Liben, who had an eye for that sort of thing, noticed her first and used an elbow to nudge Jonah in the ribs. She had long and wavy dark hair, pitch black eyes that seemed to stare no matter how long they lingered. Her skin tone was a few shades darker than any of the pale Louisianians, scientists, or basement dwellers attending the funeral, though she gave no sign that she was uncomfortable in her singularity. Her dress was obsidian, though not particularly formal, something she may have casually grabbed out of her closet. Rather than sit in a pew, she stood past the furthest aisle, just down from a

bookshelf and a stained glass window showing St. George killing the dragon. There were plenty of people at his father's funeral that Jonah didn't know, but they all assumed a fairly uniform posture, a hunched weariness. She was a lightning bolt and Jonah couldn't stop looking.

Eventually, as the viewing began, he got up, walked out towards the door and circled around the rows of pews until he was able to lean up against the wall beside her.

“Are you here for the catering?” he asked nonchalantly.

“I'm a friend of Samson's.”

“No, you're reaching,” Jonah said while still looking out at the attendees. “You gotta start out with undercover spy, then move up to weirder lies.”

She leaned away from him as she turned her head. “Are you serious?”

“I'm Jonah Lefebvre. This my father's funeral.” He extended a hand. “Now, that the ice is broken...”

Olivia shook his hand, unenthusiastically suspicious. “Olivia Cicarrone. You're right, I shouldn't have said I'm his friend.”

“Yeah?”

“I'm not exactly a secret agent. Just his literary one.”

“Uh huh,” Jonah nodded. His first reaction was a curious blend of disbelief and horror, the monster under the bed peeking up from the bedsheets and as surprised as anyone at its continued existence. Its suddenness made it that much easier to momentarily swallow down. “Did he write a book or something?”

“He never showed it to you?”

“Is it any good?” Jonah regretted the words immediately.

“Brilliant. Genius. Just landed him a three book deal. I was with him to sign the contract when your father passed.”

“You were there?”

She nodded. All of Jonah's attention fell onto Samson, the sole member of an entire pew. His hair, usually unwashed but short, was getting long and his face was sprouting strands on nearly every inch that wasn't lips, nose or eyelids. His expression was unfathomable, blank and unchanging.

“Do you mind if we take this outside?” He meant to sound insouciant, but each word felt like a home run just to get out.

While the mourner's line continued down the aisle, they detached from the side of the church and made their way out. Once they reached the door, Jonah didn't look back over his shoulder and walked a straight line to the sidewalk, briskly cutting between the identical, emerald fields on both sides.

“Oh my god, why?” he screamed at the top of his lungs. The complete melodrama of the line didn't faze him as he slumped down onto his knees. Understanding dawned on him. For the past few days, he had been disappointed in his emotional reaction to the news, as it hadn't been the overwhelming black fog that a father's funeral was meant to be. It had felt like a soft slap from a cocked back fist. Finally, he realized why the news had at first felt incomplete in terms of utter and total emotional devastation – because

there was more to come, because life could be so much worse. He sat down on the curb feeling embarrassed about the outburst, but not enough to think much of it. For a moment, Olivia fluttered away behind him. The cars stayed, buffeting him with sound and wind as they passed. The pain in his chest, incubating within years of layered frustration and disappointment, with himself, with the man that once inhabited the corpse now resting with a more peaceful expression than his father had ever been able to afford in life, broke free of its eggshell coating and oozed from his heart down into his guts. Wherever Donald was, above or below, Jonah knew that he was watching this scene with his typical lack of surprise.

He looked back to where Olivia stood, her pink lips parted by surprise enough to show a straight, pale line of teeth. There was something in her beauty that kept her presence from being a nuisance, a soothing placidity that recalled the sounds of gentle waves that began with the clear, but glistening nature of her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know it would affect you like this.”

Jonah brought up a hand and waved it off, nearly slumping over as he did. “Did my father get to hear about the book deal?”

“I think so.”

Bastard blew our father’s heart right out of his chest, Jonah thought. Thirty-three years of patiently waiting for some stroke of genius and he couldn’t handle it when it finally came.

“Was he very proud?” Jonah croaked out.

“I wasn't there, I just saw him in passing. I hope so, he should have been.”

“Yes, of course.” Jonah used a parked car to haul himself up. “I think I'm done. I can't go back in there.”

Alive or dead, being in the same room as his father and brother, for the first time since his mother's death, pushed Jonah too far back into the lonely, spiritually pauperized realm of childhood.

“Okay,” she said. “How about we go and get some coffee?”

She said it softly enough that Jonah wasn't sure he heard it correctly over the rumble of the passing cars. Before he could respond, she was already scanning the strip malls across the road from the Glendale Holy Trinity Church, examining each corner store, Indian grocery, and key shop.

“There's one up the road a bit. A couple blocks if you don't mind the walk.”

She twisted, lithe and sensual, making art out of an awkward motion as she stepped out of her heels. Using two fingers, she picked up the shoes and let them dangle against her thigh. “Let's go?”

They said little as they walked, though Jonah wasn't sure if that was his fault or hers. She seemed incredibly comfortable, with the silence, with the situation, with him, a kind of demeanor that Jonah had often tried to fake but instead spent his life envying. He swallowed the feeling that something of Samson tainted her, that his brother had beaten him to the punch, but there was little that could be done about that now. She had just met Samson, there was still time to wrestle her away before she found herself completely

disgusted with the troll, his general insanity and inhuman disregards. To show that there was a normal Lefebvre. He rushed forward to open the coffee shop door for her as they arrived and she rewarded him with a short smile.

As they sat down, each with a large coffee, no sugar, no milk, in hand, she asked, “What do you do?”

“I’m a writer.” He threw that one out there onto the table between them.

She arched an eyebrow, if nothing else at least pretending to be impressed. “I didn’t realize there were two in the family.”

“Me neither.”

“You know, his book, *Impetus Lost*, it’s very good.”

Jonah coughed. “Please, let’s change the subject.”

“To...?”

“You. Tell me about you.”

She shrugged and she did. She was a South Philly Italian, a product of a land still clinging to big hair and bigger machismo, where women grew strong through their handling of barely house-broken men. She was a Good Catholic, forged by years in a schoolgirl uniform and family tradition watched over by all of manners of monsignors, tongue-clucking grandparents and saints. Educated at Columbia, she now worked at one of the world-straddling Los Angeles agencies that allowed her office window to frame a view of million dollar villas etched into the side of the Hollywood Hills and the sprawl of gay clubs and tattoo parlors that stretched out in between. As she spoke, Jonah would

occasionally be snapped back into remembering the quickly cooling cardboard cup in his hands, would take sips from behind which he was completely mesmerized.

“Jonah and Samson,” she said, turning the tables on him. “Your parents must have been very religious too.”

“My mother was. She named my brother.”

“And you?”

“When I was born, Samson had just lost the beloved dog to what we'll call a tragic behind the woodshed accident. My father did his firstborn a favor.”

He hadn't intended it as such, but it was the first opportunity that Olivia had to see inside the absurdity of his home life, the decades that he had been unable to unlatch from his back even after the screaming fit outside of the funeral. She mulled it over before speaking. “So, you were named after the dog. By your brother.”

“That's how I've always heard it.”

“Well, maybe it's not true. You know, a long family joke that you just always believed.”

There was no time to explain that when it came to either Samson or his father, humor was for the weak or deranged, akin to shouting nonsense or a Presbyterian speaking in tongues. “A little late to find out now.”

“You could ask Samson. Maybe he remembers.”

“We don't talk. Not a lot of common ground.”

“No,” she said, a submerged laugh in her voice, “you and your brother are *nothing* alike.”

Something in her words stung, at first, and Jonah wanted to snap back before he was able to process the tone of her voice, sweet and consolatory, so unlike the way he had ever heard, or thought, that statement. She stretched out a hand, as casually as she had slipped her heels off, and placed it over his own limp hand.

The hours passed as they always did for events that deserved to have lives of their own, rather than be doomed to be ill-fitting memories within scopes so large that they could never fully do their remembrances justice. There were points that in the future Jonah would be able to recollect, but even months later Olivia would mention a question that had been answered that afternoon, a joke that either had made, and, at best, all he could know for sure was the blur of falling head over heels for someone that was essentially a stranger, made more strange by the effect that she instilled, an eye in the middle of a storm that reached out far past the confines of that one miserable day.

At some point, when they found themselves outside the shop, they kissed and both immediately kept up the pretense that it was a surprise rather than a clear destination for hours of their leaning bodies. Awkward smile from Jonah, a flutter of the eyelids from Olivia, and then both laughed.

“You know, it's gonna be rough going telling people how we met,” Jonah said as he slid a hand up her side, from hip to rib.

“What are you doing Thursday night?”

Jonah shrugged. "Mourning."

"Meet me at Roger's Lounge at nine. We can tell people we first ran into each other there."

She shrugged with one bare shoulder and black strands of hair fell in slow motion across the dark lines of her face, past the naked seriousness of her eyes. What she was selling, he bought it completely. He wanted to pick her up in his arms, take her the two blocks to the church, and kick the door open while carrying her inside. Samson would stand as he always did, silent in some meditative nirvana state, and his father had lost the ability to see, hear or react, but Jonah would take her right up to the coffin, to face the corpse he had yet to look upon.

Three years later, he found her wrapped in a blanket on the side of the bed that sat just underneath the window. It was coldest there and was usually his spot. Her wedding ring was on the dresser nearby. He sat down on the opposite side, an expanse of four feet of marriage bed between them, and admired how the way her face was revealed only by the slivers of light let in through the blinds did nothing to diminish her features.

"What are you doing?" he asked softly.

"Thinking," she said and let her head fall against the blinds. They bent downwards and cast her face into shadow.

"About leaving?"

"Yeah."

"Because of tonight?"

“No. Because...” She swallowed, either pushing down a sob or an exclamation. There was a waver in her voice. “You've always taken me for granted. Always.”

His immediate thought was *thatsnottruethatsnottruethatsnotture*, but his tongue stayed still as his mouth opened, slack-jawed. Though he couldn't articulate it, his memory raced back so fast that any other event in the previous three years collapsed together, his books, his wedding, the purchase of the house together, the love, the joy, until it settled back onto the day of his father's funeral when this woman had stepped out of another place of existence and into his. She had arrived on a sidewalk instead of a seashell, dark, Earthy features that spoke louder than those of any soft, translucent nymph. Of course, he had surely taken a woman like her for granted, but to what extent?

“Say something,” she said.

He couldn't. He sat with his hand pushing down into the mattress beneath him, feet still touching the floor in a position that spoke volumes about his readiness to walk away from this burning bed.

on parade.

Driving up Vine towards his apartment, Jonah was surprised to find a roadblock stretching across what was normally a busy intersection. There was little traffic in the street, though considerable crowds on the sidewalk, and he was able to easily detour in between two tattoo parlors. As he drove down the trash strewn alley, litter flying past like flocks of pigeons, he could hear in the distance what was surely the breath, roar and heartbeat of some terrifying monster that was dragging itself down Hollywood Boulevard. The kind that knocked down buildings, tore up streets, made for the occasional good popcorn flick.

Which, in his opinion was fine, really, and a change of pace for Los Angeles. Since arriving in Hollywood in the wake of his divorce, Jonah had found his perspective of the city, which he had spent his life living on the periphery of, to be conflicted at best. Having a home on the edge meant having all of the benefits of Southern California living – for example, not once did he ever have to admit, “Oh, I live in Stockton” – without once seeing a homeless man in a sombrero attempt to jumpkick another homeless man in the face. That scene, so surreal that Jonah looked around for the klieg lights, had occurred outside his chipped paint apartment exactly a week after he moved in, the first day he had ventured out. In any other city, from New York to Sioux Falls, the responses of bystanders would have been either stunned horror or intentional ambivalence. In Los Angeles, people stopped on the sidewalk and watched with an expression of curious

seriousness, as if a television had been left on in the middle of the street. When the sound and the fury resulted in the two bagmen simply departing the scene, Jonah could see the social criticism forming on the lips and brows of the public audience.

“Too much buildup,” one might have said to the other. “It really seemed to be going somewhere, but I never thought that destination was simple disappointment.”

Jonah found himself agreeing. Here was a moment of complete insanity, with a man in what was an extremely out of place piece of headgear attempting to physically assault a second man, whose immaculate barbershop mustache seemed out of place on a personage ravaged either by crack or clozapine, and Jonah walked away like a disillusioned theatergoer.

Something about the disappointment in absurdity permeated the city, and Jonah felt a burgeoning understanding of this as he continued to live in the heart of Hollywood. However, this awareness was fickle and understated and gave him enough insight only to fuel his depression and sense of discontent. Life was a circus and, living in Hollywood, Jonah was the saddest clown of all, the type unaware of his true makeup and too nearsighted to catch the tip of the big tent.

At the next turn, Jonah saw that the street was once again blocked off and, judging from the lack of cars idling in a filled up Tetris pattern, he was apparently the last person to hear that Hollywood Boulevard had abandoning its long-time career as a road and was deciding to pursue other options, maybe singing or producing. He drove another block and once again there was no way to head north. The flipout countdown in the back

of Jonah's headspace began ticking. It was becoming obvious that it would be most reasonable to park the car, walk a few blocks and simply cross Hollywood at Vine and return to his apartment on foot. This was so against the expected original plan of rolling into the garage below his building that Jonah was smacking his wheel out of frustration even as he pulled into an open parking spot between a Toyota with a parking ticket and a van with three parking tickets.

