AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Marjorie J. Sandor

This collection of loosely-linked stories explores the lives of a set of characters who exist in the margins of society, but quietly so. In the opening story, “Two-Minute Histories,” an ostensibly negative act—breaking and entering, among other verifiable crimes—is demonstrated to lead to some positive outcome such as a moment of clarity or insight. This is a recurring element in most of the stories in the collection. My characters can get away with these acts because, in their narrative worlds, they exist in the margins of notice: the negative acts represent the unnoticed other crying out for notice, perhaps; but simultaneously, the acts serve a liberating function: there is a certain freedom associated with existing in the margins.
The Wish List of Arturo Chan

by
Michael Shou-Yung Shum

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Michael Shou-Yung Shum, Author
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two-Minute Histories</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perfect Strangers</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Wish List of Tomohiko Nakao</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magic</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In My Dampest Hour</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satellite Down</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bombing It Out</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harm Reduction</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
While we were going out, Allison asked me: “Don’t you find it strange that you’re still friends with all your exes?”

I told her that it was symptomatic of a larger psychological issue. My relationships tend to blossom after a break-up, when the pressure is off.

“Obviously,” she said, “there’s a disconnect between what you crave emotionally and your actual behavior.”

The next day, Allison suggested we split up. We are now quite close friends. She helped me get my current job, working the graveyard shift at the Johnson County Clean Living Facility. A couple of years after our break-up, she went through rehab for an alcohol-related driving infraction and was obliged by law to live at the facility for six months. During that time, she established a relationship with the facility’s night supervisor, Harold Daffney, and when the previous night staff quit after a particularly tough week, Ally mentioned me as someone who was looking to get into harm reduction and recovery.

I have several unpleasant disciplinary responsibilities at the facility but they are straightforward: I enforce the nine p.m. curfew; I conduct room searches when suspicion arises; and whenever anyone violates house rules—there is a zero tolerance policy—I supervise the expulsion. Expulsion is always scheduled in the morning (when subjects are typically most compliant), and is the last responsibility of my shift. Understandably, many of the patients become resistant when they see the cop car,
fearing that they are going back to jail (which they are). Sometimes I have to coax and cajole them to get in, as if they are apprehensive cats.

On rare occasions, the expulsion turns violent. That is when Harold Daffney—who’d previously gone through the program himself, for painkillers—springs into action. He wrestled in high school and is skilled in grappling techniques. Because the facility is supposed to be a safe space, I allow the cops into the house as a last resort only, but by the time they enter, Harold has usually subdued the individual with as much consideration for their comfort as possible. I don’t know how good of a psychologist he is, but he is very effective at administering these holds. Once docile, the expulsant is gently led off by the cops.

All the staff members except the facility director share an office on the ground floor of the house, in a room converted from the den. The second floor of the house is the dormitory—there are enough beds for a dozen residents, two per room—with two common bathrooms. The ground floor contains the kitchen and the living room. Off the kitchen is an employee lounge with a couch for napping, an old computer for checking e-mail, and an even older shredding machine, grown dormant from lack of use, hulking in the corner.

During the night, I have the run of the downstairs. I can boil water on the stove, make tea, sit and contemplate the existence of man. The salary is reasonable, on the low end but commensurate with this freedom. And I get to work with an ever-changing cast of people and their predilections. In general, what recovering addicts need to hear most
is that their people haven’t lost faith in them. In the absence of friends and family, I try and provide that kind of support.

Harold and I share the last hour of my shift. He clocks in at five a.m. Our favorite topic of discussion is who, among the current eight residents, we think is going to make it. I’m picking Bingham and Vrosky—Harold doesn’t disagree—both of them are doing well. But we tend to root for the hopeless, the ones who receive no visitors and no phone calls. We discuss who we’ve seen around town, how they looked and whether they appeared clean or not. I try to focus on the success stories. That ensures that I like my job more than Harold does. At six a.m., I clock out, eat breakfast in one of the diners along the High Road, and then go home and go to bed. By the nine p.m. curfew, I am back in the facility, checking attendance. At midnight, I hit the switch that kills the lights in the upstairs bedrooms, and it usually takes another half-hour for the house to finally settle.

On Tuesday afternoons, I have lunch with my mother. She is retired and suffers from shingles, for which she is on a twenty-four hour regimen of neuropathic pain pills. To see her medicine cabinet now is an obscene revelation for anyone working in the substance recovery field. But still, she is 63 and has always made reasonable decisions in the past, so I guess to some extent she has earned the benefit of the doubt. When we meet, she likes to update me on two things. The first is her medical status.

“I have limited motion in my right shoulder,” she said today. “I think it’s getting worse.”
We were at Common Grounds dissecting our situations over coffee and cucumber sandwiches. She was telling me her doctor thought she might need another procedure, and also that I am too picky when it comes to relationships.

“I don’t think that’s it at all,” I said doubtfully.

“How is Allison? Has she finished her Master’s?”

“She’s still working on it.”

“I never liked her, you know. She was so careless. Always late for everything!”

She paused to eat a potato chip.

“So, mother, have you had any strange dreams lately?”

“Don’t try and change the subject. But as a matter of fact, three nights ago, I dreamt I was back in high school...”

The second thing my mom likes to talk about is her dreams. She’s been telling me about them since I turned eighteen, over ten years ago. When I was younger, I was surprised by how often she dreamt about the distant past and people long dead. Then I began having more of these dreams myself and I understood that their frequency was just a function of age. We differ in our interpretations, but we both agree that they are the toughest dreams from which to wake up alone.

She took a bite of her sandwich.

“Nick,” she said. “I wonder if you can do me a favor at work.”

She looked very serious all of a sudden.

“What do you need?”

“Do you think you could pull someone’s file for me?”
“Absolutely not,” I said. “Whose file are you talking about?”

She wrote a name on the back of a business card and pushed it across the table.

“Arturo Chan,” I read. “Never heard of him. Why do you want to see his file?”

“It’s for the rental property. He’s a prospective tenant, and the background check showed that he served part of a suspended sentence at the house in 1995. I want to rent to him—but I thought you could read it and make sure there aren’t any red flags.”

“Hmmm,” I said.

“I’m sure there’s been at least a person or two who’s come through that house that you wouldn’t want your mother to be landlord of.”

“Why don’t you just find someone else?”

“Because that would be prejudicial. Besides, he’s the only person who has expressed any serious interest.”

“I see.”

“And I would’ve thought you’d want someone like him to get a chance.”

Eventually, she piled on enough reasons, and I agreed—grudgingly—to perform the task. I slipped the business card into my pocket and she added that she told Arturo Chan she’d let him know about the apartment by tomorrow.

That night, after the house had been silent for a couple hours, I used the master key to let myself into the facility director’s office, closing the door behind me. The file cabinets were locked but I jimmed them with a coat hanger from the staff closet. In the file drawer labeled “C-Da”, I ran a thumb through the tabs until I came to “Chan,
Arturo.” I pulled the thin, black folder and sat in the guest chair at the facility director’s
desk, intending to make occasional notes on a legal pad while I read it. Any information
I could pass on to mother.

But when I opened the file, the contents were meager: some medical forms, on
which Arturo had checked off “No” to everything; results of a psychiatric battery that
were well within normative bounds; randomized drug tests, clean. There wasn’t
anything to indicate that Arturo Chan wasn’t perfectly bland, that he wouldn’t be the
ideal renter. After I finished looking through it, somewhat relieved that I hadn’t found
anything to disqualify him, I replaced the file in the drawer. I’d written nothing on the
legal pad, but didn’t feel quite ready to leave just yet. Just because it was in the same
drawer, I decided to pull Harold Daffney’s file—I’d always been a little curious—and I
read his as well. Admitted 4/17/97. Discharged 7/17/97. This time, there was more
juice: a litany of misdemeanor arrests for narcotics possession dating back to the 1980s.
It gave me a better idea of the harmful space Harold had come from, a place he hinted at
only vaguely in our conversations: somewhere quite dark and grim.

But still, a disturbing feeling was rising in me, and it became more acute when I
pulled the next file, which was Allison’s. We’d lived together for at least six weeks, and
I thought I had a pretty good grasp of her, but I discovered that the person represented
in her psychological evaluations was a complete mystery to me. The language was
distant—“The subject perceives the most banal of daily responsibilities as profoundly
taxing” — and did not (for me, at least) reflect any of the warmth or liveliness with which
I’d always considered her. At first, I questioned myself. Was the level at which I
normally knew people—even colleagues and exes—the level of a mere stranger?

I couldn’t tell.

I couldn’t tell if the disconnect was with me or the language.

So I pulled the files of the eight current residents, people I fraternized with
everyday, like Bingham and Vrosky, and read those. Again, I had the strong sense that
the words on the page were not an accurate representation of the human beings that I
knew, that they were more than just the confluence of stated symptoms. But I needed a
larger sample size. Presently, I started over, at A with Aaronson, and began making my
way through the drawers file-by-file, reading the evaluations of all the people with
whom I’d come into contact during my tenure in the house.

Somewhere half-way through the first file cabinet, my thinking began to take
shape. The failure of clinical language to express the humanity of the individual
bothered me, left me feeling unsettled. I began to remove every page that I felt
contained inaccuracies or misrepresentations, stacking them on the desk, to be shredded
at the end of my shift. For the people that I knew well, I removed more of the pages. In
their stead, I began to write on the legal pad my own description of the individual to
include in the file. I tried to be as honest as possible and the words came with difficulty,
like drops of blood from a pin-prick:

“Jerry Bingham told me he was broke.”

“I think he is scared about what will happen after he leaves.”

“I saw Hermann Vrosky at Buy-Mart the other day.”
“He looked clean and healthy.”

“He asked about his brother, and I said that Henry was doing just fine.”

When I got back around to Allison’s file the second time, every page in her folder ended up in the shredding stack, including several of my own attempts to describe her authentically. Finally, in frustration, I tore off a blank sheet of paper and drew on it a very simple flower, which, as far as I know, to this day comprises the totality of her confidential file at the Johnson County Clean Living Facility.

It’s only a matter of time before the facility director consults one of the files and discovers what’s been done, what I’ve been doing in her office the past several nights. By then, the psychological evaluations that once filled them will be long-destroyed. When that happens, I will very likely be the next expulsant from the facility. Harold Daffney himself will escort me out the door. But until then, I’m growing accustomed to spending several hours a night in the quiet house, re-writing the histories in the file cabinet by hand. I am quite certainly getting better at it, albeit slowly and with great pain. As regards the shredding machine in the employee lounge, though, I’ve quickly become an expert.
PERFECT STRANGERS

Most people don’t have the luxury of knowing when they’re going to get sick, but Jacob Park had known for thirty-two hours that for him, the time was Sunday, in the early evening, between five and six p.m. The first thirty-one hours he did absolutely nothing with this information. Then he went into the bathroom, gripped the edges of the sink with his hands, and gave himself a pep talk in the mirror:

“Come on, Jacob, it’s no worse than the flu.”

“You can stand it, Jacob, don’t tell me you can’t.”

“You don’t have a choice about it.”

At last, he dressed and drove to the supermarket. His normal practice at Safeway was to dawdle, comparing prices, seeing what other people put in their baskets. But today he shopped quickly and didn’t look at anyone else.

By five p.m., he was back in bed. He’d stripped the mattress of sheets and sat with a pillow propped against the headboard, the computer open in his lap. Within reach on the night table were arrayed the following: two bottles of water, two bananas, two blister-packs of Benadryl, a bottle of Pepto, a bottle of Imodium-AD, a bottle of vitamin B6, a bottle of L-Tyrosine, and finally — what might prove to be his trump card — a prescription bottle containing fifteen ten-milligram bars of Ambien. He was composing an e-mail to his boss:

Stan:
I thought I might be over this thing by the weekend but I still feel awful. I saw the doctor on Friday and he gave me some antibiotics. I think I should be okay by Wednesday or so. I’ll be checking my e-mail and
voice-mail from home regularly in case anything comes up in regards to the Nutria pitch.
—Jacob

He set the time for the letter to be sent Monday morning at 6:45 a.m. and submitted it.

Then he shut the computer and set it aside and waited. In the silence, he became hyper-vigilant for the first leading indicator of illness: a sniffle, a chill, a goose-bump, watery eyes. Even an innocuous yawn. The only thing he knew was that he wouldn’t be leaving the house until the sickness was over.

The concept of staying home for such an extended period of time—at least three days—would have been inconceivable to him just ten months ago. He’d considered himself an on-the-go type, a world traveler. It was his thing. He relished small souvenirs, curios that he’d lift directly from under the nose of a foreign shopkeeper. Nobody ever suspected a Korean-American tourist. These items Jacob slipped into a jacket pocket and forgot about, until he returned home and unpacked and re-discovered them, amulets and charms, figurines of glass or stone or clay hidden among his clothes and maps. His favorite was the head from a small bronze statue of a cat, eyeless, that he’d found in Cairo. The sapphires had been pried from the sockets centuries ago.

With a sense of satisfaction, Jacob would deposit these mementos into a hand-blown glass goldfish bowl that sat atop the marble island in the kitchen. The bowl itself was shaped like a goldfish and the irony had appealed to him. He’d found the bowl in a shop in Venice and paid good money to have it shipped back to Chicago. Although he did not look at any particular souvenir after it was secured in the bowl, Jacob felt an
assurance in knowing that every piece of evidence of his travels was collected in one place.

Not even Sara was aware how he’d acquired the collection. She asked once why he picked such tiny objects, and he’d told her—not untruthfully—that they felt like his little, personal secrets. Moments of doubt he had created in unusual places.

Lately, however, Jacob did not care so much for the fish bowl, nor its contents. He had other things on his mind, new interests that had superseded old ones.

Three nights before, on Thursday evening, Jacob had opened his medicine cabinet and recognized the enormity of the issue he’d been avoiding. It wasn’t hard to count the number of blue-gray pearls of Oxycontin inside the prescription bottle because there were only three of them left; in total, it was less than a quarter-gram of oxycodone, an amount so meager it was downright frightening. Two days would be stretching it.

