

2019

Coalescing Finish

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Coalescing Finish

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

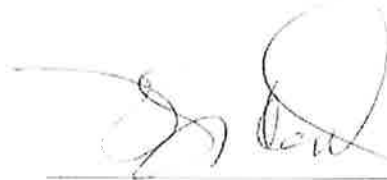
Daniel James McMinn

2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

November 20, 2019

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Daniel James McMinn entitled *Coalescing Finish* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts.



Elizabeth Hand Advisor



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Accepted



Adam-Max Tuchinsky Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

This thesis comprises five short stories, the climactic chapter of a novel, two short plays, one short screenplay, and two poems by Daniel James (“Dan”) McMinn. The work focused on satisfying endings. Most of the work is speculative fiction—either science fiction or fantasy. The work is prefaced by a statement describing Dan’s development as a writer in the Stonecoast MFA in Creative Writing program. The short stories address the following topics:

- An aging salesman gets replacement internal organs and becomes an opera singer
- A female presidential candidate must keep a straight face while watching a ridiculous PSA
- A sniggler (eel-catcher) in a medieval fable visits fairyland to save a wise princess from elves
- A grieving college student visits a magical flower shop through which he travels to the underworld to save his dead girlfriend
- Comedians attempts to cheer up Americans during a flesh-eating virus pandemic

The plays and screenplay include a Shakespearean lobster’s denunciation of climate change, a girl’s attempt to catch Santa, and a desperate attempt to liven up school lunches. The novel follows a weather mage who attempts to sabotage Napoleon’s invasion of Russia.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the staff of the Stonecoast program for supporting me as I worked toward this MFA. It is fitting that, having learned more about the quiet work of bureaucrat-heroes for my paper and presentation, I should be reminded of what I owe the program managers that made my Stonecoast experience possible behind the scenes: Robin Talbot, Justin Tussing, and Matthew Jones.

I would, of course, like to thank my Stonecoast mentors: Nancy Holder, Thomas Coash, Theodora Goss, and Elizabeth Hand, whose help has improved my writing *measurably*—in ways clear to anyone who reads my stories. My workshop leaders, David Anthony Durham, Cara Hoffman, Theodora Goss, Ted Deppe, and Tobias Buckell also guided me toward new understanding.

But the truest words in any written work, and certainly in this one, are the two in the dedication or the last paragraph of the acknowledgement. Thank you to my wife, Lecia, who has endured even more mental disarray from me than usual, as well as all of the time, attention, and care that has been diverted from her and the boys to my writing obsession. Most of all I hope that by writing stories that reach out to readers in a spirit of caring, I might earn a fraction of the love she's shown me.

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Arrival at Stonecoast	1
Breadth, Depth.....	2
Climactic (And Climatic) Endings	5
Exit Plan	9
Lobster and Anemone.....	11
Public Awareness	14
To the Bystanders in Car Chase Scenes	22
The Internals	23
I Got You This Time, Santa!	37
Serving Children: An Animated Short	41
Sweet Eel Pie	47
At the Drugstore	53
Dead Flowers	54
Corporal Mud	75
Chapter 16: The Bridge Over the Berezina	75
Sick Jokes	104
Bibliography	144

Preface

Arrival at Stonecoast

Before arriving for my first Stonecoast residency in Maine in January 2018, I knew a few things about myself as a writer. The most important insight was that I am a plot-first writer (as opposed to a character-first writer), so I tend to imagine worlds and points of conflict more easily than people who might struggle through those conflicts.

I knew also that I am more dutiful than diligent—I work best under the threat of impending deadlines from a respected authority. Which is unfortunate for someone in a field as isolated (often) as writing. But I felt that although we dutiful people—the administrators and organizers and spreadsheet-makers of the world—don’t get as much attention as the rebels and leaders, our work coordinating and supporting more self-motivated people is also valuable.

I knew from my summer at the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop (2012) that, when necessary, I can produce material rapidly. I also knew that workshop critiques from fellow writers are valuable, and critiques from fellow writers under the direction of professional writers is invaluable. My most consistent feedback was that my endings were unsatisfying.

My stated goal on entering Stonecoast was to “develop my skill at reaching a wide audience with my fiction” and explore “humor and suspense.” My more honest, and modest, goal was to take advantage of the surprises and emergent possibilities I encountered in the program. I had no confidence in my ability to anticipate them, but endeavored to find that prospect exciting, rather than troubling.

My first workshops confirmed most of my preconceptions. Student advice about a story of mine (the fable in my thesis entitled “Sweet Eel Pie”) included valuable comments such as that I had a “strong female character not acting, not because inaction would be in character, but because the story isn’t about her.” A piece I submitted to another workshop concerned comedians performing during a worldwide pandemic (“Abscess Makes the Heart Grow Fonder”). My fellow writers did not respond with disgust, as I had feared, but with considered advice about deepening the flaws in the father-son relationship and redoing the unsatisfying ending.

Cara Hoffman elaborated that the ending for the story would emerge when I had fully developed my protagonist and knew his deepest motivations. I could then deduce his greatest moment of crisis, which would become the story’s climax.

Being dutiful, I heeded Justin Tussing’s advice not to march along in my genre doing the minimum work, wasting the rich opportunities of Stonecoast. I resolved to write widely.

Breadth, Depth

Under the mentorship of Nancy Holder, I read craft books by Stephen King and Mary Ruefle; *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman*; three years of the Best American Science Fiction and Fantasy anthology; one of John MacDonald’s Travis McGee detective novels; YA paranormal romance, and more. I continued to create short stories with interesting premises that faltered at the endings (“The Internals”). I pumped out the second half of a novel that was just black lines of plot drawn on a white-room world (*Corporal Mud*). I wrote poems (including “To the Bystanders in Car Chase Scenes”).

And I left for Ireland in Summer 2018 with two rejections from McSweeney's for pieces I'd worked on with Nancy.

In Ireland, we popular fiction writers mixed with Stonecoast students of other genres in a way that rarely happened in Maine, due to natural rallying around genre flags. I learned about poetry from Ted Deppe ("every poem needs a little bit of form and a little bit of chaos"), about literary fiction from Kevin Barry ("your declaration to the world to listen is also your pact with your subconscious to feed you the lines"), and about popular fiction from Ian McDonald ("if you don't laugh, your audience won't; but if you think it's cool, your audience won't"). I finished the residency ready to further expand my genre horizons by studying playwriting with Tom Coash. Besides, I reasoned, plays were shorter and mostly dialog anyway, so the endings should come more easily to me.

I certainly developed my dialog skill and made progress toward my pre-Stonecoast goal of learning more about humor ("Lobster and Anemone," "I Got You This Time, Santa!," "Serving Children"). I immersed myself in plays, novels, and scholarly papers for my third-semester topic. Still, my endings faltered.

I learned the limits of my own appreciation of dark humor (Joe Orton and Martin McDonagh were like 99% pure dark chocolate, and I apparently max out at 85%). This limitation was a major liability, since I'd planned to write my research paper on dark humor. Strangely, though, I felt sympathy for the hapless Sam Lowry (played by Jonathan Pryce) in the black comedy film *Brazil*, as well as his fellow drudges working in giant bureaucracies. I'd found the kernel of my thesis paper.

At Winter 2019 residency, I received more great advice about endings from Elizabeth Hand: "One strategy to create better endings is to have two mutually exclusive

endings in mind throughout the writing and not to choose until the very end, even if that means letting the irrelevant events of the day influence your decision.”

In the spring, Theodora Goss helped me develop and write the research paper: “Bureaucrat-Heroes: Servants of a Higher Cause.” The paper is an encomium for spreadsheet makers, something I’d wanted to see for years without knowing it. Working on it convinced me that one of the themes of my work beyond Stonecoast will be to create heroic bureaucrats (such as the school-lunch bureaucrats in “Serving Children”).

For residency workshops in Summer 2019, I completed two more stories (one of which was “Dead Flowers”) that, true to form, stumbled at the endings.

Tobias Buckell taught me that one way to improve endings is to analyze them in terms of the protagonist’s needs and wants. If the protagonist gets what they need, the story ends happily. If they get what they want, it ends tragically. Also, “protag’s got to protag”—protagonists must relentlessly make decisions, where we plot-focused writers often forget to have them make decisions for large swaths of the story, particularly at the beginning. To my embarrassment, I noticed that my characters were bobbing along on the plot like corks on a river until they hit the one decision I’d set aside for them at the climax.

From Theodora’s workshop—both from the readings that she assigned (Elizabeth Hand’s “Winter’s Wife,” Jeffrey Ford’s “The Empire of Ice Cream,” and Kij Johnson’s “26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss”) and from my fellow students in her workshop—I learned how much the layering of detail and the refraction of detail through character draws readers through stories to endings that seem both inevitable and surprising.

The advice from both these workshops helped me understand Cara's advice at my first residency: the protagonist's desire determines the direction and speed at which the plot develops. The ending that will satisfy readers is the one in which the hero is torn at the climax between their deepest motivations. Readers will understand what those motivations are from the choices the character has made and the way the details of the story are refracted through character. Any other ending will feel like an ending for a more generic story, or for some other character's story.

Climactic (And Climatic) Endings

In true popular fiction fashion, I'd tried and failed to write good endings, passed through the inciting incident of entering Stonecoast, struggled through my semesters gathering allies (my mentors) and combating antagonists (my writerly failings). I'd failed twice, and that left me with one last chance.

First, I researched endings. Tobias had suggested gathering a dozen or so of my favorite endings and finding the 5–10 types of endings that I find satisfying. To my embarrassment, my 28 favorite endings could be categorized into just four types:

- **A protagonist makes the ultimate sacrifice:** This was particularly common in stories that humanize robots and automata, such as the films *The Iron Giant* and *WALL-E*, as well as Terry Pratchett's *Feet of Clay*. But it was also what made the series climax of Jonathan Stroud's Bartimaeus Trilogy, at the end of *Ptolemy's Gate*, one of the most amazing endings I've read.
- **A hero never gives up or relaxes principles:** This theme was common to a surprisingly wide variety of stories, from speculative work like the film *The Princess Bride*, Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, and Terry Pratchett's *Men at Arms*,

through the film *Shawshank Redemption* and Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, to stories in the "literary fiction" (or realistic fiction) genre, like Thom Jones's "I Want to Live" and Alice Munro's "Free Radicals." The literary fiction protagonists I liked demonstrated more doggedness than the unyielding virtue of Jean Valjean or Carrot Ironfoundersson, but I see a continuity in their shared tenacity. I also find crossover between this category and the next in that often an unyielding hero is matched with a co-hero more compromised and comprehensible to us inconsistent readers. In *Shawshank Redemption*, Red's wry POV permeates the tone of the story; in *Men at Arms*, Commander Vimes's grizzled veteran POV does the same for Carrot.

- **A marriage or partnership survives extreme trial:** This category includes oddities like the film *Raising Arizona* and Louis Sachar's *Holes*. It includes speculative stories like the film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and Kij Johnson's "The Man Who Bridged the Mist," as well as classics like Thomas Hardy's *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Interestingly, while stories of sacrifice generally require villains and stories of unrelenting heroes demand extremely vivid villains, stories of marriages under duress can often get by with weak villains or purely environmental challenges.
- **A plot mystery or trap resolves sublimely:** This kind of story supplements the emotional resolution of the other kinds of stories with the slotting-into-place satisfaction of solving a puzzle. The category includes Ted Chiang's gem-like stories "Exhalation" and "The Merchant and the Alchemist's Gate." It includes the just-so ending of David D. Levine's "Titanium Mike Saves the Day," the odd non-answer of "26 Monkeys, Also the Abyss," and the bewildering twistiness of the film *Memento* and Connie Willis's *To Say Nothing of the Dog*.

Having identified the kinds of endings I love, I was able to swiftly identify problems with a few of my thesis stories. I realized I needed to push my somewhat unlikeable salesman-protagonist in “The Internals” harder, and push him further down, to make him earn reader admiration by never giving up. In “Abscess Makes the Heart Grow Fonder,” my protagonist, Peter, was a sad-sack character, but I don’t actually like sad sacks. The Peter I wanted to write about was an incorrigible optimist, despite the horrors of the plague. But then he became an unrelenting hero, a little alien to the reader and even to me, so I changed the POV to the more worn down but wise Thea and gave her and Peter a buddy dynamic, to cover ending types 2 and 3.

And in what I consider my most successful work for this thesis, I realized how all of what I’d learned about endings could help me with my epic about a weather mage attempting to sabotage Napoleon’s invasion of Russia (*Corporal Mud*). My hero, Slava, is unrelentingly devoted to saving the maximum number of lives, particularly those of noncombatants, from the depredations of war. His bromance partner, Joseph, is equally unrelenting in his drive to uphold the military virtues of honor and duty. Each is driven at the climax to break their unbreakable principles to save the other, and Slava comes close to making the ultimate sacrifice. The partnership survives, though both heroes fail at their personal codes of honor. Pitting three of my favorite story types against each other at the climax felt deeply satisfying.

Work on endings has given me a new lens through which to view my favorite works of some of my favorite authors, like Ted Chiang, Kij Johnson, and (since Stonecoast) Naomi Novik. If it is true that we honor our favorite authors by reading their fiction multiple times, I can honor them by reading their work backwards, to see how the

works may have grown from climax to beginning, rather than forward, as readers are accustomed to watching stories grown.

More generally for this thesis, I worked to make my stories into causal chains of protagonist decisions, rather than large-scale setups for a single protagonist choice. Slava went from a single decision in the climax of the previous draft to a series of escalations in which he uses his powers more and more aggressively, in the process of which he needs to overcome his deepest fears. With “Dead Flowers,” I worked to make the numinous magic reflect more the character and history of the protagonist, Row, so that the decisions he makes and the quest he goes on are layered with detail that reveals his character and the conclusion springs forth more organically from his greatest struggle.

Stonecoast also confirmed a previously held conviction of mine about the value of historical accuracy in fiction. At World Fantasy 2013 in Brighton, novelist Tim Powers told a session he lead that if he finds from his historical research that “a guy broke his arm on a Tuesday, I can’t go in and break his arm on a Wednesday to fit the story better.” It’s one thing to hear such an opinion from Hilary Mantel (author of the intensely well-research historical fiction *Wolf Hall*), another when Powers says it about *The Anubis Gates*, a story that involves time-traveling body-snatching lycanthropy. I felt encouraged to maximize my historical accuracy and *never cheat*. Historical accuracy is the apogee of formal conceits.

Historical accuracy is invaluable even in highly speculative stories: the historical record rests on more interconnected factors than any one person could understand. Historically accurate details prop up writing and insights with a mass of causalities that you do not even understand. You enlist the help of the unknown unknowns behind

history. I've been reading Naomi Novik's Temeraire series, in which the combatants in the Napoleonic wars have air battalions of soldiers riding dragons into battle. Despite this, the underlying flow of the war includes many of the same characters, with the same personalities, as the historical battles, and the outcomes of the battles are unchanged. By rights, my research on the Napoleonic wars for *Corporal Mud* should have made me an unsatisfiable reader of Novik's stories, but her commitment to historical accuracy not only supported her stories with unknown unknowns, it also showed respect for the past.

My experience writing the ending of *Corporal Mud* also benefitted from correct historical detail. With more time to research the Battle of the Berezina, I realized that my first draft had drastically abridged the battle from four days to an afternoon. I went back and plotted the actual battle step by step, morning, noon, and night, through each maneuver and its outcome. I realized that the most dramatic moment of the battle took place midday on the fourth day, when the French had to make two desperate attacks, one on each side of the river, to bring the rest of their army across. When I took those events as unalterable givens, I was left with the puzzle "how can my weather mage fit into these events?" The answer yielded a new and surprising ending that I would not have imagined unless forced to by my unwillingness to change the battle for my story.

Exit Plan

I've not yet been able to apply all I've learned at Stonecoast. For example, after my third-semester paper on bureaucrat-heroes I am committed to creating heroes with bureaucratic jobs. But the only story in my thesis with a clear bureaucrat-hero is the animated short, "Serving Children." But my first steps after Stonecoast will be to submit my thesis stories for publication. I plan to complete as many writing exercises as I have stamina for, both

to generate ideas for bureaucrat-heroes and to craft short, simple stories in which the heroes are forced to constantly make decisions in richly detailed worlds that reflect their characters. I will try to create my own endings exercises, so that I have a reserve of good endings to use in other stories and for working backwards to create new stories.

I also plan to complete a post-graduation semester at Stonecoast working on poetry, focusing on the word level, the smallest unit of story. The reason for this is twofold—the first is that my prose is at present more workmanlike than enjoyable at the word level. The second reason is that I’ve become interested in using poetry to express my feelings about parenting my two boys. Before I forget the difficulty of their first few years (my younger son is four), I need to find ways to express those feelings (such as in my thesis piece “At the Drugstore,” which I introduced at a Stonecoast reading). Along the way I will continue to research and write more detail into *Corporal Mud*, developing Slava through his actions and providing the details of the world that will make his struggle in the novel real and compelling to readers.

At Stonecoast I have battled my personal writing nemesis—story endings. I have confirmed some of my beliefs about writing (the value of historical accuracy in fiction, the high value of peer and mentor feedback) and gained new insights (such as that my female protagonists often have interesting resumes not justified through action). I have taken up the standard of a new type of hero in a new type of story (bureaucrat-heroes), and I have written as many short stories as I could, to alloy my plot-first style with character-specific detail and character-developing choices from the early drafts. I am as grateful for what Stonecoast has evoked in me as for what it has instilled in me.

Lobster and Anemone

- Characters:** Lobster (m): A *Panulirus versicolor* (spiny lobster), with long antennas but only very small claws on his hands.
- Anemone (f): An *Actinia tenebrosa* anemone in red. She should have hidden on her person a white shawl. Either the shawl should have a red spot on it or she should have a blood capsule with which to stain it.
- (Consider giving Lobster and Anemone costumes like what you might see on a performer in a Children's Fun Zone.)
- Snorkeler: A person wearing a snorkel, bathing suit, and flippers. Carries a disposable underwater camera (with flash) in its plastic wrapper.
- Setting:** Shallow sea with a backdrop of coral. The coral should be vibrant colors halfway across the stage and stark white across the other half.
- Time:** Present day
- At Rise:** Lights on Anemone and Lobster at center stage.

LOBSTER

O! Angelfish take wing and damsels fly
do not like rainbow coral pale and die
for heat unseen since the Paleocene
taints algae green our aquamarine
And water that we breathe acidifies.

(Snorkeler enters and pokes around the coral. Lobster is discomfited.)

Go gobies go, blue tangs and all you rays
comes now The Carbon-geddon, End of Bays.
Your bitter tears will not this acid leach
nor armor scales turn back the Tide with Bleach.
Turn nares away but turn your tails to me
For I'll remain with dear Anemone.

(Snorkeler approaches the couple.)

ANEMONE

What cause do you, a spiny sea roach, have
to call me dear? I'd rather have the crabs
than let you past my tentacles to kiss
my ciliated, soft siphonoglyphs.

(She coughs in a spasm, then recovers.)

Perhaps I may have flirtingly caressed
your carapace with my nematocysts
I'm born of Venus tears—what can I say?
Like she with ugly Vulcan, so I play.
But rasp my polyp on your jagged hide?
I'd rather wrap around *his* rubbery thigh.

(She embraces the Snorkeler.)

LOBSTER

(To the audience)

Her words scald worse than any acid water
I weep that fickle fronds ever begot her
But steadfast I through all her scorn and hauteur
Her love beseech, besought become besotter.

(He appeals to her and she pulls the reluctant Snorkeler
tighter. Lobster addresses her.)

Embrace as lover this fine finless fish
and bid me leave? Well, As You Wish.
But I'll not seek out variegated corals
if, indeed, such places still wait for us.
I know an octopus's den nearby
Where I can, loveless, bake in octopi!

(He moves to exit.)

ANEMONE

(She throws off the struggling Snorkeler.)

Oh stop! I can't keep up this base charade—
send off true lobster to his death, betrayed.

(She coughs and coughs red blotches into her white
shawl. Lobster rushes to catch her as she collapses.)

ANEMONE (CONT.)

Brave soldier, mine, chelate and armor plate
do not by my consumptive body wait
as I, in fever, life expectorate
my corpse for fumble fish to desecrate

(She gestures at the wary Snorkeler)

Seek out what coral's left—don't hesitate.
Remember me, but please, forget my fate!

(She dies. Snorkeler removes the wrapper from the camera and tucks it in his hand while he sets up the shot.)

LOBSTER

Whitewashed agora, hear my threnody
to wisdom matched with sensitivity
in peerless Nereid, Anemone!

(He takes a deep breath, but Snorkeler interrupts by snapping a picture of the two. Lobster turns ominously.)

You!

(Snorkeler doesn't notice his threat.)

Black bile of Gaea mixed with anthracite,
you burn to race the day, ignite the night.
Fly Phaeton's discount transatlantic flight
make fattened calf an everyday delight
excess to ever-greater Fahrenheit!

But, cruel tormentor, tell me—what did we,
That you should give us all the third degree?

(As Snorkeler maneuvers for another shot, the wrapper slips unnoticed from his hand. Lobster watches it fall.)

Vile enemy of my Anemone!

(Lobster attacks Snorkeler—ineffectually scissors-fingering him. Snorkeler watches complacently, then takes a flash-photo selfie with Lobster. Lobster reels. Snorkeler swims off.)

Now blind, I gain Tiresias's sight,
to prophesy your swift oncoming plight.
Soon Neptune will in rage drag towers down,
charge crashing into every seaside town
Miami, Shanghai, Rio, London drowned.
Unless you, allies, keep your carbon within bounds.
Though climate horror now seems almost trite,
please heed our pleas before we fade to white.

End

Public Awareness

Democratic presidential candidate Lynn Keeley begrudged the nonprofit their virtuously cheap fold-out chairs. She could understand the no-pile carpet, the industrial white walls, the exposed ductwork... but not the chairs. If she pinched a nerve, the Republicans would be on her like wolves on a tired old ewe.

If this place has money for a PSA, she thought, they should have money for fabric seat cushions.

Lynn's publicist, Merc, had arranged for her to visit to the offices of "Share the Burden: Families Against Opiate Addiction." She'd almost refused ("It's a political knife fight—what use is sympathy?"), but Merc had spooked her with poll figures showing Americans thought she was "unsympathetic."

"Try to squeeze out a few tears, OK?" he'd said as she left. "Just two or three, nothing you'd need a tissue for."

By the time someone pulled down a screen and wheeled out a projector (just like the ones Lynn remembered from elementary school), she had already endured a litany of opiate-related death statistics, feeble success stories, and questionable organizational priorities. In the audience with her were recovered addicts (buttoned-up and collared), board members, and knit-cap volunteer types. And, lurking a few rows back, the journalists.

They turned the projector on, the PSA started, and there was Penny Su.

Lynn stared. *It can't be*, she thought. *In a mom suit?* But on second glance, it was her—Penny.

Merc, you bastard, you must have known. How could you ambush me like this?

In the twenty-five years since Lynn had been in a college dorm with Penny, layers of frown lines had built up on Lynn's forehead—the Republicans called it “Klingon brow.” Whereas Penny had weathered the time like a titanium blimp—ageless in a chubby-girl way.

On the other hand, Lynn thought, she's wearing mommy clothes and doing PSAs, whereas I have a shot at smashing the thickest glass ceiling of them all.

“...and we're here to talk to you about sharing,” Penny said.