He didn't much care for the mystery, but it was regardless quickly resolved as he approached Hollywood and found himself merging into a crowd of onlookers. It was no monster, but rather on the way home he had stumbled across an unanticipated parade. The great earthquake that had always been meant to create a rift through his neighborhood had instead arrived in the form of a chasm built of a middle school drumline, their instruments blinking blue with LED lights and mirrored strips down their chests reflecting back not just themselves but the rampant flashes of cameras. There was no way to cross and the parade seemed to stretch endlessly in both directions. In front of the marching band was a horse-drawn carriage and behind it a float. Despite the occasional push of the crowd around him, Jonah sighed and simply sat down on the curb.

An empty street behind him, a bewildering and unforeseen carnival blocking his way home. He frowned at every passing oddity, flinched at the horns coming from both vehicles and marching bands, and rolled his eyes at the forced cheers of the vintage Cadillac-borne, casual celebrities. It was, if nothing else, a flamboyant, wall-less cell during which he had no choice but to examine and re-examine and twist and turn into

different perspectives the relative anomaly of the encounter with Olivia, from the vehemence to the sputtered reveal of Samson's continued misdeeds. Everyone has skeletons in their closet and as they are, by their very nature, stripped down to their foundations they all look very similar. Their uniqueness comes from how they dance. As he sat, Jonah's were dancing a very cramped tango to the sounds of the passing parade, with Samson and Olivia so smoothly intertwined it was as if the two could not be parted.

“Does this ever end?” he asked a bystander, sighing the words out.

It was an older woman in a dirty turtleneck who had managed to excitedly clap along to even the rumble of the engines. “Oh, no! Gotta wait for Santa. Every parade ends with Santa.”

“I'm sure even the Soviet military review had Father Christmas as the rearguard.”

The woman in the turtleneck continued clapping with a smile on her face.

It wasn't an intentional seeking of a distraction, or finally admitting that the street-long miniature carnival was worth a little wonderment, but rather with no other choice Jonah began to take in the various elements of the procession. The young dancers of a nearby elementary school, blissfully unaware that their outfits would be considered revealing on a Vegas showgirl, flapping their arms more to stay warm in the November air than their synchronized dance. A row of original cars straight out of the movies and television, though even the Batmobile was driven by a cigar-chomping collector with a broad, satisfied grin. A large float bearing representatives of Los Angeles's sister cities, some of whom were obviously about to tear up their return ticket. One of the less-famous

Jacksons, sitting in a car even. Canadian mounties rode by to the confusion of nearly everyone. Jonah half-expected an elephant to come marching down eventually, resplendent in glorious red and orange and with tassels and a litter on its back where a princess could part her curtain and lock eyes with him from behind a veil.

And he felt terribly, devastatingly alone. More loneliness than twelve months of lethargic depression had bestowed upon him. The kind of loneliness that occasionally cracks a part of oneself open like an egg. Jonah was gripped by the kind of high octane, adrenaline fueled depression that for writers made the first words of a sentence feel like the growl of race cars at the starting line. For the first time in a year, something about seeing Olivia sent off a signal into the parts of his brain that had so calmly eluded his desperate reaches that he could, in fact, write a sentence. And, true to form, it came at the most inconvenient time, not when he had spent hours in his apartment with the blank white screen open on his computer but in the midst of a parade while he strained to figure out the next step of his floundering life. Speaking to Samson was difficult enough, but to convince him of anything he didn't want to do, to pry even a thought from his slack hands or anxious eyes, that seemed to require a moment of inspiration even greater than the one Jonah had yearned for in the entire year of being unable to place even consecutive words onto a page.

Now, something bubbled to the surface, bursting open after a long travel from the nether regions of his poisoned nous. Finding in his pocket, a chewed up pencil stub next to an assortment of wadded up paper scraps, Jonah scrawled on a glossy, long receipt for

wine, cigarettes, more wine, and a blueberry muffin, *He was the kind of man women made love to one last time.*

Something about the sentence hummed, rising to a crescendo as the stroke and snap of the pen whipped along, with the kind of chest-tightening, unheard quiver of the air that sends dogs howling hours before an earthquake. When finished, he leaned back and read it over and over again as if that would suck the taste out of the letters, even as the taste was his and his alone. The butcher's knife blocks of his handwriting were now individually dangling on some wisdom, some artful beauty. He felt that he had carved into the rough coal some diamond idea, clean and pure and ready to explode like dynamite with the lever-like push of examination. A man that women made love to one last time. Surely he had finally captured something there.

This was writing for Jonah. He was now ten minutes away from losing the scrap of paper and fumbling the entire feeling out of his mind's eye. That was also writing for Jonah.

He tried to push on, to inch past the punctuation mark into more uncharted waters, but he immediately met a familiar, feminine resistance, a svelte, defiant hand on his chest. The muse was coy and half-dressed, just enough to invigorate, to arouse, but he lacked the cold willpower to force her. He could feel her nails on his shoulders as he withdrew, defeated without being spent.

A man women made love to one last time.

Quite a man, Jonah thought to himself as he closed his hand around the scrap and felt it collapse onto itself in his palm. It folded like a tuneless accordion, limp and useless, a parody of a functioning, literary sentence. A man that he likely would find unknowable, that he couldn't explore, that he couldn't deify by placing him on a scathingly lit pedestal there in the center ring of a circus. A novel, in fewer words. A story. A book. The blow to all of his acquired inadequacies.

It had been a year since he had last managed to push out an entire joyous, coherent sentence. And this one, which at first seemed heavy, but was quickly lightening in his mind as if losing substance, was clearly an aberration: a vaguely literary sentence. This recognition painfully reminded Jonah of the first thing a reader would see when picking up the first novel that he had managed to write, two years earlier. The cover, glossy and vibrant, featured, between the gold embossed letters of 'Jonah Lefebvre' and 'The Angry Castle,' a scene jumbled with fantastical absurdities around the central figure of a sword-welding badger in a fez.

How the fez had come to be on the badger was a mystery to Jonah, as cover art control was well outside the purview of his five book contract, but now it sat there, ridiculous, uncomfortable, as if it was the artist's cruel prank, like the bare breasts sneaked into "The Rescuers" or Bugs Bunny's bunny cock hanging out of his towel in the old 40s Looney Tunes skit.

"They put a fucking fez on the badger," Jonah had panted into the phone with his editor.

“The badger with the sword and the boots?”

“Yes,” he said, after a pause. “The badger with the sword. And the boots. They also put a fez on him”

The first book was begun shortly after the wedding and finished a short while before their first anniversary. He had spent his mornings and evenings writing in the bedroom, often stretching out from the desk to pass the pages to Olivia as she curled up in the blanket. The responses fell into a narrow spectrum of various half-cocked smiles and nods. An occasional laugh. All well-intentioned, but it was during that second year of their marriage, as the pages stacked up on the desk and he felt a tug in his chest at her lack of earnestness with each one, when he began to feel that there was a third figure in their relationship.

“Do you like my book?” he asked over breakfast after beginning the final chapter.

“It’s cute,” she said, mumbling past a blueberry muffin.

She had never brought up the idea of representing him and he gradually accepted that the suggestion would never come. Any number of reasons would have been valid, that she didn’t want to mix business and family, that she had her hands full with Samson’s recent and absurd success. No amount of effort would have allowed Jonah to accept such an obvious lie. Olivia was an agent to artists, the doorway to the literary world, where those giants of insight and industry hung around on clouds of esteem and recognition. Dinner table talk had suggested that *Impetus Lost* was a front runner for the

Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. There were rumors that a recent New York Times bestseller was eyeing her as their new agent. Meanwhile, *The Angry Castle* was cute.

He found an agent on his own, without even asking for a recommendation. Olivia had frowned when she saw the name on the correspondence, but otherwise said nothing. The book sold and the entire advance was less than the ten-percent cut Olivia received for selling the movie rights to Samson's novel. No further money was made on it. The mortgage was paid for by Samson. So was the food on the table. When Jonah went to bed, what kept him and his beautiful wife warm through the night were sheets made silken by the grace of his brother.

His second book, after *The Angry Castle* sold just enough to warrant the publishing company's continued interest in developing a possible franchise among young adults, was written through the final year of his marriage. It was written during daylight hours and often at locations well away from the house. It was first printed at a Kinkos while Jonah stayed at a cheap motel as they negotiated the separation and it jammed the printer three times. It eventually was heavily edited due to themes, motifs and outright situations clearly inappropriate for either the intended young audience or adults with tastes that didn't include S&M.

Jonah opened his hand to look down at the scrawled receipt. Just the words 'made love' already suggested material beyond the scope of his former literary output. No, worse, 'kind of man' already suggested more than he had been able to give the world so far. Somehow, it didn't seem quite the same to write, *He was the kind of badger--* Jonah

paused midthought, attempting to remember exactly what a female badger was called. A sow. He had had to look it up constantly while writing the first novel. *He was the kind of badger a sow rutted with one last time.*

Half a year earlier he had had his one and only book signing. From one of the aisles emerged an elegant wisp of a woman, a purse in one hand, a swinging, young boy in the other, business casual wrapped over a midday-elliptical-machine toned body. There was the effect of a half-hearted search about her, a casual indifference to whatever she might find, that suggested that she'd been pulling the boy around the book store for his benefit even as she ignored any signs that his own interest was grabbed.

Midway through the open space, she stopped when she saw Jonah and looked him over. "You're a writer?"

"These are my books," Jonah said and watched the woman squint at the placard beside him. He prepared himself, toes curling in his sneakers.

The syllables came out like ground beef from a meat grinder. "Lay-fey-bah-ver?"

"It's pronounced 'La-fav.'"

"Oh!" the woman said, excited enough to startle the boy beside her. "Like Samson Lefebvre."

The basic truth that the woman knew his brother's name by word of mouth rather than ever having read it amused him in a cringing, nauseating way. "Sort of."

This impressed her. Jonah kept his face rigid, even smiling, making sure to include the bored boy at her hip in the friendliest of gazes.

“If you’re looking for something for your son to read, miss, he might be getting just old enough to start these. Adventure books. Boys love them.”

The woman hesitated. “I suppose we could buy a copy of this one. With the Jewish badger. ”

“*The Angry Castle.*”

“Yes, how much is it?”

“You’d have to ask the store. Twenty-something dollars, I’d think. I’d be more than happy to sign it for him.”

The woman wrinkled her nose and sniffed as if smelling bullshit. “So much?”

“It’s the same as any hardcover in here.”

“But it’s a children’s book.”

Jonah leaned in towards the boy. “What’s your name, son?”

The boy glanced at his mother, who was not looking at him, and said, “Jamie.”

“Well, Jamie,” Jonah said and opened the cover of the closest *The Angry Castle*. “You’re going to get a very special copy. You can tell all of your friends you met the writer.”

In lieu of adult skepticism, Jamie answered with sincere, childish puzzlement.

“Why?”

“Well...” Jonah said and looked up at the woman. She stared back at him with arms crossed, daring him to explain. “Because writers are very important people. It’s like

meeting your favorite baseball player or the president. Not everyone can say they did that. What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"An astronaut," Jamie said in a hushed tone.

Taking a pen, Jonah wrote, 'Jamie, Reach for the stars! Sincerely, Jonah Lefebvre' inside the cover and passed it across the table. As he did, he watched the mother's reaction. Her arms tightened around her and then they both turned to look at Jamie.

Jamie opened the book, read the note, and then turned to the first page. His mother leaned in, her own gaze falling on the size 14 font that extended out of the hokey, ornate initial, its wobbly loose ends tentacles reaching for a child's attention. As she looked, however, with the circular movement of her eyes lapping that of her son's, Jonah began to experience the emotional effect of strolling naked in front of a gaggle of giggling teenagers, uncertain helplessness mixed with an equal dose of flinching pride.

"I think he likes it," Jonah said.

Jamie turned the page and his mother once again joined him, an eyebrow raising as she skimmed. If only for her sake, Jonah wanted to lean over and grab the book back from the kid.

"Hey," he said to her, "it's about talking animals. Not like a Jesus lion, I mean animals that talk for no good reason. Magic and wizards. It's for kids, you know?"

Not only did she look up, but so did Jamie, as bored and confused as he had been since the moment he stepped into the bookstore. In the face of the teenage giggles and

laughter, Jonah realized he was now at a standstill before them, exclaiming, ‘You have to understand, it's chilly out here.’

Somehow, whoring himself out for the children never stung as fiercely as seeing his work scrutinized by a more adult microscope. If nothing else, he had convinced himself, it maintained literacy. Dr. Seuss did wonders by having kids skip through near nonsense. Jonah didn't have any talent for verse, or rhyme, or the transcendent nature that childish gobbledegook somehow attained on occasion, but he wrote words, in entire paragraphs, and children read them instead of, say, staring off into space or joining gangs.

Jonah blinked and the paper slid off his palm and blew into a small batch of parade-goers next to him. It didn't matter, he had come to conclude. For a moment, he had considered writing his own book, one to rival Samson's, but that would be a pointless enterprise. Since the divorce, he hadn't even managed to write badger stories, let alone something at the level of literature. Still, he had promised Olivia a book. Samson's book.

Her disappointment in Samson, only an octave lower than the bitterness she had expressed towards Jonah, gave him some satisfaction, but there was also the fact that whatever the circumstances were this betrayal must have been crushing for her. He had always been haunted by the suspicion that she *liked* Jonah, as a lover, as a husband, as a friend, but she *loved* Samson, as a savant, as a human being, as almost a religious figure.

For a moment, Jonah found that it was oddly difficult to remember the exact words on the sentence he had scribbled down. A man women slept with one last time. He shook his head.