It was unusual for his supply to get so low, but his last visit to the doctor’s had been awkward and unpleasant and he’d procrastinated. There was no putting it off any longer though. In the interest of conservation, he’d done just a single half-pill that night. Then on Friday, he rose early, took the Blue Line in, and by 8:15 a.m., he was in his office overlooking the Chicago River, on the phone with Lakeview Medical. No one would be in for another hour yet; he was quite safe.

“My name is Jacob Park. I’m a patient of Dr. Toranovsky’s and I need to see him about renewing a prescription.”

“Sir,” the woman replied, “you can have your pharmacy contact us directly.”
“My case is unusual,” Jacob said. “The last time I ran out, Dr. Toranovsky requested that I come in before he would authorize the refill, so I’m assuming he will want to do the same.” He paused, then added by way of explanation: “I guess he thought it was better to be safe than sorry.”

“Well, Mr. Park, we don’t have anything open today. If it’s not an emergency, we can fit you in early next week. How does Tuesday afternoon sound?”

Jacob swiveled in his chair and looked at the agency calendar pinned to the cork board. He did it out of habit, for really no good reason. Next Tuesday might as well have been next year.

“Actually, I don’t think that will work for me… I guess it is more of an emergency now that I think about it.”

“Well, sir, your best chance is to come in and Dr. Toranovsky will try to fit you in between appointments.”

“So it’s first-come first-serve?”

“I apologize, Mr. Park, but that’s the best we can do. If your condition is pressing, you should go to the emergency room...”

“No, that’s fine. I’ll be over right away.”

After the call, Jacob composed a letter to his boss:

Stan:
I came in this morning and realized I’m not feeling well. I’m heading over to the doctor to get it checked out. They weren’t exactly sure when they could fit me in. I’m all caught up on the pitch for Nutria and waiting on information from their end, so I’m at an impasse work-wise and this seems like a good time to miss a couple hours. Thanks for understanding,
He read over the letter, affixed his signature: “Jacob E. Park, Senior Account Executive” and submitted it.

The sun was out when he got down to the lobby. He stopped in the gift shop to browse the newsstand—the magazines in Toranovsky’s waiting room were always two months old—and decided on a travel magazine based on the cover’s promise to inform him of “The Hidden Fiji.” He then walked the three blocks to Lakeview Medical with hope rising in his heart. He hadn’t failed yet in cajoling a script out of Toranovsky. If things worked out right, he could get it re-filled by noon and have the entire afternoon off.

Five hours later, Jacob had read through every page of the magazine (ads inclusive), exchanged seventeen text messages with Sara (who herself was killing an afternoon at work—“All the partners went golfing,” she explained), checked his voice-mail three times (Stan said to feel better and see him on Monday), talked his mom through her three medical conditions and answered her customary inquiries (No, he wasn’t seeing anyone/No, he hadn’t been going to church), and contemplated how best to spend his Friday evening (the skies were clear—maybe head down to Comiskey?—Sara was down). He was re-reading “The Hidden Fiji” when the receptionist finally said: “Mr. Park? We just had a cancellation. Dr. Toranovsky can see you now.”

She led him to a room and left. Jacob removed his shirt and sat on the paper sheet. Another woman came in and took his temperature, pulse and blood pressure and
then he was left alone again. Finally, Dr. Toranovsky entered, tapping his pen on a clipboard.

“Jacob Park,” he said. “What are we going to do with you?”

“Hey, Dr. Toranovsky,” Jacob said. “I bet you can guess as to why I’m here.”

“Yes, I can,” the doctor said.

“Er, well, it’s like this,” Jacob began. “It’s this damn herniated disc. It’ll be okay for a couple days but the instant the weather changes, like it did last week, it just starts to ache and throb, and then I can’t sleep.”

The doctor blinked at him, giving no indication that the litany was making an impression. Jacob soldiered on.

“And when I get in or out of a car or go up and down stairs, it’s so excruciating that I think I might faint.”

“Well, Jacob,” Toranovsky said. “If it’s not getting better on its own, then I think we should start talking about surgery. I can refer you to some back specialists who can let you know for sure.”

“That would be helpful,” Jacob said. He watched as the doctor wrote some names and numbers on a notepad.

“Any of these will take care of you.” Toranovsky tore the page off. He eyed Jacob as he handed it over.

“Thanks,” Jacob said. “As for the pain—well, I was wondering if you could authorize a refill—just one more—so I can sleep this weekend. I mean, I’d really appreciate that.”
Toranovsky looked at Jacob for a long time, then placed the clipboard under an arm and leaned back against the wall. His eyebrows narrowed to a point above his nose. “Jacob,” he said, “I believe that I told you the last time you were here that it would be your final refill.”

“I know,” Jacob said. “I just didn’t think it would still be hurting. It got so stiff this morning that I had to call in…”

Toranovsky cut him off. “Jacob, I may have been born at night. But I wasn’t born last night. My recommendation for your pain is to take an over-the-counter medication like Motrin. I can write you a prescription for Ambien to help you sleep. That should tide you over until you can see one of those specialists.”

The doctor paused.

“I apologize if that sounded harsh, but that’s the best I can do. Now unless you have another medical issue to discuss, I have other patients to see. So I’m going to ask you very plainly: do you have another medical issue that we need to discuss?”

Jacob considered confessing. Telling the doctor that he had to have the refill, that the concept of an entire weekend without oxycodone was as appealing as a full-body massage in broken glass. Clearly the doctor already knew. Was he just waiting for Jacob to admit it? Wasn’t it possible Toranovsky would take pity on him? But when Jacob looked at the doctor’s skeptical eyes he could see that Toranovsky was a professional and the kind of man that would not budge.
“Alright, doc,” Jacob said finally. “You win.” You started this mess, he wanted to say to Toranovsky, and now I have to clean it up. Instead, he said: “I guess I’ll take that Ambien after all.”

Jacob filled the feeble prescription—fifteen pills, no re-fills—at a Walgreen’s and took the Blue Line home. On the way, he texted Sara: “Not feeling well, Sox game is off.” He closed his phone and cast a sullen look around him as the train swayed westbound, heaping hate upon everyone he saw: the office workers like himself, the indie-rock kids in their tattered finery, the supposed deaf-mute with the hand-painted cardboard sign. Jacob already knew with a certainty what he was going to do the instant he was alone and ensconced within his South Loop loft. He was heading straight for the medicine cabinet.

Thinking about the two blue-gray pearls of Oxycontin he had left and how he would partake of them made Jacob feel a little better. He was both a sniffer and smoker, depending on the situation. Sniffing was enjoyable and ran a strong second. The drug became diffuse in the sinuses and had a long on- and off-set, like a pleasant Sunday cruise. Smoking oxy, on the other hand, was like trying to steer a speedboat through a tsunami. Everything gets wet in a hurry. As he exited the train, Jacob decided that he was definitely smoking tonight.

Once inside the loft, he washed his hands and prepared a pill. First, he removed it from the bottle and put it under his tongue. After two minutes, he took it out and wiped off the moist blue-gray binding with a paper towel until the pill was completely white. Next, he laid out a piece of aluminum foil on the island, flattening it out until
there was a single crease in the center. He then removed a mesh tea infuser from a cupboard above the sink. His phone lit up while he was rubbing the naked pill on the tines of the overturned infuser, and he read the text from Sara: “Hope ure ok, will b around l8r if u want to hang out.” Jacob began a reply, erased it, started another. Their endlessly platonic relationship—it tuckered him out just trying to come up with a decent message. Eventually, he gave up and returned to the task at hand.

He ground the pill down to nothing, then tapped the infuser and set it aside. A heap of fine white fluff was left on the foil. He placed the foil on an elevated steamer tray and centered the powder on it using a credit card. Jacob fired up his special non-butane lighter—acquired on a trip to Amsterdam—and lovingly passed the flame underneath the foil. The oxy began to blacken and liquefy, running along a fold in the center of the foil and releasing a rich vapor.

Jacob leaned in with a half-straw and inhaled slowly, his lungs expanding with the lush smoke. Then he put the straw down and made it over the side of the couch, sinking into it as the ride started. When the first wave hit him, drenching his cells and adhering to all the appropriate receptors, Jacob could not catch his breath and he was certain his heart had stopped, just for one long pulse.

Then the subsequent tides of relief washed over him and Jacob could no longer distinguish without opening his eyes what he was lying on, what he was wearing, or even if he was dressed at all. But he did feel an immense warmth radiating from his chest, like the doors to an internal furnace had been flung open. The heat was almost
too much to stand, but Jacob stood it, because the heat was a significant element of the rush.

An indefinable period of time elapsed in this way. Whenever he sensed that the intensity was lessening, he got up from the couch to take another hit. Thus passed Friday. On Saturday, he awoke, smoked the last pill, and was officially dry. At some point he calculated when the oxycodone in his body would dissipate, based on simple concepts of half-life and bioavailability that he had learned since he had become a user, and arrived at t-minus thirty-two hours, sometime between five and six p.m, Sunday.

The first series of sneezes came at 5:37 p.m., quick and dry ones with no phlegm. Jacob felt the illness creep in, a slow discomfort that spread over the surface of his body. It was not so bad at first, and he began to harbor hope. Then, as if the foreman inside him had thrown up his hands and just walked away from the controls, his body temperature went completely haywire. He began to get warmer and warmer, and whenever he thought his temperature had reached its highest point, he realized he was mistaken. His body became flushed, overwhelmed with flashes of intense and nauseating heat.

The touch of fabric against his skin was intolerable, like he’d suddenly developed an allergy to everything. His nose ran and his eyes watered. Then the chills started, violent neuropathic ones that began in his goose-pimpled arms and shoulders and racked his entire body with spasms. He had a vision: a dozen years ago, eighteen and in England, plugging an American hairdryer directly into the wall socket and
turning it on, the motor burning out in seconds, a sickening vapor of tortured machine. It was too much electricity. His central nervous system was overloading, there was no one at the controls, and his body passed from a withering heat into a deep freeze.

For the next handful of hours, Jacob twisted and trembled under multiple layers of down and fleece, whatever he could find in his closet, many of the items flung on the heap still on their color-coded plastic hangers. Some of the sweaters—ones his mother had sent him—had their tags. For his part, Jacob could not stop convulsing. His brain was perfectly active but his body shook of its own accord, like it was speaking in tongues. The bare mattress grew sodden with his sweat but he remained frigid.

Sleep would be a salvation but there was no sleep, only an insufferable insomnia. He managed to get out of bed long enough to swallow five bars of Ambien with some orange juice and then crawled back underneath the covers, hoping for something to happen. At some point during the night, his digestive tract relaxed, the small and large intestines unclenching and loosening and then the nausea and diarrhea hit him at the same time. He made it to the bathroom and lay on the cold floor next to the toilet, not sure whether he was coming or going.

It was now sometime between Sunday and Monday. As he writhed in a delirium of pain on the bathroom floor, Jacob could hear his mother’s voice intoning like a preacher: “Every second in Hell is like an eternity.” He beseeched her to help him then, and he prayed his god-damndest, and when he worked up the courage to open one crazed eye, he thought for a moment that she was in the bathroom with him, her face
drawn and severe. But it was only his one eye staring back upon him—the face of his own admonishment.

At around two in the afternoon on Monday, Jacob felt lucid enough to consider his options. By that time, he had moved from the bedroom to the kitchen. If he could just get a hold of some Vicodin or a Tramadol—anything to help tide him over. Hell, even some god-damned codeine would be something. He lay on the linoleum tile in the kitchen, where it was cool and his body seemed least sensitive, and thought about the occasions in the past two years since he’d moved to Chicago wherein someone had passed along narcotics of any sort—a Percocet, a Vicodin, a Tylenol 3—did Sara ever have anything?—when a new idea came to him. Jacob couldn’t put his finger on it, but he was forgetting about something important. It had to do with all those times he had filled and re-filled prescriptions.

Ten months ago, he’d suffered the back injury playing softball for the agency team—trying to catch a routine pop foul, he’d run into a fence—and when his MRI came back, Jacob was told he had a slightly herniated disc. Surgery was optional, but medical therapy was recommended. It had started off mild, with five milligram Vicodins three times a day, but it had been enough to start the habit. Jacob believed he understood the risks but they did not at any moment outweigh competing factors: the way the pills made him feel, coolly disinterested; and that he was honestly unexcited enough with his life that adding a habit kind of interested him. People had far worse habits, like
pornography or electric football. Narcotics had a long, storied history. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote under their influence:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
   Down to a sunless sea.

Jacob—finally—knew exactly how Coleridge felt.

The pills had gotten progressively smaller and progressively more potent at the same time, and somewhere along the line when he switched from Percocets to Oxycontin, he had started sniffing and then smoking the pills rather than chewing them. The only issue was that Jacob had to keep making excuses about his back, but he was able to overcome those misgivings quickly. Other people in the agency preferred a different kind of nose candy. To Jacob, though, the difference between an unregulated street drug like cocaine and pure high-grade pharmaceutical narcotic was like the difference between going to Chinatown and going to China.

In the span of this addiction, he’d filled at least ten prescriptions of forty to eighty pills apiece. That was between six and seven hundred pills. Wasn’t it possible that at some point in those ten months, he had hidden a pill somewhere inside his 1200 square foot South Loop loft, for just such an occasion as this?

The odds were good. If anyone would’ve stashed a pill for a rainy day, it was somebody like him, what with his souvenir bowl and all that. He could definitely remember considering it. And given that he could not definitively remember not hiding one, well, Jacob decided it would behoove him to begin searching immediately.
He started in the kitchen. He opened the cabinets that were floor-level first because they were easiest, removing their contents, stretching an arm into the far reaches, feeling every cranny that could possibly contain a small round pill. He went through the cabinets under the sink, feeling around the pipes, and then the cabinets above the sink. He searched the refrigerator and all its compartments. He overturned drawers, looked inside the stove, climbed on top of the island, his muscles sore and sensitive as if he’d worked out the day before, and felt along the tops of all the cabinets. When he was fairly sure he had looked everywhere, he waded through the cans and packaged goods strewn on the floor and headed into the living area of the loft.