Flashes of children playing in a sandbox. Teenagers passing a bong. A volunteer at a needle exchange.

“Not those kinds of sharing.”

That was a bong, Lynn thought. Oh, god, did she just do a bong-passing joke? Penny, of all people, could have done better.

A memory—a single moment—leapt to Lynn's mind. She'd been up past midnight with her then-boyfriend when Penny had stumbled in from an after-show party, still wearing a Catholic schoolgirl costume. A cloud of beer and pot fumes wafted in with her. Penny had lurched over to Lynn's boyfriend, put a hand on his shoulder, and somberly asked if he knew he was dating a moon rocket.

Lynn almost laughed at the recollection, but instinct doused her mirth in cold dread. She imagined the headline: *Presidential Candidate Keeley Laughs at Heroin Addicts.*

She wasn't just watching a PSA, she was living through her "basket of deplorables," Howard-Dean-primal-scream, Michael-Dukakis-in-a-tank moment. An inappropriate emotion might kill her candidacy. *I must not laugh.*

A sock puppet rose up beside Penny.

"Hi, Fluffany!" Penny said.

"Hi, Penny!" the puppeteer's voice sounded like a ten-year-old boy trying to play the Wicked Witch of the West.

Lynn's lip quivered. She tore her gaze from Penny and the sock. Addiction-awareness posters covered the walls, some looking like advertisements for horror films, others like promotional material for the Mormon church.

"We're asking you," Penny continued, "to tell your loved ones about your chronic pain."

The squeaky voice added, "And the prescription drugs you use against it."

Lynn glanced back. The puppet was the texture of a shag carpet, electric blue, with daisy yellow braids and a white dress. It looked like the lovechild of Cookie Monster and Smurfette.

Lynn squeezed the folder of information they'd given her into a tight cylinder, her hands shaking. *Must remember chronic pain.* She tried to do an inverse kind of mindfulness meditation—willing herself to vengefulness.

This was the Republicans' fault. She had hammered at every one of their blinkered, bigoted, and bizarre excesses. They, in turn, had attacked her for graduating from Yale and for being "the product of a broken home." For being a dippy lawyer who

represented freeloaders against hardworking businesses, and also for being single and childless.

A tenth of voters would choose the candidate with a penis. And she had to modulate her emotional reaction to a sock.

The video was flashing a clip of a stocky woman in a floral-pattern dress at a supermarket. People dressed as ninjas jumped out from all around her as she unleashed a series of martial arts kicks and jabs.

Who is this woman? Why are there ninjas?

The force with which Lynn suppressed a laugh made her squeeze out a tiny fart. When Fluffany came back on, she glared at it in masochistic fury.

That would be Penny's husband with his hand in the sock. The Teletubby, Penny had called him—a theater major like Penny, but aiming at children's shows. After Penny introduced him to Lynn, Lynn hadn't had to express her astonishment. Penny had always known what Lynn was thinking. "Actors have to inhabit roles," Penny once said, "but you debaters are always the same behind your lips." Lynn hadn't been able to fathom how Penny could even recognize herself in the role of stable girlfriend.

The video had become a slideshow of Before pictures—the smiling families of addicts. The danger of hilarity receded before the cheerful, doomed people. *Less than a minute left.* Then the camera was back on Penny, her hand on Fluffany's head. Lynn braced for bathos.

Video montage of the Teletubby backstage at a children's show, performing in a school gym to an audience of laughing children.

“He didn’t tell anyone the accident hurt him so bad he used oxy, then fentanyl,” Penny said.

Wait, what?

“We didn’t know until the emergency room. If he’d shared, we might have helped him carry that pain... Now it’s just the two of us.”

Two? Her and the puppet?

Anxiety and mirth filled Lynn’s throat like beer foam.

Fluffany rose up into the air as if ascending to heaven, except for the arm shoved up her skirt that rose with her. The arm belonged to a boy of perhaps twelve.

“Now Mom and I are sharing the burden,” the boy said, and Fluffany curled around Penny’s waist.

Despite all the absurdity that had gone before, the way Penny’s son hugged her got to Lynn the way the video was supposed to. The “Share the Burden” tagline still hung over the contact information. There was still time to cry. She refused to give in.

Lynn didn’t know Penny anymore, she told herself—hadn’t even known she had a son. Merc (the soon-to-be-demoted Merc) was trying to change her into a generic “feminine” candidate. Holding her composure felt like keeping her dignity.

When it was finally over, Lynn carefully got to her feet, managing it without stumbling, despite the numb dead zone in the middle of one butt cheek from the chair.

“Lynn?”

She turned. There was Penny. And her son.

Penny introduced the boy as “Jim,” then got a familiar smile on her face. “You know, I could get you in a lot of trouble,” she said.

Lynn felt the journalists and cameramen lean in around them. “I could say the same thing.”

They looked at each other expectantly, but Lynn felt keenly that she had more to lose from what her former friend might say.

“Penny, I didn’t know. I would have—”

But she couldn’t finish, because she wouldn’t have come. Nor could she remember the Teletubby’s name, so she simply said, “I’m sorry.”

“About Teletubby,” Penny said, with a sad smile.

Lynn laughed.

“We want to spread public awareness about the tragedy of prescription opiate addiction across America,” Penny said, “so fewer people hurt like Jim and me. And Reggie.”

Reginald. That had been his name.

“When you are president, will you dedicate real financial support for our cause?”

“I hear you, Penny. But I disagree—I wouldn’t call the opiate crisis a tragedy.”

Three, two, one, she counted, to make sure the journalists were paying full attention.

“If pharmaceutical companies pushed opiates on doctors, and doctors on patients, it’s not a tragedy—it’s an atrocity.”

Got the soundbite out of the way.

She moved into a speech about how families being torn apart is devastating for the fabric of the nation, but Penny cut her off.

“So the answer is no,” Penny said, looking more angry than hurt. “I know you, remember? You always say the important stuff up front, so people don’t miss it.”

“The problem is—” Lynn began, but realized she was avoiding the point again. “I will do everything I can to stop this scourge that is killing more Americans than car crashes—”

“That’s still not a promise.”

Lynn was acutely aware of Jim, glancing silently between her and his mother. She knew his look, common enough among children of “broken homes.” He looked like an understudy—earnestly, quietly trying to learn how to act the part of his own father. If he’d had a little notebook and pencil with him, he could have been Lynn at his age.

Lynn forcefully pushed journalists, polls, and even the GOP out of her mind. She stared directly into Penny’s eyes.

“I made no promise,” she said, “because Share the Burden is a bad use of money. Your mission—” she waved her curled information folder at Penny, “—involves no strategic plan. It has no transitional plan—though your whole board is past retirement. You have no systematic way to choose among paths or measure your effectiveness—”

“We do! There—in Outreach—there’s graphs—”

“Yes, of ‘views’! You might as well count ‘flyers passed out.’ Against addiction figures like—what’s the statistic?—90% relapse rate after rehab? Maybe if you had a measurable link between awareness and lower addiction rates or better rehab figures. But you don’t have those numbers, do you?”

Penny was silent.

“I’m sorry, Penny, I’m going to focus my heat on the pharmaceutical pushers and taxpayer money on methadone and naloxone. I’m going with what’s proven to work.”

Penny’s pained expression burned into Lynn’s eyes. She still saw it before her as she walked out of the room, ignoring journalists’ questions.

I told the truth, she told herself, but didn’t believe or disbelieve the statement.

Instead, she remembered the night Penny the Catholic schoolgirl had called Lynn a moon rocket. Later that night, the topic had come up again, and Penny had explained, “Like blasting off. And bits of your life falling off here, there—job, family, friends.” She’d flapped her hands vaguely, slurred something incoherent, and then said, “But it’s OK, because—whoosh!—to the Moon! Right? Um... I think I’m going to be sick now?”

Lynn was practically running by the time she reached the car. When she was safely behind the tinted windows, she wiped her eyes with her shirtsleeves, because she didn’t have a tissue.

To the Bystanders in Car Chase Scenes

As a representative from the bulging waist of humanity's bell curve
I express my awe at your equipoise
transitioning from rolling barrels to somersaulting behind a dumpster
when I'd still be wondering "What's that roaring sound?"

From my camera eye over the driver's shoulder,
I appreciate how he improvises at high-speed,
but he is as nothing before you
carrying a paper bag with one baguette, who becomes
You—vaulting over a café table and through a window.

Yet I notice no spouse ducking with you under a flying GT-R,
no child under your arm as you blitz across the parking structure,
untouchable, yes, but unattached,
less committed than this movie's hero
with his allotted love interest (two if one dies).

So I exhort you—
the next time a Charger roars toward you,
dive through the shot-out windshield into the story
and take the wheel.

The Internals

They found the tumor during my last full ophthalmologist-to-proctologist inspection before the rejuve. I'd had three cigarettes in my life (my college girlfriend prohibited me from wrecking my voice). Still, I had lung cancer.

I know—boo-hoo mister lucky rich guy who's going to escape dying of lung cancer. But we all have our dramas.

I'd sold the town house, the condo, the New York place, every piece of property I had after five decades of hustling everything from add-on insurance to electronics service packs to (finally) luxury vacations. I'd cashed myself right out of the upper class to pay for a full external rejuve. I was looking forward to youthful vat-grown hands, feet, muscles, face. Dick like a goddamn ramrod, if Ron could be believed, which I admit was a stretch. And all new skin, largest organ in the body. No more sagging jowls and weathered leather exterior. Not even women's facial creams (which I'd also sold) that claimed to take decades off their wrinkled faces would tell 75-year-old me "we guarantee we'll make you look twenty."

Instead, because of the tumor, I had to rejuve my internals. Replacement stomach, lungs, trachea, heart, guts, all the plumbing. The rejuve people strongly recommended I not pick and choose to fit my budget—mismatched internal organs can have truly heinous conflicts. Twenty minutes of online searching confirmed their advice by showing me freakshows like one dude with a twenty-year-old face above an old man's turkey neck.

The rejuve took sixteen days. First day I met the nurse who'd be with me the whole time. Just as gorgeous as you'd expect for a painful multi-million-dollar procedure.

“Your heart rate’s a little high, Jeremy,” she said, “you sure you’re feeling fine?”

Nobody wants to see a play from a wattled old man. I was in for a miserable process. “Rejuve” may sound like splashing down a vitamin shake, but it feels like a two-week colonoscopy. At the end I still looked 75, which was disconcerting, considering the millions I’d sunk in the procedure.

But on the way to my follow-up a week later, I walked through Central Park despite my weak old-man muscles, just for the joy of sucking city air. When the nurse asked me how I was doing, I belted out Iggy Pop’s “Candy.” I hadn’t really sung anything since college a cappella with my girlfriend, but now it all came back. The nurse stopped glancing up at me from her tablet and *looked* at me. We salesmen love that look—it’s the look that says “Sold.” My college girlfriend had looked at me like that when I sang, too.

“You’ve got a good voice,” she said. “Don’t waste it.”

“Think I should start a rock band?”

“That would be wasting it.”

Oh, I ought to mention—her name was Blythe. Not the nurse, my college girlfriend.

###

I started looking for voice teachers. Rock stars can still be sexy even when they’re shriveled old mummies, right? But the nurse’s comment about wasting my voice trying to be Iggy Pop got me thinking. I decided to find a teacher who knew classical music, too.

Took me a while, but I found her: Lisa Letton (aka Luscious Lethe). She’d sung for a bunch of electronic bands five or ten years back, but she’d been classically trained.

For eight years she'd been teaching at a "conservatory" in Newark. Tellingly, searching for her name brought up her old electronic stuff, gushing speeches by former students who'd become keynote speakers, ribbon-cutters, and headliners, and only after that her own amateurish, outdated website. She obviously couldn't market herself, so she must be good enough to word of mouth anyway.

The cost was "by agreement," which sounded expensive. But I had a little money left, and I figured I could go back to selling timeshares. And the audition was free.

The conservatory turned out to be a windowless bunker turned recording studio. The acoustic tiles looked like giant gray learning shapes a child glued to the wall. Lisa had me stand in a marked-off spot and sing a few things. I started with some Iggy, more self-consciously than with the nurse. Lisa cut me off after a minute, so I tried Nick Cave (forty-five seconds), Dean Martin (tiniest spark of interest, minute and a half), then thought "what the hell" and sang Buble's version of "Quando Quando Quando"(three minutes). By the time she gave me some sheet music, her obvious impatience had me off my game.

"Why all the running and riffing?" she asked. And, "Can you stand straighter than that?" And, "Where were you breathing from just there?"

I stumbled through answers and excuses, knowing I looked like an amateur. And as any salesman can tell you, amateur is just a euphemism for a mark. I could feel the "by agreement" price rising.

Finally, she said, "Look, Mr. Finn, you've got good starting range, your articulation is steady, and if you could sort out your breathing mistakes, you'd have an acceptable voice. If you'd come here with the proper training, I might even have

considered you for opera”—at that my eyes must have gone round as marbles—“but you just parrot other singers with melismatic flourishes. I’m not going to waste my time and your money squandering your voice on karaoke pop music.”

“I could try opera.”

She shook her head violently. “No, Mr. Finn.”

I stared at her, thinking, she’s going to crack and give me reasons.

After a minute, she said, “Have you got a decade to spare developing a voice? Do you know Italian, German, French, Spanish? Are you willing to travel wherever you have to, to land a mediocre first role? Are you willing to learn a piece until you don’t just perform it flawlessly, but can move around the stage *acting* while you sing? No—”

“I’ve got a wager for you,” I interrupted—a lifetime of experience to lean into a hard sell. “I come up to speed in six months. I mean the whole mess—reading, terminology, tone, language. Then I come back here the kind of bushy-tailed student you’d love to have, and you take me on. What say?”

She shook her head.

“*Three* months. Final offer.”

She laughed, and grew serious again.

“Why do you want to work with me so badly, Mr. Finn?”

I waited before I responded—people react better if they believe you’re mulling their words over, rather than following your gut.

“Because I know you’re good. I go to a remedial singing teacher, I’ll end up a remedial guy. If you rejuvenated and got a new chance at life, would you want a remedial life?”

She squinted at me. “All right, Mr. Finn. If you can meet the Boston Lyric Opera’s intern-level standards in three months, I’ll take you on.” Then she quoted the price she would charge, which confirmed everything I’d feared about “by agreement.”

###

Before I met with Lisa, I went out for drinks with Ron for what ended up being the last time. I’d learned a lot about salesmanship from Ron, and about people in general.

Granted, the lessons were often depressing, but he’d gone out of his way to help me. And yet he used a hundred-million dollars of precious youth trying to pick up women twenty years younger than the women he’d been trying to pick up before. There are seventy-year-old rich bastards like him trying that same game even without rejuve. Talking to him, I realized that I didn’t want rejuvenation. I wanted goddamn *reincarnation*. I wanted to be in my young body with my wily old mind so I could get a second chance. Ever since the nurse got me thinking of Blythe, I’d wanted that second chance.

Blythe and I, we’d met singing a capella in college (in “Dandy Line Tufts”—oh the hilarity). She was a film major. I majored in business straight from undergrad. Whenever I thought about majoring in theater or music or something else fun and fluffy, I pictured my dad on the day I went off to college. He’d told me “Find yourself,” and I’d heard the painful insincerity in that. My washed-out Buddy-Holly-wannabee-turned-electrician dad. Coming from him, it sounded like *find yourself up to you neck in student loan debt with no job*. Whenever Blythe or one of the other singers in the group complemented me on my voice, I thought of dad. And deep down, I thought if I listened to those people, I’d get suckered into a job with no money, living out of a crap apartment longing for a life I didn’t have the voice for. If you hear that voice, I generally suggest

listening to it—nine times out of ten someone is suckering you. Take it from a guy who had to sucker quite a few nervous couples into buying overpriced timeshares to earn his place in the world.

So when Blythe went off to New York to “be in the scene” I went to Tampa for my first sales job. And there our story ended, until Lisa—a pro with no interest in getting my hopes up told me maybe I could sing opera.

###

Lisa said I needed know how to speak a few European languages, travel, and act. Turns out selling tour packages and multimillion-dollar houses on the Côte d'Azur and in Tuscany require all those skills. The only thing I didn't have was the “decade of experience” she'd asked me about. But doing a little research, I found that was the average, and included the basics I already had by the time I was in Dandy Line Tufts.

Moreover, Lisa had made the typical ageist mistake of looking at an old geezer and thinking he's all squeezed out. That's not even true of some ninety-year-olds I know, let alone a 75-year-old with rejuvenated internals. When I was twenty, I could work all day, drink, screw around until 3am, get up the next day and do it all over. After rejuvenate, I could put in the same hours without the screwing around. I was certain I could train hard enough to meet Lisa's benchmarks if I rounded up to the end of November (it was mid-August).

For those months I had two three-hour singing classes with two different teachers a day, plus musical notation midday and a little time brushing up on my German, in case Lisa decided to go Wagner on me. Mornings and nights, I did sit-ups and back exercises and swimming, to fix my posture. Aside from one blip early on when I had a cup of

coffee before a lesson (anything tannic wrecks my voice for a solid hour), my internals purred away the whole time. The sit-ups were the hardest part.

All my lessons together cost less per month than Lisa would, which was more worrying. I hadn't realized how spendthrift I'd gotten until it was back to paying rent money. Back to eating at home, even though I'm a woeful cook. Not back to the secondhand stores, because my suits still fit. But apart from my suits and weathered skin, I felt like College Jeremy again. And I had the skills to get good prices selling my stuff on Craigslist.

My remedial teachers were amazed at my progress, of course. I pretended I'd been serious after college and was "remembering." A couple weeks in, one of them got so excited he said I might be able to do Falstaff, and that hit the memory gong in my head.

Blythe had loved Verdi's Falstaff. She liked all the (many) unrepentant jerks of opera. I tried not to read too much into that. And she told me I should try out for those parts, or at least go look to see what the fuss was about. About a month before we split, I gave my best excuse for why I never did see an opera.

"Opera is more melodramatic than soap opera. The plot twists are either stupid or nonsensical, then somebody has an affair, then out of grief and jealousy everyone stabs everyone else and dies for just long enough to have an intermission and a couple arias."

"It's only melodrama if the feelings are unearned," she said.

I waited.

"OK, I'll put it in terms you'll get," she said, with a mischievous smile, "All stories sell feeling. Opera sells feeling with song. If you put enough of this," she tapped

me on the sternum, “into an aria, you can sell the biggest emotions of any art. Hands down. You should try it.”

In my months of training, the only breaks I gave myself were on Sundays. On Sunday, I went out for drinks, got in pissing contests with the college blowhards at the bar, dragged my way home, and never even got a hangover.

###

At my audition, Lisa started me off with the basics. Reading, singing samples, language. I was doing fine. Too fine—she started getting nervous.

She ramped things up a little. And a little more. And then a little more. She threw in a German test—I forget which passage she had me sing. She tried to nail me later for pronouncing like a computer program, rather than softening the consonants and flexing the vowels the way a native would. She couldn’t fault my Italian, though.

I ended with my demonstration piece, “*Deh vieni alla finestra*”—Don Giovanni trying to seduce the maid of a lover he’d rejected. Lisa made it clear I didn’t have the chops yet to try something new and interpretive, so I had to choose from the upright heroes of classic opera, like the Don or Iago or Mephistopheles.

I did the vocals as smoothly as I could manage and hammed up the seductive acting—remembering what Blythe had said about using voice to sell the drama. And I managed to hold the final note so well that I almost convinced myself I was sincerely in love.

Lisa watched with a lost look in her eyes. As I hit the last note, a tear welled in her eye. *Sold*, I thought, and tried not to smile.

Lisa blinked away the tear and said, “You’ve made a lot of progress, Mr. Finn. You still don’t project for a full hall, but—”

“But opera is transitioning to using mics, anyway, right?” One of the remedial teachers had told me that when we were working on volume, which was a relief.

She grimaced. “But you have met my requirements. I will take you on starting next week. Come Monday at nine. Don’t be late.”

###

Lisa sweat and bled me. Her endless exhortations, followed by insults, followed by curses, all focused on one imperative—sing louder. Some theaters may have been moving to mics, but most of opera held out against electronic amplification. It was hard to reconcile her boot-camp style with the praise her former students had given her online, but I wasn’t going to be a whiner.

My health held, mostly. Got a slipped disk and tonsillitis. My *second* case of tonsillitis, despite assurances that, once I got rejuve, such things wouldn’t happen. The rejuve company paid for fixing both those health problems, which was good because I didn’t have the money for proper healthcare anymore. Which meant risks in the unrejuved parts of my body, risks like melanoma and tooth decay and cataracts and ear infections. Especially ear infections. Internals work doesn’t get higher than the throat.

I didn’t have any possessions left to sell, and even though I was getting better at cooking, I was also having to shop more carefully for ingredients. I considered dropping to part-time singing and doing some sales to cover expenses. But I didn’t consider for very long. If I’d sold Lisa, I wasn’t in a sucker’s game. There could be a real singing career at the end, and I could be poor again to get there.

And I'd started to feel something for opera. I'd seen videos and livestreams of opera, even if I hadn't gone to one yet (*I know*, but the tickets are damn expensive). The videos were enough to make me see how the emotions in the song and the music harmonized with the emotions in the stories. The sound was oceanic—wave after wave. It would have bowled me over if I still had a sound system, rather than working off internal laptop speakers.

I never got to know much about Lisa. She kept it all business during the lessons. But I could see the effects of her teaching. Round about the six-month mark, I got more control of my voice and nudged my range closer to performance level. Lisa had to sing a wider range when she led me, and when she got up higher, she got the wobbles.

I knew what that meant. The wobbles are slow vibrations that sneak into what should be clear notes, and usually start when a singer is in their late forties. Lisa was late-thirties, tops. She must have sung too much, too high, too young, without a good teacher to help her.

It was awful. One of those moments when you try not to show pity visibly. I thought about how much Lisa must love opera, to still be in the biz despite the bitterness she must feel. And how, if I could move her to tears, I should be able to sell those great rolling emotions to other people, too.

###

Finally, after a grueling, threadbare year and three months with Lisa, I went to my first opera: Janacek's *The Makropulos Affair*, a 1920s piece about a woman who took a magic potion that made her a young femme fatale for 300 years. The opera had become increasingly popular since rejuve. I tried not to read too much into that. I got the cheapest

seat possible, then sneaked up to one of the empty seats in Row Six just before the show started. A little too close for prime listening, but optimal for judging the singers' stage presence and how they positioned themselves to project as they sang. I spotted Lisa a dozen rows back. She feigned shock when I waved at her.

Makropulos shines in the third act; the first is interminably talky. The set design was period, rather than edgily anachronistic. Most of the cast were better singers than actors, and for a while I just checked mental boxes as I prepared a critical response.

At the first intermission, I noticed some of the people from the box seats—members of the new rejuvved superrich. Some were obviously still in process on internals and externals. Some people might have mistaken the young-looking ones for trophy wives or boy toys. But I'd had to sell to those people, and I could see how they all interacted like equals. My favorite exchange:

Old woman in a red evening gown with gold starburst, smoking a cigarette in an honest-to-god ebony holder like it's the 1930s: "Why *do* I take you to the theater? You just swoon over a thirty-year-old actress for three hours."

Guy who looks about eighteen, in tux and cummerbund: "Because it's a three-hour transfusion of passionate young blood."

The old woman laughed, smooth as Etta James.