Maybe there was another way, he thought. He had hurt Olivia. Samson had hurt Olivia. Could one right fix two wrongs? Could he actually get the book from Samson? He had never been able to bully his brother into anything, which was an impossible feat even for their father. Still, of the three of them, it was Jonah that had spent six years eating the scraps and not pulling his own weight. Now, he was finally needed.

A man women sleep with, again. Or a last time. He frowned. He looked down at the ground, but couldn't see the paper. It was either among the bystanders around him, under the feet of the police patrolling the divider, or swept into the street, now home to laso-twirlers, all dressed in a perfectly identical cowboy uniform, though surprisingly ethnically diverse. For a moment, a slight panic built. It felt like the lighter and lighter sentence, so precise at the moment of creation, had sprung free.

He ducked down, attempted to spy it among the crowd. Behind him, past the barricade, a whistle blew and everyone began craning around each other to see some part of the procession. Childish feet stamped. For a moment, he thought he spotted it, ready for the taking in a meadow of legs, but, just as he prepared to lunge, he went hip to hip with what felt like a very rounded woman. Before he could recover, he was knocked past the barricade and police and into the street. He tripped, tried to balance himself, tripped again, and then found himself directly in front of the parade, caught between two floats. He tried to stand up straight, with some dignity intact, but everyone was disregarding him. Even the police were much more interested in the MGM lion cage that was approaching behind him. For a moment, compared to the lion behind and the balloon in

front, Jonah felt so mundane. So normal. So average. No body glitter. No great words of wisdom. Standing still and bland in appearance, no one felt that he was worthy of attention. So he let out a long, slow breath, one mainly of relief, as the understanding hit him that he finally had realized an in.

of his own home.

For the eighteen years that Jonah lived in the house, it had looked exactly the same to him. The grass, cut weekly by his obsessive father, was always the same length, always the same color, much like the off-white panels, the red shutters, the gingerbread house shingles on the roof. Though occasionally tempered in the placid Southern California climate, all that ever really changed were day and night, light and dark, action and sleep, right up until he left for college. It was then that the house began to age. Now, every time Jonah made the trip down the dusty, mountain guarded freeway into the Valley, it faded a little for him. Some change, if not seen, was at least felt. The floorboards weren't the floorboards he once knew. The door weighed a different amount, sometimes more, sometimes less. With their mother gone, the kitchen certainly lacked its usual scents, but the crimson spice rack on the wall wasn't the one Jonah had made for Mother's Day. Not, at least, the one he could remember hand-polishing in 10th grade shop class.

Samson hadn't been living alone long enough in the house to let it fall into disrepair. The paint wasn't chipped, the grass, though longer than their father would have ever allowed, had yet to reach savannah levels. Jonah wondered if, having left the house so rarely, Samson didn't quite understand Jonah's perception of it. If, despite being five years older, Samson did not see the decay that Jonah experienced, if for him the place remained static, a suburban crystal palace. He had certainly come to inhabit it like some

chiseled ice troll, no doubt the stuff of legend for both the neighborhood children and the local homeowner's association.

The day after the parade, Jonah made the trip. Though it was the afternoon, with no telltale lights on, he was sure that Samson was home, brooding somewhere inside. He had futilely tried calling, just in case a paramedic or police detective picked up, but the phone had simply rang and rang until his mother's voice informed him that neither she nor her son nor their father nor Jonah were home. Jonah knew, just as his mother did when she lied to the answering machine, that Samson was always home. He just never, ever answered the phone. Their father, considerably less forgiving than their mother, had found the practice to be a source for one of his more peculiar characteristics, a kind of infuriated fascination. If in the same room and the phone began to ring, Samson would lock up and stare at it, while Donald would peer at him from under bushy, quivering eyebrows and the two settled down into their places until their mother would run into the room with a well-rehearsed, "Oh, golly, you two" and answered. Much of their father's attention came from fascinated inspection of Samson's quirks.

The image was firmly in Jonah's mind as he walked down the concrete pathway, put his key into the lock, and found that no amount of persistence would make it turn. For the first time in thirty years, he couldn't simply walk inside. He tried jiggling the key in the lock, tried to turn the knob regardless, then put his shoulder into the door a few times before he stepped back, composed himself, and knocked. When there was no sound of footsteps from inside, he knocked twice more, then began jamming his finger on the

doorbell, tapping out Morse code. Nothing, though he was positive that as he walked away in frustration, one of the upstairs curtains flapped about. It wasn't the wind, every window was shut tight.

Practically stamping his feet, a prowling toddler, Jonah proceeded to circle around the house, walking through the grass and past the corner until he was able to reach the glass patio doors on the other side. There, he found the bolt locked and the inside of the house, where the living room and kitchen were visible, to be surprisingly dark even for that time of day. He had to cup his hands on either side of his face as he leaned in against the glass to peek inside, but past the glare of the sun he could see nothing but piled up shadows and the usual living room jetsam. He couldn't even make out exactly what it was that was piled up on the living room armchair, on two of the three kitchen bar stools, and in several corners, though they had the profile of cairns or maybe deer droppings.

“Well, I guess you can't be the genius caveman without making the house into some sort of creature hole,” Jonah said to himself. “Fucking troglodyte.”

Nowhere else to go, after one final rattle of the doors, he continued circling the house, heading back towards the front lawn. One of the windows above him as he walked was his old room. Jonah rolled his eyes about how the place where he had hit puberty was now being held hostage by a man deathly frightened of open air and lingering glances from strangers. He kept walking until he found himself standing on the front lawn in front of the house and raised his arms up above his head.

“Samson!” he screamed.

For a moment, there was finally movement in one of the windows. Samson's room. A head poked out from behind the curtains, Jonah's face stretched across an older, blockier prototype, a mug straight off the box for Rock Em Sock Em Robots, all squares and aquiline shapes, a construction worker reptile made artist by the Nietzschean beard that bordered his aspect like the rays of a dirty red sun. His hair was in places matted and natty, but for the most part displayed the same amount of shock as the rest of his countenance, which appeared wide-eyed and panicked from behind one corner of his bedroom window.

“Samson, I see you, you dumb prick,” Jonah yelled up at him.

Samson slowly receded from view, then reappeared making motions very similar to extremely methodical masturbation. Jonah soon realized that he had a piece of paper extended in front of him which he was using a Sharpie to write broad, almost cartoonish letters on. When finished, he pressed the paper against the window in front of him. **Too loud. Neighbors,** it said.

Jonah needlessly glanced around, to give himself a few seconds to calm his nerves rather than out of any actual Candid Camera suspicion, then yelled up, slightly quieter, “What the hell?”

Can you read this?

“Yeah,” Jonah said and spread his arms.

Another few seconds before he reappeared with a new one. **Good.**

While Jonah watched, perplexed, Samson seemed to concentrate intensely while writing the next sign, laboring over the word choice. He gnawed on the marker as he pressed the paper against the windowsill, twice interrupting his thought process to mark a word down with a manic flourish. Finally, he held it up: **Go away.**

The corners of Jonah's mouth twisted up as he had to admit that the past two days were becoming absolutely crushing to both soul and sanity. "I can't. Beyond the fact that this is practically still my house too, I need to talk to you."

Samson stared down at him, then held up the paper again. **Go away.**

"That's not fair. You used the same sign."

Samson's sweater-clad shoulder humps raised and fell on either side of his blooming beard. Jonah sat down and wondered at what point in his day he should have taken the well-known advice to calm down and count to ten.

Would that help? Had the boys at the Alamo sat down and counted to ten when they were besieged by the world? Given that scenario, he figured they'd instead sat down and counted the hundreds of Mexicans that had come to kill them. The tally no doubt gave them a great sense of calm by the time the artillery started firing. Jonah fell backwards into the grass, facing the window where Samson continued to regard him as an oddity, a weirdo.

"Samson! Here's the thing. I need your help."

Though thoughtfulness played across his face, Samson submerged back out of sight. Jonah lay on his back, Santa Anna storming the battlements, and patiently waited

for his brother to reappear. He didn't. Instead, the house fell back under the same deserted stillness. Jonah toyed with the idea that a third family member had died in the home, that Samson now wandered its interior as a ghost, less haunting than he had been when alive, and there was a part of him that rather liked the idea. Particularly considering that exorcists were still available for hire.

“It's about your book. Your second book.” The exclamation came with the suddenness of a popping balloon. Within seconds, Samson was visible in the window again, first the crazed eyes, then the inquisitive face.

“Yeah, Samson, your stupid book.”

What do you know? He wrote.

“Heard from your publishers lately? Or maybe Olivia, your agent?”

Samson shook his head. Tiny pieces of something, dandruff probably, but just as likely snow or cocaine, were flung out of his beard.

“Yeah, I know. I know because you've probably spent the last six months admiring the metaphor of the unceasingly ringing telephone or some bullshit. I know because Olivia says you haven't turned anything in. Your deadline is coming up, they're just gonna cancel the whole deal if you don't come through.”

Samson wrote on a fresh piece of paper with more achingly slow diligence than ever before. **It's not done.**

Jonah reared up off the ground, hopping up onto his feet with an accusatory finger raised up. “Well, if you're spending a minute writing three words at a time with a crayon,

that doesn't particularly surprise me. They need pages though. They need pages or it's over. You have to give them something. Give them a chapter, the introduction. Give them the personal bio that you wrote with your own feces. I know you've at least got that. And, look, I don't even care that much. This isn't for me. It's for Olivia. She needs this, man. She believes in you enough that you're practically her only client and now you're gonna just--" The final words of the sentence, 'abandon her,' died in Jonah's mouth before he could say them. Those he kept inside.

Somehow, the battlefield between the two brothers reversed, with Jonah feeling the palisades rise up around him. Samson's face seemed to clench as his eyes widened and his chin slightly reared up. The two simply breathed, Jonah slack and confused about what had just occurred, Samson maintaining the visage of a prophet walking down Mount Sinai. For a moment, one Jonah hoped would remain a miniscule and solitary apogee, he could see their father in the lines of Samson's face, in the perplexed intensity of his expression. Suddenly, Samson's hand darted up and the blinds on the window were roughly shut.

It took a few seconds for Jonah to realize that he had been dismissed. He turned back down the concrete pathway, stunned, and began ambling, each step laborious. Halfway down, almost seamlessly, he whipped around and pumped his legs into a furious walk back towards the house, his fists squeezed tight, and his chest inflating as he drew in a sharp breath.

“You know what? I'm glad you're losing the book deal. I tried reading your first book because, well, you're still my damn brother. I couldn't even get through it. Who were you to paint things that way? I don't know why the whole world, from Suzy reading on the metro to whatever hopped-up panel of eggheads thought to give you of all things a prize in literature, didn't follow my example. I don't know why they didn't see right through you. You locked yourself up in your house and in your head and the world applauds you, thinking there's something you know in there that says something about what's out here. You're a damn mystery to them; where all that comes from. People thought you were writing about mountains and you were just talking about pebbles I watched you stumble over when you were still a kid. And you haven't even changed since then. Olivia thinks you're a fucking genius, like you're solving the Grand Unified Theory of People while barely being one yourself. I'm the only person in the world that knows what a fraud you are, because I know you, I know who you are. I know that you don't know a damn thing about anything. You've lied to all of them, first and foremost to Olivia, who thinks of herself as your fucking curator. She, at least, deserves to know the truth. That you're nothing. You're not a writer! You've got nothing! You don't have a thing to say to me, let alone the world!”

And here was the trump card. The coupe de grace. Jonah could feel the turned gaze of the parade-watchers as he said it. If anything was going to persuade Samson, this was it.

“And you know what? I'm just going to write it myself. I'm going to fill up pages and pages with Jonah Lefevbre and I'm gonna throw your name on it. I'm sure it, too, will be considered literary genius. You think I can't do it? You think I can't copy the master? Here we go: 'Big ole sunlight like momma likes came in through the window shaped like all those squares back in high-’”

Within seconds, a stack of typewritten pages were dumped through the mail slot of the front door, binge vomited out onto the faded welcome mat.

The papers had come out too quickly. Obviously, at some point in his rant, Samson had been in motion, out of earshot on the stairwell, and Jonah had no way of knowing which of his words had actually reached him. He walked over to the pile and sorted them together. At the top of the first page hung the giant words, 'The Book of the Dead - Chapter One.' He placed his ear to the door, but he couldn't hear footsteps or movement from inside. Grabbing his keys, he tried the lock again, with the same results.

in print.

When they were young, nine and fourteen, Donald forced Jonah and Samson to play chess against each other while he sat nearby and watched.

Samson had never played before, but it held no challenge for him. On the third game, he beat Jonah in four moves. Their father didn't applaud, just turned to Samson and nodded. Jonah, teary-eyed, hung his head in shame. They kept playing, however, always two gladiators before their father's Caesar. By the time Jonah was ten, he was spending time in the library reading strategy books, looking up tips for the game. It became more of an obsession than a love, a need to try out the different gambits, the recreation of moves from famous world championships.

One day, he won a game. It was the culmination of preparation that had hit Rocky training montage levels. Before he walked out of the room, their father had even smiled, though apparently straight at the chessboard between them rather than either of his sons.

"Maybe he let you win," Olivia had offered after he told her the story. An hour later, they were both going to bed angry.

Thinking back, though, Jonah remembered Samson hunched above the chess board, long, dirty strands of hair falling down in front of his face as he watched Jonah sweep a bishop across six straight squares to complete a checkmate. To say there was a reaction would have been a gross exaggeration. Samson had traced the previous moves with his eyes, zipping around to where they had exchanged queens, where Jonah had trapped his pawns, where the white knight had stood biding his time, putting pressure on

squares in order to corner the black king. He reached for one of his rooks, reconsidered, placed the same hand up to his fuzzy chin and slowly nodded. While Jonah watched, eager for the first declaration of defeat so that he could begin pumping his fists in the air, jumping up and down, anything, Samson simply got up, shrugged, and walked away, following their father out of the room.