The search here was far more daunting and Jacob tried to be systematic, going through each section of the room thoroughly before moving on the next. It only took ten minutes, though, before he surrendered this notion and emptied the shelves with a brusque forearm, scattering books and DVDs across the rug. Whatever struck his eye he turned over or tore open. He stabbed the couch with a steak knife, slicing open the cushions and spilling their contents everywhere, and small feathers drifted and settled around him, the down coating his ankles and legs. He did not find a god-damned thing.

Ravenous. That was the first thing Jacob noticed when he became conscious. Also, that he’d slept in a bed, with sheets. His phone, in its stand, buzzed pleasantly. When he saw Sara’s name, Jacob felt a flush of gratitude toward her, and then a little guilty. The worst part was over. She would be the first person who would call—she was a far better best friend to him than he was to her.
“What the hell? I’ve been trying to get a hold of you since Friday,” she said. “I was about to come over.”

“Sorry,” Jacob said. He explained about the stomach virus. “But I think I’m over it now. In fact, I’m really hungry. What time is it anyway?”

“About a quarter to eight.”

“What day?”

“Wednesday, you jackass.”

“Hey, I’ve been sick,” Jacob said. “I think I just slept for two days.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Not great, but good. Eighty-two percent. Except I’m really hungry. Do you want to get some breakfast?”

“Tomorrow night,” she said, “Let’s get together tomorrow night. You might be contagious.”

After he hung up, Jacob gazed around his apartment. The place looked like it had been ransacked by wolves. He got off the floor and took a very long shower in order to decide what he would do next. Under the hottest spray he could tolerate, Jacob took stock of his physical state—how his joints felt, his level of strength—and determined that he still felt slightly sick. He’d stop at Café Adelia’s, which was on the way to work, and grab a bite. Yes, maybe he’d even sit down with a newspaper and enjoy a couple cups of coffee and an actual meal. He looked at the clock as he dressed and it wasn’t yet half past eight. After breakfast, he’d decide on the day. He’d left himself plenty of time.
At Adelia’s, Jacob took a booth next to the window, ordered three eggs over hard with a side of bacon and two English muffins plus a glass of O.J. and a cup of black coffee, and went through the sports section of the Sun-Times. The contents surprised him. The Cubs were twelve-and-a-half back. The Sox, on the other hand, had won seven in a row. And when had they gotten Jake Peavy? How could he have missed that? Well, he knew how he could’ve, but still, it was a little disorienting what happened when he stopped paying attention for just the briefest snatch.

Unfortunately, no one seemed to have the time nor the inclination to linger and talk to him—about the unusually warm day, or the pungency of the river, or the Cubs and the Sox, even though he’d just caught up on all their whereabouts. Jacob decided it was time to decide what to do. There were times during the breakfast where he’d felt quite confident he was going to work that day. Now, though, that outcome seemed less likely. The tipping point was the thought of returning to his condo—in its current state—after a day at the office, exhausted. He’d better e-mail Stan from his phone:

Stan:
Sorry, I’m still sick. I’m seeing the doctor today. Tomorrow for sure.
Nutria is going great.

Jacob finished reading the Sun-Times sports section, then got on the train across the street and returned home. He opened the vertical blinds, turned on the television, and began to clean. He started in the bedroom, carefully re-hanging the clothes, smoothing out their creases. Later, he’d go through them with an iron. Right now, he was shooting for respectable, a level appropriate for close company. Maybe he’d host a small party that weekend. He had few visitors: only Sara had been in the condo in the
last year—except for that one time Desmond Green had given him a ride home after a company function. Jacob couldn’t refuse Desmond’s request to use the bathroom, of course, but it had made him extremely uncomfortable, because there was no telling what he’d left out on the kitchen island, exposed. A strange piece of tin foil streaked yellow with burnt powder, perhaps? But Desmond had been too drunk to notice, other than to say: “Nice fish bowl, man.”

In the late afternoon, Jacob was still cleaning the living room when he experienced a slight vestigial chill. For a second, he became worried. But there were no convulsions—he put on his light jacket for prevention—and swallowed two twenty-five milligram Benadryl to stave off the residual symptoms. Then he returned to restuffing the sofa. His limbs were tender. Weak and dehydrated. But he still felt grateful.

Gradually, the evening grew quiet around him. It was a Wednesday night in late spring, and there was still light out, and from his window—which he’d opened at noon—he could hear the chatter of pedestrians walking beneath, the sounds of city traffic, the distant toll of a clock. When he’d been using, Jacob could stare at a single brick in his living room wall for hours, but now, the bareness of his surroundings made him restless. He considered calling Sara. But he would see her tomorrow night. He didn’t want to see her until he felt one-hundred percent, anyway.

He looked at his watch. It was still early enough. He could always call his mother. Their conversations, though, were undependable. She might ask if he were going to church, or if he had met someone, or if he was taking good care of himself, and
the answer to all of these questions was no. He had absolutely nothing new that he could actually tell her, nothing that would remotely interest her beyond concern.

What he needed to do was get out. Some place where he had something to do. Jacob looked at his watch again, then called a saved number on his phone:

“What games are running right now?” he asked the voice who answered. “Can you put me up for the 2-5 No Limit? Under J.P. I’ll be there in forty-five minutes or less.”

Jacob was a bit apprehensive about his reception at the card room, having not played there in so long. He hadn’t even driven anywhere in so long. But the driving gave him something to focus on—merge on the expressway here, pay the toll there. By the time he crossed the border into Indiana and arrived at the Horseshoe, a new game was starting and he was able to slide in without hassle. Some of the faces he recognized.

“Yo, JP!”

“Holy shit, it’s JP! What’s up, bro?”

“Well, I’ve been out of commission for a while,” Jacob explained.

He started slow, playing tight and using the time he spent out of hands to catch up with the guys. One of them had had a child. Another one gastric bypass. Other than that, it was just as Jacob recalled: the guy who was considering a divorce was still considering a divorce; the guy who liked to complain about the Cubs was still complaining about the Cubs; and the stoners he could still smell, getting up every three orbits to smoke a bowl on the deck, and returning to play increasingly drowsily.
The conversation at the table was effortless, and Jacob participated in it as he saw fit, contributing enough so that his silence was unremarkable. But mostly he listened, looking around occasionally with what felt like new eyes, feeling positively sanguine in his present social circumstances. He was winning a little bit. Sure, his relationships with these guys were casual, ones he’d let wither once going to the casino had become too distant a haul when high, but it still felt good to be out and active. No, this was certainly a closer approximation to living than what he had been doing.

When the table finally broke, Jacob exchanged fist-pounds with several of the players, and one called Baxter said, “We’re glad you’re back, bro.” Jacob walked off the boat to the parking garage, and it was almost three in the morning, but he didn’t feel tired. It was good to be thought of, even by strangers.

The next evening, after another missed workday—he’d e-mailed Stan around noon, when he’d gotten up: “Doctor says my immune system is still weak,” then spent the afternoon at the Horseshoe breaking even—Jacob stood in front of the mirror, grooming himself in preparation to meet Sara. It wasn’t all bad: he looked fairly healthy, actually; he still had a fair amount of hair, and he was skinnier than he’d been since high school. The paunch that had accumulated in his mid-twenties was gone—he’d eaten sparingly for the last six months—but he hadn’t lost so much weight that he was skeletal. 135 lbs. on the digital scale, he was only about twenty pounds under what he should weigh, and only about forty pounds under what he had weighed.
Jacob was still considering his appearance in the mirror when he heard the buzz of the phone from the other room.

It was Sara. Were they still meeting?

“Yes!” he replied.

If anything was ever going to happen between them, tonight seemed like the night. He was close to one-hundred percent. And he was clean. He felt like he could love her, if he gave himself the chance—again, Jacob felt a pang of guilt as he thought of her. In the past, they’d often discussed why they were both still single: Sara said it was his fear of intimacy, and he said her confidence intimidated men. Really, what they were discussing was why they weren’t going out with one another. But what he couldn’t tell her was that he always found her lack of care about her own appearance faintly disappointing. She had no style. It shamed Jacob to care, but the fact of the matter was that he cared. At some point—perhaps tonight, after his recent ordeal—he firmly believed he could change. He felt ready to move on, ready to look for something that opened out instead of narrowing down.

Perhaps this hope influenced his perception, but Sara seemed different when they met an hour later at the cinema. She was still dressed from work, and her navy pantsuit and burgundy blouse gave her a serious, mature air. She squeezed him when they hugged—her perfume subtle and clean—and told him that he felt so thin. He said he was feeling much better now. They went to the movie—Still Life in Mobile Homes—and then had dinner to talk about it. Sara said she would give it two stars and Jacob said two-and-a-half, maybe three. He said he liked the girl that was in it.
“Really? I didn’t think you were into blondes,” Sara said.

“She was just, you know, so lively.”

“Lively? Ha! You couldn’t handle that first thing in the morning.”

“I don’t think it would be so bad,” Jacob said. “I’ve been thinking about, you know, having a relationship.”

Sara arched a single eyebrow. “You have someone in mind?”

“Maybe,” Jacob said.

“Are we staying long? Maybe we should get another drink.”

After a couple more—enough of a testimony to his new-found self-discipline— Jacob was nicely acclimating to alcohol being in his system, a substance that had become completely superfluous during the ten months he’d been using oxy. He felt relaxed and warm with Sara, and grateful for their closeness.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked.

“I’m just glad you’re my friend,” he said.

“Jesus, Jacob, you’ve become such a lightweight! Two drinks and you’re already maudlin!”

“Can we go somewhere else?”

“Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. The Horseshoe, maybe?”

“I’m not going to the casino with you. I thought you stopped that.”

“It was more like a hiatus.”
Sara was scrolling through messages on her phone. “Well, here’s an idea. Some friends from work were saying they were going to the Green Dolphin tonight.”

“Who’s playing?”

“I think Mark Farina.”

“Okay,” Jacob said. “Let’s check it out.”

They took a taxi up Ashland to the spot, sitting together in the back of the cab, nice and intimate behind the thick glass that separated them from the driver. Despite their relative privacy, Sara whispered to him the whole time, showing him the text messages that she’d been exchanging with her friends, one of which said: “All the guys here are lame!” She let him look over her shoulder as she texted back: “Well, I’m bringing one that will fit right in then.”

“I wish you hadn’t said that,” Jacob said.

“Why are you so serious all of a sudden?”

“That just wasn’t a very nice thing to say.”

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings,” she said. “So sensitive!” Sara paused. Then, in a quieter tone: “I missed you, Jacob. Where have you been these past few weeks?”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Jacob said. “I haven’t been feeling like myself lately. Work.” He told her about the Nutria pitch. She had some familiarity with the client, and it seemed a more-reasonable-than-usual thing to talk about because of her business attire. Sara, for her part, listened attentively. As he talked, Jacob got the feeling they both might have been using the conversation as an excuse to look at each other, in the back of the cab, under the passing shadows from the streetlamps.
“Maybe,” he considered saying, “we should just go back to my place and hang out.”

Sara looked like she wanted him to ask her.

But the shadows stopped moving. The cab had pulled alongside the curb on Ashland, in the valet spot for the Green Dolphin. Sara shrugged a little, as if saying, “Oh well,” and got out of the cab. Jacob paid the fare and followed her onto the sidewalk. They queued up, and Sara was texting her friends inside the club. She lit a cigarette and they shared it, and the little kick from the nicotine brought Jacob around a bit as they stood waiting. He began to feel social again. He was glad he was out and about. They were frisked by security, and then after paying cover and getting their hands stamped, he followed Sara into the club as she tunneled through the crowd, leading the way to the booth where her friends were sitting. There were three girls in total—four counting Sara—and Jacob did not catch any of their names as they were shouted above the music, except for the dark-haired girl he slid into the booth next to.

“Amanda,” he said, “that’s one of my favorite names.”

She gave absolutely no indication that she heard him. He could tell immediately that he was not the kind of person she was looking out for. It was too loud to talk, anyway. Instead, Jacob drank the rum-and-Coke Sara bought for him and signaled he was getting the next round. A few cycles later, when it got back to his turn to buy again, he realized that maybe he’d already had too much.

The girls went on the dance floor as a group and Jacob followed them, persuaded by Sara: “Come on, dummy!” They danced in a small circle, with the girls’ purses in the
middle. Sara and Jacob danced on the outer periphery, and she moved close to him, their bodies brushing occasionally. Jacob liked it—but he couldn’t tell if he wanted it to go any further.

“You’re drunk,” he shouted at her.

“Yes, I am,” she replied.

He was nowhere near sober himself. The concomitant glaze over the passage of time on the dance floor served to make him feel sloppy and out of sorts. In the recesses, however, in the part of his mind that was still clear—the part that was beholden to the precision and allure of narcotics—Jacob could see that Sara wanted to be close. It was their inability to talk. Without banter to fall back upon, her guard seemed more down than it had ever been.

It was a lot to think about at the moment, under his current condition. He was still recovering from sickness. He needed a quick time-out, a bathroom break, to catch his breath, even without anything to crush and sniff this time around. He’d grown to think of a private stall fondly, as his own little haven. As long as it had a clean, flat surface to work on.

Unsurprisingly, there was a line for the stalls, but Jacob was in no hurry. While waiting, a man in line nudged him from behind and said:

“Boy, it’s hot out there!”

Jacob nodded.

“Hey, bro, those girls you’re with—they’re smokin’!”

“They’re not so bad,” Jacob said.
“Is it just you with them, bro? Hook a brother up, man. I can hook you guys up, too, you know?” He winked at Jacob. “You know how girls are…” He tapped his left nostril with his index finger. “They can’t resist it.”