In the second act, my attention wandered from Baron Prus (the baritone I was supposed to be analyzing) to Emilia, the soprano lead. All the characters were hot for Emilia (except the daughter, who just admired her) but she just brushed them off. Yet this Emilia conveyed such a sorrowful quality that you didn't lose sympathy for her. I was so

focused on her that when Baron Prus made his big move at the end of Act Two, I was surprised.

The videos hadn't done justice to what I felt in Row Six. The Baron planned to extort sex from Emilia in exchange for a document that she wanted. Like Sinatra's, his singing was angelic—the whole time you're thinking “this guy is a complete shit,” yet it still knocks you out. His voice was smooth as silk cloth over a crystal ball. And loud. Watching him, I realized that I could practice with Lisa for decades, until I had to sell plasma to pay for lessons, and I still wouldn't be as good as this guy.

At the next intermission, I rushed over to Lisa, who stood at the bar with a couple of soda-drinking college kids.

“I'm Paul,” one of the kids said as he shook my hand. “Just putting my student discount to good use.” He laughed in a horrible forced way that said, “I don't belong here,” and “There's more truth in my joke than I want.”

I pulled Lisa aside. “That soprano is great,” I said. “The baritone, too.”

“It's a pretty good cast. And a good opera for a novice operagoer.” She smiled, not unkindly.

“I mean,” I said, “he's really good, a lot better than me.”

She laughed. “You've been at this a year, Jeremy.”

“I mean he's better than I will ever be. I can tell. And if I can tell, you can, too.”

She took a sip of her wine. She wasn't smiling anymore. She nodded.

“But I don't understand. I get now that I won't ever be star material. If I make it in opera at all, it will be as the uncle, somebody six people down the cast list. But then

why did you cry at my audition? How could I have moved you so much if I'm not even pretty good and you've seen really good guys?"

Lisa stared into her glass for a long time. She looked pained, then angry.

"I cried, Jeremy," she said, looking me dead in the eye, "because you don't deserve any part of this. I researched you. You're some salesman. A one-percenter selling condos to other one-percenters. And you don't care—you've *never* cared about opera. Maybe you'll succeed and take a job from a guy like Paul"—she gestured at the boy—"who's sacrificed everything to be here. And for what? An old man's whim?"

She tried to leave, but I blocked her way.

"Thank you for respecting me enough not to lie," I said. Paul had noticed her distress and hurried towards us. I stepped aside, calling after her, "Another eight suckers like me and you could rejuvenate your voice. Then maybe you'll know something about me."

I returned to my stolen seat for the final act without looking back.

The music swelled. Emilia's lies were caught out, and she confessed. She decided not to use the potion of youth again. Instead she gave the formula—the document she'd prostituted herself for—to the daughter who had admired her. That daughter burned it before her eye, and Emilia died.

The soprano who played the eternal, twenty-something bombshell was a frumpy, forty-year-old woman. But the singer was inspired. She didn't give her 100% to the final showy death scene, but to her memories of Baron Joseph, a character who's barely a plot point in most productions. She sang so that the audience believed the best of her had died with Baron Joseph—the lover to whom she had entrusted her most precious possession,

the formula for the elixir of youth. The lover who had died a hundred years before the story of the play.

I cried at the beauty of it. Maybe I'd been suckered, but opera had me *Sold*.

###

I've been at it a decade now, most recently at Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre, playing uncles and assistants and one of a coven of old men gossip-singing about the lead. The pay isn't bad—"benefactors" love opera. I have enough for room and board and my singing instructor, who's a good guy and an all right teacher.

I sometimes get in the paper. Not for my singing, but in the debate about rejuves. Some hate me like Lisa hated me, some like me for using my experience to help my house sell tickets. I mostly don't pay attention to them. But I keep wondering if, after some show, Blythe might show up. Maybe even Lisa, looking for a reconciliation. Probably not. Probably I've just watched too much opera.

I Got You This Time, Santa!

- Characters:**
- Spouse A (20s-40s): Wears comfortable Christmas clothes; must be athletic
- Spouse B (20s-40s): Wears comfortable Christmas clothes; must be athletic
- Daughter (7): Dressed in jammies
- Santa: Standard mall Santa costume. Carries a big red sack with an inside lining like Christmas wrapping paper and a pen and paper.
- Setting:**
- Inside of an apartment full of secondhand furniture. Front door on one end, with full coat rack and Christmas tree from which the tree-topper is tilted over. Window with wide windowsill on non-ground-floor view, surrounded by full-length curtains. Small cabinet. Bunged-up old-fashioned wardrobe with cornice, then bathroom door, tall potted plant, and across the stage from the front door, a doorway hung with mistletoe. Center stage is dominated by a garish red and stained fold-out sofa with big cushions, next to which is a side table with carton of milk, glass, and a plate of cookies
- Time:**
- Present day
- At Rise:**
- Open on the spouses contemplating the Christmas tree.

(Spouse A goes to the table, pours a glass of milk and starts eating a cookie. Spouse B notices the fallen tree-topper and sets it right, which causes an alarm bell to ring briefly.)

DAUGHTER

(From the mistletoe door)

Santa?

(Spouses panic. Spouse A drops the cookie.)

Santa!

(Spouse A hides behind the coat rack, Spouse B behind the near curtain. Daughter runs in, races to the side table and feels the glass of milk.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

Still cold.

(She rushes to the front door and wrenches it open, only to get it caught on the chain, which she removes and opens to look out. Spouse B steps up on the windowsill and slips over behind the far curtain.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

You couldn't have chained this!

(She spins around.)

Still here.

(She goes and glances under the curtains for feet. Spouse A crawls commando-style behind her and in front of the sofa.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

You can't imagine how it is to be the last girl in school to believe in you.

(Daughter opens the window and leans out. A blast of air billows the curtains and reveals Spouse B, who pulls the curtain back.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

No footprints on the ledge. So then—

(She runs around the front of the sofa as Spouse A slips around the far side. Daughter pulls out the fold-out bed as Spouse B goes around to the far side of the couch. Daughter crawls under the bed that she has just pulled out. Spouse B climbs onto the cabinet and from there to the top of the wardrobe and hunkers behind the cornice.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

(From beneath the sofa)

I swore I'd catch you, Santa—

(Spouse A goes over the top of the sofa, clambers to the front of the bed near us and lies down as Daughter appears on the far side of the bed.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

And I will—in the bathroom!

(She races into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Spouse A gets up and Spouse B climbs down,

creeping toward the door to the bedrooms. Sound of someone pulling curtains aside.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

(Behind the door)

Wait!

(Spouse B dodges left against the wall, Spouse A dodges right behind the potted plant as the door slams open in Spouse B's face. Daughter races to the wardrobe as the door swings back to show a dazed Spouse B. A moment later daughter wrenches open the wardrobe and hits Spouse B with the wardrobe door. Daughter looks at the clothes in the wardrobe and slumps.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

Fine. Well next year I'll be a tween and won't believe in you either, so there!

(She runs off to bed. A moment later, the spouses emerge and go to the hall door and peep through. Spouse A holds a hand low for give-me-five. Spouse B raises a hand to slap it and knocks against the mistletoe. They stifle giggles, kiss, and exit, closing the hall door behind them.)

(A couple moments later, the center back cushion of the couch rises up. It's Santa Claus. He spits out a mouthful of couch filler. Then he picks up an empty sack he was lying on and goes over the back of the couch, where he takes the real cushion and puts it in his place. He shows the audience that the sack is empty by turning it halfway inside-out, revealing a lining like wrapping paper, then wipes his brow. He walks over and drinks the milk.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

(Offstage)

The tree!

(Santa quickly turns his sack fully inside out wrapping-paper lining outside, steps inside and pulls it up over himself. Daughter opens the door and races over to the tree and inspects behind it. Behind her back, Santa scribbles on a large white tag, then holds it up with one hand, the rest of him hidden inside the bag. She turns around and notices the sack.)

DAUGHTER (CONT.)

How did I miss you?

(She glances left and right.)

Well, it's almost Christmas, a little peek won't hurt.

(Santa wiggles the tag. She notices it and takes it.)
"For My Honeysnugglemuffin!" Ewww...

(Daughter walks dejectedly toward the mistletoe door.
Santa's hand reaches out of the sack toward a cookie as
daughter reaches the mistletoe door, a puzzled look on her
face.)

End

Serving Children: An Animated Short

FADE IN:

EXT.SCHOOL LUNCH REVIEW BOARD (SLRB) BUILDING - DAY

Open on a 3x3 honeycomb of boxes, like tiny offices set up along the lines of Hollywood Squares. (Here labeled 1A, 1B, 1C, 2A, etc.) The offices are connected by pneumatic tubes.

The sign for the office block reads "School Lunch Review Board: Serving Children." The department seal shows an American eagle blocking a hotdog from going into a child's open mouth.

WORKERS enter the various offices. All wear drab office suits except PRANKSTER, who enters office 1A wearing a lurid apron and chef's hat and carrying a duffle bag.

OFFICE 1A, PRANKSTER'S OFFICE

Prankster opens a package with a date stamp that contains a lunch tray. The contents of the tray are yellowish fish sticks, lumpy mashed potatoes, creamed corn, mashed cauliflower, a carton of milk, a banana, and one perfectly cylindrical pale carrot. He puts each ingredient in a different capsule and drops the capsules in pneumatic tubes. He completes a sheet and stamps it INITIAL REVIEW and drops that in a tube, too.

OFFICE 1B

1B receives a carrot and measures its dimensions.

OFFICE 1C

1C slams the "Sniffer II"—what looks like a clear beauty parlor hair dryer—over the cauliflower. With a sound like a person inhaling deeply, it displays "3 MONTHS, FROZEN (within parameters)."

OFFICE 2A

2A takes a wand connected via phone cord to a white box and sticks the wand in a fish stick. The box reports "Free of Food-Born Pathogen."

OFFICE 2B

2B (wearing goggles) places creamed corn between two small metal rods. The rods shoot an electric spark through the food and on a display with "Salt:" on it, "200mg (within parameters)" appears.

OFFICE 2C

2C dumps the milk in the measuring beaker of a device. The device monitor displays “NO GROWTH HORMONE.”

OFFICE 3A

3A, a sour-looking older man, taps out mashed potatoes on the tray of a scale labeled “Nutritional Density” and an old-fashioned 7-segment display shows a number sequence, which Bill types in.

OFFICE 3B

3B points a huge dentist’s-office multi-tool at a banana. 3B dons a helmet, dark goggles, and a lead vest and presses a button. A pair of pincers come out of the machinery and peel the banana. 3B breaks off a piece and eats it.

INTERCUT OFFICES

All the workers stamp forms APPROVED and drop them in capsules in the tubes.

OFFICE 3C, THE BOSS’S OFFICE

A mass of tubes ends at BOSS’s desk. She combines the papers, stamps FINAL APPROVAL and dumps the packet in a bin.

EXT.SLRB BUILDING - DAY

The offices buzz with productive, monotonous activity.

OFFICE 1A

Prankster completes another distribution. Then he gets a mischievous expression and pulls a different stamp from the duffle bag and stamps that on the document before putting it in a tube.

BOSS’S OFFICE

Boss receives a package of sheets stamped APPROVED, APPROVED, APPROVED, and a purple unicorn with stars flying from its horn.

She glares toward Prankster’s office.

PRANKSTER’S OFFICE

Prankster pulls something orange from the bag and shoves it in a capsule.

OFFICE 1B

1B receives a carrot that splits in two, like ears, on which the face of a rabbit has been drawn.

OFFICE 2C

2C dumps milk in the measuring beaker, which displays “WHITE RUSSIAN.”

OFFICE 3A

The old man taps out the mashed potatoes on the scale, squints into capsule and taps one more time. A large lead weight labelled “Butter” falls out, splattering mashed potatoes on him and causing the Nutritional Density reading to show all 0s and beep in alarm.

OFFICE 1C

1C slams “Sniffer II” over white mush flecked with blue. A siren goes off and the screen flashes red “GORGONZOLA! GORGONZOLA!”

OFFICE 2A

When 2A sticks the wand in a fish sticks, the fish sticks flops around and 2B drops the wand with a shriek. 2B cautiously approaches to find that an electronic toy fish was hidden inside the fish stick.

OFFICE 2B

When the rods shoot the electric spark through the creamed corn, kernels of popcorn shoot out.

OFFICE 3B

When 3B’s equipment tries to open the banana with the pincers, it can’t. It tries a knife, a vise, a corkscrew, and then a flamethrower. The banana is unharmed. The machine starts in with a saw, which puts up sparks when it cuts.

EXT.SLRB BUILDING - DAY

The offices are in chaos. Workers shake fists at Prankster.

A digital bell rings and the officers leave for lunch.

INT. SLRB CAFETERIA – DAY

Three COOKS stand behind a cafeteria counter. Above them is the same organizational slogan: “School Lunch Review Board: Serving Children.”

The cooks glance conspiratorially at each other as the workers march to the center of the room. With Boss in front, the workers advance on Prankster, who sits in a corner with his duffle.

When Prankster looks up, he catches the eye of a cook, who winks.

1B drops the carrot-rabbit on the table. Prankster bites off an ear and hands it back encouragingly. 3B drops a smoking, blackened, partially sawed banana on the table. The sawed place reveals jagged gray metal.

Boss puts her knuckles on the table and leans in. She takes a deep breath.

Before she can say anything, Prankster raises a finger and opens his mouth.

INT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CAFETERIA – DAY

Prankster, dressed as blandly and with expression as dull as the other workers, enters a school cafeteria full of rambunctious CHILDREN. He spots his DAUGHTER at a full table. He waves at her shyly. She frowns.

He gets to her table and motions for her to come.

She shakes her head.

He taps his watch.

She points at her tray of various uneaten pale green lumps, and then at the trays of the children around her, and then at an overflowing garbage can at the end of the room.

LUNCH COUNTER

Prankster's daughter points up the line of doleful CHILDREN facing equally doleful LUNCH COOKS. She looks pleadingly into his eyes. All the others do, too.

Prankster stares back. Then he straightens his tie.

INT. SLRB CAFETERIA – DAY

The workers facing Prankster move aside as one of the cooks leads Prankster's daughter between them.

Prankster's daughter sets a tray with compartments of colorful food on the table. It contains what look like red, orange, and green gummi bears, vegetable sushi with brown rice, a small green burrito like a worm or caterpillar with a cherry-tomato head and jicama antennae. And a fruit stoplight: strawberry, round mango piece, round honeydew melon chunk.

Boss picks up the gummi bear and holds it under Prankster's nose. Prankster retrieves a bulky, hole-punch-like object from his duffle, takes the half-chewed rabbit carrot from 1B and punches out a bunch of little orange gummi bears from it.

The workers look partially mollified. Boss does not. She points at the cooks and points at her watch. The cooks smile.

INT. SLRB KITCHEN – DAY

The cooks are working like mad. Boss holds a stopwatch.

They squirt refried beans from a tube down an unbroken line of burrito wraps. They cut cylinders through oranges and honeydews and slice them. They wrap sushi at top speed.

Boss raises an eyebrow.

They look nervously at the clock, put on a last burst of speed, punching out gummi bears like firing a machine gun, while other cooks are underneath catching the bears in trays.

They stop. Thirty trays are full. Boss looks at the stopwatch: 29 minutes and 56 seconds. Boss looks at the workers at the cooks, and last at Prankster's daughter.

Boss sighs and nods. All rejoice.

EXT.SLRB BUILDING - DAY

A worker is working on the bottom of the sign on the building. The offices are much changed.

OFFICE 1B

1B's office is decorated with modern art sculpture. 1B measures an avocado. Then splits it open and dumps salsa in the hole from the pit and examines the final product.

OFFICE 1C

1C's wall has a wine rack. Next to the Sniffer II is a selection of fruits and vegetables. 1C opens the Sniffer II and wafts the aroma from a portion of strawberries. After a moment's thought, 1C tries the strawberries with a cucumber and looks surprised and pleased.

OFFICE 2A

2A's office is full of sound-recording equipment. 2A sets down the wand and chews a piece of arugula with an audible crunch and watches it register on the equipment like a minor Richter scale event.

OFFICE 2B

Lots of pictures of fractals. 2B electrocutes a glass of yogurt on a high current, then passes the glass through a small window to Office 2C.

OFFICE 2C

The office is full of mad-scientist titration setups. 2C takes the yogurt glass, pours it into the beaker, then presses a button and the beaker of yogurt blends to a light green color.

OFFICE 3A

The office is the only unchanged one. 3A types up the “Nutritional Density” figures for a pile of mashed potatoes and gets a figure of 531.7715. He sourly glances left and right, then sprinkles some green herbs on until the number reaches 531.8008. He smiles briefly.

OFFICE 3B

3B’s machine has created an astoundingly accurate statue of worker 1C entirely from food. 3B sighs and looks up, longingly.

PRANKSTER’S OFFICE

Prankster is working like a maniac, sometimes passing through foods that arrive by capsule, sometimes adding things from a huge new duffel bag. He’s smiling.

OFFICE 3C, THE BOSS’S OFFICE

Boss reviews trays of vivid food marked with labels like 20% cost savings, 15% better mouthfeel, 18% lower waste. Boss stamps the label for the one with low waste FINAL APPROVAL, the words written above a picture of a winking unicorn.

EXT.SLRB BUILDING - DAY

The sign now reads: “School Lunch Review Board: Serving Children with Relish!”

FADE OUT:

Sweet Eel Pie

[From the end of a novel about a young man, Mule, who struggles through many dangers in Aelfland to apologize to his betrothed, Marigold, for his jealousy and mistrust, which drove her to escape him into Aelfland. Mule tells this story to Marigold in front of the aelf court, having bet his life they will not understand the riddle of how the enchantment in the story is broken, but Marigold, who's a master storyteller and riddle-solver, will. Among the aelfs is a lord named Bonneluck, who considers Marigold his consort and for whom this battle is very important.]

There once was a land with a prince and a princess. The prince, Abernathy, was stern and cold, fiercely proud of his divine right. The princess, Elli, preferred to steal food from the kitchens and sneak into the dung-caked parts of town to meet with the tanner's boy and the varlet boy, the baker's daughter and miller's daughter and Tom the sniggler.

Elli was the elder sibling, but Abernathy was a boy, so the rulership he craved was his birthright. Nevertheless, their parents watched in dismay as all that the tutors and seneschals and councilors failed to cultivate in Abernathy the grace that Elli exuded, even when sneaking back into the palace smelling of the tannery, flea-bitten from the varlet's kennel, and with a baby eel in her pocket from Tom. Her father even called her power "aelf-like," causing her mother to go white and shush him frantically, for fear of catching the aelfs' attention. Elli's parents had reasoned that if the town saw their daughter splashing in the muck playing children's games, they would scarcely consider her noble enough to adjudicate disputes.

Their stratagem failed. When they died of a plague, Elli was not yet sixteen, but every fishwife already took her concerns to Elli before the sheriff.

Abernathy did not have grace, but he did have eyes. The day he ascended to the throne, he sent his sister in secret to a nunnery.

Instead of receiving word of her swift arrival, he received a single guard who said they'd been ambushed by aelfs and Elli had been taken. Only he had been spared to carry a message:

“Dear Elli, sweetness, shelters in our power.

We'll see what fruit you bear without your flower.

She'll dine with us in sanctuary keep

Save if you furnish sweeter life than ours.”

When word of Abernathy's deed spread, the domain was outraged. He was forced to send his best knights and footmen to retrieve his sister, along with anyone who thought they might provide such sweet enticement as might break the spell and bring her back. None returned.

Many commoners rose up in revolt. Abernathy put them down and hanged the tanner, the baker's daughter, and the miller's daughter as rebels. The commoners saw that Tom was not executed with the other friends of Elli: they assumed he had betrayed them to the king, despite his protestations of innocence.

Still, they could not bring themselves to kill a friend of Elli's, even one as low as he, so they contented themselves with beating him frequently. When he caught eels in the millpond, he would sit in the water rather than the on the shore, to soothe the bruises.

As a sick animal attracts predators, so Abernathy's kingdom attracted avaricious neighbors. Within a year, Abernathy was killed in a border skirmish. Most of the commoners wondered anxiously which neighbor would be ruthless enough to capture and keep their land. But Tom the sniggler stole a piece of maggoty meat from the varlet's dogs, baited his hook, and slipped off into the marsh. At midnight, he pulled out an eel long as a peasant girl is tall.

He brought the eel to the baker and had it baked into a pie, took the pie and walked out past the kennel and the tannery. At each he bowed his head and remembered a lost friend. Then he slipped into the forest. He walked always toward the distant sound of music and tinkling laughter, and after three days he entered Aelfland and came to the local Aelf keep.

"I'm Tom the sniggler," he told the guards, "and I have an eel pie sweeter than anything in Aelfland."

They laughed but let him through. The court, too, laughed at him, then sat him at table with Elli, who stared over his shoulder at the wall.

Tom stared at her and felt ashamed, because his love was mixed with awe and fear and a prickle of lust. It was not pure and sweet enough to free her. As he'd known when he set out.

He ate a portion of the eel pie he'd brought, and after the aelf lord beside Elli ordered her to eat, she did so. Tom regretted the grist in the pie—the miller was a waste since his wife had been hung. Tom also regretted the hard, flavorless crust—the baker too was a waste since his wife had been hung. And the faintest stench of the tannery and the

kennels seemed to cling to the pie from his walk through the city. Elli took one large bite and grimaced, which made Tom want to cry.

When he finished, he said, “While your brother lived, I could spare you this pain, but you would want this of me now. To these aelfs you are only sweet, dear Elli, but to us you were wise. Please go and lead your people and share their joy.”

Then the elves dragged him away and beheaded him. Throughout the proceedings, Elli sat, with the same uncomfortable expression on her face.

But when the castle retired for the night, a terrible screaming could be heard from Elli’s bedroom. The aelfs rushed in to see Elli’s eyes red with tears: she hurled things at them and cursed them, calling them lepers, warts on Beelzebub’s horny ass, and the worst imprecations a man might hear in a tannery. She demanded release. When the aelf lord appealed with her to calm down—for he had become fond of her—she fell into his arms, wailing for her dead countrymen. While the lord was distracted by her cries, she snatched his dagger and stabbed him with it.

“That was for Tom,” she told the other aelfs.

Rather than break their oath, the elves released her, though they could not understand, and afterward were disturbed more by confusion than by grief for their lord.

Elli returned to her domain and ruled both wisely and cleverly. The farmland was managed judiciously, and the kingdom’s fine leatherwork was known in distant lands. Because her knights were dead, she was forced to gather warriors from among sinister cutthroats. They murdered invading leaders in the night, rather than face them on the battlefield, until Elli, by the power of her spirit, transformed the cutthroats into a new circle of knights.

The contrite townspeople built a statue of Tom, riding a horse, looking noble and lordly. Elli faithfully shared their joy in their prosperity. But she never visited Tom's statue, for she said he'd never ridden a horse in his life, and he'd been taller without one.

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"I cannot tell if you are fool or liar," Lord Bonneluck said when Mule had finished his tale, "to think our sweetness less to be desired than the paltry joys of any human child."

"My story isn't a lie," Mule said, "Elli's childhood must have had its child-sized sorrows, or the memory of its sweetness would have broken the spell at her first bite."

The hall was silent.

"Can no one else here can answer the riddle?" Mule asked.

"Not sweet but *bitter* food disturbed her palate," Fray the unseelie guessed. "He tainted eel with tanner smoke and grief to fill her mouth with viscid taste of sadness. And fouled whatever aelf-food next she ate."