Something of that game resonated in Jonah still and always had. It wasn't his only victory over his brother, but the strange truth was that they had never played chess again. Whether it was because Samson had grown tired of it or their father never demanded it, he didn't know for sure. Maybe the victory meant the torture was no longer effective. Maybe the whole ordeal had been to advance his skills.

The temptation to crack open his brother's writing grew as he drove home. It had taken him years to finally sneak away Olivia's copy of *Impetus Lost*, to read it in its entirety while no one was home, but this was an opportunity to see his brother raw and unedited, at his most vulnerable. Potential vindication, of a sort, lay just around the corner.

This time, he managed to actually reach his Hollywood apartment, effectively a storage unit for almost a year now. There were unopened boxes stacked in the corners, unopened mail piled up at the foot of the door. There was a coffee table in the living room, almost snug with the base of a beaten, vanilla leather couch. A TV, adequate but too small for the stand it was on, stood across from them. A painting, one of Liben's

abstract color explosions, hung on a wall. That was it for everything from the doorway until the kitchen.

Settling in on the couch, his hands a touch sweaty, Jonah cracked the manuscript open.

The Book of the Dead – Chapter 1

This was real. At one end of the bed, a fragrant, spring wind blew a pair of ragged curtains akimbo to reveal green country hills slowly bisected by the steady outgrowth of locomotive smoke. The train was distant enough to be nearly silent, but it was the only visible movement outside the cave-like darkness of the room, whose flickering shadows and oak browns of the spool furniture danced with the curtains. It was 1909, but the Man had lost track of the months, let alone the days, and soon even the year would become inconsequential once he slipped free of his native England. The journey didn't have a set schedule or a time limit, short of his life, and once he arrived in alien places there would be little left but the walk around the world.

The Man's name was Harry Bensley, but it was now a secret name. He had, in effect, sold it along with his free will in the hopes that complete ruin in life would be avoided. Since then, the only times he ever truly felt like himself were shortly before sleeping and in the moments after waking up. The location didn't matter, as he had already stayed at almost two hundred inns, taverns and bed-and-breakfasts throughout Great Britain, but it was feeling the breeze on his face, rather than his own returned breath, or even the warmth of sunlight on his cheeks. It had been almost a year since he had felt the sun in any manner except framed by a window, since he had begun carrying a jail cell on his shoulders.

He lifted up a bare foot and held it up towards the distant locomotive, pretending the smoke was curling around his toes and winding up his leg. As soon as there was a

knock on the door, he'd have to begin his morning routine, but until then he wanted to feel undisturbed and indisposed, ineffably occupied with the simple pleasures of staying in bed. He wanted to feel the wind in the long whiskers above his lips or a friendly hand pushed through his hair.

There was a knock on the door.

The Man rolled over onto his side as the door was opened by the Minder, whose pock-marked, working class countenance still bore a film of dried sweat, the morning dew of a hangover he had clearly worked all night to earn. The Minder, already dressed in a travel-worn suit capped off with a badly beaten bowler hat, quickly shut the door and strode into the center of the room.

“Good morning, guv'nor,” the Minder said.

“For once, you and I agree on a matter of taste,” the Man responded.

The Minder shrugged and put his hands into his pockets. “Lady downstairs says there be breakfast here, but you wouldn't know it by the smell. Threw her some coin anyway, said she can bring it up when it's finally looking ashy.”

The Man eased up into a sitting position. “Does this establishment at least have a water closet nearby?”

“Down the hall and to the right, but I just pissed out the window.” The Minder waved a hand in front of himself. “I like feeling the breeze.”

The Man smiled at the Minder in the way one does towards a harmless, but petulant child. As he stood up, the lean muscles of his body stretched and strained against

the previous night's rigor. It wasn't necessarily a healthy leanness, at least not one achieved through exercise or athleticism, like the bodies of the young men with whom he had shared time on the pitch, school colors stretched out over paragons of vitality and youth. Instead, the flesh he had accumulated through so many evenings of motionless leisure in cigar clubs and at card tables had fallen off him like chicken meat while it's boiled for its bones.

When the Man angled his body in order to move through the small room and past the Minder, the Minder grunted and kicked a foot under the Man's bed. From underneath came the tuneless note of a cymbal crash. The Man knelt down beside the bed.

“Really, you should be lauded for your fortitude of attitude,” the Man said. “Are you my friend or my warden?”

“You're a silly bastard. We could stop this whole game whenever, you know. Finally gets my god damn ass out of Europe.”

“God damn arse. You're no longer in America. Please, be blasphemous properly if you can't do it artfully.”

The Minder searched the room for a spittoon, then ejected a massive wad of chewing tobacco out through the window. “Fucking arse.”

From under the bed, and with some effort, the Man removed an aged helmet, normally belonging on top of a suit of armor. A keen eye would have been able to place it at some storied point in history, of the War of the Roses or the Hundreds Year War, but

none was to be found in the room. What instead was apparent was it was old, very old, and it no longer inspired awe in those that saw it.

“Down the hall and to the right?”

“Hell, piss wherever you want.”

The Man placed the helmet over his head. Since its actual function was to deflect a glancing blow from a mace upon some warrior whose bones had long since given additional life to the soil of England, its ironclad symmetry was thick and heavy, a weight felt on the neck and shoulders while the Man’s head was able to turn freely inside. It was, in effect, a birdcage, though one that echoed his chirping back onto him.

The Minder smiled at him. The creases that appeared on the Minder’s drink-swollen face reminded the Man of a shaven, well-fed cat. “Every time, I feel like I should salute you.”

“Likewise,” the Man said. “Bon voyage.”

“England expects youse all to do your duty.”

The Man sighed and he could feel his morning breath bouncing back. As with so many things, it was pointless to correct the Minder. He left the bedroom and walked down the hallway. The eye-slits in the helmet were multiple, but narrow, letting the world bleed in through perpendicular gashes. The sounds came in muffled and directionless, with the pattering engines, and horsecarts, and street rabble of outside pulsing in equally from the floor, walls, and ceiling. He was only ever confident in his own footsteps.

In the water closet, he shuffled over to the toilet and fumbled at his underclothes. They were the same pair that he had begun the journey in, the only change of clothing he had been allowed. Every night he washed and dried them before once again slipping them back on in order to go to sleep in an often cold bed. At those times, he was as nude as a newborn, rubbing soap into the fraying fabric as the sun set on yet another English hamlet.

As he let loose a stream, he had to tilt himself forward in order to not soil the floor around him through lack of accuracy. Steadying himself by placing a hand on the wall above the toilet, he could feel the weight of the helmet slide onto the back of his skull, cool as it pushed in through his hair. He could feel his insides emptying even as the pressure on his head seemed to grow.

He was already stepping back into the hallway when it occurred to him that he could have simply taken the helmet off while relieving himself. He hesitated in the doorway, wondering whether to step back in, but instead he continued back to his bedroom, where the Minder sat on the floor in front of a plate of food scraps with an envelope in his hand.

“A letter for you,” The Minder said. “Someone left it with the innkeeper last night.”

“What is it?”

“A marriage proposal.”

The Man took off his helmet, opened the letter and read aloud the contents. ““You do not know who I am, but I have seen you and heard of you. I believe that I have all of the qualities you would desire in a bride, one that would ensure a well-kept home, a large and beautiful family, and that every day was more happy than-”” The Man crumpled up the paper and threw it down on the ground.

The Minder revealed three more envelopes. “Suppose you don’t wanna be reading these either?”

“Not particularly. You’re not a married man yourself?”

“Who says I ain’t?”

“Well, if you did, why aren’t you with her?”

The Minder grunted. “Maybe I prefer that she be missing me. You want any of this?”

The Man sat down on the ground by the plate and removed the helmet. “Of course. I don’t believe I’ll be eating again today.” He eyed the Minder. “By any chance, while being the toast of the town last night, hear of any place we can set up the wares?”

“You’re the toast, I’m simply drinking it.”

“Well, I happen to have heard the races are in town. We should get to work there, they may draw quite a crowd.”

“We?” The Minder shrugged. “It’s not my work if I get paid either way.”

“You do want to get out of England, don’t you?”

“I’d like a lot of things, certainly, but I reckon you can tell I have never worked enough for any of them.”

Before this journey, the Man hadn’t worked for anything either, but he didn’t say this. He forked bits of scrambled eggs into his mouth and chewed. As soon as he was done, he put the plate aside and began putting on his usual outfit.

When they came downstairs, Cordelia, the rotund, finger-chewing proprietor of the inn rushed over to thank them for their business and made sure to hug the Man and to shake the Minder’s hand. She was about half their height, bent over with age, and time had taken a good amount of her teeth as well. The Man smiled, but she couldn’t tell, so he simply bowed slightly and said, “Our heartfelt thanks for everything.”

The Minder nodded next to him. Cordelia raised a finger and disappeared from the room, only to reappear with a framed photograph. It was the same postcard that the Man sold to pay for his food, lodgings, and passage through England, one simply of him, in helmet and monochrome, black uniform, next to his only other possession, a baby carriage where he kept accumulated knickknacks and stacks of the postcards. It was one that was in fashion at the time of its purchase, with a certain elegance to its design, the spokes in the wheels thin as spider webs and the cover above the hollow where the supplies were stacked was half unrolled to look like a monk’s cassock.

“It’s going on the wall,” Cordelia said.

The Man and the Minder bid farewell to Cordelia and the Man assumed his responsibility pushing the baby carriage out of the inn and into the road. As they left the

more impoverished part of town, where folk still emptied pales of piss and trash onto the unpaved streets for the horses to trample on, the stares of the street-lining pedestrians increased as the dirt became cobblestone. The fancier the clothing, the more pronounced was the gaze, as high society afforded its ability to gawk at the peculiar. The noonday drunkards and streetwalkers hadn't felt the need. Up ahead was the racetrack, where losing one's coin was still as fashionable as the morning suit, and the smells of horses and the sounds of hooves wafted in on the outlying streets.

“What exactly did you do for J.P.?”

“What's with all the questions?”

“After all this time, I suppose I'm feeling like getting to know you.”

“Are ya now?”

“I'll be honest, chap. I never thought you'd stick around.”

The Minder laughed. “I'd never worked for Mr. Morgan. Or his company. I was a porter on the ship he came over in. Coulda been me or the next guy, I figure. Except the next guy's a shit, because I'm the one who's got the easiest gig in the world.”

“You find this easy?”

“Beats lugging.”

The Man swiveled at the waist so that he could look over at the Minder, but the Minder was occupying himself with whistling and peeking into storefronts. They walked wordlessly until the racetrack, where the Minder was able to observe the Man setting up shop on a corner across from the buzzing gates. With that, he belched, rubbed at his

stomach, and assumed a watch post on the other side of the closest pub's window, throwing glances over when he wasn't distracted by the whip of a dress fluttering by. The Man paced around the baby carriage, touching up the sign that hung on its side in order to catch some passerby's eye and occasionally dancing to any song that was bellowed out from an open pub door or played by a passing street fiddler. Slow dances were less draining.

Hours passed, the routine hours of a vendor, no matter how exceptional his stock, as customers came and went with their typical rhythm. More often people stopped to gawk from a distance or even look him over with a particular distaste. In those moments, the Man had already worn to the bone any emotion linked to shame or humiliation.

“How much for one?”

The voice was one aged by drink, decades and tobacco, though made pleasant by the experience as a fine oak barrel does to brandy. The Man turned to find a large form standing a few paces away from him, impeccably dressed in a stroller and homburg hat even while owning a body too rounded for the crisp lines of contemporary fashion. Instead, the lowest suit button was left unclasped in order to allow a bit of girth to reveal itself, creating the impression of two suit jacket lines of perspective leading right up the majesty-imbued body to the elegant, white beard of the most well-known man in England, India, and the British Dominions.

“My Lord,” said the Man, shaken, and bowed down from the waist. Through its centuries, the helmet was no stranger to the motion, and he could once again feel it

through his hair. After straightening, the Man hesitated, realizing that King Edward VIII was waiting for a response, and quietly said, “A penny, sir.”

Edward glanced around at his entourage, a mixture of lords, attendants, and prominent townspeople. All of them were dressed for the races and apparently had just left the event. “Who has a penny?”

To a man, everyone’s pockets were checked and checked thoroughly. There was an overabundance of pounds, notes and coins that were looked at with reluctance and, after being weighed with a look at the Man, put aside. Change was made and exchanged. The stocks were consulted. Possibly some deeds to Kenyan farmland was bought and sold. Finally, one man, in a top hat and tails, walked over and placed a penny in the Man’s hand while his own was covered in a white glove, then just as quickly retreated into the crowd.

“Everyone carries my face in their pocket,” Edward said. “That seems silly for me. I’d say put all the faces of British citizenry on the pennies, we’ve probably got just enough of them floating around. However, I’m told that’s not terribly practical.” Edward glanced back at the entourage, all of whom continued their role as daily spectators of the king’s habits. “But that’s only because some faces aren’t worth the penny they’d be living on. Yours, I hear, no one knows.”

“Yes, sir,” the Man said and handed Edward a postcard. “How was your horse today?”

“It ran, that much I can say. Know something about gambling, do you?”

“Your Majesty, I’m a gentleman, and once knew the horsetracks as my home. Unfortunately, the prizefights and the tables as well.”