The man waited for a response. Eventually, Jacob said: “I’m still listening.”

“Here, I’ll show you.”

One of the stalls opened, and they both went into it and turned the latch. The toilet roll dispenser had a nice, flat surface. Jacob brushed it off, while the man took a baggy out of his pocket and untwisted it, pouring enough for a couple lines onto a flyer with a crease in the middle. Then he put the flyer on the dispenser, and cut out two substantial lines using a credit card. Jacob offered to roll up a bill, but the man had his own tooter, the tube of a Bic pen cut off on one end, about two inches in length. The man snorted one of the lines, then passed the tube over.

“Go ahead,” he sniffed. “It’s good but not too heavy, you know?”

Jacob took the tooter from the man and leaned down. When he got close to the line, close enough to see the individual granules of cocaine, the white powder looked exactly like oxy and for a second Jacob hoped that was what it was. But then he did the line and it was definitely coke.

“Should we go back out?” the man said.

“Go on ahead,” Jacob said. “I need a second.”

“Hey, we had a deal…”

The initial hit of the drug was edgier, so much less smooth than oxy. One second he was sloppy, and the next he was far too on. Things came at him starkly. Jacob
suddenly felt disgusted. He was in a public restroom stall with a complete stranger, a coke dealer. Two days into supposed clean living, and he was fucking up profoundly already, and he was upset—and getting angrier—because he had a hard enough time living as it was. Why the hell were complete strangers trying to bring him down?

“So what do you think?” the man asked. “Good, eh?” He placed a hand on Jacob’s shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” Jacob said. “I’m leaving.”

“What? Chill, bro…”

Jacob touched the latch. The man was picking up his stuff, saying something about how gooks couldn’t be trusted. Jacob grabbed the man by the collar and tried to throw him against the wall but there was not enough room. They grappled within the confines of the stall, banging the sides in a struggle for leverage. Eventually, the man got Jacob in a headlock and Jacob kicked with his leg, snapping the door open on its hinges, the lock still hanging on the latch. They looked up and saw staring back at them through the opening an audience of guys in striped shirts and jeans, looking in curiously.

The man slowly released his hold. “You’re lucky,” he said so only Jacob could hear. “If I see you again, you are a dead man.”

Jacob brushed past him and the line of guys and hurried out to the club.

Two of the girls were yawning by that point. He pulled Sara aside and said: “I think it would be for the best if we leave immediately.” She said everyone was planning on leaving anyway. It was almost four. He said goodbye to them, no longer caring
about making a good impression, and then Sara said: “Let’s go. We can share a cab.” They went to the curb—Jacob still looking nervously behind him—and hailed one.

When they arrived in front of Sara’s apartment in Bucktown, his heart rate had returned to normal and he was beginning to crash. She turned to him and asked if he wanted to hang out for a bit.

“I always like to decompress after I go out,” she said.

He said okay. He did not think much about it. She obviously wanted company. But as Jacob stole a glance at her as she exited the cab first, he realized his physical interest in her was wearing off as swiftly as the coke. Her work shoes! He could see the soles as they stepped onto the curb, molded brown rubber with a scant, podiatric heel, demoralizingly functional. Silently, he paid for the cab and followed, climbing the three wooden flights to her place.

“Do you still smoke?” she asked when they got inside. She hung up her jacket and went into the kitchen. The faucet ran. Jacob cleared a stack of art books and sat down on the futon. Her place had always felt a little cluttered: the mismatched lamps, the vintage curtains, the small plants, the secondhand shelving filled with tchotchkes and knick-knacks. Jacob would’ve kept that kind of stuff in the fish bowl, hidden. He preferred things more austere. Presently, Sara returned to the living room with a couple glasses of water, setting them on the coffee table in front of Jacob. Then she opened the drawer in the table, and took out a half-foot glass bong. “Are you zoning out again? Anyway, I just got some new stuff a couple days ago. It’s really good.”
She held a bag out to him and he smelled it. The weed’s strong odor made him nauseous.

“That’s intense,” he said.

“Wait until you smoke it.”

“I think I’m alright actually, but you go ahead. I’m trying this new sobriety thing, you know.”

She stared at him. “Jacob, shut up. You’re sitting here totally wasted telling me you’re trying this new sobriety thing!”

“I’m not that drunk.”

“You can even have the first hit, since you’re the guest.”

“Hey,” Jacob said. “Let me tell you what just happened at the Green Dolphin…”

“More smoking, less talking,” she said.

Jacob went ahead and did a nice rip, milking the chamber slowly. He watched as Sara did hers, and by the time she was reloading the bowl, his thoughts had become confused. What was he doing here again? He wanted to know. He wanted to be home. There was too much clutter. Not even a clean spot to put his glass of water. And somehow, the art books he had so carefully stacked on the futon beside him were now upset.

“Don’t worry about those,” she was saying. “Here, do another.”

“I can’t.”

“Come on, I don’t want to smoke by myself.”
So he did another and then he could no longer confirm if she did hers or not.

The world was coming at him in a series of freeze frames, like the passage of time was being guided by a discrete second hand on a clock. He felt a little sick to his stomach as the image of Sara loomed in front of him, her face huge.

“Do you need a drink of water?” she said. “Or do you want to lie down…?”

“No, no, I’m okay,” Jacob said as he tried to gather his thoughts. They were as elusive as fish. “What I’m trying to tell you is that something’s happened and things have changed—I’ve changed. Everything is going to be different now.”

“Okay…”

“I see now how everything and everyone is always conspiring to preserve the present moment, like a snapshot… and therefore, everything and everyone is conspiring against my changing.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I guess what I’m saying is I feel like everybody is trying to bring me down, and I don’t know why.” Even the words as they came out sounded confused to him. “And I can understand perfect strangers, because they don’t know me and they don’t care about me. But Sara, you’re supposed to be my friend.”

“Jacob, what the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I’m trying to get my shit together—for once—and it just seems like I’m being sabotaged by all this… vileness.”

She sat on the couch and stared at him as he staggered to the door.

“I’m in a better place now,” he said as he turned to face her.
“You’re an asshole.”

“Don’t you see? I don’t need any of this anymore.”

She waved an arm at him. “Just fuck off, will you?”

How he found the Blue Line station he would later not be able to recall. But somewhere near Chicago and Milwaukee, the motion of the train became too much and he was sick. There was no one in the car, and he threw up in the conductor’s area underneath the handicapped seats. His vomit was a thick sick-colored fluid that smelled like alcohol and had the consistency of phlegm. Strands hung from his lips as he heaved and when he wiped his mouth, they adhered to his hands and fingers like disgusting appendages and eventually he took off his jacket and wiped his mouth and hands with it. Then he left the whole mess there, jacket and all, and moved to another car. His head was a little clearer and, as he considered it, his line of reasoning at Sara’s no longer appeared as sound as it did at the time.

He felt in his pocket for his phone, then realized he was underground and that there wouldn’t be any bars. He texted Sara as soon as he emerged from the Clinton stop:

“Sorry Sara got too messed up, will you forgive me?’

There was no reply. Back in his condo, he waited another fifteen minutes, then texted her again. Then he tried calling and it went straight to voice-mail. He was angry at himself now, and for a moment, he thought about going back to her place and explaining face-to-face: I don’t know what happened, Sara. The whole night was strange. I shouldn’t have smoked. I think I freaked out. I’m sorry if I upset you. I don’t even know what I was thinking. You are my best friend. I can make it up to you.
The phone buzzed. Apprehensively, Jacob approached the island and picked up the phone and read the two messages from Sara:

“U r a jerk,” the first one said. The next one said: “Don’t ever speak to me again.”

Jacob closed the phone and considered it, and then he wound up like he was Jake Peavy and heaved it across the room with all his might. It landed in the corner next to the television and from the clatter of the plastic on the floor, Jacob could tell the phone was still intact. This knowledge enraged him, the fact that he could be so bad at intentionally destroying something, but so good at sabotaging everything else.

He was standing against his island, and his head was pounding. He reached a hand up to his forehead and his arm brushed against the souvenir bowl. There it stood, fat and defiant in front of him, and as Jacob gazed on its contents, he felt convicted by their mediocrity, by the very fact that he had once prized such utter crap, the thin, cheap amulets and the mass-produced charms of his ancient history. What did it signify that he had evidence of being in Togo, or Cairo, or Chichen Itza, when he’d left no impression at all? Jacob extended his hand and pushed the bowl near the edge of the island, until a third of it was off the edge. It began to teeter, and was at such an angle that if he removed his hand, it would fall to the floor. Jacob played with it for a moment like this—on the edge, off the edge—and then finally let go.

There was a tremendous crash and Jacob felt debris shower the legs of his pants and his shoes. Glass crackled underfoot and when he looked on the other side of the
island, the sight was a sad, hideous heap of memorabilia, glass and coins and shattered chessmen and key-rings and stuff he couldn’t even identify in the mess.

“For the love of Christ,” he said.

Five minutes elapsed. Jacob sighed. He’d damn well better start learning how to take better care of himself. That was for certain. Slowly, he walked to the laundry closet and removed the broom and plastic dustpan.

He returned to the kitchen and surveyed the catastrophe again, this time in a cooler state. The first thing he should do, he knew, was to kneel down and separate the stuff that could be saved from the stuff that couldn’t be. But no, he decided against that almost immediately. Everything he saw when he looked down represented something that was distasteful to him. Instead, he began sweeping everything into the dustpan and as he did so, he felt a little better, a little less frustrated with himself and his situation.

He could think about his issues more clearly now, without the confusion that had dominated him earlier, and he could see that a profound change had taken place inside him in the past week. Of course there would be hiccups along the way, re-learning the things that mattered to everybody else, things like love and family. Security. Hopefully, it was only a matter of time before those things would become second nature. Even Sara: he could learn to love her the way he wanted to.

But just as he was about to empty the dustpan, Jacob stopped. Something in the remaining debris had caught his eye, and he dropped the broom suddenly, letting it clatter against the hardwood. He knelt down and inspected the contents of the dustpan and then reached in with trembling fingers, brushing aside slivers of colored glass and
shattered pieces of clay and stone. A single object he removed, something that he wiped against his shirt and beheld in a primitive terror: his favorite of them all, the head of a bronze statue of a cat, one eye socket still empty, still blind, the other filled now with a small blue-gray pearl, round and smooth and perfectly preserved.
THE WISH LIST OF TOMOHIKO NAKAO
(inspired by the poem “Welcome to Your Wish List, Tomohiko Nakao” by Cynthia Arrieu-King)

The new man in the office is a Japanese national called Tomohiko Nakao, from Kyoto. He was at the university there, majoring in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, and then went on to get his MBA from Kellogg in Evanston, Illinois. I know this information from the CV that circulated prior to his second round of interviews. This is the limit of my knowledge about the new hire. Two years ago, as part of the formal hiring process, I would’ve had the opportunity to interview him. But that was before someone caught on that I never voted “yes,” and my name was quietly excised from the committee rolls. The SVP was right to replace me—I would’ve voted down Tomohiko Nakao also. It was not that I cast my votes disingenuously, or without care, but the workload in the office felt thin enough, and to spread it thinner, to add another layer to the already byzantine organizational chart, violated my logical sensibilities. But that didn’t mean I would always vote no.

Down the hall, the cubicle in which the new hire will be installed is silver name-plated and at the ready, anticipating usage once again. Tomohiko Nakao, MBA, the name-plate announces. It is my favorite location on the floor—the cubicle I first received when hired. It is located directly across the corridor from the men’s restroom. Many of my early hours at the agency I spent in the stalls or at my desk, pondering what my own degree in Psychology had gotten me into. Less often, I pondered how to get to exactly where I am today, which can best be described as three or four workspaces diagonally
up the ladder. The filigree on my name-plate has become fine. I have a view now, overlooking the Dearborn Bridge, overlooking the Chicago River, overlooking the low-flying birds, the marquee of the Chicago Theatre, where the annual company holiday party (the Breakfast) is held—down below, the people are tiny, as in paintings of China.

The cubicle remains empty for three days after Tomohiko Nakao’s official start date, as its occupant undergoes the New Hire Orientation provided by Human Resources. On the first day, the desk stays clean. There is no sign that Tomohiko Nakao dropped off his briefcase in the morning, or checked his e-mail during lunch. No jacket ever drapes the chair nor does an umbrella hang from the peg, despite it being a precipitous month. Silently, we wonder if the new hire will ever actually show up. The Orientation is entirely its own affair, and one hire, several years ago, did not even make it all the way through before leaving the SVP a voice message declaring that she was leaving and never returning. By way of apology, she was relinquishing the day-and-a-half’s pay owed her.

Then again, Tomohiko Nakao is a Japanese national, from Kyoto. There is the issue of the work visa. He does not have nearly the same freedom as that woman who vanished years ago, when I was in the same cubicle that now bears the new hire’s name.

I do not recall much of my own Orientation, except for the second day, when the new hires walked as a group across Dearborn Avenue and into Revisions, the lavish twenty-four hour gym built specifically to serve the twelve-hundred employees of the agency. I was fresh out of graduate school, and had never been among a cohort—the
half-dozen or so other new hires—who were so enthusiastic about the prospect of working out. Although I have not set foot in Revisions since, I still imagine that I will be exercising there soon. I don’t, after all, have anything against working out.

On the second day, I imagine Tomohiko Nakao imagines he will be exercising there soon also—perhaps on the last machine in a row of gleaming ellipticals, listening to careful pop music through white ear-phones, only a slight sheen in his hair to indicate that he is exerting himself at all.

Near the close of the second day after Tomohiko Nakao’s hire, the SVP asks me if I am free to meet over a quick matter. In his office, he says he is in the process of assigning a departmental mentor for the new man, and wants to know whether I would be up for it.

I can see where this is headed.

— I think he might feel more comfortable around you, the SVP says. More open to discuss things.

— To be honest, I can’t see that working out, I say.

— Why not?