"It's a good guess," Mule said. "But Tom would not have poisoned Elli so."

After another silence, Titus the ghost said, "There is a longing and regret that is itself like sweetness. Such sweet sorrow might be truer than the aelf sweetness."

"Also a good guess," Mule said. "But again—why was the spell not broken immediately? And why would the food have tasted of sorrow to Elli, who had done no great wrong to her childhood friends?"

The hall was silent, until Queen Niobe, in obvious impatience, said, "Speak your riddle."

Mule turned to Marigold and smiled. She smiled sadly back.

“The answer,” Marigold said, “is the sweetness of adult remembrance. Elli’s childhood could not match the sweetness of life in Aelfland, that is true. But men remember childhood terrors as the adults they are and remember childhood joys as the children they were. Joys ferment in memory like wine in the barrel, while terrors sink like sediment. The reason the enchantment was not broken quickly enough to save Tom’s life is that adult wistfulness steals upon a person only slowly.”

“Better than I could have ever spoken it,” Mule said. “Yes.”

To himself he added, *And none of the aelfs or their retainers could answer the riddle because denizens of Aelfland do not change, and so cannot understand the thoughts of those who do.* He was sure Marigold knew that, too.

“You haven’t changed much, Mule,” Marigold said.

“But I have! This story has a happy ending. Will you return with me?”

“I will return,” Marigold said, and when she looked at Lord Bonneluck, he turned away in anger and indignation.

“How sweet indeed, revenge in equipoise,” Fray said. “To try dear Bonneluck as I was tried. His loss is wereguild for my stolen love; I claim no more redress as justly mine. So I admit I trailed a magic thread behind, down in the dungeons down the web-crossed ways. Unseelie now come creeping up its length. For you to slay.”

At these words, the hall erupted into noise and shouting.

At the Drugstore

[From a series of poems for parents of young children.]

“I’d like children’s cough syrup and earache relief,
an antidiuretic, rehydration salts, deworming pills, specimen jars,
and—I don’t know what it’s called—a plastic tube with a bulb for sucking out snot?”

“An aspirator, yes.”

“And a pregnancy test. Oh, and ibuprofen.”

“Chewable or syrup?”

“What?”

“The ibuprofen, chewable or syrup?”

“Oh, no. That’s for me.”

Dead Flowers

Rowan “Row” River stumbled down fifth street, singing Rateliff & The Night Sweats.

“I’m gonna cover myself in the ashes of you, and nobody’s gonna—”

“It’s not even dark yet, alkie!” shouted an underclassman with five friends for backup.

Row considered having words. Then he shrugged, gave his best jaunty wave, and continued along.

“My heart is breaking, hands are shaking, bugs are crawling all over me!”

He turned off at his street and improvised a new verse of the song.

“That bastard—Nick—through grass came snaking, stole my Elle away from me.

He filled Elle’s veins, her eyes all vacant, dug his grave, you wait and see.

I’ll pull her out of dark forsaken, give him to Death in place of she.”

He looked up and realized that he was not, in fact, on his street. He stood before a shop he didn’t recognize. The sign said, “Dead Flowers” and the window box held a huge metal vase, like an inverted church bell filled with sunflowers, heads drooping, as if in sorrow or regret.

Well, that’s appropriate, Row thought with grim amusement. He went in.

Almost immediately, he got poked in the eye by a whip-like stalk in a pot near the door, a tiny flower still clinging to it. Tall shelves and cabinets crowded aisles that curved or made lightning-bolt switchbacks, so Row might have gotten dizzy even if he’d been sober. He’d taken enough plant biology (and spent enough time with his mom) that even drunk he could recognize pressed snapdragons under glass, the violet and green double

five-point star of borage, suspended in some kind of gel, and the misshapen egg-noodle petals of witch hazel, preserved in some way he couldn't see.

He wobbled along, unease seeping into the fog of his brain, until he heard a friendly hello and saw the shopkeeper at a counter. The man was small, tan-skinned and plump as a bread roll, his plumpness accentuated by a riotous orange cummerbund around his belly. His formal-looking white shirt and dark slacks only made the cummerbund seem more ridiculous.

Row laughed. "Hiya, friend!" he said, too loudly. "Cozy place you got."

On the counter were a pair of garden clippers and a mass of stalks covered with spiked, burrs like small, almond-shaped chestnuts.

"Ugh," Row said, "why would you want cocklebur. It's a weed."

"Precisely for that pertinacity for which you despise it," the shopkeeper said.

"What would you like?"

"Roses. Like the song says—roses to put on her grave."

"Ah, my condolences."

"You must get a lot of Rolling Stones fans in here—sign like 'Dead Flowers.'"

"And people looking for black orchids and little black flowers. Or for six little marigolds or Elisa Day roses or desert roses. Right this way."

As he followed, Row tried to place the shopkeeper's accent. For all Row could make out, it could be Arabic or Armenian or Argentinian.

The shopkeeper squeezed around a tree trunk that seemed to have grown up through the floorboards. Finally they reached a tall shelf of cubbyholes, each of which contained dozens of roses.

“At the light end of my reds are strawberry and raspberry,” said the shopkeeper, indicating the top-left cubbies, “and here, Burgundy. Note the violet and hazelnut highlights. And on down into the blacks. Which would be most appropriate, Row?”

Row flinched. “I didn’t tell you my name.”

“But you did. You said, ‘Hiya, friend, I’m Rowan River—mom was a hippie, what can you do? Call me Row.’”

Row frowned. He often introduced himself that way. But not here, did he?

“I’ll make us even,” said the shopkeeper. “Call me Dezzy.”

Row stared at him incredulously.

The shopkeeper sighed. “It’s short for ‘Derzelas.’ A propitious name, if you go back long enough. But what is the name of your departed love? Something to guide our choice of flowers. She wasn’t Camellia, was she?”

“Elle—Elira,” Row said. “It’s Albanian, I don’t know what—”

“‘Free One.’ And how did she die?”

“Heroin overdose, last month.” Row was sobering fast and getting more uncomfortable by the moment. “You know, sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

“And Nyx, how does Nyx fit in?”

“Now wait a second, I did *not* say his name.”

“No, you sang ‘That bastard Nyx’ right outside my door, with feeling.”

“First off, it’s just ‘Nick.’ ‘Nyx’ is the prick’s stage name. And second, what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Ah, a rival then. She left you to sing with Nick’s band?”

“She left me to go shoot junk with the bastard.”

“Say no more! Now I have something to work with.” Dezzy pulled a long-stemmed rose from the bottom rightmost cubby. “Midnight black!”

He sped down an aisle to a cabinet, Row moving uncertainly behind him. Dezzy opened a drawer, muttered to himself and slammed it shut again. The cabinet was carved with elongated figures, faces emerging at odd angles from the woodwork, their fingertips at the top of the cabinet and their toes at the base. From another drawer, Dezzy pinched out an orchid.

“Blue Orchid—you being a music lover.” Dezzy pulled out and waved a small bulb under Row’s nose. “Wild garlic for manly resolve, a few notes of context...” He plucked out smaller flowers, and then opened what Row could have sworn was the first drawer he’d tried and withdrew a feather-edged white blossom with maroon speckles and a maroon stain the size of his finger at the base of the stamen.

“Ghostflower, from the desert of New Mexico. You are both southwesterners, yes?”

“Tempe. She was from Scottsdale,” Row said, hardly surprised Dezzy knew.

“It is your accent.” Dezzy laid out his collection on a battered curio, pulled a length of very fine twine from a pocket and collected the flowers into an arrangement. The ghostflower went on top, with the thorny bar of the black rose stem sideways beneath. Below that, all the “context” flowers made a nest, so deftly tied the twine was hardly visible. The finished work was dark, eerie, and beautiful.

“Whoa, whoa!” Row said, coming to his senses. “I can’t pay for this!”

“Twenty-nine dollars even.”

“I don’t even have that,” Row said, though he thought he might just have enough.

“After you place it on Elira’s grave, you can return and pay me.”

Row stared at the man with the cheerful orange band around his middle and the ghostflower bouquet.

“Dezzy,” he said, slowly, “what’s your game? There is no way an arrangement this,” he searched for a word, “*imaginative* could cost less than a hundred.”

“Ah, but I am a romantic. A story of death and vengeance and lost love...”

Dezzy looked at Row’s skeptical expression. “Also, a young woman recently came in—down to the basement, where the rarest flowers are. A singer, singing to herself something about a ‘needle in the hay’?”

“Did she have a black choker with the word ‘Hurt’ on it?” Row’s throat felt raw.

“On a stud of obsidian at the throat, yes.”

“How’d she look?”

Dezzy stared pityingly at him. “She was a junky, Row.”

Row felt a tear trying to well in his eye. “She wouldn’t even see me by the end. And then I couldn’t see her—she ran away to San Francisco. Where *he* lives.”

Dezzy proffered the arrangement. Row took it. “It’ll be a while before I can put in on the grave,” he said. “She’ll be buried in Scottsdale.”

Dezzy shook his head. “San Francisco. She asked for it in the will.”

“San Francisco, then,” Row said, irritably. He turned to go.

“One more thing. Did you mean what you said about getting Elle back?”

“And killing Nick?”

“Yes.”

Row imagined all the sorrow and fury of those first days after he learned of Elira's death. Listening to some of the last songs they preformed together, over and over again. His music a mess, the recording a mess, sounds of the rest of the band carousing behind them, but her voice like Melody Gardot's—like how a young beautiful woman might sing if she was possessed by the ghost of herself as an old woman. All the luscious sound of youth, with the kind of ironies and dolorous self-mockery you'd expect from someone much older.

"Yeah," he told Dezzy. "I meant it."

"Very well. The door is by the bleached cactus."

"I know where it is."

But when Row got to the place he thought he'd entered, there was just the front window. He walked along the window until he reached a cactus, one bony branch across the door. Was that what he'd almost hit his head against on the way in?

He went out into a cold fog. It wasn't the street where he'd entered. Had he gone out a side exit? And where had the fog come from? It had been bone-dry in Davis. At the end of the block he stopped.

He stood at the top of a hill. A vast graveyard stretched out beside him, at least three blocks long. There was nothing like it near his apartment, nothing like it in all of Davis. The sign over an entrance gate read "Golden Gate National Cemetery."

The last of Row's buzz evaporated in icy terror. He ran back into the shop and slammed the door behind him.

"That was quick," Dezzy said. He rounded the corner, wielding the clippers that had been on his table. He frowned. "You didn't place the arrangement."

“What the hell *are* you?”

Dezzy looked down at a dry branch like a spindly hand reaching out of a jug. He snipped it off. “I am a cultivator of dead flowers,” he said. “Many kinds of dead flowers.”

Row blanched. “You mean dead people? Like... Hades?”

Dezzy scoffed. “The Greeks had some lovely stories—I particularly like Hyacinth, Anemone, and Peony, as you might imagine. But their underworld was a walled garden. Think of me as a botanist with an interest in cross-pollination between this world and the next.”

Row took some time to think about Dezzy’s words. “You said Elle came in here and went in your basement. *When* did she come? What date?”

Dezzy smiled broadly. “August twenty-seventh.”

The day after she died, Row thought. Oh, God.

“Can I see her?” he asked, hoarsely.

“Mortals do not enter that place.”

Row thought for a few moments. “There was that Greek—Orpheus. Who went after Ariadne.”

“Eurydice, not Ariadne! And Orpheus’s music made gods cry. Can you make gods cry?”

“I’ve got a band,” Row said, defensively. “‘Honeywine.’ We do rock, blues.”

“You are an agriculturalist. You lost Elira to the *real* musician.”

“Nick’s not a musician. He just fiddles with a board of switches. He wants to play like Elbow. Talking Heads-shoulders- knees-and-toes alternative shit.”

“And yet—”

“How much do you want?”

“My friend, I am not a ferryman. You don’t pay me. But you risk much to enter my basement. The phantasmagoria there contorts itself around your mind. What nightmare visions do you have?”

A mental image of his mom, near the end, jumped unbidden to Row’s mind.

“The nightmares will be there. And you can craft real things from imagination. Even if you return, you may spend the rest of your life weeping for that lost power.”

Row swallowed. “That’s a steep price.”

“Just take the flowers and go.”

Row wavered. But Elle’s voice seemed to call to him, like a Siren, but stronger, because even the echo of it drew him onward.

“I’ll do it anyway. Take me.”

Dezzy stared at him a moment longer and then said, “Come.”

They walked to a staircase of plain tile steps leading down into the dark. The air didn’t smell moist and fungal, as you’d expect from a basement full of growing things, but like home—juniper and creosote. Woodbine creepers with dark-red leaves gripped the walls around the door.

With another deep breath, he descended the stairs, Dezzy behind him. It seemed as if some insect was crawling over the creepers around him, because while Row concentrated on the stairs, he thought he glimpsed tiny skittering movement on the creepers around him.

He reached the bottom and stepped out into a cut-stone chamber. Immediately, a wave of dizziness washed over him, like high-THC cannabis chased with tequila, which reminded him of his mom, again. Row hated weed.

The smell was dry and close, more mineral than herbal. Twisted roots, some like streamers or cobwebs, some like pillars, stretched floor to ceiling all around him, their tips powdered with dust or fine sand. The tiniest root hairs intertwined, creating spiderweb patterns. Row gasped.

In this web shimmered soap-bubble hallucinations, like moving portraits. He saw his childhood, his mom's hippies-with-guns friends—the ones he liked, her jerk-ass boyfriend—high school friends, early college days before Elle, friends from the band circuit. But no image of Elle. He touched one, trying to break the bubble, but it flexed like membrane and returned when he pulled his hand away.

“Damn,” Row said. “Damn, damn.”

“...antechamber,” Dezzy said behind him. Row only heard one word in three. “you’ll... real... further.”

The hiss and plink sound at the edge of his hearing was something like desert wind and something like the hollow echo of a cavern. But it was disconcertingly regular—too distant to make out, but a noise that seemed deliberate, musical.

They walked together, Row shook his head but his dizziness didn't lessen. A blue-green glow, like bioluminescence, grew ahead of him, like a wide lake or sea. Row gestured at it excitedly. Dezzy just smiled and tapped Row's head with a forefinger.

“...dream.” Dezzy finished, pointing at himself. He shook his head.

Approaching closer, Row realized that the glowing sea was dry, a barren sea of salt, the salt dyed green, blue and every aquamarine mix between. The closer he got, the more the glow resolved into the sparkle of millions of grains of salt. The hiss and plink resolved as well into music that made his heart sink. “Down Hearted Blues”—his mother’s song. She would have chosen “Cry Me a River,” but the first time Row heard “Down Hearted,” he knew it was hers.

“Damn-n-ation,” Row slurred. His tongue felt like raw meat in his mouth.

Dezzy grabbed him by the shoulders. More by reading the man’s lips than by hearing his words, Row understood him to say, “I go. Elira... circle south...Broken Point. Broken Point.”

Dezzy gestured at the pool, then drew a line with his finger away from the water. “Into the dark. Beware...”

Row thought he might be finished, but after long pause he added, “Hades.”

Row could only nod. The shopkeeper gave him a grim little nod and walked off. Row watched him until he disappeared down the path.

He passed low sparse plants—yuccas and sparse grasses, until he came to a body. It was a college guy he thought he remembered, but whose name escaped him as the boy writhed naked on the ground. When Row called to him, he didn’t respond. Then pale goldenrod grew and bloomed from the crook of the guy’s elbow, his inner thigh, neck, and anus. Flies and beetles seemed to crawl from the ground around him and onto his writhing body. Row was horrified and ran on. He passed a woman on her knees with spearheads of agave bristling from her screaming mouth, and others throttled by climbing weeds and pierced by thorns and spars of wood, also attended by insects. When he was

able to push down his horror, he tried to rush to the aid of a woman with small pink flowers with yellow necks and dark purple bases growing from her nose. But she seemed unable to hear or respond to him and as much as he beat away the scuttling beetles covering her, she didn't respond to his touch and more of the insects came on.

Eventually he gave up and walked on. He could tell he had further to go, because the sound of "Down Hearted Blues" was growing. Although the feeling of being high hadn't receded, he was able to control it more, move with surer footsteps.

He walked and tried to ignore the suffering shades of people he passed, moving faster and faster, though he was terrified of what he'd find when he reached the song. Maybe his mother as she had been at the end, half crazy from all the stuff she'd done to scramble her mind, strung out and lying around her house in her own urine because she'd refused—screamed—against going to a hospital. Ranting about her lost Sun Devil—Row's father, an ASU undergrad who'd loved the desert and the outdoors and her, but still left, heading for California, shortly after Row was born.

Would he find her with peyote cactuses like warts growing over her skin?
Hanging limp from a Saguaro attended by flies?

An outcropping of stones thrust up from the salt lake like the broken bones of a giant. Broken Point. The song was everywhere. Disgusted and heartbroken, mistreated and troubled. Row couldn't tell who was singing; it wasn't Bessie Smith. When he rounded the largest of the broken stones—three times his height, the music crescendoed, seeming to rise up from beneath him and he saw... nothing.

He stood on barren ground of coarse, white gravel. Nothing grew. No shades contorted around him. And from the music he could feel through the soles of his feet, he knew his mother was somewhere beneath him.

He wondered if he would need to dig through the gravel with nothing but his fingers to get to her, or if he had a heart cold enough to just walk over her when something spiny burst from the earth.

He recoiled and the thing continued to grow. It was covered in spines thick as fur and branched awkwardly as it emerged. A cholla cactus, growing from his mother's soul or body or whatever was in this terrible place. Even as he watched, the branches stretched to block the way away from the stones of Broken Point. Row remembered Dezzy's words—that he must strike out away from the sea when he reached this place, but the cholla was blocking his path. Row ran toward the thickening wall of cholla, trying to find a way through.

He leapt a low branch and ducked another and found five more in his path. Even as he glanced back, more had grown behind him. A spine pierced his shirt on the left arm and pricked him and he cursed. A small fire of fury sparked in him that his mother would bar his way even in life and he held that spark, because the cholla grew tighter and anger kept away the fear, even while the song sang about trouble all the way to the grave. He clenched his fist and found that he was clenching it around the handle of a survival knife seemingly formed from his anger. The blade was painted red, the handle black.

He hacked at the cholla with it and lopped off piece easily. But more grew in its place. He cut and slashed and was jabbed and stabbed in turn by a hundred tiny spines

and when he was drenched in the sweat of exertion, he retreated, cutting backwards where the branches were thinner until he was back at Broken Point.

Row stood heaving for a few minutes and stared at the obstruction. Although it spread out as far as he could see in each direction, all of the branches of cholla seemed to diverge from a single trunk in the spot where it had first burst from the ground. The central trunk was thick around as Row's shoulders, and he knew with a feeling of intuition he wouldn't be able to cut through it.

The song reached the final lyrics—a jug with the world in it, the stopper in the singer's hand, pouring out until her man's trapped. It gave him an idea. He tried to form a jug from his imagination—a water pitcher. Nothing happened. Remembering how his fury had made a knife, he tried again, this time imagining all his sorrow at his mother pining her life away when he was a child, until he'd sworn he wouldn't lose his love like she had. And yet he'd done it, she was out there somewhere, beyond the cholla.

He noticed the pitcher in his hand and almost dropped it. He didn't know what moment it had appeared. Then he went around the stones and stepped into the salt sea in a hiss and smell of leather and scooped up the salt in the pitcher before scampering back on shore. His boots were smoking and his feet uncomfortably hot by the time he reached the shore. He walked back toward the cholla. A grain of salt emerged from the bottom of the pitcher and scored a line down his leg, and then another and he realized the salt was burning through the bottom of the jug, he ran forward, the trickle growing stronger. When he was as close to the trunk of the cholla as he could get, he hurled the contents of the pitcher under the branches, toward the trunk.

Salt hissed against the branches it hit and burned through them. Only a few grains made it as far as the trunk, but those grains sizzled until the trunk was black, and then all around was black, and then blackness rode outward along all the branches like fire burning down a matchstick. After the branches turned black, the spines and flesh of them fell away to dust, leaving only the skeletal structure of the cholla. It looked a bit like fishnet stockings and a bit like a drawing of human tendons—a thick mesh of white through the holes of which Row could see the cholla’s hollow core. And within that core, cactus beetles emerged and crawled out over the branches.

When the last of the living cholla died and the music faded and all around him was only spindly white, Row hacked at branches and broke others off with his bare hands, swatting at the insects that landed on him. When he got to the far side of his mother’s cholla, he dropped the knife and walked out into the black.

He came to a vast landscape of ocotillo—desert coral. Bent stems three times his height and no thicker than his thumb, but in the wrong colors—the leaves ashen, the flowers not red but pale pink. The twilight there was so dim, he had to squint hard to make out strands of ocotillo in front of him and avoid their thorns. When he stared, his eyes felt scraped by what he looked at so that they were red and watering after a few minutes. Other plants slowly appeared. He stepped on their withered husks, which grew thicker, and his boots crunched. When they crunched he felt something like a wiggling beneath his boots and did not look down.

The march and his streaming eyes and the crunch and the silence—he’d heard nothing but his own breathing and the everpresent scuttling since the cholla—Row used thoughts of Elira to keep him going. He remembered the early times, the good times.

Meeting her out on a camping trip with a couple crazy archaeology students he knew. Playing in bars with Honeywine, when she'd joined in with her pure, wry voice. Row formed his memory of Elira into a flashlight, a beam of Elira-light that he fixed into a lantern above his head and admonished it to stay there, like a halo. The light eased the pain in his eyes, and Row smiled for the first time since coming down into the underworld. He could make forms from his imagination. And wasn't he supposed to be a musician?

Row made himself a guitar from the nothing. The body was hollow as the feeling in his chest when Elira died, the strings were steel of determination, made taught with his anxiety. He held the guitar—the body a dark curved shape against his chest, his fingers on frets like the ripples of scars. He decided Glen Campbell's "Gentle on My Mind" would be good for the circumstances—imagining her always gentle within his memory—so he played that and sung it to thin ocotillo around him, and drowned out the scrabbling of insects and seemed to draw clarity out of the mental haze of the underworld.

After a time, the light of his halo fell upon a form. She had the hollowed out, scraped away look and twitchy movement of a junkie as she broke off fronds of ocotillo with her bare hands—heedless of the thorns—and dropped them on a fire that gave no light. But he knew it was Elira as a person knows another in a dream, whatever face they wear.

"Elira!" he shouted. She turned her head. He tossed aside his guitar and ran forward. "Elira!"

Though he'd stopped playing, his head was clear, as if he and Elira were in a bubble, a lens-like droplet that exactly cancelled out the disorientation of the underworld so they alone were clear and sober.

Elira saw him and leapt over her campfire in her rush toward him.

He ran, she ran.

"Nick!" she cried.

Row stopped running. She continued a few more paces, then stopped, her face contorted. "No! You obsessive fuck! I can't even escape you *here*?"

"Baby, wait!" Row implored her. "I've come to get you out."

"I'd rather stay dead." She crouched, as if he were a mad animal she might need to outrun. She looked desperate. Insane.

"What'd he do to you?" Row whispered.

"He gave me hope of escaping you."

"Yeah, riding on a heroin high," Row spat. The ocotillo behind her faded away and the shadows behind her writhed and scissored against each other.

"That wasn't Nick."

"Bullshit!"