There was something in the way Edward held himself that was affable, almost grandfatherly. His face had a shifting, melting quality, vacillating between the hardness of concentration and the softness of internal laughter, a pendulous motion that rode the waves of whatever he was listening to.

“I suspect that may be not the only thing we have in common,” Edward said, ignoring the impatient foot-shifting of the Empire’s backbone in a half-circle behind him. “But now you do this?”

“For a year now. It was my last wager.”

At this, Edward’s Father Christmas visage broke out into a broad smile. “Finally, someone is speaking my language.” He called out over his shoulder, “Hear that, boys? That’s what English sounds like.”

The Man cleared his throat, a sound amplified and echoed by the helmet until it buzzed in his ears. “I would like to sell a postcard to any of your men that are willing, Your Majesty. It’s my only form of employment. I am unable to raise money in any other way.”

“God, I know. I’ve heard of you, you’ve been gossip, old boy. Mind you, they will.” Edward easily slipped resolution into the tone of his voice. “Every man here will buy your postcard, provided you tell me the whole wager that got you here. The wager and the stakes.”

The Man nodded. “The wager is simply the only way I can get my life back. Once, I was a man of considerable taste and resources, but now I am in horrible debt, enough to send me to a pauper’s prison if not a potter’s field. My only chance was to agree to a gamble for one hundred thousand American dollars from a man of my acquaintance that I encountered while hoping to regain my luck.”

“All of that money simply to walk around England with your head in a can?”

“Not quite,” the Man said and felt himself warm up. Edward had made him feel cheap. “It’s not just around England, where I have almost finished walking to over a hundred specific towns and areas, but around the entire world. Europe. China. India. I can not be recognized by anyone, thus the helmet. No one can know me. I can not have a job, but I must finance myself completely. Thus I sell these postcards. I must walk the entire distance and push a baby stroller. I am attended by a man hired by the American who oversees me and ensures that I do all of these things.”

Edward’s grin began to fade more quickly than before, sliding off his face and disappearing like a runny omelet. “You must think you’re the most miserable man in the world.”

“By the end of the trip, the last requirement is that I must be married. Married, though no one can know me or see me.”

“And a bachelor at that.”

“I have no choice; this is what I must do. This is my life.”

“Tell me, are you at the beginning of your journey or the end?”

“With what your men give me, I’ll be able to leave England and sail to Europe.”

“That’s good, that’s good.” Edward stepped closer, his prominent belly only several feet from the Man. “Would you care to know that I envy you?”

“Your Majesty, I don’t understand.”

“See, there’s commonality. You can’t know me either.” Edward stepped back, sighed theatrically and looked down at his postcard. “I suppose the wager means you can’t autograph this, my boy?”

The Man shook his head. “Not without breaking the rules.”

“Honorable, too. You know, from all I heard, I had been expecting someone more cheerful. Rakish. Adventurous.”

The Man looked Edward over. “Your Majesty, so was I.”

A smile teased its way back through Edward's beard. “Good day.”

As the entourage departed, each buying a postcard and cavalierly tipping their hat to him, a new crowd surged in, eager to retrace not just the King’s footsteps, but his spending habits.

Hours later, the Man was stacking bills, a pound at a time, and counting loose change as the Minder approached, a wobble to his walk and a blush to his face.

“I pray you were aware that you were talking to a working woman over there,” the Man said without glancing up from the cash.

“Oh, good,” The Minder grinned. “Here’s me worried I'd been too forward.”

The British sun was setting over the lands of England behind him. The customers were thinning out and the Man closed the baby carriage. Gray clouds had formed overhead and a slight drizzle began, each droplet caught by the helmet streaming in to puddle at the base of the Man's neck.

“Done good today, you did,” the Minder said.

“It means a roof over our head tonight and a ship under our feet soon enough.”

The Minder yawned, stretching his arms out over his head. “How about some drinks tonight? On me.”

Though unseen by the Minder, the Man smiled. “Leave a few bottles in my room tonight, if I don't drown on the walk home.”

That night the Man drank alone, one foot resting on the helmet at the foot of his bed, and watched the lights of the town shimmer outside the window between long sips of ale that did little to numb the ache of his shoulders.

Upon finishing, Jonah leaned back and lay on the couch, letting the blankness of the ceiling above him help coalesce his thoughts.

“So this is what she wants,” he said to himself. “Personally, I’d say it could use some badgers in fezzes.”

between friends.

Their feet slipped on the moist ground as they went down towards the water, Jonah excitedly moving as fast as the little slides of his feet allowed him, Liben swiveling in all directions, his lips ajar and his breath coming out in tight, little puffs. Behind them, the headlights from Lincoln Boulevard rolled by like method out will o' the wisps, visible through the blades of wetland grass that poked up higher on the embankment. When those were no longer visible, the muffled rumble of the engines could still be heard, inescapable. There were no bird calls, or animals rustling through the growth, no splashing in the water except debris dislodged by Jonah and Liben as they made their way down. It was late and there were bouts of complete silence except for their scrambling, the beginnings of long minutes where no one in the area had anywhere to go or had already long since arrived.

An hour earlier, Jonah had pounded on Liben's door until Liben, his face a complete blank despite the time it took him to open the door, had finally appeared.

“Come on,” Jonah had said. “I want to show you something awesome.”

Liben peered at him. “I've been seeing awesome things all night.”

“It's a special occasion. Trust me.”

Liben had fidgeted around without looking thoughtful, playing with his dreadlocks and occasionally becoming fixated on a wall socket or empty space.

“It's good news,” Jonah had added.

“Good news.” Liben nodded and followed Jonah out, twice going back to check if he had locked the door. “But, really,” he had asked during the second time, “what does this lock really do?”

Jonah had seen the boat on a drive to a familiar spot on the beach, flipped over a few meters from where Lincoln crossed Jefferson, the beginnings of the Ballona Wetlands Preserve. The area itself was largely unfamiliar to him, but crossing through the effectively isolated beach town was the only way to get onto a particular crest just above Ocean Vista. It was a residential road, with tightly packed houses on one side and a view of the ocean below on the other. When they were dating, when moments like it swelled in their chests without any premonition for how they'd feel echoing in the same place, Olivia and Jonah would come there to watch the sun set beyond the distant sands and waters. They sat on the hood of the car so that they could feel the wind and coming chill on their faces, drawing closer as the light around them turned to streetlamp orange, before the cliché of the moment caught up to them and they had begun simply spending their evenings watching Jeopardy.

He had smiled when he saw that their usual space was somehow still empty, as if their hastily drawn 'Reserved for *Olivia and Jonah*' sign, scotch-taped to the guard rail, had not only been respected but remained despite years of brisk ocean breeze. The smile didn't linger long, setting with the sun. Cars drove by, the beach below emptied out. The seagulls stayed, looping around in the sky and the hungriest of them dipping down to investigate the castoffs. Jonah stayed in the car, watching the minutes change on the

dashboard clock, hearing the tick in his head. When he turned the engine back on, the sound felt more real than the color of the world outside, than the chillness of the wind sweeping up from the waters below. It felt like failure. Pulling out of the space, he had to hit the brakes hard at the sudden horn, the incoming car turning the bend just behind him and then disappearing further down the crest.

Then he remembered the boat.

“Where did you get this thing?” Liben asked.

“I didn't get it anywhere,” Jonah said, walking around it. It didn't take more than a few steps, being a tiny aluminum dinghy barely six feet long. “Help me flip it over.”

Liben's head whipped around and he stared off into the grass. Jonah flipped the boat over himself and nodded, satisfied, when nothing but two seats, bolted-on plastic planks, were revealed from underneath. The absence of hissing, rabid rodents was pleasing. Even the fact that it floated once pushed out into the water was refreshing. While Liben stood, motionless, Jonah searched the grass around the edge of the water for paddles. Instead, he came up with a broom and a half-rotten plank of wood, possibly a fencepost from the guardrail above them. He walked over and handed Liben the broom.

“Oh, I see,” Liben said, but stayed still.

“Look, it's some Tom Sawyer shit. Like on a raft. You want to paddle instead?”

“I just don't understand this boat thing.”

“It'll be fun. Get in the boat and life will be a little different.”

“My life, man.” Liben exhaled sharply, his eyes momentarily wild. “Change my life, man.”

“Are you getting in or not? I don't want to go out there by myself.”

Liben took a few halting steps towards the boat, then retraced his steps to test out the suction of the mud against his feet. “Like I'm taking moon steps,” he said. “But the opposite.”

“Can you take some moon steps into the boat?”

“I think so.”

Jonah hadn't expected the boat to feel as small as it did once they both got in. The boat sank quickly, leaving the water level barely a few inches below the edge. Liben had to sit with his knees up by his elbows, shifting around them as he used the broom to push the boat into, at most, slightly deeper water. Facing Liben, and looking back over his shoulder to navigate, Jonah used the plank to steer them past an outgrowth of reeds and deeper into the preserve.

They rowed silently until the bank where they had found the boat disappeared into the black strip that surrounded the wetlands, between the moonlit radiance of nearby vegetation and the amber coals of civilization. Nothing shown brighter than a corporate logo that hung just above the nearby intersection, a pale white watchful eye. On the other side was a long bluff that was topped with first long, sloping backyards and finally a housing development that perched unceasingly along the entire edge. Jonah rowed

harder, pushing them further into the center of the preserve, but its limits remained clear and static, the reeds never high enough to hide them from view.

Jonah slumped into the nose of the boat, his legs shifting forward to rest against Liben's. Liben stopped rowing as well, letting his thousand-yard-gaze seep into the spaces between the reeds and into the unknown, but almost certainly shallow, depths below the boat. Jonah found this to be a far more interesting sight than the vacant, corporation-built, corporation-lit marsh, watching Liben's surprised reaction at the flutter of the blades in the breeze or the ripples left in the boat's wake.

“Like it out here?” Jonah asked.

“You're right,” Liben said. “Changed my life.” There was a gruff, complete seriousness in his voice. “Change your life?”

“No,” Jonah said and smiled. “I'm disappointed that you can see the buildings. I thought it was going to be an adventure.”

Liben nodded, then looked over and gasped a little. “It is to me, brother.”

“Really?”

“Really. We should go camping. Right now.”

Jonah laughed. No birds flew up out of the brush in response.

He let his head rest on the nose of the boat, a few long, red locks dipping their tips into the rippling water. Above was the typical Los Angeles sky, the color of scabbing, a purple swirl where elsewhere there was infinity. The facts on the ground shined too bright for the stars. Once, while Olivia apologetically took a call inside the honeymoon

suite, Jonah walked out onto the balcony and into the Costa Rican night. Since then, he had wanted to paint every sky with what he had seen.

“Camping,” Liben said. His voice was monotone, resolute. “You get to do a lot in nature. Nature is like the ultimate filter, because it's breathing, and it's alive. Life recycles. Not like the city. You should change your life.”

“My life is changing. Not like yours is about to, but it's changing. I saw Olivia again. She needs me. I mean, basically she needs things from Samson, but she needs me. All I had to do was get the first chapter for Samson's new novel so the publishing company doesn't drop him. You know, he must be a millionaire from sales on that first book, with what his second advance is.”

“Who?”

“What? Samson.”

“Fucker, that's mine. He's got my money.”

“What?”

“He's got my money, man,” Liben said, earnest.

“You haven't been making sense all night. What the hell are you on?”

Liben frowned. “I'm on acid, brother. But what I'm trying to say is that I bought his book. Gave him my money.”

“You're on acid right now?”

Liben gave a long, slow nod.

“Well, shit,” Jonah said. “Why?”

“I, uh...” Liben looked down at his hands, seemed to be counting his fingers. He started following the creases in his palms with his fingertips, shaking a little as if he was tickling himself. “I had this acid this morning. A few tabs.”

“What's it like?”

“Sublime. We're cool now. Sometimes, though, it's terrifying. Sometimes it's beautiful. I mean, I see everything right now. I see the heartbeat in the reeds, man. Though, lately, I've been feeling hammers.”

Jonah suddenly understood the nearly repressed wonder that occasionally played over Liben's face. He had wanted to bring Liben out to tell him about the decision to allow him to install his art pieces, but Liben was already mesmerized by everything but Jonah. Something about this tugged Jonah down, took away something he had felt was rightfully his.

“That good, huh?”

“I can't say it's *good*. It just is.”

“Yeah, well,” Jonah said and chuckled. That felt halfhearted. “Slip me some sometime.”

“Oh, sure.” Liben had slide both massive arms into the water. He looked over his shoulder at the luminescent corporate logo. “It'd be a good thing, we got the sky visiting.”

“You never told me you read Samson's book.”

“It's good.”

“Really?”

“I felt it.”

“Where?”

“In my brain, motherfucker.”

“Your brain is currently in low earth orbit.”

“Didn't you read it?”

“Sure, I read it,” Jonah said and wondered if there was enough derision in his voice. “I read the beginning of his second book too.”

“Just the beginning?”

“That's all he's written.”

“That is some amazing shit. You're seeing art in motion. Like you're at the base of a watermill.”

“That would put me underwater. Look, it's not art. At all. It's pretentious bullshit. It's set like one hundred years ago and on one hand it's a true story about someone the world has rightfully, completely forgotten about and on the other hand it's some sort of metaphor or allegory for I don't even know what. The inability for the common man to relate to others. The road of destiny that we all travel on. The shield that we all put up around ourselves as we go about our lives. It's fucking nonsense, man. The characters don't even have names, just phony stuff like that. Look, it's 'The Man,' what could he possibly be representing? It's just stupid shit. And yet, a million dollars.”