First, I say, we are natural enemies by heritage. Second, I tell the SVP that I’m a little resistant to his assigning of mentorship based on the fact the new hire and I potentially appear more similar to each other than we do to the other people on the floor.
—You two look nothing alike. And besides, I don’t feel I’m trying to disguise the ethnicity factor at all. I don’t like sushi. You like sushi. I’m guessing Tomohiko Nakao likes sushi.

—Still, I say, I find the reasoning just a tad offensive.

—Okay. Fine. I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to do it.

We sit in silence as the afternoon sun turns the corner in the SVP’s office. Eventually, under the influence of the new set of shadows, I tell the SVP that I’ll see what I can do to make the new hire feel welcome.

—But don’t put me down officially as the mentor, I say.

—Fine, I’ll write in Desmond Green.

We leave the arrangement this way. Upon my departure, the SVP remarks—unnecessarily, I feel—that people usually get less sensitive as they get older.

—Not you, he adds.

Not I, for some reason.

Further evidence: on my birthday, for fear of giving offense, people bestow gift cards upon me now rather than actual gifts. I’ve accumulated a stack of cards in the top right-hand drawer of my desk, all clean and waiting for that right moment when they can spring into action. Soon, Home Depot, very soon. Barnes & Noble and Blockbuster’s, you are in my six-month plan. Pottery Barn and Pier 5, you interest me less. And as for you, Starbucks, I’ve got my eye on you—maybe this week? Maybe so. (white space)
I feel a little thrill discovering the cubicle across the hall from the men’s bathroom shows the initial signs of habitation. Tomohiko Nakao has come and gone on this second day, but the computer monitor has been shifted, ever so slightly, to accommodate nearsightedness. A faint ring from a coffee mug remains, marring the surface of the desk next to the mouse pad. It has been dry-wiped, and I imagine Tomohiko Nakao must have been in a hurry to leave, to board the Blue Line at State and Lake, ass-packed in, reminding him of a Kyoto subway car as a young boy, late as hell to meet his friends—with no thought of a degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology, nor thought of a life in Chicago, nor thought of me. The young Tomohiko—my crucial and unmet friend—only knew that the train was crowded beyond its natural capacity, and that he was running behind, choking down rice and thin, pristine sheets of seaweed in order to be finished by the time the car reached the terminal station.

On the third day—the last day of Orientation—it is customary for whoever is available in the department to take the new hire out to lunch. The lunch is expensed and is steak—it is always steak. Still feeling slightly accused from my meeting with the SVP the afternoon before, I beg off the lunch, as I am not quite prepared to see Tomohiko Nakao just yet. By word of mouth, I learn Desmond Green and several of the Junior Analysts are the ones taking him to the S & W.

Desmond tells me later that Tomo showed a polite interest in joining the floor’s intramural basketball team (Go Big or Go Home). Otherwise, he was a little quiet, and that we might get along because both of us are a little quiet.
In my office, I take out the gift card for Starbuck’s and set it on my desk as I write an e-mail to the new hire: Welcome to the department, Tomohiko! We will be working closely together. Shall we have coffee tomorrow at 3? I carbon-copy the SVP, so everyone knows exactly what has and will transpire.

Sometime during the afternoon, Tomohiko Nakao checks his e-mail in the cubicle and composes a reply, which I receive time-stamped at 5:35. Yes, certainly I will have coffee tomorrow. It is so nice of you to ask. Everyone has made me feel very welcome. I look forward to meeting you! Tomo.

I imagine his e-mail to me was his last order of business for the day, before he departed for the trains. This I confirm several hours later.

I am on my way out that night. The cubicle across from the men’s bathroom has changed once again. There is a green banker’s lamp on the desk now, a parting gift from Kellogg. Memos from Payroll and HR have been pinned to the corkboard. A small black-and-white photo of an orchid in a small frame sits atop the shelf. It looks as if it had been taken in 1967. I unhinge the back of the frame, and there is another picture, also black-and-white, also bearing the feel of 1967, of a young Japanese woman. Is this your mother, Tomohiko Nakao? Perhaps. I am careful to put the frame back exactly as I found it, showing only the orchid.

The cubicle welcomes me to sit. I put down my keys beside the mousepad, and the impact is such—the mouse may be too sensitive—that the screensaver dissipates and I am exposed to Tomohiko Nakao’s last browser window.
The first tab of the window contains my e-mail to him, and his reply. Maybe I lingered there for a moment, in his mind, even as he was walking to the station to board the train that so reminds him of a Kyoto subway car, as much a mystery to him as he is to me. Perhaps he has been indulging in some heady speculation also, filling in the parts, as I have.

But I will hold a distinct advantage in this regard when we do meet tomorrow. For in the second tab in the browser window, the Amazon.com Wish-List of Tomohiko Nakao resides, quietly and expectantly.

What can I buy for you, Tomo, to make you feel welcome? (I have the gift card to do it).

I feel like I can begin to glimpse what you seek by virtue of the most recent additions to your wish list: The Fundamentals of Proper Basketball Technique (2nd ed.), and the book you picked about how best to invest in American residential property.

With a single click, your wish for a global transistor radio to listen to late at night is my command, as is your wish for an executive planner to keep track of your days.

But, Tomohiko, you were so recently here, competing in the fabulous World Cup of Wishing, where even winning results in disappointment.

I can and will buy you all of these, as well as the recommendations Amazon makes that conforms to your taste profile. In the text box for the gift, I will write: Welcome to your wish-list, Tomohiko Nakao! Welcome to America.
I will meet you tomorrow. We will replace our speculation with facts. But I am certain that no matter how our friendship develops, how close we become in the future, you have already discovered what I also understand even as I confirm my purchases for you. Tomohiko Nakao, whatever you added to your wish-list this evening, this month, this year, cannot possibly eclipse what you really need—what you actually longed for—on your grey ride home from this coal black stone building.
MAGIC

During the American Bicentennial—a year that coincided with my consciousness coming suddenly and sharply into focus—the sport of baseball experienced perhaps its final resurgence in this country. Many parents, seeing the national glory heaped upon the heroes of October, enlisted their children in Little League—Houston more than other towns was seized by the craze. And in fact, over a period of twenty years or so, our city supplied the professional diamonds of America with prodigious talents: Knoblauch, Youngblood, Gruber, and of course, Curt Flood, the player nicknamed Rembrandt. Impressionable boys who witnessed the Big Red Machine dismantle the Yankees that fall—the MVP a diminutive black Texan called Little Joe who formerly starred for Houston’s professional franchise—became particularly vulnerable to the sport’s allure. To play with such aplomb, to lace a frozen rope down the left field line or sling the pill across the diamond to catch a runner by half-step, signified in some important way that despite shade or size, the blood in his veins ran a very hearty red.

So it was that when a Houston boy reached five or six, he would be handed a fielder’s mitt, assigned to a team with a dozen other runts, and sent out onto the practice field three times a week for formal instruction, under the guidance of a local small-business owner. I was no exception. Without my awareness, my parents submitted the requisite waiver of liability along with a nominal administrative fee of five dollars, and one spring evening, I was taken to a convocation of similarly puzzled boys held in the local public school cafeteria, wherein I was drafted into the ranks of the Panthers. Now, the Panthers were historically very solid in the league. We wore black caps with the
letter “P” stitched in white on the face, and black jerseys with the name of our sponsor, Crosby Resale Auto, heat-transferred onto the backs. Due to my nearsightedness and lack of experience, our coach, Mr. Shea Crosby, had the damndest time deciding where to put me in the line-up. At the plate, I was predictably abysmal, but my performance in the field made my hitting look like the second coming of Ty Cobb: line drives and fly balls sailed gracefully overhead no matter how deep I played, while grounders on the infield rolled unerringly beneath my glove, or worse, skipped off a pebble to smack me directly in the eye. After one such incident in practice—my first black eye—my mother, who lived in a state of constant anxiety those years, suggested to my father that they should consider withdrawing me, but he didn’t think so.

“He likes to play ball,” he would say to my mother in Cantonese. “It’s the only thing he seems to like! He watches it on television all the time…”

Afterwards, she would draw me aside and, looking dubiously at a fresh bruise, ask if I indeed liked playing baseball. I always said yes. But what went through my head was something quite different from dreams of athletic adequacy. Scraping my way through the fielding drills in the desultory heat, I caught a glimpse of the easy verbal camaraderie that existed among the other boys, a circle that I craved to be within. My teammates’ often inscrutable chatter, their conversations and jokes in a language I was only beginning to acquire, enflamed me with curiosity. What were they saying that made them laugh so? Moreover, why was what they were saying funny? I silently devoured their phrases and expressions as I dawdled away in the outfield; at night,
alone in my room, I would try to commit them to paper. Each letter dripped from my pencil like lead filings:


Composition was a hereditary preoccupation in our family, although it skipped my father, who instead turned out to be an excellent businessman. His father, Grandfather Chen, lived with us at the time—this was the main reason my mother was so consistently nervous. Grandfather Chen, despite his frail frame, had an oddly intimidating presence. He refused to speak any English, but could with a single glare or a barked Chinese word make you feel intellectually inadequate, or perhaps not quite good enough for his son. Purportedly (i.e., according to him), he had once been a renowned professor and scholar in the province of Chiu Chow, forced into exile due to his vehement opposition to Red China. During his years in America—eventually over twenty—Grandfather Chen spent every day writing an anti-Communist newspaper he distributed for free entitled *The Chinese Voice*. Everyone said I took after him, in appearance and demeanor.

Grandfather Chen’s only responsibility in our family was to drop me off and pick me up from Little League practice. Otherwise, he was left alone to work on *The Chinese Voice*. In public, he always dressed smartly, regardless of weather, in a white shirt and dark tie and slacks; at home, he wore the Chinese equivalent of pajamas—a loose dark-blue tunic and trousers, all silk, and slippers—and drank nothing but a mysterious, bitter-smelling tea that neither my parents nor Auntie K. (who always
seemed to be in the house in those years) partook of. Grandfather Chen spent most of the time in his room, hammering away at an enormous Chinese typewriter, which was much closer to setting moveable type on a printing press than actually typing on a modern keyboard. Until you became accustomed to it, the constant noise of the heavy keys stamping an impression on the page was unnerving. Grandfather also had his own telephone line and the first Xerox duplication machine I’d ever seen. He would emerge to drink his special tea, read Chinese newspapers and books, watch occasional television (programs that didn’t require English to understand, like fights), and drive around Houston during the day, hitting the numerous Asian districts to distribute his newspaper. Oftentimes, he would get into minor car accidents that he kept secret, and that my parents only discovered because of a phone call from an insurance company, or an apologetic policeman appearing at the front door. I was the sole witness of several of these fender benders and parking lot dent-and-runs, and it did not even take a look from him for me to understand that I was, as always, to remain quiet.

Three times a week, Grandfather Chen would ferry the both of us in his enormous liability-ridden Cutlass Supreme—painted a lavish maroon, the interior laden with mountains of bundled newspapers that left the white leather permanently darkened with ink residue—to the practice diamonds near Houston Baptist University, where I would be dropped off, smelling of fresh newsprint. Then he would leave to make his rounds.
One day, after being so deposited, the clouds looked especially gray and pregnant with the promise of a Texas thunderstorm. After we’d warmed up playing catch, Coach Crosby—a robust, mustachioed man—ordered extra hitting and fielding drills, as a meaningful game against the first-place Beavers was coming up. They had beaten us soundly, fourteen-to-two, earlier in the season; in addition, they were the only team in the league that pitched over-hand rather than under. In other words, the Beavers were not to be taken lightly. As each of our players took extra BP, the thick Houston humidity clung to our jerseys out in the field, dulling me as I waited for the moment when I might spring into delayed reaction chasing the forlorn ball. In the midst of our serious concentration, lightning pierced the sky. As I stared above, the great vault of heaven cracked open before me. Out of this fissure, the rains came—as happens in the Gulf, everyone was bone-drenched in the time it took to dash to the sideline.

Because practice was not officially over for another half hour, there were only two or three attendant cars, and we crammed into them to wait out the downpour, at least until our own rides arrived. I jumped into a Buick Century with a couple other teammates, including a boy named Scotty Masterson, who went to my elementary school; up front sat two men—older than twenty and younger than forty—who were affiliated with a church that one of the boys attended (and, unlike my father, impressively free of work responsibilities in the middle of a weekday afternoon), and who had the task of dropping several of the players off at their homes after practice.
As we waited, I sat quietly in the middle of the back seat, listening to the conversation between the men and the boys. They were playing the radio, and discussing all sorts of things. I was completely satisfied to listen, comprehending very little but enjoying the unusual company, dazzled that people of such varying age could even have common conversational ground: the Astros had won last night, a new movie had come out, a new record had been released, all in an effortless flow. Then a song came on, an old one that everyone in the car seemed to know. The volume increased. Someone started to sing along, and then they all did, and the sound in the car built to a crescendo. I tried to make out what it was that moved them so:

\[ O, o, o \\
It's magic, you know \\
Blah-blah blah-blah blah blah blah\]

After the song finished, I secretly desired to hear it again, having not caught enough of it the first time. Scotty, aflame with life in the aftermath of singing, sensed my awkwardness and asked me if I liked the song.

“Yes,” I said hesitantly. “What is the name?”

“Why, ‘Magic’ of course. The song is named ‘Magic.’”

“What is magic?” I said.

Poor Scotty Masterson. He considered the question seriously, but of course, first graders can no more describe what magic is than they can explain why the sky is blue—it was something extraordinary and powerful, I gathered, something that involved things as disparate as playing cards and rabbits-in-hats and incantatory utterances. His own knowledge exhausted, he deferred the question to the men up front. They put their
minds together in an attempt to arrive at a sharper definition. Inwardly, I was surprised—up to that point, I’d believed that every word in English corresponded to its own concept, but here was one that seemed to defy those constraints. The mystery of the word appealed to me. After several moments of debate, the two men in the front were forced to give in as well. As they surrendered, the man in the passenger seat threw his hands up, and remarked to the driver: “He’s six years old. How can he not know what magic is?”