"He's straightedge. He wanted me to quit." She smiled slightly. "Said he'd play laundry detergent commercials to get the money for rehab, if I'd try to get clean."

"Then who?" demanded Row.

"One of Sheila's friends, the blond one. *Your* crowd. When I couldn't take all your 'Where you going, girl, where you been? Where you going, girl, where you been?' I got away the one way I could."

“I didn’t—”

“You broke into my dorm room and went through my stuff!”

“Because you were using!”

“Because you are a jealous psycho. And I wish so bad I’d had the guts to call the campus police to drag you off.”

In the next still, awful moment, the scissor-shadows behind her resolved into tiny mandibles and serrated legs and volcano-glass teeth. Locusts and beetles and ants not individual but together in one mass—a dust storm of glossy black. They reached Elira’s campfire of darkness and engulfed it.

This was Hades, Row realized. And he was coming for Elira.

“Come back with me,” he said.

“Never.”

Rage, grief, a convulsion of longing made Row dizzy. He gritted back all his words and watched, cold as stone, as she backed two more steps toward the devouring swarm.

Schick, schick, snapped the mandibles.

They stared at each other in mirrored loathing and had the moment just before a fight when a quarreling couple became like seers—able to predict every argument and accusation they would use and their lover would use in response, able to see every move and countermove until they’d smashed the furniture.

“You don’t ever get what you want, do you, Row?”

Before he could respond, Patti Griffin's "Never Get What You Want" jumped to his mind. He looked at his empty hands—where had his guitar gone?—he'd strode in singing Glen Campbell, and now he would let Hades silence her forever?

"Wait, Elle, wait! I'll leave. Please, but you got to follow me."

"The hell you say!" She half-turned away.

"Don't turn!"

And to his relief she stopped. He felt that if she saw the mandibles behind her, she'd be too terrified to move.

"Please, follow me back to the lake—the light, whatever you call it or see in it," he begged her. "You don't have to go further. I won't turn around and try anything, I promise by God in heaven and the blues and anything you want."

"You already promised by all of that."

Couldn't she feel the swarm scraping?

"Then I promise by every wrong I ever did you! The jealousy and crazy and everything that drove you here ... please, we have to go. I'm turning now, please follow me."

With that he turned—did he imagine it, or did she take a step forward as he did? He walked forward. Within a few moments, the droplet of clarity he'd felt when he faced Elira had faded, and he was again dizzy and disoriented. He trudged on.

The ocotillo was still there, its thorns tore bloody gashes in his arms and legs and face. He walked until he felt sure hours had passed. The urge to look back was excruciating.

Then, like the halo of pre-dawn, Row saw the blue-green glow of the salt lake.

“Elira! Do you see it?”

Behind him was utter silence. Silence so terrible, he knew she must have been devoured. He couldn’t bear not to look back.

But that’s the fucking story, he shouted at himself. That was Orpheus’s story. Almost got his wife back, but too stupid to keep his eyes front.

The silence was worse than when the darkness had scraped at his eyes. Worse than the mad rage when he and Elle and started fighting again and he’d almost let the swarm have her. He couldn’t bear it.

Silence.

Of course, he thought. Of *course*. Orpheus played his way into hell. He brought tears to Hades’ eyes and saved his girl, and then the idiot tried to walk out again in absolute maddening silence.

Row reached out, and his guitar formed in his hand. Against the darkness, he played Dylan’s “Restless Farewell.” Following his feet away from the woman he’d hurt, away from the past along a line that took him, at last, to the Broken Point and the bed of salt.

He turned aside, without glancing back. He stopped just long enough to shout “Goodbye, Elira!” Then he walked on, still playing.

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Row trudged up the steps from the basement. Dezzy stood beside the massive polished oak tree at the middle of the shop, clipping small branches. He turned and set down the clippers as Row approached.

“Row! How pleased I am to see you. You *are* still you, aren’t you?”

“More or less,” Row said. “She didn’t come back with me.”

“No, she wouldn’t have.”

Row glared at Dezzy’s bland expression. “You knew, you bastard.”

“Here,” Dezzy said, and handed him an arrangement—small spiky orbs of vibrant violet he recognized as globe amaranth and dark dried seed pods like blades, both of which were woven into the familiar fishnet mesh of cholla cactus.

“Amaranth for unfading love, black locust for affection beyond the grave, and cholla for warmth.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Oh, they’re not for you. They’re for Nick.”

“Nick? You expect me to go find that prick and say, ‘Here’s a bouquet, go get your girlfriend—my old girlfriend—out of the underworld’?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“And he’s going to believe me?”

“If you give him this bouquet, yes. My intuitions about people are usually good.”

“Like with me?”

“Actually, you I couldn’t decide about. But you’ve buoyed my optimism. Incidentally, if you’re so enamored with the Greeks, you might find some comfort in the story of Aristaeus.”

“What?” Row said in irritation. He stood for a few moments. He wanted to take the arrangement and throw it in Dezzy’s face, but he knew he wouldn’t. He’d walked Elira as far out of the land of the dead as she would go with him. Let her sing for Nick if it would mean she’d sing again.

He looked around for something to delay the inevitable.

“Hey,” he finally asked, “why do you need clippers? The plants in here are dead.”

“You are thinking too much like a Greek again. Life and death are most fruitful when they mix in promiscuous, fecund confusion. Watch.”

He proffered the arrangement again and Row took it. Almost immediately, spindly stems grew out from the arrangement, topped with flowers that had straight white petals ending in regular curves like a child’s paper cut-out of a hand.

“Gravel ghost,” Dezzy said, and clipped off one of the stems. He set down the clippers and faster than Row could follow, he pinched something from just under the bulb of the flower. A black beetle.

“Can’t have these,” he said, and popped the beetle in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. Then he smiled until Row turned away.

Row walked out listening to Elle’s voice in his memory singing “Ghost Wiring”—needles soft and sharp, and swaying leaves.

Corporal Mud

Chapter 16: The Bridge Over the Berezina

[The protagonist, Slava, began the novel having already watched his supply-captain father die retreating from Austerlitz. After that, he'd learned weather-magic from his crazy hermit uncle. In revenge for his father's death, he pretends to defect to Napoleon's Grand Army in its invasion of Russia. He passes intelligence to Lavrov, a Russian agent working with Don Cossacks to undermine the French. Lavrov does blood magic. Slava complains of dysentery and frequently walks away from the men to defecate; this is his excuse to get away from the men to do his weather magic and leave spy reports for Lavrov marked with his blood. Because he uses the excuse so much and jokes in a ribald manner, the French call him "Corporal Shit."]

Slava's magic works by appealing to the Winds and the Fogs, which he imagines as mounted raiders and entrenched infantrymen, respectively. He can generally make small but substantive weather changes over the long term, but not shorter and more precise changes. Intensifying summer rain to make the ground a muddy morass ahead of a slow-moving army: doable. Calling down lightning to smite an opponent: impossible. He carries a horsetail jangling with beads that he claims is a trophy, but is actually a Winds talisman. Finally, all magic gets harder to do the longer people are in large social groups: people's auras blind magicians to the subtle forces they manipulate, so magicians are, by necessity, loners. Slava's powers have only recently revived due to the isolation of the march from Moscow, so many men having died of starvation.

Over the course of the novel, Slava loses sympathy for the Russian cause and gains sympathy for Joseph, an honorable Jewish officer who commands the mounted skirmishers to which Slava's attached. To Slava's horror, his intelligence results in the murder of Theresa, a Spanish cantinière (woman who sold additional food to French soldiers, as well as coordinating washerwomen and acting as a battlefield nurse). Theresa was a luck magician and Joseph's beloved.

On the starving, terrible retreat from Moscow, Slava's guilt and shifting loyalty prompts him to use his magic to aid, rather than further oppress, the French. His ultimate act of sacrifice is to use his bond with Lavrov to lead Joseph's starving men to Lavrov's camp in the forest and kill Lavrov's unit for their provisions. Although Slava is in the risky position of approaching Lavrov alone while Joseph's men sneak up, Slava survives, and Joseph does not learn that Slava had once worked with Lavrov. Because Lavrov's horses are so desperately needed, when Slava and Joseph bring them back to the French command at the Berezina river, the two get to meet Napoleon. Despite Slava's hatred, he is unwilling to murder Napoleon, when Joseph would surely be blamed for the murder with him and killed as a traitor.

At the start of the final chapter, it is November 26, 1812. The afternoon before, Joseph left with cavalry to support Marshal Oudinot in a desperate feint to cross the Berezina much further downriver, so that the army's true crossing (where Slava is) will not be perceived until too late. The feint has worked. The majority of the Russians forces have gone south. General Corbineau's cavalry have crossed and set up position to protect the French as they try to build pontoon bridges before the Russians return.]

Slava gladly accepted being pressed to help the engineers working on the two pontoon bridges that the French would cross. Alongside the others, he dragged the sledges with the logs for the bridges. The pain of the leather straps chafing his shoulders was for him a relief. When he and the Master had been hungry or when he had been overcome by memories of his father's death, wandering between Carpathian villages doing their weatherwork, he'd been able to dull hunger pangs and heartsickness with work that blistered his palms and bruised his back. Pain of the skin, Slava had found, eased pain in the viscera.

But the hundred and twenty paces from the ever-dwindling treeline to the river side with a heavy load on his wounded shoulder was barely enough.

He'd stood before Napoleon with a pistol at hand but had not fired. Surely the life of bloody imperial conqueror—who hurled Frenchmen upon Austrians, Spaniards, Englishman, the peasants of the Russian Empire—was worth more than one skirmisher captain. How much did he value Joseph's honor—and not even his honor, which would remain clean, only the *perception* of his honor—that he'd stayed his hand? Perhaps all thoughts of Joseph were delusion—he'd failed from cowardice.

The engineers took the most recent log Slava and the others brought. There were twenty-seven engineers left of the forty-two of Eblé's men who'd volunteered to wade into the water. The first man among them who'd stepped in, hours earlier, had had his leg smashed from under him by a slab of ice and been sucked down the river. Engineers now worked chest deep in the freezing water, some shoulder-deep, dying and going under as they went. One engineer, in particular, leered at Slava every time Slava arrived with another log. On Slava's most recent trip, the man had been on his knees on the bank, one

of many working with small forges, making iron bands for binding the pontoon logs. The engineer's skin was gray with fatigue and cold despite the forges' heat. His trousers were wet and dripping to the groin. He stared at Slava with such a lewd, brothel-going expression that Slava shuddered in horror. The engineer was like a demon too impatient to wait for the French to die.

Slava walked to the edge of the clearing with the other men. Could the engineer be a ghoul or an illusion of Slava's own conscience? Perhaps he was an uncanny with the power to sniff out sin, the way Lavrov had sniffed out blood? A peculiar terror of the apparition gripped Slava. He sighed with relief when, on his next load, the engineer was nowhere to be found.

He returned to his rumination. He'd accepted the risk of death going into Lavrov's camp, true. But such desperate acts might only be a reckless charge that saves a man from a slower more terrible death. The act of a coward, rather than the sacrifice of a man of honor.

On Slava's next load, the engineer splashed up out of the water just as Slava arrived. The engineer's expression was full of feral avidity. Slava recoiled as the monster threw himself upon him, seemingly set to grapple him to the ground.

"Corporal Shit? Is it you, Corporal Shit?" the engineer shouted directly into his face. The man wasn't grappling but embracing him. He was terribly cold—his clothes crackled with ice.

"Yes," was all Slava managed.

"It's good to know that far as we've marched, we're not rid of our filthy shit."

He laughed at his own joke, then snatched Slava's arm, his hand like Old Winter's himself.

"Listen, you brigand, take this," the man whispered. He pulled an oilcloth-wrapped bundle from under his coat and stuffed it in Slava's.

"This," he patted the bulge in Slava's coat, "will be worth nothing if it soaks in the river with me. If I come out again, we'll share. If not—then the shit will go on!"

The engineer rushed back to the others working on the next pontoon.

As the day wore on, the bridge-building progressed painfully, murderously slowly. Slava thought the French ruse downriver must surely be discovered soon—any moment the Russians might come charging up from the south. Or Kutuzov's great horde might even come slogging in from the East. Napoleon would be trapped and defeated, perhaps executed. At the thought, relief filled him like blood returning to a frostbitten limb.

And yet the engineers pushed and pushed, hour after hour, until finally they secured the final pontoons on the far bank and collapsed.

Napoleon arrived from the peasant hut that had been his imperial command tent and crossed. Incredibly, the Russians in the forests around them and south in Borisov, were still absent.

Slava looked after Napoleon, thinking of new levies, new divisions, new armies, the many more men who would die. He had not seen his frigid engineer in hours. Even if the man had been one of the few to make the other side, there would be no way, and hardly any reason, for him to press backwards against the men marching over the bridges.

Among the first to cross were a few women. Cantinièri and wives and unfortunate camp followers from Moscow who'd chosen the wrong army, Slava guessed. Most were bundled in multiple French coats looted from the dead. One wagon held a wailing woman, beside whom was propped a dead girl of no more than twelve. It seemed strange and terrible to watch the French soldiers who'd suffered so much, some of whom had surely done terrible things out of mad hunger, all gazing at the little wagon with sadness. Time was short and all of them were in danger. Yet as they watched a dead girl travel in a cart where a live man, even an injured one, might ride, Slava saw only sorrow on their faces.

He could not bear it. He walked away from the rest to sit down. Hard work had reopened the wound in his shoulder. The package the nameless engineer had given him was a kind of flour cake or dumpling—crumbling dough with a few seeds of fennel in it. Slava ate slowly, hunched over to shield his meal from the view of the other starving men, though he kept one eye always to the south, where Joseph had gone with Oudinot's forces. Cannon fire could be heard distantly from that direction.

When Slava was half finished with the cake, he replaced it in the cloth, saving it for Joseph. He feared that if he sat any longer, he might fall asleep and not see when Joseph arrived. So he stood, checked his coat, wiped at his beard to make sure there were no crumbs, and walked back to the bridge.

In the time Slava had been absent, the press of men on the two bridges had increased. Out of urgency they marched across pressed close. The press was so tight they'd apparently broken the wheels of two carts. The men moved interminably slowly

around the obstructions. They cursed and occasionally cried in terror as they slipped off the sides of the bridges. But the mass moved on.

Time passed—minutes, or at least not more than a few hours—then the downriver bridge collapsed under the weight, pitching all who were on it into the icy water. The remaining soldiers moved even more slowly over the upstream bridge.

“Slava, is it really you?” cried a voice in Russian.

Slava turned to find a young man he recognized only barely—a gaunt Russian youth with tawny hair wearing cast-offs and no uniform. The young man’s face was pinched with want, out of place on one so young.

“Andrushka? Andrushka from the village?” Slava said. [*Andrushka is a 14-yr-old from a village Slava and Joseph’s unit raided, only to find the Russians had already stolen their food, so none would be left for the French. Andrushka joined the French march rather than starve at home.*]

“Yes, sir.”

“I had no hope you might have survived. How did you accomplish this miracle?”

“Probably the same as you and the others did, sir. I do my best as a guide.”

“Are there many like you, like us?”

“Not so many, but there were Russians and Germans and Spaniards and others following the army. Some still live. I heard one officer say there are maybe twenty thousand of us, and didn’t he wish we were soldiers instead of civilians.”

Slava was shocked to hear the numbers. He did not think the French army itself could be much more than three times that size anymore. He looked at the masses of people near the river. He could see signs of perhaps a thousand or more followers at the

bridge itself—doing small jobs or waiting their turn to cross. He exhorted Andrushka to take up some piece of equipment and say he was expected on the other side. Andrushka in turn, told Slava of an area off the main road where many of the followers were bivouacked.

The French passage across the single bridge was dangerously slow. Engineers were trying to replace the broken bridge, but the current was too strong and their distress was obvious. At the present rate, they had no hope of evacuating the soldiers and twenty-thousand innocents like Andrushka before the French were forced to burn the bridge to prevent the Russians behind them from crossing. Slava resolved to help: for Andrushka, and also for Joseph when he returned.

Slava staggered down to the Berezina again, searching for a powerful talisman for the strongest weatherwork he could manage. Just downstream of the bridge, one of the bodies had drifted to the bank—a young soldier, hardly more than a boy. Slava pulled the corpse from the river.

“What, precisely, are you doing, private?” said a voice behind him. Slava stopped, making sure he didn’t betray guilt by flinching. He slowly turned around.

Before him were two soldiers, both in the motley that most men wore now, but the lead one had the posture and attitude of an officer. And a dark, dangerous look in his eyes.

“I was his age at Austerlitz,” Slava said, which was true. Then he deliberately looked away. He withdrew a handkerchief from a pocket of the corpse’s jacket and used it to wipe river weeds and muck from the boy’s face. Slava had no idea what plan or order had sent the officer here. The men were clearly dangerous, but Slava did not know

how to lessen the danger. They were all three of them far enough from the tumult of the bridge that the two might attack him without much fear of questioning. He heard their footsteps draw close and looked up again.

“There’s a pit behind the medical station,” Slava said. “Will you help me carry him?”

“Oh, you just wanted to save him from the looters. I *see*,” said the officer.

“It’s likely the looters will have him out of the pit, too,” Slava said, “when we are all across or killed or captured. But it’s something.” He crossed the boy’s arms over his chest and tried to close his eyes—brown eyes—but they were frozen open. Then he pocketed the handkerchief—that was what he’d needed from the body—and picked up the boy’s legs.

“You are not French,” the officer said. He was close enough that Slava could see the yellow at the corners of his eyes, a front tooth broken off and hollow as empty honeycomb from malnutrition. He was shorter than Slava, and slighter. Slava thought perhaps he could kill this man, if he attacked. Likely the other man would then kill him, though little was certain with all three of them so weak.

“No,” Slava said, “I am not French.”

Slava and the officer stared at each other. Slava still held two stiff legs against his armpits. Eventually the other Frenchman came up behind the officer and took the corpse’s shoulders. The officer looked ready to reproach him, but kept silent. Together, Slava and the soldier carried the body up the bank and to the grave pit, while the officer remained behind.

When they'd heaved the body in, Slava thanked the man and walked upriver until he found a ridge with a moldy, useless haystack, in the lee of which was a depression—not too deep, and filled with snow, but just enough for privacy if he was quiet.

He needed to slow the river so that the downstream bridge could be rebuilt. Slava pulled the dead boy's handkerchief from his pocket, twisting it so river water dripped from the hem. He called upon the Fogs to withdraw deeper into their winter holdfast at the bottom of the river, down among the river weeds where they made their winter berth among slumbering frogs and drowned Frenchmen. Down and deep.

He hung the handkerchief on a tree branch and pulled out his horsetail. The river flowed north to south, with Slava on the east bank, so he spun counterclockwise, flicking the tail southward each time his arm was aligned with the river. Slava called the Winds to race down from Winter's northern stables. With all the cold he had used his magic to restrain while he marched with Joseph's men. He called the Winds to scour the river, and the last of the Fogs to form into ice against the onslaught.

Slava danced and coaxed and wheedled. For an hour or more he moved—his dance becoming more strained as afternoon wore on to evening, his movements erratic as exhaustion slowed him. He had to stop using his left arm entirely. Still he snapped the tail with such ferocity that the bindings holding it together—frayed from the long journey—finally split. He was left with a handful of hair like thin, dry straw.

When this happened, he stumbled out and back to the crossing. A dangerous mass of ice had built up against the upstream bridge, but the ice dam had slowed the water enough that the engineers could resume their work. The downstream bridge was whole again. Soldiers and camp followers were crossing in good order. Slava cheered hoarsely

to see it, and then made his way to the bivouac that Andrushka had spoken of. They boy was not there—a few there said they thought he'd crossed—but his name gave Slava a place to collapse into exhausted sleep.

He woke after dawn to the sound of cannons and guns. He asked among the men until he learned that Victor and fifteen thousand men were protecting the French rear against a much larger Russian force. Oudinot (and Joseph with him, Slava assumed) was on the far bank with a like number of men, facing similar poor odds. Slava did not when or where they'd crossed. Many of the French remained on the east bank. Slava was dismayed to see how many camp followers remained as well. He exhorted them to go, but the Russian forces across the river were much easier to see (and fear) than the ones behind, hidden as they were behind forest and hills. Slava tried to force his own way onto the pontoons, hoping to find a way to support Oudinot on the far bank, but the guards at the bridges turned him back.

“Get to the fighting, Corporal Shit,” said one of the guards at the bridges, “or I’ll have you up for desertion.”

Slava hastened away toward Victor’s force. The men were right, in their way. The rear guard was more important now, more necessary to ensure the Russians did not take the bridges and crush the French between their two armies.

The previous day he’d built up the ice on the river. Above that ice, he reasoned, should be a cold flow—a channel down which he could race the Winds. The clouds overhead were patchy, just gray enough that Slava thought he call snow from them. Not much, but perhaps enough to drive into the faces of the oncoming Russian forces and hold them back. But to do such magic, he needed a talisman to replace his lost horsetail.

He caught up with the back end of Victor's infantry. The din of the battlefield and the horror of death grew in intensity, but so did the purposefulness of the men's movements. The furtive scampering of followers and hangers-back became the movement of trained soldiers at war. Even so, Slava could sense by overheard shouts and the looks in their eyes and their moments that the French could barely hold their line.

Slava assisted with the wounded and helped wherever commanders ordered him. The handkerchief he'd looted from the dead boy had proven a strong talisman. For this battlefield, he needed a wind talisman just as powerful, just as saturated with death. So he searched as he worked. Finally, he found what he needed in the bloody wreckage of an artillery wagon hit by Russian cannon.

Only a direct hit with a cannonball could have splashed so much gore. One horse had been blown to pieces, the most discernible being a chunk of its haunch blasted into a tree. The French artillery was a small bore that must have been firing canister shot before it had been hit, because those bodies that were still recognizable in the swath of destruction were shredded by scrap-shot set off by the cannonball.

As at Borodino, Slava saw his dead father in the destruction. Behind the ragged beard of one dead man—his stomach almost entirely gone—Slava saw his father's clean-cut mustache and sharp nose. Another body had his father's dead, hand, fingers clenched like claws. But unlike at Borodino, Slava mastered his emotions.

He stepped over the body. Behind it, shielded by the man's flesh, was half a cracked canister full of horseshoe nails, rusted hinges and scrap metal the artillery officers had cobbled together. Slava picked up the broken canister, a trickle of sulfur and gunpowder trailing behind him as he hurried to a gully too far from the fighting to

immediately come into use. A broken wagon-train had fallen upside down in it. Slava stood upon the bare wood between the wheels, unseen beyond the lip of the gully.

The spell required Slava to call the Fogs and Winds to alliance in an assault on the earth. [*Usually Slava rouses the Fogs and the Winds to fight with each other, but both are forces of erosion. He can make them unite, but it is more challenging than making them fight.*] He stuck his hand into the mass of flammable powder and shrapnel, cutting his finger. He picked up a handful and tossed it across the wood of the cart, toward the Russian line far ahead, as a village wise man might toss wildflowers across the floor of a hut on Midsummer for luck.

Ride forth, terrible Winds, Slava thought. Ride into the stone teeth of Earth and shatter them and ride howling down its throat.

He did this again and again, over and over, until he had to switch hands and almost let the canister slip to the ground, blood welling from his cuts. When he was done, the canister was empty and his fists dripped blood. A strong breeze had risen, but not the howling gale he needed for his magic. With dismay, he realized what he had to do.