“Well, his first book-”

“So's his first book. Don't tell me it's good. Don't. You never knew him like I did. You just knew him as the guy that stopped cutting his hair when we were twelve. That book is just him and his bullshit with Mom, his bullshit with Dad. Threw in quotes right from life taken out of context, that asshole. You know, Mom was a saint. Damn it, maybe Catholic enough to literally be one. And he threw this character into his book just so he could caricature her.”

“And you?”

“No,” Jonah said and sighed. “Thank God. Definitely had the dog in there though.”

“Jonah?”

“Yeah?”

“I meant, wasn't that the dog's name?”

“Right. Yeah.”

“Wait, we were talking about Olivia.”

“What?”

“I could have sworn we were talking about Olivia.”

They had drifted between two rows of tall reeds, and one of the lonely clouds cut into the moon like a knife. For a moment, Liben was barely visible, despite being only a few feet distant. Though that had nothing to do with speaking, it gave Jonah a moment to contemplate for a moment where he was. He was in near pitch darkness surrounded by a

halo of city lights, but there, at least, was his best friend, tripping big, fluorescent, mind-blowing balls, but at least they were literally in the same boat.

“How's that acid treating you?”

“It's winding down. I'm serious, by the way. I'm going to slip you some. You need it.”

“I thought we were going to have an adventure. We're just two guys in a boat too small.”

Liben shrugged. “So, you don't want to stay here, then?”

“No,” Jonah said, not knowing that this was the last time he'd be this close to serenity. He picked up the broom and began beating against the surface of the water to get them to move.

of the day.

They parted ways, returned home. Jonah fell asleep with great difficulty. It was the next day's dusk by the time he was able to gather the courage to face Olivia again, even with the manuscript in his possession. Something about it had sapped him slightly. To his right, a picture was already being painted with broad, smoggy brush strokes. Ahead, rolling down the slant of the 405 as it cut north through the mountains, joining together as a caravan of headlights, came a steady stream of the valley-wise, as golden as the sun's own piss. Liben once told him, night doesn't arrive in Los Angeles, it leaks out of its pores like the same fumes that color the sunset, that give it such a tourist-impressing vivacity, something to play in before it all gets soaked back in with the dawn. Jonah had smiled and shrugged.

The day before, he had anticipated that the drive to his house, his former house, Olivia's house, would feel triumphant and exhilarating, the stretch run towards an exciting finish, a culmination of months of hoping, and worrying, and dreaming. As he took the freeway towards the South Bay and watched the exits become more and more familiar, he remained undecided on whether he wanted the radio on or off. He'd turn the knob and would be impressed by the aptness of the random radio selection, something upbeat and unflinchingly saccharine, puppies dancing with butterflies, people finding true love, and the like. Then, he'd have to choose between avoiding the maudlin, the morose crooning of those lost and not found, or be forced to consider it. When that plagued the

whole of his dial, he turned the radio off completely for stretches and read the exit signs in silence.

In the passenger seat next to him was Samson's manuscript, the first chapter of *The Book of the Dead*, prized for the first time, a little bow attached to the corner of the front page.

Eventually, a little curve of asphalt previously well-worn by his tires came up amidst the billboards and rooftops at the end of the 90, a good half of the horizon around it dedicated to distant ocean even if neither the rustling sounds nor salty smells carried. A few blocks from the freeway, he pulled into the driveway of a beach town ranch-style house, what the few mutual friends they had had called a 'starter home', even if everything had finished there as well.

As part of the divorce, she had kept the house. Originally, it was meant to be sold, the money split between the two of them. One day, Jonah, without articulating why, pleading and begging in circles with nothing concrete to show for it but insistence, had gotten Olivia to keep it, with him paying half the mortgage. Every month, he deposited a check in an account to keep at least Olivia's name on a house he hadn't stepped foot into since he'd walked out on the marriage that built it.

Lights were on both upstairs and downstairs. Olivia's car was in the driveway, the same white BMW they'd taken to Playa del Rey, next to a car he'd never seen before, red and dirty and old. Not something her girlfriends would drive. Jonah walked right by it, manuscript under his arm, and knocked on the door.

It took a long time for the door to finally be opened. Long enough that he considered peeking into the windows, right through the new, mostly drawn curtains. They were vanilla with tinges of a floral pattern. He was still looking at them when the door opened halfway and Olivia, her head immediately tilting to the side, stood in the entrance.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her eyes narrowed.

She was wearing a white dress he knew she hadn't worn to the office earlier that day. Loose at the sides, tight at the hip, it wrapped her from halfway down her chest to her knees. A silver metal chain, the kind a lock could be attached to on the gates to a vast estate, spun around her waist, resting unevenly on her hips, cutting diagonally across her. Wavy strands of hair fell down to her bare shoulders. Behind her was complete silence.

Jonah made the mistake of being speechless. Instead, he held the first chapter of *The Book of the Dead* up with a smile. The smile slowly melted as the door opened up a few inches more and a man was visible inching in behind Olivia, slinking in, almost like he was seconds away from wrapping a protective arm around her waist, pulling her back inside.

“Everything alright?” the man asked.

“Everything's fine,” Jonah said, staring right at him.

The man was young, or at least had pulled off the trick of looking younger. Stringy black hair fell down over his face and his stud earrings, one in each ear. Icarefullydontgiveashit stubble spread across his cheeks, but not below his admittedly

impressive jawline. There was something softly masculine about him, in a few sharp angles that left him with the strong chin and sharp cheekbones of an emaciated, if confident, child. His brown leather jacket was unzipped, a plain black t-shirt underneath. At the sight of Jonah, he angled his head back, a friendly head-nod if it ever came back down. It didn't.

Jonah lowered the manuscript until it hung limply next to him. "Who's this guy?"

"Don't be an asshole right now," she said.

"I just didn't know you were seeing someone," he said.

Over her shoulder, the mystery man lifted an eyebrow. Over his shoulder, Jonah was able to see the first notable changes to the house. The wall of the foyer, since their second day after moving in, had held a line of old, even classic, records. Led Zeppelin. Joni Mitchell. Billy Joel. For whatever reason, they'd been rearranged. The flow, the current of album covers that he remembered, had been shuffled. The Rolling Stones' *Some Girls*, he couldn't help but notice, was gone completely. The one they'd first danced to. Not even a note in the rhythm.

Now that the door was open, enough that he and the other man were within a few feet, Jonah extended a hand. "Jonah."

"I know who you are," the man answered and didn't reciprocate. There was a tinge of aggression in his voice, the beginnings of boundaries that remained elusive.

"Oh," Jonah said, the first chapter of *The Book of the Dead* still in one hand. "Did I interrupt something?"

“Yes,” Olivia said, but her voice was softer than her eyes.

Jonah found himself situated on an unexpected front, the defensive. His feet were still parked a good foot from the threshold of the door, his own door, what had once been his own door, sinking into the concrete of the doorstep. Though he could feel the shovel in his hands, it was there to dig a hole, not a trench. Meanwhile, some phantom self, of a different life, or at least a life already lived, knew the walk inside.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I couldn’t call, my phone’s dead. I thought you might want this.”

He held up the manuscript while standing at the threshold, essentially thrusting it into their faces.

“Is this?”

“Yeah.”

Using his foot, Jonah helped the door slide shut behind him. The man, short, squat, hip, watched the door’s motion rather than Jonah’s.

“This is?”

“Yeah.”

“How is it?”

“I haven’t read it. Probably shit.”

“Okay, now I believe you. Hold on.”

She needed her reading glasses. Jonah felt a certain triumph in knowing this even as the man behind her was clearly perplexed by her retreat back into the house.

As he watched Olivia walk away, curly tangles parting to reveal tense, dark shoulder blades rising to converge, he realized Olivia's back wrote a new, leather-bound volume with every step. Lettered rather than numbered, the spines clearly spelled out G-O-F-U-C-K-Y-O-U-R-S-E-

“So, what, you're just going to hang around?” the man asked.

But it's a beautiful back, Jonah thought without looking over.

“We didn't say goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Jonah.”

There was a table in the foyer, just a wooden table below a mirror hanging by chainlinks attached to the stretch of stairs. On the other side, the jacket closet. Once upon a time, lost in fairy tale fog and countless days, there were a different set of framed photographs on the table. Now, there was a shot of Olivia and Samson at formal event, her resplendent, him oblivious. Vaguely, Jonah remembered the night that it was taken, when he was far from the main table, chasing distractions. A suit had been pushed onto Samson for an award banquet, a celebration of the success of his first novel, pride painted on the lips of everyone framed by the picture but him.

“You know,” Jonah said, a foot away from the table, “I don't really know who you are. I mean, really. Who are you?”

“Why would you?” the man said. He stepped forward, taking up most of the way out of the foyer and back into the house.

It was still his house, Jonah thought. Even if he hadn't stepped foot into it, he'd built the house. He knew the rooms. He knew the floors. No amount of rearranging the furniture changed that.

“Are you sleeping in my bed?” Jonah asked.

The man's head reared up further, as if from an unexpected slap. His earrings, jiggling like water molecules in a microwave, moved independent from him.

“The hell makes it your bed?”

“Consecrating it. God. Marriage. Stuff like that.”

Strands of oil black hair fell across the man's face as he leaned forward, his neck telescoping in surprise.

“Again, I know who you are.”

Jonah figured this was an assumption of Aristotalian levels. Celestial spheres and all that. Music of those or not, regardless. Knowing someone. Presumptuous.

“Hey, fuck you, man.”

This one, the man was prepared for. Reveled in it. Despite being several inches shorter than Jonah, he was able to puff his chest out, clench his fists shut at his sides, take a step forward as if that was enough to prepare him for whatever those steps would bring.

Somewhere inside Jonah, a manhole cover was wobbling from the stress built up underneath it, ready to blow off to reveal a geyser equal parts toxic and emotional. The things he wanted to say were there, bubbles bursting with phrases, colors tied together to

form a consciousness, a scattered thought made meaningful by the weight of what it had hanging on it.

“Hey.”

Olivia's voice cast a line between them. Still, the other man solidified his shoulders, stepped forward with an authority that Jonah found alien to the situation, smothered Jonah's sense of propriety as easily as looping passes of saran wrap.

“River, stop.”

The two had stepped forward until they were nearly abreast of each other. Olivia, reading glasses on, still looking down at the manuscript in his hands, the bow hanging limply on, walked into the foyer with a perplexed glance at both of them. That wasn't true. One of them got the slightest extra second of consideration.

“River?”

For a moment, River, the man in the leather, looked wounded. Jonah absorbed every audible syllable of his name and turned it upon him.

“I get it. River Phoenix didn't die, he just got fat.”

It was an unfair blow to every degree but the one Jonah figured he found himself in, which was that that he had shown up at his own house to find a different man enjoying the silk sheets that came with the place. Also, Olivia.

“Fat? Fat? I'm not fat. That supposed to be funny?” the man asked, stepping forward to accentuate his non-point. “I'm not even fat.”

Yes, Jonah thought. It was, in a way, supposed to be very, very funny. Funnier than the situation offered.

It wasn't funny at all. No one else thought so, anyway.

Jonah coughed uncomfortably into his hand, then opened the manuscript and held it up for Olivia to read. She scanned the first page.

“What do you think?”

“It's definitely Samson.”

“The one with the actual gift,” River added, showing a remarkable aptitude for a sleazy sort of snideness, hissing the words out through white teeth.

“The hell would you know? Did you use a classic for rolling papers recently?”

River's posture didn't change so much as evolve, starting with a sturdiness of the spine, a crease in the lips. “I'm a writer.”

“A writer. River. The writer.” Jonah chewed on the oddly familiar words, but didn't swallow until he noticed that Olivia was standing nearby, oddly quiet, darkening behind her reading glasses. “Wait a minute, are you sleeping with one of your clients?”

“Strazzo, che cazzo,” she said, nostrils flaring, the foyer elongating behind her.

“None of your damn business,” River said, stepping between the two of them.

Half a head taller than River, Jonah had no difficulty leaning past River's head and raising eyebrows at Olivia. The manuscript fell closed at his hip.

The bow had long since fallen off, lying forgotten on the floor.

“But you know who's bringing home the bacon?” Jonah asked, pointing down at the manuscript. “Me. This guy. I'm doing it.”

For a moment, Olivia's face reflected a kind of sad understanding. A puzzle solved, but in the least gratifying way. Though anger still tugged her face taut, her lips fell open just enough to communicate a different kind of emotion. “You just picked it up. You're not Samson.”

Ever the flanking artillery, River threw in, “You were just the paperboy.”

Jonah wasn't sure if Olivia flinched as she looked away from both of them, the leather jacketed artiste, the slack expression of her ex-husband. Her head turned until it couldn't anymore, facing the foyer table rather than the mirror hung above it.

“I do appreciate that you got it,” she said, kneading the syllables like dough.

Jonah took a step backward, not sure who to address, Olivia or River. Olivia seemed to have transferred all of her usual fury to River, who stood with the kind of arrogance befitting the man that actually had the woman behind him, even as ambivalent as she suddenly looked. “The paperboy?”

“Back off,” River said, completely misreading the steps Jonah was already taking.

“The paperboy?” Jonah asked again, this time past River.

“Olivia, I'll handle this.”

“Handle what?” Olivia looked back over, irritated at both of them. “Not better than I can, let it go.”

“I'm just going to throw him out.”

“No. You won't. Settle down.”

Jonah let a pleased expression escape in River's direction. One that withered when he looked again at Olivia. She looked like someone at a funeral, not even the pyre able to bring warmth to her face.

“I told you, I'll handle this,” River said. “I said if he showed up around here--”

“River, shut up. I'll take care of this.”