How slow was my acquisition of the things one needed to know! Mentally adding the word to the growing list in my head, I turned and glanced out of the window. Across the practice field, his shrunken body bent against the Texas downpour, his white shirt, tie, and dark slacks soaked through, Grandfather Chen was advancing, looking for me. He looked so out of his element, wading through the storm with his bald head uncovered, I felt compelled to look away. I had never seen him appear so vulnerable—so foreign—and I found that I could not reach out to him in that moment, could not possibly connect myself with this man in front of my teammates. Certainly, I did not want to return home, where all sense of belonging to this new language seemed cut off. I wanted to linger, and within the heavily-condensated windows of the Century, I knew I was safe from his gaze. There was no chance he would approach the vehicle—my grandfather knew virtually no English, and would avoid at all cost a potentially embarrassing situation. I estimated the time it would take for him to walk past, and when I risked a second glance, he was gone, the field empty once more. I was careful not to look through the window again.
Time passed. We listened to many more songs, but none seemed to carry the same weight as that first one. Meanwhile, the rain continued to beat unceasingly against the top of the car. During this time, all the other rides arrived and departed, including Coach Crosby. The men were puzzled as to why I’d been left behind. I did not think it wise to tell them Grandfather had already come and gone. This left them in a peculiar situation—they couldn’t very well leave me there at the field, so they took me along with them as they dropped off Scotty Masterson and another player. Then it was just me and them. By now, more than four hours had elapsed since the day’s practice had started, and it had grown dark. They asked me where I lived, and I told them my street address, 7703 Moss-Laden Drive. They asked me if I knew the directions, or what neighborhood my house was in, and I shook my head no. Finally, the man in the passenger seat turned on the dome light and extracted from the glove compartment a map, which the two men consulted as I sat in the back seat, waiting and wondering.

We drove silently—or at least, I was silent. The men murmured in the front seat, in a quiet tone I could not make out. The drive seemed to take a far shorter time than I imagined: I suppose I was under the illusion that I was further from home than I actually was. As the surroundings outside the window became more familiar to me, I found that I did not grow more comfortable—instead, I could feel the mystery of the afternoon expiring as I drew closer to home.

I lived in the first house on my block. The men stopped the Century short of my driveway, and the driver turned to me and asked if this were it, and I nodded yes. I got out of the car and they wished me well and took off immediately, tires fairly screeching.
Standing at the end of the driveway in the dark, in my cleats and my black Panthers shirt, my outfielders’ glove in my small fist, I looked at our single-level 1960s ranch house, every window lit now, and if I remained quiet, I imagined I could hear the furor inside due to my disappearance, the recriminations and concerns tossed back and forth in the sharp and unfriendly tones of Cantonese. I sighed and took a moment to compose myself. Then I steeled my shoulders, lifted the latch on the gate, and walked into the house.

In the time that I was gone, the whole family had assembled. My mother was weeping. She sat next to the telephone in the kitchen, wringing her hands. Auntie K. was in the middle of saying something about Father being gone, sent out in the storm to look for me. When they saw who stood amongst them, a huge hubbub erupted—Mother and Auntie K. grasped me by the arms, rolling me about, asking questions for which I had no legitimate answer. How and what I could explain, but “Why? Why? Why?” I knew not the words. During this time, Grandfather Chen emerged from the back, alerted by the noise. We all grew silent as he stared at us, stonily. Finally he spoke, firmly and succinctly, as he always had:

“I told everyone,” he said. “There is no need to worry about my grandson.”

When he returned to his room, I extricated myself from their grasps and sat down on the edge of the couch in the den. Auntie K. was on the phone with Coach Crosby, spreading the news that I’d been found. I wanted to go to my room and write down the word from the song, M-A-G-I-C, the mysterious word that defied definition. Mother followed me and held me firmly by the wrist so that I wouldn’t run away.
“Will you promise never to run off again?” she said.

But I was quiet. From down the hall, Grandfather’s typewriter keys began clanking, and for a change the sound was comforting, like sweet music recalled. In that moment, I envisioned myself as old as him, hunched over a desk, typing out in words a life that fomented effortlessly in my mind. I was right to remain silent. I couldn’t possibly respond to my mother’s question—not with all those beautiful words coming to life in that silence.
The mainframe in the cold room was discovered early this morning hacked all to shit, which was why, according to Hongbo, we were having the 9:00 a.m. Emergency Meeting. The first consequence was that the current issue of *Valley Trader* (production deadline: midnight tonight) was corrupted—irrevocably so—and would have to be rebuilt from files stored on individual hard drives, then laid out by hand. Now I hadn’t done manual lay-out since 1994 and I’d been hoping for something different when Mrs. Weed’s shrill voice went out over the intercom, herding us into the West Wing Conference Room. Somehow, I’d been thinking *severance package*—perhaps five months of pay for five years of service—and it took me a second to realize that the meeting was not, in fact, about mass layoffs.

At the podium, Hongbo was already describing the second major consequence of the security breach: due to the compromised firewall, the hacker(s) may have gained access to sensitive employee information, including Social Security and bank account numbers on digitized W-2 and Direct Deposit forms. Mrs. Weed from HR recommended close monitoring of personal accounts for suspicious behavior. Daniel Kelly asked her for how long we should do that, and she deferred the question to a small Middle Eastern man in a neat suit who had, up to that point, been standing in the corner nearest the whiteboard, watching us with a discomfiting intensity.
“One week,” the man said. He approached the podium, speaking in a slight English accent. “Nine times out of ten, identity thieves move on an account within seven days.”

His name, we discovered, was Mr. Amirabad Alsharif. He was a cyber-crime specialist.

“Please don’t be alarmed,” he told us after Mrs. Weed introduced him. “And call me Amir. But it has been shown that in cases such as this, the culprit is usually an employee or someone working closely with an employee. That, of course, makes everyone in this office a person of suspicion. Mrs. Weed”—Amir indicated her with his head—“has been so kind as to provide me with a complete employee list. Full- and part-time. On-site and off. The temps and the janitorial staff, even. Everyone will be called in and I will speak to each of you face to face. You see,” he concluded, “one of you may have aided the culprit without even knowing it.”

Afterwards, Amir set up shop in the East Wing Conference Room, and one by one, we were called by Mrs. Weed to enter in for our own personal Q&A. I admit, his unsettling presence served to revive my interest in work, ever so slightly. After five years at the premier weekly classifieds paper in the Greater Willamette Valley, you would think I’d seen it all, but this was something new: an actual workplace mystery.

II

“That guy,” Daniel Kelly told me in the break room, “is basically a cop.” He was making coffee. “But I’ve got an alibi,” he added, “an iron-clad one. I don’t know the first god-dammed thing about computers.”
“That’s exactly what the culprit would say,” I pointed out. “The thing is I don’t know where you were last night. As a matter of fact, I hardly even know you.”

“Where the hell are those filters …?” Kelly’s thick corded forearms—designed by God as if to specifically address a golf ball with a long iron—flexed and relaxed in turn as he opened each drawer until he found them. Presently, he tapped the start button on the machine and we waited as the coffee brewed.

It wasn’t strictly true that I didn’t know Kelly—we’d shared office space now for three years, since the merger with Sentinel. From our initial meeting, he struck me as the kind of person who was both good at everything and also easily contented—in short, exactly the type that was difficult not to despise. I hadn’t been happy with him since he beat me by thirty-four strokes at the last Company Golf Outing, back in April. It was around my tenth time playing, so he could’ve let up a little on the back nine, but of course—in the interest of preserving the spirit of legitimate competition—he chose not to.

“Maybe you’ll incriminate yourself and end up as the primary suspect,” I offered.

He snorted. Midway through his cup of coffee, he was called in to conference with Amir and I returned to my cubicle with this hope. Prison wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world for Kelly: guaranteed, inside of a week, he’d know everyone’s nickname and be recruited by the most favorable gangs—but even as I entertained this vision, I began to discern, from the six-foot gap that separated the top of the cubicle wall and the ceiling, the murmur of voices in the office: speculation about when the crime
occurred and how, what information was on the mainframe, et cetera. No one seemed to care who’d actually done it. The hot topic was identity theft. Tales of woe circulated (Mrs. Weed’s niece was forced to declare bankruptcy after hers was stolen, for example), nest eggs compared but only in the most oblique terms (“The value of my assets aren’t inconsiderable, after all…”), accounts were checked and re-checked—in other words, my colleagues obviously had a lot to protect. Myself, I didn’t necessarily share in this worry. If the hackers wanted access to Arturo Chan’s credit rating (F-) and the $144.98 in his Umpqua Bank checking account, they were more than welcome to them. To be honest, I’d grown a little sick of my own identity lately, and wouldn’t mind trading myself.

Still, all the excitement served to create within my cubicle an air of expectation. It was rare I got the opportunity to be questioned. By the time Mrs. Weed appeared in the cubicle doorway—looking anxious, her white blouse creased and bereft of its usual starch—I was ready to give Mr. Amirabad Alsharif all the help he needed in regards to the investigation.

“I’m a little surprised Hongbo called in someone from outside,” I said as I followed Mrs. Weed down the hall. Her blouse was damp and adhered to her ample back. “Who’s footing the bill for him?”

“Not us,” she said. “It’s through our insurance. We have a Digital Liability Policy.”

“He doesn’t seem like he’s from around here. He must’ve been called in from Salem. Or Portland.”
Mrs. Weed shrugged. She’s lived in Lewisville for forty years, and I was sure as far as she was concerned, Amir’s presence was a moot point. Granted, the Willamette Valley draws to itself some of the kindest and most tolerant people in the country, but at the end of the day, a place like Lewisville is still little more than a glorified two-bit farm town. As nicely as people have treated me here—nice enough to feel like I belonged, in most instances—I’ve noticed more than once that people of Amir’s coloring get glanced at, on the streets or in the bars. I mean I definitely wouldn’t live in Lewisville if I looked like him. There isn’t even a decent Chinese restaurant in town, much less Middle Eastern.

“It smells like it’s going to rain,” Mrs. Weed said as we neared the closed door to the East Wing Conference Room. She left me with that remark hanging in the air, like a warning. I sniffed at the hallway. September in Lewisville had been particularly long and dry—a real Indian summer, every day marked by a sunny and stultifying sameness. Like an oblivious houseguest, though, when the rainy season arrived, it was sure to linger for months, well past its welcome date—the dampness got into your clothes and the carpet and made everything smell like a large, wet dog.

III

“Mister Arturo Chan,” Amir began. We sat on opposite sides of the large, oval-shaped conference table—at its widest point—facing each other across what felt like a vast expanse of space. “What kind of name is that?”

“American,” I replied. “Do you mind if I sit closer?”
“Actually, I’d prefer we remain as we are. Purely out of habit—I apologize if this all seems a bit strange.”

“Not at all,” I said.

He picked up a document and scanned it. “Mr. Chan, it says here that you’ve worked at Valley Trader for five years…” and so on. He jotted my responses on a clipboard. This all took at least half a minute, in which I observed that he was left-handed and used a fancy pen to elicit my confessions.

“Did you know about the mainframe?” he said.

“No.”

“Do you have any information as to what happened to the mainframe?”

“No.”

“Have you heard anything from anyone to suggest that it was more than a simple target?”

“I don’t know what that means, but no.”

Amir turned a page on the clipboard. From a distance, his dark coloring provided a pleasing contrast against the whiteboard behind him.

“What have you identified any suspicious behavior on the part of your colleagues over the past week or so?”

I thought about mentioning Daniel Kelly. How well he’d fit in at the prison exercise yard. But the urge vanished with the realization that I hadn’t the faintest shred of proof beyond personal dislike—i.e., any legitimate evidence. Sadly, I shook my head.

“Well, Mr. Chan, that’s all I have for you now. You may return to your station.”
I leaned forward in my seat. “Is that it?”

“Do you have more to add?”

“No,” I said, “I just thought the interview would be, you know, somewhat more rigorous…”

“Just standard procedure, Mr. Chan.”

“Arturo,” I said.

“Do you like it here, Arturo?”

“It’s alright, I suppose. For a glorified two-bit farm town…”

“Actually, I meant at Valley Trader…”

“Ah, yes,” I said. “Well, I’m getting a pen engraved with my name next Friday for my Five-Year Anniversary here, so I suppose it can’t be the worst job in the world.”

“I see,” said Amir. For some reason, this revelation warranted noting on a separate pad that he removed from his breastpocket. I imagined the note: Arturo Chan — receiving a commemorative pen next Friday. Obviously, a man who has nothing to lose.

Then he flipped to the front page of the clipboard and consulted it. “Do you happen to know the next interviewee? A Cassandra Coombs?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.” Amir’s notepad stayed out, his fancy pen poised over it, as if daring me to say something worth writing in it. “What do you want to know about her? She works off-site and comes in a couple times a month. Client meetings. She’s in Sales… What else? She’s about 5’7”, 142, 143, in that range. Brown hair, brown eyes… We used to go out. Nothing serious, you know, just dating …”
Amir tapped his pen against the clipboard, once. “Well, Mr. Chan, if you happen
to see her out there, could you please let her know that she’s next? Thanks so much.”

“Do I get a card?” I said.

“You may contact me electronically.” He pointed to the whiteboard behind him
on which had been printed in meticulous handwriting amir.alsharif@email.com.

I rose from my seat. For a moment, I wondered whether we were supposed to
shake hands. But the distance proved prohibitive and also, he did not move to stand—he
just smiled at me inscrutably—so I departed, closing the door behind me quietly.