First he took out the boy's handkerchief. He'd filled it with snow on his way, so now it was damp and icy. His blood mixed with the dripping water as he squeezed it in his fist and shook it. Instead of imagining the Earth, he imagined the Russian general. He had been told it was Wittgenstein, but he didn't know what the man looked like. So he imagined a pompous Russian general with sideburns like horse reins, his face contorted in terror as sleet cut at his face and the hands he raised to protect himself.

Fogs! Slava thought. Arm the Winds with your lances, forged in clouds of ice.

The first slushy snow fell, much too shallowly. Before it could fall in earnest, Slava knelt. He lit the end of the line of sulfur and gunpowder he'd laid by throwing handfuls upon the wooden planks. He covered his face as they flared and sent bits of shrapnel spinning and dancing, though not, thankfully, directly back toward him.

Cut them with a million icy knives, Slava thought.

Slava stumbled from the pit, still half-blind from the flash of powder. Almost immediately, faster than Slava could have hoped, the breeze rose to a howl and the snow flew toward the Russian line as sleet. Two soldiers ran towards him.

"What was that fire?" one shouted. "Identify yourself!" cried the other.

"I was told to dispose of the damaged canister where it can't kill our men, only it went off." Slava held his bloody palms up toward the men and they recoiled.

"Get those hands bandaged and return to duty!"

Slava bowed and scraped and apologized until they rushed off again. Then he visited the nurses, got his hands bandaged, and lent what help he could for the wounded, his own bandages slowly turning crimson. He was weak from the exertion, so his help at the tent was minimal. But he saw that the Russians had indeed stopped advancing. One officer he passed encouraged his men with, "Keep on, men—see how the Russians falter when they must face true French resolve! Vive le Emperor!"

Let it be so, or at least let them take such a message to heart, Slava thought.

With night, the fighting stopped, as if curtains had been drawn on it. Slava returned to the followers' camp. There were fewer of them than before, but still far too many. Slava cursed them for fools and showed them his bloody hands, claiming that grapeshot was exploding all around. He told them Russians fell upon the French rear like

wolves. Some of the followers seemed terrified. Some shouted at him that the far bank was lost already, and still others cursed him, saying he only wanted them gone so he could take their sleeping places.

Their words about the far bank frightened Slava, so before he lay down, he walked to the river. The men at the bank said Oudinot had repelled the Russian attack, but only by terrible valor. Eblé's engineers had held the bridges together, too, but more had died and Eblé himself was near death.

"Tomorrow we'll see the bitch's teeth, without fail," said a soldier. "Either we will cross the bridges, or the Russians will."

Equal parts relieved and uneasy, Slava returned to the camp. He told those still awake the good news about Oudinot's success, and fell asleep.

Next morning, he woke sluggish with fatigue. With a quiet apology to Joseph, he ate the other half of the cake, gone all to crumbs in his coat. He'd managed to get some horsemeat and a couple handfuls of grain on the field the day before, but that and the cake were far less than what would be needed to revive him. He pleaded with the guards to let him cross the river. Oudinot would need his help more there than here, he said—but they disagreed. Privately Slava thought they were right.

He trudged back to Victor's army, no closer to reuniting with Joseph. The skies were an unmanageable mess after his two days of tempest-raising. Even if he retained the power to influence the Fogs and Winds, he didn't think he had anything left to work with.

The morning's fighting turned from bad to worse. Early in the day, General Partouneaux, in the rearmost position, failed to return to the line, and his men were assumed lost. This setback heartened the Russians: they overcame the dread Slava's

storm had put in them. The French were pushed back until Slava, at the tents in the rear, could just make out the river. Word came from the other side that Oudinot had been grievously wounded and Ney had taken over his command. The French on the far bank were being pushed back as well. The pincers were closing.

Where is Napoleon in all this? Slava wondered. *Where is the brilliant general?* Napoleon's Imperial Guard, most on the far bank by now, seemed little involved in the fighting. Perhaps he was holding them back for one of the swift sword-cut maneuvers he liked so much. Slava thought of his meeting with Napoleon and how the Emperor's gaze had been like that of a butcher. Not like Lavrov's uncanny gaze that saw to the soul. Napoleon looked at a battlefield always for where to joint, where to chop, where to cut. When he succeeded, he dressed a battlefield as a butcher dresses a pig. Only this mess on the Berezina was like the horses' bodies still attached to the destroyed artillery cart—so smashed that no clean cuts remained in the gore.

Almost without thinking, Slava moved beyond the medic stations, advancing to the back of the army. He picked up a rifle beside a fallen soldier. Partly it was his own stubbornness, but partly it was so he would not see what was happening behind him.

The pressure of sound and carnage was not so great as at Borodino, where he'd needed to breath open-mouthed like a fish to relieve the pressure in his ears as he ran about the battlefield. But there at the Berezina bullets fell like hail, and cannonballs like lightning bolts. Slava wondered that he had ever thought Napoleon could be the uncanny master of all this. Even the Emperor was no master of this.

With this, Slava finally realized that Napoleon had not aimed the cannonballs that killed his father. Napoleon had merely seeped into Austerlitz in the midst of the dark

cloud of the Grand Army, and Slava's father had been caught in the tumult, as all the French would soon be caught.

Slava raged. He raged at the storm of death that would kill all these men and all the women and Andrushka and Joseph. He raged at the storm of war for all who had already died—Conroux, Ormancey, Morlot, Segaux, Guilles, even Poncet. And especially Theresa, whom he'd pushed out into the elements himself. This was the weather that most oppressed people—this war storm. This was what he should have learned to control, not unseasonable frosts on village gardens.

The French cried out in defiance—the Russians were charging again. Shells rocked around Slava and he felt the madness of the battle. In anger and grief he cried out the foulest obscenities he knew. Although he spoke in Russian and occasionally used the older curses of the villages of his homeland, the French could tell his meaning clearly enough and added their own. The unit to which he'd attached himself pushed forward. A cannonball screamed past Slava, so close that the man to Slava's right was blown apart and the tree behind him cracked and fell.

In the eerie hush and dizziness when the cannonball utterly took away his hearing, Slava heard, or felt, power. He knew this feeling—it was like the feeling of the weather on the Carpathians with no one around but the Master. The auras of the men around him were not gone—he was drowning in men's auras. He should have been unable to feel anything, but their swirling auras themselves were like the Winds and Fogs Slava recognized. Or not precisely Winds and Fogs—there was a Blunt power that crushed and a Sharp power that cut.

And the feeling was familiar. He realized he'd felt the full force of it at Borodino, and again at every skirmish along the road from Moscow. He'd become so used to it he'd felt the tingle even in the forest, fighting Lavrov.

The line was breaking up ahead of him—the French had no cannon left at this position—and the nearest artillery unit was across the river with Napoleon. In such an impossible position, the men hunkered down in any half-defensible positions. Slava looked around his feet and saw a six-pound cannonball, spattered from its passage through his neighbor, beside an oak it had cracked. He dropped his rifle and rushed to it. As he did so, he pushed against the bullets flying by him with force of will—unsure if he had any power on them.

He picked up the ball. It was still hot, even through his gloves and despite his frostbitten fingers. The auras of men—the aura of war—rippled from it with the heat. Slava cupped the cannonball against his shoulder and ran forward. Another cannonball flew past him. He roared. Frenchmen rose from whatever cover they were firing from when he passed.

“Blunt power of war,” Slava murmured in Russian, “smash the vise that will crush the men beside me and the women and children behind me.”

He passed the front of his unit, ran down a slope and up another. When he reached the top, a bullet pinged off the cannonball and he vaguely felt a stab in his forefinger.

“Blunt power of war,” Slava murmured, “break through failure and death to survival.”

He dodged around the remains of something—a peasant hut, an animal sty, it was impossible to tell anymore. An officer sheltered behind a doorframe, absurdly still

standing without a wall around it. The officer could have no idea what mad idea Slava had, but he ordered his men to give Slava covering fire.

“Blunt power of war,” Slava murmured, “push back inevitability until tomorrow.”

Slava reached the front of the French position. Bullets whipped by him. He ran, dropped to a crouch, and then pushed upward with his legs, his shoulder, and his arm, hurling the cannonball from his shoulder toward the enemy line, screaming as he did so, before falling to his knees from the effort. The ball flew in a low weak arc and dropped unceremoniously a few feet away. The French cries of “Vive le Emperor” were drowned by “Ura” from the Russian line, but Slava felt the power flow out of him. He rolled behind an overturned log and waited. He noticed that the tip of his forefinger—which had pinched him as he ran—was missing. He tied up his finger with a handkerchief.

A minute later, there was a whistling sound, and death rained down on the advanced Russian units. Slava scrambled back on hands and knees to the captain behind the doorframe.

“Did you know Baden’s artillery was moving up?” the officer shouted.

“Yes,” Slava said.

“Haha! A more gallant messenger I’ve never seen, nor a heavier missive!”

“It will keep up till night,” Slava said. “Just hold.”

“Oh yes,” the officer said, “take that back to the generals. While the artillery lasts, we’ll hold.”

Slava crawled to the next decline, then walked as fast as his legs would take him, past his original unit. Men waved their hats to him. When he reached the place he’d

started, he saw the remains of his dead neighbor's coat, faded but still recognizable. Blue coat, red blood, white snow.

With a sigh of weariness, he picked up the largest piece of the coat—a rag from the tail, perhaps twice the size of a handkerchief. Then he found the rifle he'd discarded when he grabbed the cannonball and attached the rag at the base of the bayonet. His fingers were clumsy, but after a time he managed it.

He walked downriver, both to escape unwanted attention and to position himself nearer where the Russians would attack. He walked until he saw, directly across the water, smoke and flashes of movement. Reaching out more confidently with his war sense, he felt the mass of Russian auras pushing up—elongating at roadways, flattened at forested places, clustered on higher ground. The shape of Oudinot's line was almost to the wall of the river.

Slava raised the rifle, bayonet high, and brought it down. The rag fluttered as it fell.

“Sharp power of war,” Slava muttered, “cut a way through the enemy.”

He brought the rifle up and whipped it down again. The rag fluttered a bit more strongly. He repeated his chant and the movement. And again, and again. Over and over until his arms shook at his sides.

When he thought he had no strength left in his arms, he lifted them one more time, moaning with pain, and shouted—not caring anymore if anyone was close enough to hear:

“Sharp power of war, cut a way through the enemy.”

He brought the rifle down with everything he could put behind it, the cloth cracking in the wind. Power flowed out from him.

Slava smiled and dropped the rifle from his numb fingers. He slumped to the ground as his vision faded. His feeling for the auras of men drifted. He sensed a group of French cavalry speeding toward the Russian position with the deadly precision of a blade.

Slava fell into a half sleep.

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When he woke, it was evening. Slava didn't have the energy to focus on the auras of the men around him, but the French around him weren't hurrying and he didn't hear gunfire. He fell back asleep.

When he woke once more, it was night. Slava forced himself to move—any more exposure to the cold and he might die of frostbite. He returned to the followers' bivouac.

He was appalled to find Andrushka had returned. He'd crossed, then crossed back again with Baden's artillery, out of fear of the Russian troops on the far side. Slava gripped the boy's shoulders and stared him in the eyes and told him the bridges would burn by morning. He told the rest of the followers around him the same, then practically pushed the boy across himself. Some others of the followers crossed, too.

When Slava turned back, Andrushka tried to as well. Slava had to convince the boy he would arrive later with the medics, who would take the last of the wounded. He told Andrushka it was essential the boy went forward, because food would be held aside for doctors and assistants, but boys must rush ahead to grab it for themselves. Andrushka cried, but went, and Slava breathed a sigh of relief.

He did not return to the medical station, because a horror had overtaken him. A horror of himself. He felt like a soldier waking in the medical tent after unspeakable pain, who caught his reflection and saw a piece of his face had been blown away.

He had feared and loathed Napoleon for all those many versts they traveled, because he had believed Napoleon had magical power over war. Such power must certainly make a man into a monster, but it was not Napoleon who had it. It was Slava himself.

He could control the storm of battle. The men against whom he'd thrown the cannonball were subjects of the Russian Empire, as he was, or had been. They were not serf-hunters like Lavrov. They were men who served the Russian Emperor as others served the French Emperor, taking their ration of buckwheat and charging upon the guns as the French did. Their bodies were as numerous as those of the French at Borodino, only buried more shallowly. But when he'd thrown the cannonball, he'd felt no more sympathy for them than he did for Lavrov.

He'd used his power intentionally only once, but already he'd used it out of a furious hatred that made a man into a monster.

Slava could not continue with the French. He could not be sure he would resist the temptation to use his power again in the next desperate circumstance. Nor would he return to the Russian army. He would be tempted among them, too, and he no longer cared for their cause.

Even more dangerous, while most of the men at the front of the line when he called down death with the cannonball must have died, some might still live who could

recognize him. If anyone guessed his power either side would capture and torture him to extract his power from him.

Slava was too much of a survivor to commit suicide. As horrified as he was, the thought of killing himself was somehow worse, in a way he couldn't articulate. He must disguise himself, convince the Russians he was a captive or conscript, and flee back to his uncle Svarog, as little chance as there was the man would accept him.

Slava gently used what weatherwork he could manage to steal a bit of strength from the breeze. But the breeze remained confused from his previous work, and he'd spent too much time among men to be able to use his power effectively. He drew only as much strength as from a deep breath. Guiltily, he reached out with his power over war, and sapped a tiny bit of strength from the nearest Russian soldiers. They were distant, and most of the power was lost as he pulled it toward him, but still he gained enough strength to walk and move around as well as he had the afternoon that Joseph left, three days and a different lifetime earlier. Even more uneasy and horrified at his new power, Slava moved around with firm purpose.

He shaved both his face and his scalp with a discarded bayonet, with no particular care. He would say he'd done so because of lice. As an afterthought, he pricked himself on purpose—so he could show them where the “louse bites” had been. There were plenty of bodies about, occasionally still warm enough to remove their clothes. He traded out all of his most recognizably French clothing, and even found new gloves to cover his missing end of a finger.

He returned to the riverside at dawn, walking hunched and with the ox-sway gait of a big peasant man. He swerved just north of the bridges to keep his distance from the

mass of followers grouped south of there. Partially because some of them might recognize him, but also because so many still had not crossed. He could not bear to recognize any of the doomed wretches. They'd sided with the French. The Russians who arrived after the bridges burned would be on rations almost as short as those of the French, and they would surely know that the French army had fed captives to each other. The Russian soldiers had stolen food from their innocent peasants just to hinder the French. Slava expected they would let the French camp followers starve and call it justice.

Slava was startled from his grim thoughts as a plume of orange arose on the bridges along with shouted commands. More plumes, and French soldiers running away from the bridges on the far side. Even though he'd expected it, Slava felt surprised to see it happen. A howl of anguish went up from the camp followers and those wretched French soldiers too injured to cross.

Goodbye, Joseph, Slava whispered. *May fair winds carry you past every obstacle.*

The flames rose higher. Some of the camp followers rushed onto the bridges, into the flames, or tried to run across the ice still dammed up against the upstream bridge. But those in the flames vanished almost immediately, and the ice cracked beneath those who stepped on it.

Slava turned his face from the terrible sight. Beside the path to the bridges, a mass of people gazed on the inferno, weeping. Only one man had his back to the conflagrations, his rifle at the ready, watching those who ran past.

Joseph.

"No," Slava whispered. He rushed forward, praying he was wrong.

It was Joseph. He had a bandage around his shoulder, peeking from gaps around his scarf. Had he volunteered to some suicidal duty against the possibility the Russians might try to save the bridges?

Slava reached the captain. Joseph turned to him.

“Joseph,” Slava said, “why?”

Joseph looked at him. His eyes widened, then narrowed.

“Come,” he said coldly.

He walked Slava some distance upriver. Joseph favored his right leg, but didn’t drag it. Slava found himself back by the little depression beside the moldering haystack where he’d performed his weatherwork days ago.

Joseph lowered his rifle toward Slava’s chest.

“That Cossack boy who escaped,” Joseph said, “remember him?”

Slava nodded.

“He joined another raiding party that tried to get past us to warn the Russians about Oudinot’s feint. We killed most of the men around him, but he surrendered.”

Slava nodded slowly.

“He told us, Slava, that you were a spy and an uncanny. That the reason you became,” he pursed his lips in distaste, “‘Corporal Shit,’ was that you were leaving intelligence for Lavrov. Is this all true?”

“Yes,” Slava said.

Joseph pulled back the hammer on his rifle.

“He also said you told them to shoot Theresa.”

Slava closed his eyes for a long moment, remembering Theresa as he'd last seen her— shocked, confused, her blood spilling on his coat. He felt every day's march from Moscow heavy upon his shoulders, as if they'd been in a supply train behind him and had only now caught up. He opened his eyes.

"I told them only that she was uncanny. As I told them everything I saw, for a time."

Joseph's hands wavered.

"If you hated Napoleon so much, why didn't you kill him when I brought you right to him? Did cowardice seize you?"

"No," Slava whispered, and his earlier doubt seemed to flee from his mind as he spoke, like a monster from the cock's crow. "I could not make myself stain your honor that way, even for such a revenge. It was too much villainy even for me."

Tears tricked trickled down Joseph's cheeks.

"I knew you were still alive," he said, "because some of the last men to cross said Corporal Shit called down Baden's cannonballs."

He waited. Slava told him truthfully what he'd learned of his new powers. For a long time, Joseph was silent, and then he spoke.

"You're dangerous. And a traitor."

"Yes."

"A great threat to the Grand Army."

"To any army."

"Goodbye, Slava."

"Goodbye, Captain."

Slava stared into Joseph's eyes. It didn't feel like suicide to die this way. It was death by the inexorable force of Joseph's honor. As Joseph would run into a burning building to save Theresa, as he would execute his own man—with his own pistol—for cannibalism born of starvation. As he would always choose the righteous path.

The crack of the rifle seemed louder to Slava than anything he'd ever heard. Loud as he imagined it might be to be struck by lightning. But he felt no pain. Joseph had jerked the muzzle to the side at the last moment.

Joseph slung the rifle over his shoulder, already turning, saying nothing when Slava called his name. He ran back toward the bridges, his gait awkward and lurching, but swift. Slava followed a few paces before stopping. The bridges were burning—high and hot. Much of the ice on the northern side had melted away. Joseph was running toward certain death.

Slava bared his teeth in grief and frustration. Before him Joseph. All around was war—the tail of the French line slipping away, the Russian forces nearing. He focused on his power and almost lost his concentration. The Russians were only paces from the bridges. A shot from any of them might kill Joseph.

Slava pulled everything he could from every aura he could sense, tugged so that the loss of strength might make the men dizzy and disoriented. And when he had done so, his veins burned with power. He picked up a piece of moldy straw and a handful of snow.

“Winds and Fogs,” he commanded, “freeze.”

The ice piled against the north side of the bridges began to harden. Most of the change was underwater, yet Slava felt it. As the ice built up, it rose a few finger spans from the water and froze together in a solid mass.

Joseph had reached the upstream bridge. He raised a hand to shield his face against the heat.

The Russians are not firing, Slava thought, disbelieving that he had been so powerful. Then he heard taunts. They were merely saving their bullets while they watched Joseph jump into the fire.

Instead, Joseph turned and leapt to the first piece of ice.

The surface of the ice was uneven, and he stumbled, but his stumbling did not cause the ice to wobble. It was frozen fast. He jumped again, and again. Perhaps he jumped awkwardly, seen up close, but from Slava's distance his movement seemed methodical.

As he continued across, Slava drew more and more power from the Russian soldiers. When Joseph was a third of the way across, the Russians seemed to realize he might escape. They began firing their rifles. Slava pushed with the Blunt power of war against the bullets, trying to shield Joseph, but Joseph flinched violently. He'd been hit.

Slava wept as Joseph continued to jump across the ice, becoming a harder and harder target. Slava shook from the effort of filling and emptying his power. Joseph held a hand to his left leg and half-hobbled, half-jumped.

The center of the upstream pontoon bridge broke, and the two pieces of the sundered bridge crashed into the downstream bridge, breaking it apart, too. Joseph slipped and fell as the ice shifted beneath him, but it did not break apart. He got back to his feet and kept moving.

As he neared the far bank, Joseph's movements became erratic. He seemed to be gripping his left leg tightly, and his jumps were awkward. The Russians had stopped

firing and contented themselves to shout insults at him. Thirty feet from the bank, Joseph fell in.

A few of the Russians shouted triumphantly.

“No,” Slava whispered. The river sloshed and eddied around teeth of ice.

Joseph surfaced, his scream of exertion faint at this distance. He got hands on one of the last few pontoons at the far side and pulled his sopping body up and into the flames.

Smoke and heat and Slava’s tears distorted his view. He couldn’t see Joseph.

He stared into the flames. The Russians observers were silent, as well.

At last, on the far bank, he made out a figure lurching. The man turned and Slava felt he must be staring back, perhaps had seen him. Then Joseph turned away and marched on, after the rest of the army.

Slava remained a few moments longer, shaky with relief. Finally, he put on the meek, ingratiating smile of a peasant-conscript and shambled into the forest to begin his long journey back to the Carpathians.

Sick Jokes

The pudgy dude that the nurse introduced as Peter was so bright and cheerful, he looked like a time-traveler from before the Mayday plague, six months and 1.2 billion lifetimes ago. He was wearing a green T-shirt with an alligator that had what looked like tumors on its head and the word “Broccodile!” The kind of pun Marco would have liked, which made it worse.

Peter’s shirt was a little too short for his belly, so Thea could see what looked like a knobby scar running down toward his crotch. Judging by the scar, he’d probably gotten Mayday no later than November. She supposed she could feel sympathy for that—Mayday scars around the genitals sucked.

To distract herself from a sudden itch, Thea took another swig from her Stand-Up Comedy Thermos—stainless steel, just big enough for a fifth, with Silver Bullet written up the side. Marco had gotten it for her, of course, before he lost his tolerance for her drinking. She was surprised to find the thermos half-empty. She’d need to go a little easier during the first show or she wouldn’t be able to keep the car on the road afterward.

“You were a comedian before?” Peter asked. Even his voice didn’t have the usual post-Mayday rasp. Thea nodded.

“You weren’t,” she said, not needing to make it a question.

“No, but my dad and my brother used to be really funny.”

“They stop joking when Mayday hit?”

“No, they died.”

“Ah.”

“And there’s our headliner,” the nurse interjected hastily. Thea reflected that she probably had a lot of experience with awkward pauses about dead people, working at a nursing home that had gone through Mayday.

The nurse greeted a man in a “beekeeper”—what people called hazmat suits these days—as he came into the little waiting area. His armband was white—the symbol for uninfected—and the beekeeper was an expensive one with a full, plexiglass faceplate, so she could see his face clearly: Lang Callum, semi-famous internet shock-humorist. Goatee like a pompadour for the chin below a spiteful smile. And because it was him, he wore a novelty poncho over the beekeeper, a cartoon of a stripper—bow tie, pecs and abs, and a penis with the same contours as a booster rocket.

“This is Langford Callum,” the nurse said.

“Oh,” Peter said, “have you been a comedian long?”

“Mister Callum is—” the nurse began.

“Don’t you use the Internet?” Lang asked. He looked to Thea for help.

Thea frowned and pretended to think before saying, “You played the younger brother in that dramatization of the outbreak in Vegas, right?”

“Oh wow!” Peter said.

“Drunk-ass losers,” Lang muttered and walked off as far as the room allowed.