Jonah allowed himself a smirk. “At least I never told her what to do.”

“Yes, you did,” Olivia said, stepping forward with such potency that she might as well have physically pushed River to the side. Instead, he backed up against the wall all on his own. “You told me very clearly who I'm not married to anymore.”

There was something about the pain, the bitterness, the seething, slow magma, in her voice that struck Jonah like a tackle in slow motion, all grinding image and stretched out audio.

“Well, I'm trying to...” he started. And there was nothing he could voice. Nothing he could explain in so many words. “I got you Samson's stuff. Like you wanted.”

She slowly nodded, like to a child. “It's nice. Really. I didn't think you actually would.”

“Why not?”

“It just doesn't change anything.”

“Why wouldn't I get it?”

“Do you understand that it doesn't change anything?”

“It does. You're happy. Happier.”

“Sure,” and it was the same slow nod. Unexpected molasses when the walls of the house knew full well the brunt of lightning and tidal waves. It was a tone of voice that compelled Jonah to sit in the corner. “I don't know how you did it, but you brought me a few pages of what's probably a very long book. That's helpful. Really.”

“This is ridiculous,” River said, finally disengaging from the wall and pushing past Jonah to the door.

“Hey,” she said, clearly directed at River. He stopped. “Jonah, just give me the pages and get out.”

It was pointless to argue. That inflection, at least, he recognized. Still, finding River here had ruined the dynamic he had hoped for – this didn't feel like salvation or victory. He felt like a mongrel being thrown back into the street. This was not how he had planned it. “No. I'll come back with the whole thing. I promise. I'll get this fixed for you.”

“Whatever,” she said, fixated on River, who had frozen completely. “Okay. Fine.”

Jonah lingered for a moment, still wishing to feel the acceptance of the carpet behind her, then turned back to the door, eyes wet. River was standing there, decidedly not eager to step aside, his jacket close enough to reek of cigarettes and overyouthful spirit.

“That hurt?” River asked in a whisper as they passed. “I hope you're hurting even half as much as you hurt her.”

The sentiment was lost on Jonah. “When you're in my bed tonight,” he said in return, “I hope you die in your sleep.”

Jonah was halfway to his car before the sound of the door, his door, slamming shut was able to affect him. To shake his body a little. To make him fumble for his keys an extra second, standing with his chin tucking into his throat while he reflected in the driver's side window. He angrily threw the manuscript onto the passenger seat.

The street held none of its typical qualities as he drove away. The lamplight diluted through the branches of the sidewalk-infesting trees.

He went a few miles before he saw the first bookstore, a national chain, imprinted upon one of the usual strip malls rising up from behind nearly every turn. He attempted to park in the sprawling lot, but the height of shopping season meant it was full. Forced to park on a side street, he walked the block to get to the store with purpose, cutting right towards the sales counter once he arrived. There, a teenager, her face glistening with piercings, looked up at him apathetically.

After a few seconds of restless waiting, Jonah said, “Do you have any books by a guy named River?”

The girl flicked her eyes up at him. “Is that a first name or a last name?”

“Might be a nickname for all I know.”

The girl let out a well-rehearsed sigh and let her fingers run across the keyboard in front of her. “I'm looking. Any idea of the genre?”

The genre. Jonah laughed. “Christ, I don't know. Emotional ranting. Opportunist how-tos. Guys fucking my wife.” He paused and shrugged. “Mystery, maybe.”

The girl looked at the screen and looked back with a slightly more intense ambivalence. Her face said it all. “Maybe you should just look around?”

“The store?”

“I'm not getting anything here.”

Jonah gave what he figured was a polite nod, a smile just for extra effect, and staggered away, back into the store. He felt the directionless thrill of being drunk. Inebriation by virtue of a soulful apathy, poured on his lips from a gourd of misery.

Books, or at least bookshelves, stretched out in all directions. People managed to fill the aisles in their individuality, the college professor, the woman that earnestly loved her cats, the teenager with hopes and dreams, the pained, feckless poet, the odd prospect that did fall in love with the words. The nonfiction section, the memoirs, the creatively remembered, the lives not lived, was particularly popular, home to searching squints and little else. Jonah walked through it without a glance, pushing past what felt like an irritated mob.

He was lost in a sea of fish hooks.

As he went past them, he suddenly beheld an entire table devoted, at a discount at least, to his brother. The first book. *Impetus Lost*.

Rows lined one side of the table, upon which perched the same book help up as if on a throne, the discount sticker plastered on as a medal of honor, a recognition of mass

success. If everyone is buying, wouldn't you buy at a slightly depleted value? The sticker blocked out a solid one-fifth of the cover, which featured a golden, smiling Buddha statue amid a turquoise field. Above it all, a small banner was at the top of the table, 'Soon to be a major motion picture!'

He walked up to one practically gilded book, a store sticker emphasizing that it was a signed copy. A signed copy. Samson's signature. An added bit of intimacy. The author's pen scrawled over the author's publisher. Jonah opened it to find 'Thank you so much,' followed by his brother's usual spider's web of a hand. It stung. Bad.

He returned to his car and grabbed a pen.

Faking Samson's signature was easy enough. They'd spent hours in childhood not just practicing their own, but trying to replicate each other's. Samson had never bothered to really learn Jonah's, the tight waves of the wrist, the loops of the J, the petering out of the H. Jonah, however, knew Samson's as if it was his own, or his mother's, or his father's. As well practiced as those that graced late permission slips or absence excuse notes.

Opening the first book, he wrote 'Fuck You' and signed it with Samson's signature. It was nearly identical to the real deal. He dropped the book back on the pile. The next one he picked up, he wrote 'I Fucking Hate You, Actually' and signed that one as well.

After that, the thrill coursed through him, but he felt the need to be creative. One by one, he picked up the books and sketched a message inside them.

'Buy my book, pay for my laughs.'

'This is all real. Real bullshit.'

'Thanks for jacking me off.'

'Read this book and impress your friends, like your old photo with Donald Rumsfeld.'

'If you smell real close, I shat on every single page.'

As he put one of the last books down, he realized that one of the other store employees was standing a few feet from his left shoulder, downcast and confused. Just as young as the counter girl, the ID badge hanging on a chest yet to fully mature.

“Sir?”

“Yes?”

“Have you been marking up the merchandise?”

Pen still in hand, Jonah looked over at the employee, two-thirds his age. “Well...”

He wanted to explain that he was doing good in the world, enlightening the masses, providing understanding from the one person close enough to the author to not only fake his signature, but to legitimize the message. Instead, he watched the boy's hand creep closer to his walkie-talkie, security only one furtive button jab away.

“No,” Jonah said.

The employee looked down at the books, then back up. Jonah continued, “It's not as bad as it looks. Samson is my brother. And his book sucks balls.”

The employee appeared to take this personally. Eyes flashed with anger. “He's a literary heavy weight. He does not suck balls. Does. Not. Suck. Balls. His last book, I mean, I'd put it up there with *Ulysses*.”

“I'd compare it more to Joyce's letters to his wife.”

“I haven't read them.”

“He captured love itself and bound it within simple, epistolary prose.” And then had it fart on him, Jonah added to himself. “Really, Joyce's best work. Right up your alley.”

“I will look into that,” the employee responded pointedly.

There, Jonah decided, the day wasn't a total loss. Even a little thing, like the moment this sycophant realized that he was eye-deep in the most scatological morass that Joyce's pen, an 'is' away from what was in his other hand, could create, maybe could count as something accomplished. Opening the eyes.

“Now, sir... I'm going to have to ask you to leave. And...” The boy looked over at the books, now defiled, stacked at Jonah's midsection.

“And?”

“And pay for any merchandise you've defaced.”

Thirty minutes later, Jonah was lugging twenty copies of *Impetus Lost* through the parking lot. Unable to fit the entire bag into the storefront trashcan, he considered simply throwing it down and running, but the shopping center security guards had been quickly called in and were watching him. As he finally made it out of the parking lot, nearly

dropping the bag of Samson's literary prowess several times, he turned onto the side street he had parked on...

The car was gone.

Jonah put down the bag of books and stared at the empty parking spot that he had left his Camry in.

“What.”

The confusion stemmed from the fact that Jonah had assumed the consequences of parking tickets, specifically the unpaid ones that were stacked up on his coffee table, would bide their time while he managed to fix everything else in his life. The year of writer's block had not been good for his finances, and Jonah attempted to do the mental math in order to figure out how much he'd have to pay in order to get the car back. Then he added in how much he had just put on his credit card in order to buy twenty copies of *Impetus Lost*.

When the police arrived due to the noise complaint, they found him in the middle of the street tearing apart the pages of the last copy of Samson's book, the rest sprinkled like snowfall in a twelve foot radius around him.

on the auction block.

“So,” Jonah asked the phone, “where is it, exactly?”

The general timbre of the neighborhood around him, a quiet suburban vibrato, shamed him into not raising his voice. Still, the hand he rested on the curb while he crouched down was clenched.

“Again, yeah, the tow yard's main office is in Koreatown.” The Department of Transportation employee sounded like he was at the same time distracted by manually changing traffic lights on a big map or playing Jenga. “The actual impound is, uh, in South Central. Write this down.”

“Great. That's fantastic. That could not be less convenient. Fuckers.”

Jonah was certain that at that moment the employee shrugged. “I can hear you,” he said. “That shrug? That was loud. I could see you pretty much checking out. Seriously, this has not been my night for customer service.”

“Uh huh, yeah. Sir, have you considered that you're, uh, just an asshole?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Jonah figured he was somewhere in West LA. The neighborhood looked solidly middle-class, which meant that no one middle-class could afford them. The kind where teenagers managed to get away with only having the really stupid problems in life. That meant the lawns were all green and well-maintained with only the occasional uncollected poop from the dog owned by that neighbor everyone knew about. A curtain nearby

briefly opened a couple inches, then closed again. No interest. Streetlamps illuminated sidewalks that no one was walking on. It all existed about eight miles west of his car.

“I'm not an asshole though. In fact, I've been trying to do a little good in the world.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. I was hoping to win my wife back. So I could have love in my life and write again.”

“How excited she must be.”

“That's why I'm blackmailing my brother into giving me his book.”

“So, we're done here, right?”

Jonah hung up and looked around. There few options he had in terms of where to walk to and what to do after all seemed equally exhausting. He called Liben and after a few rings got Liben's voicemail. Re-dial, voicemail. Re-dial, voicemail. Jonah began walking. Liben's apartment was just close enough. And it seemed the best option in the middle of the night, as the bus lines began to shut down.

The walk had its share of hills and most of the time he kept his hands firmly in his pockets.

Halfway there, Jonah's cell phone rang. He looked down and saw that it was Frank, his editor, calling at a bizarrely late hour. There was no good news that he could be calling about. The alternative seemed to be that he was calling with the worst news imaginable, the kind that had to be delivered immediately even at a time most people

were sleeping. This was red telephone news. Jonah didn't pick up. He waited and waited for the voicemail tone, imagining the potential litany of disasters that Frank was recording stretching out further and further. Eventually, it was clear that no message was left, unless Frank was filibustering the voicemail system.

Jonah put the phone back into his pocket and tried to ignore the possibilities. Maybe magical badgers were being declared pornography. No, that'd mean revenue. The wind was starting to whip past and the resulting chill was easy to focus on. On the way, he swung in on a 7-11, bought a six-pack of dark beer.

Arriving at Liben's bungalow, tucked in behind a much bigger house in a quiet residential area, he tried calling one more time then began pounding on the door. Finally, the door cracked open and Liben's pale white eye seemed to float in the darkness.

“Password?” he growled.

Jonah held aloft the six-pack. Liben looked it over, shrugged, and swung the door open. “It's a start. Get in here.”

The inside of Liben's studio was sparse in terms of decoration, with off-white walls, floor, and ceiling, a kind of infinite space around the installation pieces that were the true residents, such as the massive, hollow dodecahedron coated with wax and the jungle gym hammock where he slept. It was cluttered and tight, shapes rising out of nothingness towards a tall, vaulted ceiling that still exposed ducts and wires. As they walked in, Jonah tried to avoid brushing against Liben's paint-splattered clothing, a robe and a pair of sweatpants whose whiteness was now covered by kindergartner finger-

painting, but he was too close to avoid the occasional whipping from the swaying dreadlocks.

Nearby, past all sorts of stiletto gargoyles and abstract heart valves, newspapers surrounded one of the newer sculptures, as tall as Jonah but only up to Liben's chin, with splotches of black paint accumulated on them. The paint can sitting nearby had a brush balanced on the edge and a half-smoked roach on top of the brush. Jonah walked up to it and tilted his head.

“That looks like a deer,” Jonah said.

“Well, thank you,” Liben answered. “Give me a beer.”

The two pulled out bottles, opened them, and knocked them together in a well-rehearsed, nearly synchronized motion. Out of habit, Jonah awarded them a 9.5, though the competition was lacking.

“I called you. Five times.”

“I was working.”

“I was getting fucked.”

Liben turned around. “I'm happy for you! I mean, bad sign if you've hit a point where you have to excitedly call me about it, but--”

“No, the bad way. My car got towed.”

Liben continued to paint, ensuring the complete invisibility of the deer statue in even dim lighting. As he circled around, he made no effort to avoid where Jonah was standing. Jonah harmlessly bounced off him. “That's rough, man.”

“Yeah, and I was thinking you could drive me there. Like... right now.”

Liben took a sip of his beer and shrugged. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay.”

Jonah let out a sigh and nodded. “Thank you. I'm thinking... I don't know who else I could have asked.”

“We'll take the beers with us.”