There is a small corridor between the corner conference room and the rest of the
Trader’s offices in the East Wing, and I allowed myself to stand in it, gazing upon the
framed sepia-colored map of the Willamette Valley circa 1910 on the wall. The names—
Helenaburg, New Troy, McMahonville—indicated towns that haven’t existed for fifty
years, towns just like Lewisville that, for one reason or another, just didn’t make it. As is
generally the case with maps—old ones especially—the thing gave off a faint sense of
longing. Not that I would’ve stood a chance in that time—racism, lack of automated
teller machines, et cetera—but I’d grown to learn that just because something was wrong
for me didn’t mean I was immune to getting wistful over it. Cassandra was an excellent
case in point.

As I told Amir Alsharif, she usually appeared in the office twice a month for
scheduled meetings, which isn’t really less than how often we used to see each other—
twice a month, or three times if it were an especially lonely month—with the main
difference being we were having sex at the time. I understand that’s a big difference,
and a major source of the nostalgic regret that I’d felt since we stopped seeing each other. I didn’t rue the day she came into my life, but I did rue the night she departed from it, almost a year ago.

We’d been eating at the Thai-and-American restaurant called The Woodchopper in Sweet Home, Oregon. She had a curry. I’d ordered the Salmon Pad Thai and there it remained, plated and neglected. I’d just told her in no uncertain terms that after three years of sharing a friendship-with-benefits, I was ready for a more conventional relationship; that when I thought about her now, I no longer thought about the loud moments so much as the quiet ones. Having dinner, for example, in a cheap restaurant in some rainy two-bit town like Sweet Home. I’d reached across the checkerboard tablecloth and grasped her hand to make my point—her hand was bone dry.

“Arturo,” she’d said. “How can I put this?” She freed her hand from underneath mine, and used it to smooth out her long, shoulder-length hair, which had matted against her scalp due to the rain. Then she picked up her fork. At least two minutes elapsed before she finally spoke: “It’s not that I don’t believe you believe what you’re saying... That’s not it. But don’t you know how these things work? I thought you did. Maybe it’s just this way for me. But I can’t start casual and end serious—otherwise, I wouldn’t have started casual to begin with.”

She took a bite of curry. She asked me if what she said made sense, and I had to admit that yes, indeed it did—in her mind, the fact that we’d had casual sex for three years kind of proved that I was a non-starter in the relationship department.
“That doesn’t mean we can’t still have fun,” she said, but under this sudden mask of pride, I replied that I did not feel that was possible. Perhaps my declining suggested to her that I thought it was somehow beneath me to continue our relationship after being rejected—which is a laugh, considering how low my life can get. But by the time I came to my senses in regards to this decision—maybe a month later—she’d already changed her e-mail address and started dating Daniel Kelly.

When I’ve seen her since, my feelings have been mixed. Sometimes, I’ve tried to avoid her, like at the Company Golf Outing, when she turned up unexpectedly and I ended up playing at the last minute. Other times, I wanted to see her quite badly. More often than not, though, I’ve felt both ways at the same time, and although this uncertainty was unsettling, I could be confident of one thing, and that was that neither path ever led to any positive psychological outcome.

IV

I emerged from the corridor lower than I’d gone in—my initial interest in the case replaced by the weight of unfriendly recollections—and when I got back to our side of the office, I saw that a woman was speaking to Daniel Kelly at his cubicle. As I approached, the woman became more and more appealing in a very familiar way, as if my body were recognizing her before my mind did—the particular way she leaned over Kelly’s cubicle wall, the way she looked from behind in her sharp corporate dress—and when she turned, I understood why: it was Cassandra, with a new haircut.
“Hello,” I said. “I like what you’ve done with your hair.” She’d gotten a dark auburn asymmetric bob that looked great with business casual—every hair was so in place that I instinctively wanted to bury my hands into it and mess it up.

“Hey, you,” she said. She smiled winningly. “It’s been a while. Have you been good?”

I tried to think of an appropriately careless response, but Kelly rose over the cubicle divider, trampling all over the moment. “How was the chat with Amir?” he said. “He wanted to know what I knew about network security, and I was like, do I look like the IT guy?”

“I told Amir my suspicions,” I said vaguely. “In fact, Cassandra, I bet he’ll want to speak to you very shortly.”

“Ha ha,” she said. Her lips grew thin and clean as a razor. “Same old Arturo, I see.”

“And what is that supposed to mean…?” I asked. I may not have gotten the tone right—too accusatory—because Cassandra’s neat smile vanished and Kelly was looking at us strangely.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “So what’s the story here? Should I cancel my cards or what?”

Kelly began to fill her in on the morning’s transpirings. As they chatted, I observed them both carefully, and in doing so began to feel increasingly inadequate. I couldn’t tell if Cassandra was genuinely interested in Daniel Kelly, per se, because she could seem interested in anyone—that’s her knack for Sales. But as I examined the
individual pieces of evidence, I discovered most did not bear any true psychic weight: I
was less handsome than Kelly, and of course that one stung a bit. But the fact that he
was a better golfer (due to his forearms), or that he made $1,575 more per annum,
mattered little—I was never the most productive employee to begin with and probably
didn’t deserve a penny more than I got.

No, what really stood out in that moment as my glaring deficiency was a lack of
whiteness, and I mean this more than purely race. I’m talking about cleanliness of a
cultural quality. Good breeding. I’m talking value systems. Ethics and morals.
Concepts that had always consistently remained a mystery to me, like being a team
player—something I learned at a young age that I was not. While I stood awkwardly as
Kelly and Cassandra conversed, it brought to mind an incident from my youth:
malingering similarly during a 3rd grade flag football game, when a play broke and our
quarterback scrambled toward my side of the field. As the opposing players descended
on him like a pack of wolves, he screamed: “Block, damn it, block!” in the instant before
he was buried. After he emerged from the pile, he got in my face—and rightfully so, I
hadn’t been paying the least attention. Our gym teacher separated us, generously
pointing out that there was no point in yelling because look at me, I probably didn’t
understand the game, nor even what was being said to me. But the real explanation was
that I was no team player.

Twenty minutes later, Kelly and I were in the break room overseeing the
production of the next pot of coffee. I hadn’t said a word about Cassandra after Mrs.
Weed had taken her to the East Wing, so it came as a surprise when Kelly, who was at
the basin washing an orange university-affiliated mug, suddenly said: “You’re better off without her.”

I must’ve look startled.

“Am I right?” he said.

“Right about what?”

“You two had a thing,” he said confidently. “You and Cassandra. I can tell.”

I refused to admit anything. I wondered if Cassandra had told him, but Kelly wouldn’t have been as coy as he was being. So he was more sensitive, too—add it to the freaking list.

“Well, you’re better off without her,” Kelly said again. He was drying his hands on a dish towel. “She doesn’t strike me as your type. Anyway, we need to go over those proofs before the Production Meeting at four. How about Pan’s Garden take-out for lunch and then we get to work? Can you pick it up?”

VI

It was warm and muggy in Lewisville that day, as if the entire town understood that the rainy season was overdue. The leaves on the trees had a thick, wet luster to them and the night before, I’d heard the crack of thunder but there was neither lightning nor rain. I drove slowly to Pan’s Garden. Still, the order was five minutes from completion. The damp lobby smelled like a large, wet dog mixed with the vapor of cheap Kung Pao Chicken, and the effect was a little nauseating, so I went back out to wait in the car with the windows rolled down.
A lone streetlight creaked on a wire behind me, flashing red in the rear-view mirror: Lewisville during the lunch hour rush. The choices were always slim.

Pan’s Garden, for example—I could never recommend this place. But the food came in a form that was somewhat recognizable, and perhaps that bare comfort was enough to keep me returning. So it was with Cassandra—there were aspects to our relationship that approximated something quite real: waking up together on a lazy weekend morning, or having someone to eat dinner with, even. But I couldn’t blame her for my being here in Lewisville for five years—our romance plus the recession could, by my calculation, only account for three-and-a-half of those years. The other one-and-a-half was pure inertia: knowing that sticking around the Trader long enough to get a commemorative pen—only a week more now—suggested that you are a person of severely limited imagination, but still going through with it.

Only Hongbo and Mrs. Weed had those pens, and they were lifers at the paper. No amount of levity on my part could hide this terrifying fact—soon I would be receiving my own, with my name etched in hematite right on the barrel, in a public ceremony, no less. Outside, along the main thoroughfare, people passed on bikes and on foot—bearded men in flannel and women in thrift-store ensembles—and they all suddenly struck me as strangers, individuals whose affinity for thoughtful living I didn’t necessarily share nor understand. Through the rear-view mirror, I examined their polite interactions with each other for a full ten minutes. Then I went back inside Pan’s Garden to pick up the bag of food. As I crossed that grim threshold, I envisioned myself doing the same for another five years, walking through that filmy door, over and
again—the monotony of the vision frightened me, and gave me to understand quite clearly that I should walk out those other doors, the ones at the Valley Trader, before it was too late and that pen was in my hand, and another five years off the clock.

VII

On the way back from the Garden, I stopped at the Umpqua Bank ATM on 4th and Jefferson to take out forty bucks. The grayness had lifted for the moment, and through cracks in the clouds, a thin sunlight shone down upon me, illuminating by snatches this hope I harbored, that my desires could for once form the beginning of an actual plan. It was only after I’d stuck my card in and indicated to the machine I spoke English that things started to crystallize and fall into place. First, the machine informed me I had insufficient funds for the withdrawal. I checked the balance and instead of the $144.98 that was in there yesterday, the number was now $4.98. I immediately phoned the Trader and Mrs. Weed wasn’t available but I got a hold of Hongbo. After listening to my story, he asked if I’d cancelled my credit cards.

“I’ll do that right now,” I said. “Can you let Amir know? I’m on my way back to the office.”

As it very well may’ve stated in Amir’s pocket notebook, Arturo Chan was a person with very little to lose. I only had one credit card, from a bank willing to gamble on high-risk users—in return, they gouged me with a 27% interest rate. Before I called them, I made one more stop at the dog park downtown, which contained, next to a stone fountain of an angel, the busiest and most public ATM in Lewisville. A CitiBank one. I walked right up to it and draped my blazer over the camera, as naturally as I could.
Then I inserted the credit card into the machine. By this time, a woman with a schnauzer had queued behind me. Quickly, I entered my PIN and withdrew from the machine the maximum allowable cash advance on the card, which, as it turned out—the number surprised me—was twelve-hundred dollars. The machine issued twenties for a good long time, long enough, I was sure, for the woman with the schnauzer to have noticed. I didn’t have the nerve to look back.

When I was finally in the parking lot of the Trader a few minutes later, I called the credit card company and hit zero until I got somebody live, and I told them my identity had been stolen. They asked when the last time I used the card was, and I said yesterday, I think, for a $3.99 burrito. At Tacqueria Roberto. Yes, that’s exactly when and where it was.

VIII

Walking back through the office on the way to my cubicle, I sensed an unusual level of interest in my return. I felt a little like Charlie Sheen at the end of Wall Street, when he goes to work and finds the SEC waiting for him. And it wasn’t just the food I carried, although certainly the odor of the bag marked my passage. I was, therefore, not surprised when I turned the corner and saw Mr. Amirabad Alsharif sitting at my desk, clipboard in hand.

“We need to talk,” he said.

I told him to give me one second. I took the plastic bag of food over to Kelly’s cube and handed it to him plus $1.47 in change. He was checking his bank balances online.
“Mmm,” he said. “Unlucky you. So you were the first victim, eh? Mine are clean so far. Do you have an easy PIN to hack or something?”

“Yes,” I said, “I do.” It’s four sevens—the blighted day on which I was born.

“Aren’t you eating?”

“I’ve got to speak with the cyber-crime specialist. You go ahead.”

“I’ll save you a fortune cookie.”

Back at my desk, Amir wanted to know all the information about my compromised bank and credit card accounts. I gave him balances and transactions—everything itemized—off the computer.

“They took $140 out of my checking account,” I told him. “And also $1200 off the card.”

“It says here that the cash advance occurred recently, just twenty minutes ago.”

I shrugged. “I was at the restaurant. You can call them if you’d like. Pan’s Garden. I’m there all the time.”

“I’m not accusing you,” Amir said. “I’m just gathering information.” He tapped the notebook in his breastpocket as if it were reassuring. “However,” he added—winking unpleasantly—“you do fit the profile…”

His joke only made me more suspicious that he was suspicious. I half expected him to ask me to pull out my wallet and show him the billfold, filled to bursting with sixty twenties. But he simply remarked that as an employee of the Valley Trader, I was protected up to $10,000 under the Digital Liability Policy, and that I should contact him if anything else came up. That was exactly how he put it. This time, I got the business
card. He also said I might want to consider selecting a more difficult PIN in the future.
After he left, I sat in my chair and considered the angles and they all seemed covered,
except for the woman with the schnauzer at the ATM. About her, I could only hope.

Eventually, I headed over to Kelly’s cube to grab my food before we started on
the lay-outs. Kelly was through with his Kung Pao Chicken, but, as promised, he’d
saved me a fortune cookie. I cracked it open before eating—bad luck, I know, but the
only way was up for me in that regard—and, believe it or not, the fortune inside said
that my lucky number for the week was seven.

Well! Tell me something I didn’t know already. It was time to get to work.

IX

Twenty years ago, when I was co-editor of the Barrington Hills High School
Yearbook (the Horizon), we laid out pages on drafting paper using rulers and protractors
and scissors. But seeing these obsolete implements now, spread over my desk, I felt
slightly ill at first, and quite old. It was the nausea of nostalgia, exacerbated by the
heavy food, and made more acute by the fact that these tools were the object of much
derision in the office. Eventually, though, the immediacy of the midnight production
deadline overrode everyone’s personal and sentimental considerations, and the Trader
settled into a quiet hum that I had never before witnessed: every employee bent over his
or her desk, actually working.

Even Cassandra had been enlisted by Hongbo to aid in the effort. At 5 p.m.,
having finished the Auto classifieds ahead of schedule, and perhaps emboldened by the
strangeness of the day, I sought her out in the temporary work space set up in the break room, and invited her outside for a smoke.

“Look, I’ve even got cigarettes,” I said, tapping the soft pack of Marlboro Mediums in my breast pocket.