“OK,” the nurse said, “remember—this is an *elder-elder assisted living facility*.

The last bunch of comedians thought we were nursing care and had nothing but goddamn diaper jokes. You don’t see any little alert lights, you don’t see any nurses, pay attention.”

Oops, Thea thought.

The woman—her nametag said Nadine—must have seen Thea’s embarrassment. “I am *not* a nurse,” she said. “Since November, we’ve had one nurse and *zero* doctors for a fifty-three-person community. Those like me who were in independent living before are caring for our peers now, so that maybe the same elder-elder community will be there for us if we decline at the end, instead of just dropping dead.”

Nadine laughed. Then she said, “You’re up, Peter.” She opened the door and Thea got her first look at the audience.

There were maybe a couple dozen people, many of whom were in tight pairs. Only one person looked anything like a grandmother to Thea, a straight-backed woman in a lavender cardigan with a high collar. The woman paired with her was willowy, in a frilly hippie-looking dress snug at the hips and thinning to gauzy transparency at the neckline, her attractiveness only marred by the goiter bulge in her neck. Thea thought how Marco would have been proud of her. He’d been the registered nurse; she’d hated doctors. But now she knew that the goiter bulge was a swollen lymph node, and that it should be checked to make sure there wasn’t an abscess to drain. A quick glance at the rest of the crowd showed nothing much in common she could latch onto, except Mayday scars.

“Uh,” Peter said, “Hello, Golden Hills... Assisted Living Facility. I worked at a nursery a little while ago, so I guess this brings me full circle.”

Silence. Thea shuddered. Peter had to perform for a tight community audience, utterly cold at—she looked at her phone—11 o’clock in the goddamn morning. Sunlight streamed in the windows. She took another swig from the Silver Bullet.

“Aren’t you lucky you’re up on a hill, rather than down by a river?” Peter asked.

Silence.

“Golden River Community?”

“What?” said the woman in the cardigan.

“It’s a piss joke,” croaked the lovely hippie woman.

“What did I say about diaper jokes?” Nadine shouted. Peter wasn’t the only one who flinched at the sound.

“Give the boy a chance to warm up,” the hippie croaked.

“I was quite clear, Lina—”

“We *know*,” rasped a thin woman in a blue-and-white tracksuit with three red-glistening sores like bullet wounds down her jaw to her neck. She sat with another woman in black T-shirt and jeans, four small silver earrings in each ear.

“Peter,” said a black man in denim jeans and jacket in a wheelchair, “I have just one question. How did you get the weight back after Mayday?” The man was heavysset but had the deflated look of rapid weight loss. He was paired with a tan-skinned man with straight black hair and milky-clouded eyes.

He’s giving you a softball, Peter, Thea thought, you got to hit that one.

“Uh,” Peter said, “one forkful at a time, sir.” But he said it so forlornly it killed the mood. Thea needed two swigs to make it through the excruciating silence.

“I mean,” Peter went on, “it’s easy. Out in the infected zone, the food is so much better.”

It was true, but Peter didn’t managed to take the joke anywhere. The only mercy was he ended his routine early.

Thea gave him a fake smile and a nod and went out on stage.

“Thea Morton,” Nadine announced.

Thea decided to start her routine with pain. Pain was a safe bet in a Mayday world.

“They say ‘whatever gets you out of bed in the morning.’ But I don’t think they meant an infected blister like a hot poker in the ass.”

Tracksuit laughed, or maybe just hissed. A few others smiled.

“But what am I telling you for? You know the score. Mayday-infected people tell you, ‘it takes all my energy just to go to a convenience store. If I sit, my ass hurts, if I stand, my feet hurt, and walking anywhere feels like moving through blistering steam.’ And y’all say, ‘welcome to my world, bitches.’”

“Mizz Morton,” Nadine said, with a tight smile, “perhaps a little lighter?”

Thea stared at Nadine. Then she took a long beat to squint through the mercilessly curtain-free windows and shook her head.

“Can’t see how you could want any more light in here.”

“Perhaps if you—”

“At least this is better than those fluorescent lights at hospitals. I remember when I was in the Crash phase of Mayday—you know how sensitive you are to light then?”

A few people in the audience nodded.

“And that light everywhere stabbing you in the eyes and making everyone look awful. It was like living in the little dystopia you can glimpse in your driver’s license photo. I wanted to smash them all and make everyone walk around with candelabras. Then at least all the suffering would seem Victorian and mysterious, you know?”

Thea used her crappy rich-lady voice, “Mary, I feel my complaint vexing me again, be a dear and bring me the laudanum.”

A few of the people were smiling, but she was just shambling along. She had a joke about getting apocalypse-horny that she thought would fly, but she needed something short and punchy to get the momentum for it. *Guy runs into emergency, she thought, and says ‘I need a doctor!’ The receptionist says, ‘Which doctor?’ And he says, ‘Well, alright, if that’s all you got left.’*”

But that was another Marco joke, and if she told it she was going to start bawling. So instead she downed the rest of the thermos and spun out bullshit until she could escape.

“Jesus, Morton,” Lang said as she walked by, “there was smoke coming off those old piles and you pissed on it. Guess it’s all riding on my blazing brilliance now.”

“Ass,” Thea said, as the plastic weave of his beekeeper suit brushed her arm. But she stayed by the door. The first posting that had earned him Internet fame had been when he said of Mayday, ‘Thanks, God, for the Climate Change Solution!’ She hadn’t a clue how he planned to connect with this crowd. Peter sidled up closer, too.

“Hellooo geriatrics!” Lang shouted from the stage as he snatched up the cordless mic. A couple people flinched so violently they looked like they’d received an electric shock. Lang jumped down and started giving people high-fives with his free hand.

“Who’s pumped? I’m pumped!” He got down into a deep knee bend, writhing so his stripper poncho jumped and bounced. A couple people shouted in surprise or disgust, but Lina shouted, “Thank God! A lively one.”

Lang pointed two fingers at his faceplate and then at Lina's eyes and shouted, "Who's a sexy beast?" Lina jumped up and started dancing with him, and when that got groans and laughter from the people around, she started grinding, her chest and goiter bobbing as she went at it, laughing.

"Wow," Peter whispered. Thea shook her head. If Lang hadn't been expecting this reception, he was improvising like a pro.

"Damn, Lina!" said the man in denim.

"What's the matter," Lang shouted back, "just 'cause Mayday let the whoopie out of your cushion."

The man in denim laughed good naturedly. Lina was laughing hard enough that she had stop dancing.

"Remember, baby, I'm always protected," Lang told Lina, slapping at his suit.

"Not from me, sweet-cheeks," Lina growled, and ran her fingertips against his faceplate. "I use my nails," she whispered into the mic, and the scrape of her fingers was audible for a moment before Lang lurched back toward the stage. Audience members hooted and laughed.

Thea chuckled. *He moved pretty fast there.*

"Whoa!" Lang said, "stay out of the way of those claws, good to know. Stick to anal sex—and speaking of anal sex, who here's gotten their hospital bill?"

Some of the audience was laughing, some still seemed to be deciding. Lang continued to bitch about bills, though, as uninfected, his complaints couldn't be sincere.

He's waiting for a sucker to speak up, Thea thought.

He made a couple more fat jokes about Denim, and then Tracksuit made the mistake—Thea didn't catch what it was she said, only Lang's response. "Damn, woman, are those Mayday scars or did you dodge too slow when Dorothy threw the water?"

"Fuck you, too!" Tracksuit said.

"There isn't enough Viagra in the world."

"Then I'll hold up a picture of your mom," Tracksuit said. "That should get you hard."

The woman in black next to Tracksuit didn't look away from the window but she visibly shook with laughter.

Lang placed his fingers against his faceplate like he was covering his mouth, and people laughed. "Oho!" he said in mock shock, and then in a singsong voice, "Sticks and stones *may* break my bones, but fucking you would surely—What's wrong, Nadine, you look constipated?"

"That will be enough, Mr. Callum," Nadine replied. A few in the audience booed her, including—to Thea's amazement—Tracksuit. But when Lang turned his head and Thea caught a glimpse of his expression, she giggled.

"What?" Peter whispered.

Lang looked like a safecracker who'd just heard something inside the lock click.

"Yes, Sir, Mein Director," Lang said and snapped his heels together.

Several people snickered.

"Nadine the Director, mind if I call you Nadir?"

"Yes—"

"Who died and put you in charge, Nadir?"

“The whole staff!” Nadine shouted.

“From Mayday? Or did you badger the last few to death?”

The laughter got louder.

“This show is done,” Nadine shouted. But without a mic, her voice was weak.

“You were OK when I was getting roasted,” yelled Denim.

“Hear, hear,” cried Tracksuit.

“Community of equals, right, Nadine?” Lina asked.

Lang spent most of the rest of his time skewering Nadine, though he also managed to insult the blind man, a demented-looking woman in the back, and a stroke victim. He left the stage blowing kisses to everyone.

“You’re the best, absolutely the best aside from all the rest—I kid, I love you, have my babies, I’ll have yours! Call me!”

Peter and Thea were too stunned to move out of his way as he came off, so he knocked past them, muttering “pussies” and then he was out the door.

###

Thea sat in her car and tried to sober up for a few minutes. To keep her hands busy, she opened the glove compartment and got out a spare fifth of Jameson’s and poured it carefully into the thermos.

She thought she was probably a road hazard, and if she felt that way despite being drunk, she *was* a road hazard. But with the show over and nothing to occupy her thoughts, she also itched in the worst possible place. She decided she couldn’t sit in the lot any long. She’d pick up a coffee first place she could find. And drive slowly.

She pulled away from the curb. As she drove by the front of the nursing home, she saw a smooth green curve with the Golden Hills sign at the top. Thea thought about how nursing homes always had names that sounded like a good spot for a grave. That place would have been better named Down-to-the-Filter Elder Care. Lust for Life Community.

A figure appeared in Thea's rearview, next to the Golden Hills sign. He was running and flapping his arms like he was pretending to be a bird. Peter. Thea stopped. Partway downhill, he tripped, fell, hit the ground belly-first and tumbled to the sidewalk behind her. She backed up slowly, but still almost clipped his shoulder as he got up. She lowered the window.

"My car died," he said, "and I couldn't fix it. Can I bum a ride?" He swatted at a clump of grass stuck to his knee.

Thea sighed. "Alright, but you're not allowed to wear the seatbelt."

"Uh, OK?"

"And if you try anything, I slam the breaks."

"OK."

"Just kidding. Come on."

"Give me a moment—I left my car open back there."

While he was gone, Thea had a few swallows from her thermos before she realized what she was doing. She'd resolved not to drink before the next show, but the alcohol made her lizard brain smarter just as it was making the rest of her dumber. The lizard brain had figured out she'd soon have a sober passenger who could drive.

She made it out of the town OK, though Peter looked nervous. But when she almost clipped a streetlight on a turn, she pulled over, got out, and asked Peter to take over. He drove like somebody who'd just received his learner's permit. The lizard hissed with pleasure.

"I liked your driver's license joke," Peter said after a lot of fiddling with the rearview mirrors.

Thea shrugged. "I have my moments."

"I wish I could be that funny."

"You had to go on first. First position is cursed, that's common knowledge among comedians. Why we give it to newbies."

"It would have helped if I knew any good jokes."

"What *do* you know? Did you go to college?"

"This was supposed to be my senior year."

Thea waited. She smiled at his embarrassed silence. "Major?" she asked.

"Nutrition."

Thea laughed.

"Hey!"

"It's just, like, the opposite of meeting a skinny chef, you know?"

"That wasn't very nice." Peter didn't look away from the road.

"Then use it in your show. And grow a pair, or the hecklers will eat you alive."

Thea looked at him for a while. "Didn't you say your dad was funny? What kind of jokes did he tell?"

"Oh, he mostly used props in his shows."

“Like rubber chickens and shit?”

“Rubber chickens and rubber dog poo, yeah. And a little miniature rubber kitchen, so if someone asked him about the chicken, he’d pull out the kitchen and say, “What? Oh, *chicken*, you meant a rubber *chicken*.”

“Oh, my sides.”

“Yeah.”

“OK. He had all this stuff—why don’t you?”

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t you bring your dad’s kit?”

“Use his props?” Peter looked scandalized. “I couldn’t, it’d be disrespectful.”

“Using his rubber kitchen?”

“Yeah.”

Thea shook her head. “First Law of Comedy—if you’re going to be funny, you got to find that thing you’d never joke about and make all your jokes about it.”

“What?”

“Go home and get the props.”

Peter glanced over. “You’re serious?” He looked more scared than incredulous.

“Yeah, we still have an hour to the next show. Get your foot off the brake, step on the gas, and go get your rubber shit together.”

Thea winced. Marco joke again. The lizard suggested drowning the feelings, and she complied.

The car picked up speed—over the limit, Thea was gratified to see.

“So you have props. You can tell nutritionist fat jokes. And you said the last place you worked at was a nursery?”

Peter blushed. “I kind of lied about that.”

“Good for you.”

“I was a janitor at a Mayday boarding school, but that was older kids.”

“Ah.”

Like HIV, Lupus, and the “Maedi” sheep disease that it most resembled, Mayday hijacked the immune system. So the people most affected weren’t always who you expected. People with overactive immune systems—like medical workers—got a bad initial flare up, what was called the Crash. Then, when their immune systems were totaled, they declined precipitously. But people with normal immune systems, weak immune systems or—like children—underdeveloped systems, didn’t get hit as hard, and fared better afterward. Their lives were often compared to those of people managing HIV. Many kids who had outlived their parents ended up at Mayday orphanages. Kids with voices like smokers and faded ulcer scars, kids who’d watched their parents die.

The last show that Thea and Peter and Lang would perform that day would be a Mayday orphanage, but Thea didn’t like to think about that.

“I bet that job was a laugh a minute,” she said.

“It kind of was!”

Peter pulled into a spot by a government housing block, hopped out, and ran inside.

The building was within sight of the barbed wire fence around an uninfected neighborhood, which told Thea that Peter probably had contracted the disease recently.

Mayday symptoms had at first been hidden and obscured by the bad flu season in August and September. By the time governments isolated the problem in October, a fifth of the nation had been exposed. Soon after, officials sat down with urban planning software and epidemiology data and tried to map out infected and uninfected zones in cities across the nation. There had been a lot of friction—moving people between zones—but sick and scared people turned out to be a lot more pliable than Thea would have thought. Even she hadn't gotten up in anyone's face when the authorities hustled her and Marco off to an early quarantine zone.

Peter rushed back out with a duffle bag designed to look like a steamer trunk with stickers. He got in the car and punched it to 28 miles per hour in a 25 zone. After three rolling stops, he scratched at the scar near his belly absentmindedly. "Thea, why did you get into comedy?"

"Abscess of the heart."

"What?"

"My feelings build up inside and fester. So I go onstage with a needle and drain the pus."

"Ew. Really?"

"No. I just like a laugh."

Peter laughed. "See, you did it again."

"How about you?"

Peter glanced at her but didn't say anything.

"Come oooooon."

“OK. I was working at the orphanage, and one day I was cleaning a back hall and I found a little girl from the second grade named Kirsten. She was sitting on the floor with her shirt off, scratching at a stretch of blisters in her armpit—you know when they line up so it makes a kind of crevice?”

“Chaining, yeah.”

“It looked deep, so I went over and asked if she wanted some antibiotic cream. She said, ‘For this? It’s just a little valley.’ Then she leaned in and whispered, ‘You should see the Grand Canyon.’”

“I start freaking out, because I’m thinking deep-tissue ulcer and we’re on limited antibiotics. If it’s in the wrong place and goes bad, this little seven-year-old girl is going to die. I lean down and say, as evenly as I can, ‘Kirsten, can you show me the Grand Canyon?’ And she hops up, spins around and moons me.”

Thea laughed.

“Right! When I got over the shock, I lost it. I was howling, laughing so hard I steamed up my beekeeper. She was giggling like a mad elf. And that’s how the vice principal found us—Kirsten with her pants down wagging her butt and me laughing.”

Thea chuckled. Part of her was confused—if Peter was in a beekeeper at his last job, and he lived on the border, that suggested he got Mayday recently. But his scar looked old. Her thinking seemed foggy, she couldn’t grasp why. The lizard suggested a swig from the thermos might clear her mind, and again she complied.

“Since I was out of a job anyway,” Peter said, “I wanted to try to return the favor.”

“What? Moon children?”

“No! Make people laugh, especially children.”

“Yeah,” Thea said, not laughing anymore. “Good luck with that.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Thea brooding. When they approached their second gig at the “circus tent,” she discovered that her thermos was only half-full again. She fished under her chair for another spare bottle and carefully topped it up.

###

When the authorities first moved Thea and Marco to the commandeered military hospital, they hadn’t known better than to dope people up with immune-system boosters before the Crash. They’d doped up Marco that way, even though people like him were Crashing like motorcyclists into an overturned 18-wheeler.

She’d sat down by Marco’s bed, trying to speak. Another ambulance screamed by on its way to admissions.

“Not going to sell much ice cream moving that fast,” Marco mumbled.

“I’ve got a serious question,” Thea blurted out.

“Oh, honey,” he said. “Yes, of course I’ll marry you.”

Thea froze. They’d never talked about marriage. His fever was already climbing. The authorities didn’t know shit and Mayday had an eighty percent mortality.

“Kidding,” he said.

Thea tried to keep her voice even as she asked, “Between the vulva and the anus, what’s that word for that stretch of skin?”

“That’s the taint, baby.”

Thea glared at him and he gave her a shit-eating grin.

“The perineum. It’s called the perineum.”

“The perineum is the goddamn worst place on the body to get an ulcerous blister.”

He laughed, which lifted her spirits a smidge.

“Marco, why is it you? You’re the doctor—”

“Nurse.”

“You’re the *doctor*. The world needs you.”

“Maybe you got it backwards. Everybody’s learning how to do my job now, but nobody can teach how to be funny and we all need a laugh.”

“Marco.”

“I could use a laugh,” he said quietly. He looked scared. Thea had rarely seen him so unguarded—he had a ferociously cheerful game face from his years in emergency.

When she could speak, she said, “Don’t worry, they’ll get you cleaned up. Did you know they only use holy water at this hospital?”

Marco smiled. “Because they boil the hell out of it. Not fair, that’s one of mine.”

“Then all I can say is rest in peace, boiled water. You’ll be mist.”

He’d laughed.

###

Patients suffering a Mayday Crash needed medical supervision and supplies, but they were also susceptible to infections: it was best if they didn’t cluster and stayed in well-aired places. To accommodate these needs, huge medical tents had been erected across the US. Other large, enclosed spaces—like stadiums—had also been commandeered. The “circus tent” in Harrisburg wasn’t actually a tent, but Giant Center hockey stadium.

Thea had a hard time walking down the hall to the locker room. Each step felt like she was in a space movie when they turned on the hyperdrive, or a time-travel movie

when they went through the kaleidoscope tunnel into the future. Only whoever was driving the movie kept hitting the brakes.

When she finally reached the locker room, Lang was already there. He snorted, but didn't say anything. They stood beside a staff person, waiting for their call. Thea looked over at Peter holding his duffel.

"Ain't you going to practice?" She realized she was talking to his clavicle, and raised her head to meet his gaze.

"Oh, I've seen Dad do the tricks dozens of times."

Thea arched an eyebrow. Doing so set her off balance a bit, so she adjusted.

"Uh," he said. "Maybe I'll practice a little now?"

"Good thinking."

He opened the bag, got out a bunch of things and started going through a routine. He was totally silent, but his mouth moved like he was speaking. The patter struck Thea as grisly, either because she was drunk or because of the way his face contorted. Everything went OK until he tried to tip his novelty top hat and a couple multicolored scarfs and a rubber dove fell on his head. As he put them back into the hat, one of the scarves got wrapped around his throat, and something else tore.

Lang sauntered over and smiled scornfully at the spectacle. Another hospital staffer came in and announced, "OK, we're about to start. You'll have the North End amphitheater." She gave them an expectant smile.

"Haha," Thea said. Apparently too loudly, because the staffperson recoiled.

"She's a little dazed," Lang said in a stage whisper. "The bottle hit back."

“I see...well, first up I have....” The woman looked at Peter for the first time. Peter had something like foam confetti streamers draped on him. He looked like a fat kid the gym teacher just told to climb a rope in front of everyone, to prove the class was weak.

“You got me first,” Thea said.

“No, I have—”

“You got me.”

“Alright,” the woman said with a shrug, and went onstage to introduce her.

Peter turned to Thea and said, “Thank you, Thea. Thank—”

“Just work on it, OK?”

“OK.”

She walked onto the makeshift stage. She was happy it didn’t involve walking on ice. They’d drained the rink so she could see the concrete and water pipes.

I liked ice hockey before it was cool, she thought, *I mean, I liked swimming*. She shuddered at the Marco joke and took a swig from the Silver Bullet.

The stadium was hung with large pieces of canvas cloth that divided the space. The North End amphitheater was just the semicircle of bleachers at one end. The patch of concrete in front of them was covered with foam jigsaw pads, like at a gym. This area had been curtained off with sheets of canvas. More canvas folds hung above. Thea figured those were for acoustics.

In front of her was a wall. The audience sat in rows of seats above it that rose steeply, so she had to crane her neck to see them. Most were in civilian clothes, a few in scrubs and some in beekeepers with the yellow and black armbands of infected. She felt

like she was performing from the bottom of a pit. Or maybe she was a defendant performing for judges. At least they'd taken down the plastic walls that protected fans from the puck, or she'd have felt like she was at her own medical demonstration.

"Hey there, North End amphitheater. It's like I'm an ancient Greek down here. Hockey Socrates."

Thea fiddled with the mic for a couple moments, although the sound was fine. Stadiums had great sound systems, even if the hanging canvas didn't do much to stop the echo. She carefully set down her thermos on the fold-out table that some thoughtful person had put next to the mic stand. The break allowed a few moments for the adrenalin to kick in and burn off some of her buzz. She took a steadying breath.

"So, y'all are stuck here in the Circus. You bored yet?" A few people shouted *Yes!* "I don't know, you sound pretty cheery. How bored are you, really?"

She raised the mic above her head, though there was no chance of picking up a voice. She tried to stand on tiptoes, but dropped back to her heels and flailed her arms as she almost fell over.

"Whoa. What was that."

A man shouted, "Bored enough to watch you!"

"Bored enough to watch me?" Thea said, and let the audience giggle. "Imagine how I feel—I have to come to *all* my shows. Same damn jokes. What?" She listened intently and finally made out what a man with a line of sweat on his brow was saying.

"Bored enough to learn bridge?" Thea knew nothing about bridge. "Like the card game or the architecture over water? The architecture would probably be easier."

She waited a beat, then said, “The boredom’s the worst part, isn’t it? When I was in your seat, a buddy of mine said he’d go around with the clipboard getting inpatient information just to have something to do. Someone else said she’d hold the barf bags. Then we made a bet—whoever thought up the nastiest job they’d do to stave off boredom won and had to volunteer for it. Think that shut anyone up?”

The audience shouted *no*.

“Too right. The next guy said he’d mop under the oozers. And another said he’d baste on that ferret-paste ointment stuff—you know what I’m talking about?”

People laughed and nodded.

“Another said he’d hold down the raving oozers while the other guy basted. Then a woman said she’d carry the bodies to the crematorium, and—”

Thea stopped. The guy who’d won said he’d carry the bodies from the children’s wing. What had she been thinking? “The guy who won said he’d learn to play bridge.”