They drove Liben's Jeep Wrangler deeper into the city, arriving in Koreatown only fifteen minutes later thanks to the deserted nature of the streets. Leaving West Los Angeles meant shifting into the kaleidoscope nature of everything east of the 405 and west of the 110. Graffiti and barred windows mixed with kosher bakeries and Jamaican barbecue joints. Some places stayed as open as their doors, giving stretched out homes to the shadows of the men putting their shoulders into the thresholds and exhaling cigarette smoke at passing cars.

When they eventually found the tow office, they were greeted by a man with a big enough gap in one half of his teeth that his lip collapsed a little as he sucked away at it. He wore overalls and a dirty shirt with a name tag that said, 'Otis,' which was too cliché to take seriously. Jonah assumed that the commute from Wichita every night must have been a killer, even by Los Angeles standards.

“I'd like my car back,” Jonah said, and flinched how pathetic his tone ended up.

'Otis' shrugged. “Yeah, sure. What's your information?”

Jonah passed over his registration. The yokel walked away with it and was gone for well over five minutes. At one point, Jonah tried to peek into the office, to see if he could catch the man with his feet up drinking a beer. By the time he returned, Jonah and Liben had already patiently examined nearly every inch of the office billboard, which included such treasures as three separate ads for DUI lawyers and one for divorce lawyers. Several photographs seemed to be of repeat customers. One had the owner smiling next to a bleary-eyed Lamar Odom.

“So, how much is that total?” Jonah asked.

“One thousand two hundred and eighty-four dollars. That's the parking fees, the late fees, and then the tow fee.”

Jonah felt like he was sinking into the floor. “That seems like a lot of money to pay you for stealing my car.”

“It's the law.”

“So was the Holocaust.”

“Woah,” said Liben in the back. “A little far on the metaphor, don't you think?”

“I'm just saying.”

'Otis' smacked his lips then returned to sucking on the hole in his tooth line. “I suppose that's a darn shame. Got the money?”

“I don't. Not after buying twenty copies of *Impetus Lost*.”

The man squinted. “That any good, huh?”

“I'd highly recommend it,” Liben chimed in, “if you like to read.”

The man gave it some thought. “No.”

Jonah waved a hand to get the man's attention. “So, what happens now that I can't pay the ransom? You shoot my car in the head and send a video tape of that to its family?”

“Well, we'll just forget what you owe if you sign over the car. Then we put it up for auction.”

It took a moment, but Jonah became very, very excited. “And I can buy my own car back at the auction, right?”

“Sure.”

“Alright, hand over the paperwork.” 'Otis' slid over the release form and Jonah quickly signed it. “Congratulations, until that auction you are hereby the proud owners of a 1997 Toyota Camry, a duffel bag full of year old gym clothes in the trunk, and what must by now be a one of a kind 'Dangerous Minds' soundtrack cassette tape in the glove box. Now, when is this auction exactly?”

“Seven o'clock this very morning. Right in South Central.”

“Okay, I guess I'll just do that.” Jonah paused, halfway turned to the door. “I have to ask. What's your real name?”

“Stuart. 'Otis' is just for theme authenticity.”

“There's a theme to this tow yard?”

“That's right. This here be a theme tow yard.”

“What's the theme?”

'Otis' leaned forward and rolled his eyes. "The theme is 'tow yard.'"

Outside, Jonah checked his watch as they returned to the Jeep. "I hate to do this to you, Liben, but--"

Liben shrugged. "What else am I going to be doing tonight? Working? Sleeping? Let's find somewhere to chill out."

They drove quietly into South Central. The environment became grayer, more asphalt and coiled wire. Junk yard dogs stared at them from behind fences, most of them blurring together as they passed. Churches and liquor stores became prominent; God seemed to weigh heavily on even what sprouted out of the cracks in the pavement. There was a sense that everything, from the nightpeople to the lampposts they appeared under, was buckling slightly under pressure.

They continued on down the road until they were able to park at an overpass over the dried up half-shell that Los Angeles called a river. Grabbing the four beers left, they sat down on the lip of the stone embankment to take the occasional swallow and chat.

Hours went by, along with two beers each, in aimless conversation before Jonah simply let it out, as easily as a burp.

"Okay," Jonah said. "I couldn't do it last night, but I'll admit it now. I'm not doing too well."

"Why, man? What are you talking about?"

"I don't know. That's the problem. Like things should be going well, but they're not. Every time I think I'm finally going to get what's mine, it falls apart. I can't win. I

keep thinking I can, but then....” In the distance the sun was rising, dawn like an orange slice. “Are you doing well?”

“Sure.”

“What's your secret?”

“Didn't know I had one.”

“Am I an idiot?”

“Beats me.”

Liben looked down at the sandals on his feet, his dreadlocks falling forward to obscure his face. “Jonah, I've never said this before, but why don't you just move on?”

“Because I loved her. I fell in love once and now my heart just knows that beaten path back to her. Every time.”

“But it's over. Right?”

“Why does anything have to be over?”

“All in all, that's a very Western mindset.”

Jonah peered at Liben. “No kidding? I'm a French Catholic. You're an Ethiopian Jew.”

“Not the two most obvious candidates for changes of heart, but...” he motioned down at himself. “And, hey, look at your brother.”

“What about him?”

“He's a guru. If anyone really knew how he was living, he'd have little bald men in orange robes studying even how he takes shits. Ohhhhhhhhhmmmm. Namaste.”

Jonah slackly released his beer bottle. It hit the pavement and began rolling down, loud despite its small size, until it hit the bottom and shattered. “Why? Because he's retarded?”

“You don't ever give Samson credit, do you?”

“Because it's hard to give credit to the luckiest man in the world.”

While Liben opened up another bottle, Jonah cracked his knuckles, shifted around in his seat. Before taking a sip, Liben spent a few moments watching Jonah's squirming.

“Yeah, okay. So, you're saying he's a lucky retard. And you're jealous of that.”

“Right.” Jonah nodded, paused, then raised a finger and shook that instead. “No, wait. Not what I meant. It's just, you know.... him? Really?”

“Him what? What about him?”

Christmas, Jonah wanted to say, but the word kept meeting a premature death in his mouth. Fucking Christmas, okay?

Specifically, the year that Samson refused to open his presents, staring at them with an empty gaze instead, had been a pivotal one for the Lefebvres. Jonah had been an adolescent, still in pajamas and excited at the idea of running downstairs and tearing through the wrapping. Instead, he had arrived on a tense scene in his living room, the whole moment colored by the blinking tree lights. All of the presents were still wrapped and sitting untouched under the tree. In a chair, folded into himself like a bird, Samson sat unfocused and distant. Their parents were on the other side of the room and it was clear that Jonah had intruded uninvited upon something he couldn't quite piece together.

Their mother was actively praying, down on one knee and with a Rosary in her hands. Their father's attention was completely on Samson, looking him over as if deciphering some puzzle.

“Why aren't you unwrapping your presents?” Jonah asked.

“You can have mine,” Samson said.

Donald walked over and put a comforting hand on Samson's shoulder. Samson didn't react. For a moment, there seemed a flicker of discomfort across his features, a break in the usual blank slate, but then he sagged a little under their father's touch.

Fury built up in the young Jonah. “No! I don't want your presents!”

Samson and Donald didn't look over at him. A few feet away on the ground, their mother's praying intensified. Jonah was able to walk through the room as if he was alone, without touch or gesture or eye contact. He sat down unnoticed by the other three and clumsily tore at the wrappings. He didn't read the nametags or care to whom each belonged. Some should have elicited excitement, some were clearly meant for someone else. Jonah unwrapped them all and cast them aside, noisy and aggressive, sometimes smashing the boxes down loud enough that it rattled whatever was inside.

“Why?” Samson said, though it was directed at their father.

“Son,” Donald said.

“Hail Mary, full of grace,” continued their mother, looping back in on herself.

Jonah picked up his other beer bottle and let it follow its sibling down the side of the embankment. It landed with a satisfying crunch at the bottom. “You don't know him like I know him.”

“So, how well do you really know him?”

“I was there when he started crying because Jackie Pinkerton touched his junk. I was there when he dropped out of school and didn't leave his room for two years. Tell your bald orange men about that.” He sniffed, rubbed his nose. “I was there when he fooled the world.”

“You ever talk to him?”

“Sure.” Jonah pushed himself up off the lip. “Ready to see me bid for my own car back?”

The impound lot was located within a cluster of junkyards, two blocks off the main road and thus two blocks removed from both corner stores and churches. As they pulled up, they noticed that there was actually a crowd milling around, far more people than Jonah would have expected gathering at a car mass grave. He hadn't expected the vultures.

Most of the marauders were older, properly adorned in heavy layers for the chill morning air, grinning at each other as they walked around holding fat rolls of cash. Each looked like it had only been a slight walk from wherever they lived to the impound lot. The younger ones were equally bundled up so that only their neck and face tattoos were visible. They kept their hands in the pockets, their chins in the air. Jonah was the only

even vaguely white person there, though that attracted no attention. Conversation, outside of the pairs that huddled close to each other or circled cars together, was minimal.

Instead, the air was filled with the exuberant energy of the albino auctioneer.

Standing on a small, steel stage, flanked by PA speakers, and babbling madly into a microphone, he spit syllables with such rhythmic regularity and lack of pause that it felt more like a soundtrack than a running monologue. As the cars were presented to the vultures, identified by an orange cone placed on top of it, the auctioneer rattled off the bids, each starting only at \$100, and peppered the whole ordeal with jokes, anecdotes and off-hand references while pacing on the stage like a crow. The cars themselves were lined up in rows as if on parade before him. The carrion-eaters slunk around them, peeking into windows, kicking tires, trying to identify the debris that covered each interior. At one end was Jonah's Camry, being looked over by two tall men inexplicably wearing massive aviator sunglasses.

A small, age-withered man in an equally ancient mechanic's coverall, his skin a blemished brown, seemed to be the floormanager. He wandered the lot holding a large metal pole, helpful when not outright friendly. While Liben watched the auction in outright wonder, Jonah waved the floormanager down.

“What do you take here?” Jonah asked, and then, when the floormanager raised an eyebrow, “Like credit? Check?”

The floormanager laughed. “Cash only.”

In the distance, bids were being placed on a caved-in BMW, the remaining evidence of a car accident possibly involving a brontosaurus. “Does my little ear hear foooooooooour hundred?” came the call from the auctioneer.

“I’ve got about thirty dollars in cash,” Jonah said.

The floormanager shrugged.

“I’ve got five hundred,” Liben said. “Sold a statue last night.”

“Liben...” Jonah sighed. “You know I’ll pay you right back, right?”

“You need it more than I do.”

By the time they walked up to the Camry, the men in the aviator glasses had elected to stand by and guard it like Secret Service agents. Now, a tall, middle-aged woman in a surprisingly skimpy dress, barely walking on her high heels, cupped her hands around her face as she looked into the window.

“Oh, look,” she warbled. “Oh, look! He’s got a CD player!”

“It’s a cassette player!” Jonah quickly called out. “And it doesn’t work. Also, the cassette is the soundtrack to ‘Dangerous Minds.’ Which, I don’t know, maybe you’d like, actually.”

Heads turned toward him. He continued, “That’s my car, okay? That’s my actual car and this shouldn’t be happening.”

“Hnyeaah,” a nearby older man said, and then sincerely added, “Good luck with that.”

Still, while Jonah watched, people began floating by the Camry as the auction wrapped up. Several times Jonah considered bidding all of the cash they had on one of the junkier pieces of oldtime Detroit bowel movements. However, confidence built with every disapproving shake of the head, every upturned nose. As even gangbangers with skulls vomiting out more skulls tattooed on their necks seemed to pass on buying a Camry for their run up north, Jonah started to have a good feeling about the whole thing. If nothing else, this had turned out to be an amusing story. Car picked up due to overwhelming parking tickets, given away for nothing due to financial difficulties, then bought back at auction for less than previously owed. Presumably, since it was officially given away, the parking fees attached to it would have been cleared with a filing of a liability release. This was a smooth move. Maybe he'd actually played all of his cards right.

“Here we got a 1997 Toyota Camry, old wheels, old brakes, some ripped up seats. I can't tells, but bet ya it smells. Have I got a-”

“One hundred dollars,” Jonah said and raised his hand.

“One hundred dollars. Can I get a-”

“Two hundred dollars,” said the woman in the skimpy dress, but she sounded unenthused. Jonah could detect weakness in her bidding.

“Three hundred,” countered Jonah.

“Four hundred,” said a man from further into the crowd. He wore a hairnet and baggy pants and a dour expression he kept aimed back at the entrance of the lot.

“Five hundred. And ten dollars.”

“Six hundred.”

Jonah stared at the hairnet man. Had he arrived late? Had he not heard Jonah's pleas to the crowd? “Five hundred. And ten dollars.”

The auctioneer tilted his head. “Sold. Sold for six hundred dollars.”

The whole auction took under fifteen seconds. The last chance to retrieve his car, his only mode of transportation, had a quick death. The man in the hairnet hiked up his pants and jogged over to the Camry. “Damn,” said Liben.

It was the last car up for auction and the meeting began to disperse. Jonah simply stood a while, Liben beside him, his hands in his pockets. Only minutes passed before the man in the hairnet drove the Camry past them, Coolio's 'Gangsta's Paradise' playing. He looked happy, satisfied, a Swishers Sweet dangling in his mouth. The hours since the car was towed, the breakneck tear of the night as he attempted to retrieve it, even if it was mostly spent sitting in the Jeep or rationing two beers on the lip of the river, felt like a damn shame. All that and no big win at the end.

And then he remembered that he had left Samson's manuscript in the front seat.