Weak laughter. She opened her thermos and took a swig.

“So let’s give a hand to all of the doctors and nurses here who’re basting our oozers. Can all you medical staff stand up and show us who you are?” A few of the people in scrubs stood and the crowd clapped. Thea pointed at a woman in the first row.

“Where’d you work before?”

She said, “Plastic surgeon’s.” A few people chuckled.

“Plastic surgeon? Wow. When this is over, you’re going to be like a gourmet chef when the Donner party drags into town, aren’t you?” Thea used her crappy rich-lady voice. “I recommend a slight tuck to hide the pelvic scars and recontouring of the chin—” and the patients shouting, “Just take a glue gun and pump me full of silicone!”

She waved her hands like a gunslinger, but the mic slipped from her grip and hit the mat with a deafening bang and a crack of static. The audience winced.

“Tell an awesome joke, *then* drop the mic,” Thea muttered as she retrieved it. “I always mix that up.”

She went off on a long string of jokes about how all the serials had gotten weird. Either a show pretended there was no Mayday and had all kinds of creepy imposter syndrome when actors got sick and were replaced without comment. Or they made the show all about Mayday and ended with preachy public service messages. Or the actors were infected, but tried to pretend it was a minor thing, and became unintentionally hilarious.

But she couldn’t hit the beats, and every time she took a drink to try to get back in rhythm, everything got harder, until she finally stumbled off to a smattering of weak applause.

Offstage, Peter had managed to wrap himself in a long black string that led to something brown and fuzzy she couldn’t identify. He tried to go out for his call and tripped over what looked like an inflatable water-weenie.

“Jesus,” Lang said. “If I have to wait for you, I’ll never get out of here. I’m going on.”

He strode onstage. After a few minutes, Thea heard laughter and howls and shrieks that might have been indignation. She tried to help Peter, but he kept getting tangled in his props. He had scribbled notes to himself, and he whispered them and nervously rubbed his thumb against the rubber doggie doo in his hand.

How do you do? Thea thought. *In the toilet, the same as everyone doos.”*

Lang returned after another swell of applause and left without even a put-down.

Peter was flushed and sweating, his shirt limp and wet around his belly. But when the staffperson called him, he marched on with a determined look on his face. Out of a morbid curiosity, Thea peeked out at his show.

Through the curtains, the echo made his words almost inaudible, but he started off promisingly enough. He called down some volunteers. He demonstrated his novelty top hat and turned it upside down without anything falling out. But when he hit it with a wand, nothing happened then, either. He hit it again. He shook it until it squashed like an accordion, spewing a mass of cloth and rubber on the girl he was working with. When he tried to help her, something in the bag behind him exploded, sending confetti into the air and causing the other volunteers to shriek in surprise.

When props weren't actively working against him, he seemed possessed into working against himself. He had a volunteer hold a card behind her back and show it to the audience (not that they could see from that distance). Then he began to pick cards out of the deck and ask if each was hers, first confidently, then confusedly. When he got down to the last card, he tried to smile like he'd done it on purpose, only to look genuinely amazed that it was also wrong. The real card was still behind her back—he'd forgotten to have her return it to the deck.

What had started as nervous giggles slowly grew to genuine appreciative laughter from the audience—people seemed to think he was some kind of auteur. Extreme experimental fun. The laughter peaked when, instead of pulling a rubber dove out of the now thoroughly mauled hat, he flourished the fake doggie doo. He left the stage to wild applause totally at odds with his look of misery.

###

When Peter walked offstage and there was no more show to distract her, Thea's nausea and dizziness returned. Her thermos was empty again. When they got back to the car, she had to lean against it as she opened the door. Peter had only driven a few blocks when Thea needed him to pull over so she could puke. There was a public garbage can on the corner, but it was the kind with the flat metal top and slits around the four sides like mailbox slots. She stood with her head cocked at 90 degrees trying to puke into a slot, vomit splashing back to speckle her jeans.

I'd like to thank my whole team for making this possible. Without grueling marathon drinking, I wouldn't have come so far—four blocks! Special thanks to the Lizard, my trainer. You bring up the best in me.

She wiped off what she could. When she got back in the car, she opened the glove compartment, but her package of ibuprofen was empty. Peter looked at her concernedly. He'd said something, probably asking if she was all right (*nope, half left*).

"Give me some of your painkillers, will you?" she asked. "Doesn't matter what kind."

"Uh, I don't have any."

"How can you not have painkillers? Everyone has painkillers."

He blushed. "Well, I... they're in my car! Which we left behind. Tell you what, I'll buy you some."

Thea groaned. She was getting what she called "solar-flare vision." Like tunnel vision, only instead of cool blackness, her peripheral vision burned with white fire. She tried to control her nausea. He drove and drove.

The car stopped and she heard the driver's door slam. Her eyes burned, her head ached, and the itch was still there. And she was hot, so hot. Why was it so hot?

Fever, she thought.

When the pneumonia made Marco delusional, he'd answered every question about his health with "half left" and then shouted at the staff, "Bring some kids in here! I need some kids in here with me!" Thea hadn't even known what that joke was supposed to be. He'd run a temperature of 98 for a week straight, shitting himself over and over and then he'd sung Elvis Presley's "Fever" to her for an hour before collapsing into sleep. The next day, he died.

You give me Fever.

The car door slammed again and there were pills in front of her: ibuprofen and migraine pills and a few others she didn't recognize, also a bottle of water.

"Bless you," she mumbled and pounded some of the pills. After a few minutes of slow, gentle driving, the white fire receded enough for her to see again.

They had left the city behind and the air was fresher. They drove through an upscale suburb, past a store that sold ridiculous-looking pet supplies, another that sold fancy stationery, and a chocolatier.

All had wide glass storefronts. Although some neighborhoods in the city had looked bombed out since the big Mayday panic in October, even there most of the stores didn't need bars over the windows. It made Thea a little happier that the social fabric, seemingly so fragile, hadn't been torn wide open when all those dead bodies dropped on it. Nobody in this little suburb had thought, "The world is going to hell anyway, I'm going to smash open that window and get a French maid costume for my cat."

“What do I owe you for the pills?” she asked Peter.

He waved a hand dismissively. “If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t have been able to finish the shows and get paid.”

“All those tens of dollars you’re making.”

He laughed politely.

“I stole that line,” she added.

A little girl in a surgical mask was on a swing at a public playground. Thea didn’t see anyone else around. She stared at the girl, who was too busy trying to time a jump to notice.

“Did you,” Peter began, then said, “never mind.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“Did you start drinking a lot when Mayday hit?”

“Ah.” *Why did the elephant drink so much?* she thought. *To forget.*

“Not really. I mean, I got worse when Marco wasn’t around anymore to nag me. And booze helped with the opiate withdrawal after I Crashed, which was a bonus. But I started because of stand-up.”

“Because you were in bars and clubs?”

“Not just that. I’d been bombing at open mics and novice shows for a long while. One day I got so disgusted with myself I spiked my beer with Jameson’s—I always had a beer up on stage with me.

“Right at the start of my act I pounded the spiked beer, thinking, ‘Now I’m Just. Like. Mom.’ Then I looked at the crowd and realized I still had their attention. I had their

anticipation. So I raised my empty mug and peered through at them all like it was a telescope and said, ‘Well I’ll be, y’all do look better through the bottom of this thing.’”

Peter laughed.

“Yeah, I know. The rest of the show was on my mom’s drinking—joking about that shit you don’t joke about, right?”

“Gotcha.”

“And it worked. My first good show. After that, I started being funny. Except I needed the booze to get me doing the crazy real stuff. Like Popeye. Every episode he tries to go without his performance-enhancing drug. But by the end you know he’s going to need that spinach.”

"I never thought of Popeye as a tragic figure."

"Watch him now and then tell me he doesn't cry on Olive Oyl's shoulder at night."

“She has shoulders?”

They drove for a while in silence. They were out in the fields now. Even if no cure was ever found and all the windows got smashed and Mayday chipped away at people until everyone was dead, here in the countryside, things might not look any different than they did at this moment. At least until the weeds took over.

They pulled into a drive-through, got food, ate it, and drove on. Thea halfheartedly asked if her burger would have a complete vegetable portion if she had both the pickle *and* ketchup.

After a while, he said, “As a nutritionist, I’ve always wondered if Popeye would have had a Mr. Universe body, instead of a freaky forearms body, if he’d switched to fresh spinach.”

“Now you’re—”

“No, listen. What I mean is, maybe you’re eating canned spinach.”

“What?”

“You found this thing that works for your comedy, but maybe if you did all that off-limits material fresh, instead of using booze—canned spinach—it would be even stronger.”

I’d love to, Thea thought, *but you can only get canned laughter these days*. She gave a little grunt to let him know she’d heard.

He shrugged. “Sorry, never mind. You’re the funny one.”

Thea opened up the glove compartment. She took out the bottle of Jameson’s and began pouring some into her thermos.

“You’re funny, too. You killed at the hockey rink,” she said, then winced.

“Probably not the best choice of words for a Mayday world.”

“That wasn’t me. It was just them laughing at how bad I screwed up.”

“Take it as a gift,” she said. “Second rule of comedy—after ‘always go off limits’—is when you bellyflop, get up with all your dignity and say, ‘I meant to do that.’ Do what you did at the hockey rink again, and you’ll do awesome at the orphanage.”

She finished filling her thermos and screwed the top back on.

“I can’t,” Peter said.

“You have to.”

“I can’t.”

“Don’t—”

“I can’t!” Peter said. “I threw out Dad’s bag, OK?”

“What?”

“The whole time I was trying to do that show, it was like he was still alive, saying ‘You imbecile, don’t mess with my stuff’ or ‘There you go again, like I knew you would,’ until it drove me nuts. So I dumped his bag in one of those biohazard bins.”

“Oh.” She’d been so sick leaving the place that she hadn’t noticed if he’d had his bag, but it wasn’t in the car now. “Well... at least the next audience is just kids.”

Peter laughed. “Some Mayday orphans will eat you alive.”

“I once did a show where a woman mistook me for somebody who stole her boyfriend. She said she’d be waiting for me in parking lot with a couple of friends of hers named Smith and Wesson. What can kids do to you?”

“The janitor before me,” Peter said, “he was uninfected, too. That was one of the perks of the boarding school—”

“That reminds me, if you were uninfected then—”

“Just let me finish. They had a good beekeeper that the janitor could use. Except some of the kids must have gotten bored, because they started putting tacks on his chair.”

“Can we get back—”

“Since he was too wily for that, they started also prying up splinters of metal in the desks and leaving sharpened pencils in the cubbies and stuff like that. Until one afternoon, he opened up his storage closet. The kids must have picked the lock, because a string pulled and a drawing compass came swinging into his face. He dodged, but it scraped his goggles and almost caught in the fabric of the suit. When he turned around, a whole mass of kids was standing there quietly, watching him. He quit the next day.”

“You’re bullshitting me.”

“I swear that’s exactly what they told me before they hired me.”

“And you still took it?”

“They’re still just kids, you know? Kids who’ve lost their parents, or maybe one parent is still in the uninfected zone and too scared to come be with them. They’re hurting. Even a little help could mean a lot to a kid who needs it. And maybe they’re not so nice, but they’re ... fresh. My dad always preferred to do his show for kids, because some haven’t even heard the ‘what’s black and white and red all over’ joke.”

“So what jokes are you going to tell?”

“Fart jokes, I guess. You?”

Thea swirled the whiskey around in her thermos. “Fart jokes for me, too.”

Peter stuck out his fist, and Thea reached over and fist-bumped him.

###

Lang was already at the orphanage when they arrived. He still wore the stripper poncho, though he’d pulled a pair of extra-large polka-dot boxer shorts up over it. He was with Mr. Mess, the superintendent. Mr. Mess wore cheap glasses and the impervious smile of a man who has seen something so awful he’s retreated to a special place from which he never returns.

"The kids we've got here," he said, "don't expect them to be rolling in the aisles. At least not because they're laughing. My background is in psychiatric care, so we accumulate the most traumatized orphans. I exchange with the nuns for the ones with behavioral issues."

"You hear that, Lang?" Thea turned to the other comic. "Maybe avoid mocking their deformities?"

"Actually," Mr. Mess said, "playground insults might be easier to deal with than what's going on in their heads right now. I'll have the staff take away anyone who starts sobbing."

Oh God, Thea thought.

"Am I going to need to worry about kids getting psychotic?" asked Lang.

"No, not that bad. None of them are on anti-psychotics, and I doubt they have the money for illegal narcotics. The most I've caught is weed and glue-sniffing."

"You hear that, Thea, glue," Lang said. "You've got lots in common."

"And that's about it," Mr. Mess said. "Except watch out for Frost. If he gets to be a problem, just let me know and I'll have him removed. I'll point him out to you."

"I got a question," Lang said.

"Yes?"

"The kids probably won't laugh, and a bunch of them are deranged."

"Bereaved."

"And I get paid no matter when I go on."

"Yes."

"Then I'm going first. Let's get this over with."

"Is that OK with you?" Mr. Mess asked Thea and Peter. The two looked at each other and tried not to smile.

"Alright, whatever," Thea said.

Lang went out. Peter and Thea crept to the door.

"Hello, boys and girls and dog's breakfasts. Feeling better than you look, I hope?"

"You're the idiot who *chose* to come look at us," said a skinny kid whose skin was so inflamed and cratered he looked like they'd just dragged him from a burning building. Thea was amazed he was alive.

"Frost," Mr. Mess whispered to her and Peter.

"Whoa!" Lang shouted. "Hansel, buddy, looks like Gretel got you out of the oven late. Stay away from those candy houses, eh?"

The children laughed. Frost started to shout a retort.

"Can't hear you, Hansel," Lang interrupted. "Oh, look. That's because I've got a mic and you don't. What? You, yes. The kid with strawberry cheesecake smeared on his face. Oh, that *is* your face?"

Thea turned from the stage in disbelief. Peter and Mr. Mess were shaking their heads back and forth like metronomes. Mr. Mess still wore the impervious smile.

Lang insulted three more kids, to general laughter, then gave Frost a second helping. When Frost shouted back, Lang leaned down, hand cupped to the side of his suit at ear height, then shrugged. As the audience settled down, they could all hear a tiny girl with owlsh glasses mumbling to herself. "No no no, bastard no, bastard."

Lang inclined solicitously toward the girl, like Jesus in a Sunday school picture.

"Wow, aren't you tiny. You remind me of a friend of mine—friend, what am I saying? Poquita was our chihuahua. In fact, she wandered off sometimes. You wouldn't happen to know—was your Mom about this tall, wore a poncho, walked on four legs?"

The girl stopped muttering and looked straight at Lang. Her expression, magnified by the glasses, was so fierce that Thea, Peter and Mr. Mess all reared back.

"I mean," Lang rolled along, "at least you look better than the guy next—"

The girl screeched, "You fuckswizzle gulping bloody shit from a hobo's ass!"

Dead silence for five full seconds. Childlike wonder on every scarred face.

Then Frost shouted "Yeah, Lucia!" and all the kids were cheering and shouting over Lang's reply.

"That's more engaged than Lucia's been in months," Mr. Mess whispered. "Your friend Lang is some kind of insane genius."

Lang yelled over the children, but then his microphone went out. He tapped it, to no effect. Frost stood by the stage holding two pieces of disconnected cord. The kids cheered.

"Get him!" shouted Frost.

Children clambered onstage. Lang backed to the door, shouting insults while Mr. Mess and two of his assistants blocked the pursuing children. Lang turned and ran into the room, banged against a desk that Thea couldn't remember having seen there. She heard a tearing sound.

"Oh man," Peter said. "Bad luck!"

"Aah!" Lang screamed.

Children peered around Mr. Mess and cheered. "It's this little loose screw," explained Peter, pointing, but Lang was already sprinting down the corridor.

He'll probably be OK, Thea thought. There wasn't much of a hole in the suit, and not much time for the disease to get inside. But he'd still need to go to quarantine and wear the red and white armband for two weeks while tests were run (provided someone reported him).

The children had all gathered on the stage, hugging and laughing and giving each other high fives, like actors at the end of a production. Lucia stood in the middle, crying like she'd played the lead.

"Look how happy they are," said Mr. Mess. His assistant suggested something in a whisper, but he just shook his head. "Let them be for a bit."

"Will you report Lang's possible infection?" Thea asked.

"I can do that," he said.

###

When Mr. Mess and his assistants had calmed the kids down and gotten them back in their seats, Peter went on. A couple kids chuckled. Somebody said "fresssh meeeeeeat," to general hoots and laughter.

"So, hey there, Altoona kids! Watch any TV around here? Anybody seen Cathypillar?"

Cathypillar was a new Sesame Street character—a caterpillar like a line of fuzzy green spheres with red splotches that were her Mayday scars. Some of the kids nodded.

"Do you think she'll last, or will someone accidentally play a few rounds of tennis with her?" Peter mimed hitting a lob right into the center of the audience.

"They should bring you in for the surgeries," Frost shouted, "to save on anesthetic." A few of the children snickered.

"And you are?"

"Bored."

An assistant approached Frost and whispered something to him.

"Aw, this fatass isn't funny anyway," the boy said.

"You sound just like my d—" Peter began and then stopped.

The assistant grabbed Frost, and the boy tried to pull his arm away.

"Wait," Peter said.

The assistant stopped. Thea leaned out.

"Hey, Frost," Peter said. "Want to have a contest. You make me cry, you win. I make you laugh, I win. Want to see that, kids?"

Children shouted approval. The assistant looked to Mr. Mess and Mr. Mess looked at Thea—she didn't know why. She nodded. Mr. Mess waved the assistant away, and Frost brushed off invisible dust and sat down.

"Make you cry?" he said, with a smile. "That's easy, I just hold up a mirror."

"Don't you mean two mirrors?"

"Why you want me to humiliate you? Don't you get enough in the rest of your life?"

A bunch of kids said "Ooooooh," but Peter got a wide goofy smile that made some of the kids giggle. He fired off a rejoinder. Frost retaliated by insulting Peter's hygiene, his intelligence, his job, his masculinity.

"You've got more poop between your ears than between your fat butt cheeks!" Frost said. Kids laughed.

Peter raised the pads of his hands to his mouth and blew a loud raspberry. "Oops! Brain fart!"

That doesn't even make any sense, Thea thought with a smile, as the kids giggled hysterically.

As his insults kept failing, Frost's frown deepened until it puckered his swollen red face. At last he said, "Your momma's so fat, the elevators in your town list 'Maximum Capacity or One Your Momma.'"

"Mom died four years ago. She's pretty skinny by now." The kids gasped. "Want to do a 'your momma's so ugly' joke?"

"Ah. Your dad is...ah..."

Peter smiled. "I got this one. Dad was the kind of guy, when I was eight and I asked to be Superman for Halloween, he gave me a weight set."

"So? I bet he didn't even steal your candy."

"For my ninth birthday, he gave me a hundred dollars, only I found out at the store it was one of the fake hundreds he used in his magic shows."

Frost grinned. "My dad got me half a bottle of whiskey with a cigarette butt in it for my last birthday."

"That's just neglect. A month before prom, mine bought me a tuxedo that was three sizes too small."

"You see this?" Frost pointed to one of the scars on his shoulder. "I got this one from my dad."

Peter reached down into his pants. Children shrieked and groaned. Then he grabbed his scar, pulled it out, and slapped it to the floor. It was latex.

"And I got this from mine," he said.

Jesus, Thea thought. That's fake. He's not infected. He wasn't infected until these shows.

Frost stared at the fake scar, then at Peter. Then he screeched like a deranged Pillsbury Doughboy.

“No wonder you don’t laugh often,” Peter said. The boy laughed harder.

“Your... face,” Frost choked out.

“We covered that. Well, not covered, exactly, like with a paper bag. But a potato was used for comparison.”

“No—I mean, damn. You win, man.”

“Good luck, Frost,” Peter said, and left the stage to enthusiastic applause.

“You crazy bastard!” Thea whispered at him. “You got to get to a quarantine now!”

“After your show.”

“Why the hell didn’t you use a beekeeper like Lang?”

“You can’t connect with an audience in one of those things,” Peter said sadly.

“That’s the *point*, now—”

“First, do your show.”

Thea pursed her lips, but she grabbed her thermos and stalked on stage.

“Hey, kids,” she said, “good to see you.” She set the thermos by the base of the mic and tried to reclaim her presence of mind. “So you all right here?”

“What’s in the bottle?” asked a boy from the second row.

Thea pretended not to hear. She looked around for other kids to answer, then said, “What’s in the bottle? You mean my thermos? Booze.”

“That’s not very good for you,” said a girl.

"No," Thea said, "but it's better than sniffing glue. I hear some of you are fond of that."

She weaved her head back and forth, like a snake getting charmed. She had no idea if that was what glue sniffers looked like, but the kids laughed.

"You eat the stuff in kindergarten, then sniff it? What'll you do in high school? Inject?" She mimed using a syringe and then walked around like Frankenstein. "Man, I need another hit of Elmer's!"

She milked the Frankenstein bit as long as she could manage. Then she said, "But I don't judge. Whatever—"

A girl jumped up and clawed at her face until it bled. The nearest assistant ran over and hustled her from the room. The room went into uproar, the kids exclaiming and shoving at each other. When Thea tried to get her show going again, another girl cried, "Jeremy pooped his pants!" The whole process repeated itself as the embarrassed boy was hurried off. Thea felt like a substitute teacher at storytime.

"No, Popeye!" Peter stage-whispered from the wing.

Thea looked at him quizzically. He was looking at her hands. She looked down and—wouldn't you know it—there was the thermos, with the top off. She looked back at the kids.

"Don't," Peter hissed. Thea could hardly hear him.

"Fuck spinach, Popeye!" Peter shouted.

The hall went dead quiet for a moment.

"Ooooooh!" said the kids, all of them staring at the stage with wide eyes.

Thea had their attention again. Their anticipation. And she could see why doing this had mattered so much to Peter that he risked infection for it.

There were little scarred kids and kids with goiters and kids with blisters and one with crust all around his eyes. A small bundled-up wincing girl and another with reddish phlegm smeared across her cheek. All of them adorable. She got why Marco had screamed for a kid to be put in the hospital room with him—so he could tell a dumb fart joke and maybe make a kid laugh and the whole plague-infested world a bit more bearable.

She screwed the top back on the thermos.

“Hey kids,” she asked, “what’s invisible and smells like peanuts? Elephant farts.”

Laughter.

“You know why all those pills they give you are small, white and smooth? Because if they were big, gray and wrinkled, they’d be elephants.”

A few giggles.

“How is a banana like an elephant? They’re both gray, except the banana.”

“Do all your jokes have elephants in them?” asked one girl in exasperation.

“Not all. What’s gray and not there? No elephants.”

The girl rolled her eyes, but the corner of her mouth twitched.

“What looks like an elephant and flies?”

“A flying elephant,” said a boy in the first row. “I heard that one before.”

“That’s irrelephant.”

The children were laughing or trying not to laugh and smiling. So Thea made her show elephants all the way down. She did the four-elephants-in-a-Ford-Fiesta sequence,

the elephant with red toenails joke. Even the black-and-white-and-red-all-over joke (an elephant with a sunburn wearing a nun costume).

When she left, the kids were clapping and shouting and drumming their feet.

And that, she thought, as she hustled Peter away, is how you kill at an orphanage.

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