“I didn’t know you were smoking again.”

“I’m not. I may have borrowed them from Kelly’s desk when he wasn’t looking.”

“Ha! I don’t believe you,” she said.

“It’s true.”

“That’s okay. I’ve been dabbling again, too.” She showed me the inside of her purse and we laughed.

“Come on,” I said.

“Will we be nice to each other?” she asked. “Let’s be nice to each other.”

Outside, the sky was misting and a light rain had begun to fall. We lit our cigarettes and smoked under the terrace. She was filling me in on her life, and I admit, I did not catch much of it—for several minutes, I was just astonished to be listening to her voice in the rain, and the content did not matter so much as the tone.

“What I’m trying to do,” she was saying, “and I feel pretty good about it, is to try and live my life on my own terms for a while, you know?”

“Where does Kelly fit in?”

“Please,” she said. “Don’t start. You’re the one that rejected me last, after all…”
I smiled. “Thanks for saying that. I don’t believe you really believe that for a second, but I’m glad you care enough to say it.”

“You’re welcome.”

The wind was rising and we had trouble getting our second cigarettes going. There was a thin sheen of moisture on everything: my jacket, my face, and, I noticed, as she leaned in for the light, that her hair, so sharp and clean in the morning, had become the least bit wet and ragged. I felt strangely privileged, as if I were being afforded a rare glimpse into this human richness that had compelled us toward each other in the first place.

“I’m leaving town,” I said finally. “Next week. I gave myself a deadline.”

“That’s great, Arturo. I wouldn’t mind doing the same thing.”

“You can always come with me,” I said. “I’ve come into a bit of money…”

“You know that won’t ever happen, Arturo.” But she said it in an encouraging way and, for some unknowable reason, my heart leapt.

I said I understood.

“I do miss you,” she said. “Maybe not in the way you miss me, but in my own way.”

“I’m glad,” I said. “I’m glad we miss each other.”

“We were good for each other, weren’t we?”

“Yes,” I said. “I don’t sleep with just anybody.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Neither do I.”

“Your hair,” I said, “is getting wet.”
We embraced to demonstrate how much we meant what had been said, and the warmth, for once, seemed to radiate even after we’d removed our arms from one another. Something clicked then, like a new gear had been added to the malfunctioning machinery of my life. I suddenly didn’t mind the rain so much—only in the dampest hour had this bright and valuable thing resurfaced, and although I could not put a name to it, I wanted to believe that Cassandra sensed it too.

By the time we returned to our desks, however, everything about her—the hair and the smile—was once again in order. I watched her walk away down the hall, past cubicle row, and even when she exchanged a look and a wave with Daniel Kelly, my new mood suffered only the slightest amount. I refused to let that image linger.

At eleven-twenty p.m., we finished the layouts, with forty minutes to spare until the deadline. My stomach had been heavy with the weight of Chinese food for most of the afternoon, but in the last hour, I’d grown hungry again. For real food. As the last of the Trader employees trickled out, I rooted through the employee refrigerator in the break room, but none of the remains were appealing: old carrots, a half-eaten tempeh sandwich that had grown mossy, a slice of someone’s birthday cake from last week, and an untold number of bottles of water and sports-related beverages. I ate the slice of cake anyway, and as it turned to ashes in my mouth, I realized that there was nothing in the refrigerator that you could point to and say: Yes, this food represents some experience far wider than where we currently stand.

Eventually, though, my nose led me to the microwave. Inside, I discovered an abandoned Southwestern-Style Lean Cuisine meal—the sight of it was pathetic. I
touched the punctured plastic film on top and it was wet—already heated but now
grown cold again. The thing had been sitting there for hours. As far as I’d observed,
Mrs. Weed was the only person in the office who ate Lean Cuisine, and the fact that
she’d left one there, wasted, was at complete odds with my perception of her personality
as meticulous and ordered. A person does something unexpected, or in this case, does
not do something expected: was this a clue of some sort?

I began to think back on the last fourteen hours in the office, since the Emergency
Meeting in the morning. Throughout the day, silently walking the Trader’s aisles, I
might’ve observed more than I knew—I culled these memories now, for any notable
behavior, for clues. For example, in the afternoon, Daniel Kelly talking to someone on
the phone and hanging up when I entered his cube. Hongbo keeping the door to his
office shut, when it had always been open. Mrs. Weed’s abandoned meal. Cassandra
staying around and being so nice. I’m sure I could’ve thought of more if I’d been paying
better attention. But from now on, at least for the next week, I was going to have to be
vigilant.

Had people been looking at me differently? I knew I hadn’t committed the
crime, but I also knew the money I took sure made it look as if I did, especially if I left
town with the case unresolved. I didn’t want anything—including anxiety over twelve-
hundred dollars—to hang over my head while I was trying to move forward, but the
problem was I needed that twelve-hundred dollars to enact that change. It was clear
that I’d have to stay on my toes. I recalled those cryptic conversations I’d had with Amir
during the day, the ones that suggested some secret knowledge on his part, and I
wanted to be privy to those secrets: what he wrote in the notepad he kept in his breastpocket, and whom he suspected, and perhaps even how he lived his life in the Valley in general, always under a subtle and well-intentioned surveillance.

I removed his business card from my wallet and examined it. His number contained a 503 area code – from Salem, as I’d surmised. I dialed the number and it rang. And rang. And rang. At some point, I expected it to go to voice mail, or an answering machine, or an answering service operator, but it just went nowhere. I imagined a phone ringing in the dark in a downtown office in Salem, not a living soul for miles. Clearly, Amir wasn’t exactly burning the midnight oil on this case, which led to the question—what sort of cyber-crime specialist didn’t have voice-mail? It made me question whether I’d dialed the number correctly, so I dialed it again, and this time the phone rang on and on, just like before. I hung up, mystified.

It was like a fortune cookie, left mysteriously and mercifully blank.

I walked out those Trader doors then, accompanied only by the echo of my footsteps in the now empty lot. The rain had stopped. Already, I was beginning to grow wistful—for Cassandra, of course, but also for Lewisville: its small, spectral thoroughfares and well-situated crosswalks and ATMs; its scent like a dog’s. That map on the wall in the East Wing corridor of the Trader. Hongbo. Mrs. Weed. Even Daniel Kelly—it would take the longest to miss him, but I was certain it would happen one day, likely when I was golfing poorly in the rain.

Outside, it was quiet, and, in the open sky, the stars blazed like diamonds, the way they do in two-bit farm towns. Was everyone asleep already? Did no one else bear
witness to this majestic accident formed by the crossing of Lewisville, Oregon, and Arturo Chan? It seemed like a show, a glorious divine spectacle—only for me.
SATELLITE DOWN

Jesse drove from Seattle to Las Vegas in the middle of March every year with the same goal in mind: to make enough money off college basketball that he could return the following year. He had been successful enough that he was making the drive for the fifth consecutive March. Two out of the five years he’d won amounts large enough that he was able to return to Seattle in a newer vehicle than he’d left in. Last year, however, he had just scraped by. It had all come down to the last play in a second-round game between Duke and Canisius; Trajan Langdon sank a meaningless three at the buzzer to raise the Blue Devils’ margin of victory from 18 to 21. The sportsbook had erupted. Duke had covered the 19-and-a-half and Jesse was in the black for another year. The amount of his wager had been twenty-five dimes, his entire bankroll.

The ticket—the largest he’d ever held—cashed for $47,750. He’d had the amount wired to his bank account, checked out of his room at the Hilton, and was two hours through the twenty-hour drive back to Seattle before the late games went final. As in previous years, he returned to a tidy studio apartment in Bellevue and bided his time until the tournament rolled around again. He fished, read books, and went on a few dates through an on-line site. He dabbled in horses and poker but never played high. His budget was strict: Jesse allowed himself $2,500 per month, rent and health insurance inclusive. Over the course of the intervening year, these expenses whittled his bankroll to $16,300. This money he’d cashed out from his bank that morning, one-hundred and sixty-three hundred-dollar bills, bundled in stacks of twenty-five, in a black Ralph Lauren duffel bag in the back seat.
Jesse was making good time this particular drive. The skies were clear and the roads open, the radar detector was clean and he was bombing the A6 down the I-84 corridor with a bag of dough and no responsibilities to speak of. He was not the type of person who was too deluded to laugh at himself; Jesse knew that his lifestyle was ridiculous and unsustainable in the long-term. But he was twenty-seven years old. Time was only on his side as long as he kept cashing winners.

Eventually, the skies dimmed on the prairie and the air grew cool as evening descended in the West. Near the juncture of I-84 and US-93, Jesse pulled his A6 into the Chevron in the town of Twin Falls, Idaho, for his second gas stop. The only other vehicle in the lot was a black rig with no cargo at one of the diesel pumps. There was a yellow happy-face emblazoned on the passenger side door of the rig, with a bullet hole above the eyes from which fell drips of stylized blood. No one was in the cab.

Jesse switched off the engine and got out of the car. He stretched luxuriously. The night sky was cloudless and lit to the heavens by a map of stars. Closer, Jesse saw the lights of two planes headed south, perhaps bound for McCarran International. He smiled at the thought that he might encounter some of those very passengers over the course of the next week at the Race and Sports Books in Caesar’s and the Hilton. Pleasantly diverted, Jesse swiped his card and waited for the pump to flow. Then a scratchy voice came over the P.A.:

“The satellites are down, sir. You’ll have to pay cash inside.”

Jesse muttered an epithet. He replaced the nozzle and took out his billfold and opened it. Inside were two twenties, four ones and his lucky two-dollar bill. It was just
enough to fill the A6’s eighteen-gallon tank, a fact which relieved Jesse. For a moment, he’d envisioned having to dip into the duffel bag of dough: the six bands—$2,500 each—and the thirteen loose hundreds, all new bank notes, the edges crisp as razors. Now he knew he could get to Nevada on what he had in his pocket. If he had to, he would dip into the bag then. But not before.

Still, the fact that the satellites were down disturbed Jesse. Living in Bellevue, so close to the Microsoft campus, he was not used to being disconnected from the rest of the world. As he walked toward the station, he was straying farther from the A6 and the bag of dough on the back seat. He found himself giving the diesel pumps a wide berth. The black rig—its lack of cargo, the mark on the door, its abandoned appearance—only added to his growing unease.

“How come the satellites are down?” he asked the haggard woman behind the counter as he paid for the gas. “There isn’t a cloud in the sky.”

“Who knows?” she replied. “The last time it went down for thirteen hours.” She leaned closer and Jesse could smell the tobacco on her breath. “That gal in the rig has been waiting over an hour.”

Jesse turned around discreetly and confirmed that no one else was in the store.

The haggard woman understood the look. “She’s sleeping in the cab, I think,” she said and shrugged.

Somehow it was a little more frightening to know that there was someone in the rig, and a woman at that. Jesse didn’t want to imagine what she looked like. He took his change, his bottle of water, his gum, and the bag of chips and exited the store. The
chill had grown sharp and he shivered. There was about one hundred feet between the
door and the safety of his A6, and in between was the black rig with no cargo and the
happy face emblazoned on the doors.

Jesse walked quickly. His shoes made no noise as far as he could tell, even in the
prairie silence. He stole a glance at the cab as he approached and saw no one. Jesse
couldn’t perfectly define why he felt an unreasoning dread as he passed the rig. No
doubt it had something to do with the fact that he had a bag full of dough in his back
seat and out here, in the vastness of the West, he felt suddenly vulnerable.

When he got back to the A6, Jesse got in and closed the door. He reclined in the
seat and sighed. The duffel bag was still there. Everything was okay. He was safe. It
was time to get the hell out of Idaho. Jesse turned the key and the 2.8 liter 6-cylinder
engine leapt to life. It was only when the indicator on the dash began to blink that Jesse
realized he had forgotten why he had stopped in Twin Falls in the first place. To fill the
eighteen-gallon tank.

Grudgingly, Jesse turned off the engine and got out of the car again. He walked
to the pump side, annoyed that his sense of security had been so short-lived. He
inserted the nozzle and pressed 93 Octane and watched the rotary-style numbers
increase slowly toward forty dollars, like the gauges of old-fashioned slot machines.

He was at $27.32 when he heard the door of the cab slam. He quickly looked
from the pump to the rig and in that span of time, it seemed the woman had moved far
faster than he would have imagined. She was very tall. At least six feet. Her age was
indiscernible. She was wearing all denim, and her dark hair was pulled back in a severe
widow’s peak, ending in a braid. From the meager lamp-light, Jesse could see she wore no make-up and her features were sharp and unkind.

“Hello, there,” Jesse said hopefully. He glanced back at the number—$28.93—and then back at her.

She was about ten feet away from the A6. “Are the satellites back up?” she asked. A thin coil of vapor rose from her lips as she spoke.

“Um, not as far as I know,” Jesse said. Was it really cold enough that he could see her breath? “I had to use cash.”

She uttered something indecipherable—a curse—and then spat into the darkness. It was quiet enough for Jesse to hear her phlegm land. “You’d think in this day and age you could use an ATM or a cell phone anywhere,” she said.

The pump was up to $31.67.

“I hear you,” Jesse said.

“Do you think you can spot me forty bucks?” the woman asked. “I can make Boise on that much and for certain, they’ll have the satellites working there.”

“Hmm,” Jesse said. He was looking at the pump now—$33.02—and not at her. “I don’t know if I would be comfortable with that.”

“I’ll take down your number. I’ll call you as soon as I hit Boise.”

Jesse didn’t say anything. The pump was at $33.97. It was getting close enough to stop.

“In fact, I’ll give you my number. And my address.”
“I’ve got a two-dollar bill,” Jesse said. “That’s all I’ve got in my wallet. It’s my lucky bill, but I’ll give it to you.”

“Two dollars won’t get me a hundred yards,” the woman said. She was close enough to the A6 to look into it. “Washington plates. You look like you’re traveling. You must have a twenty stashed somewhere. That can get me to the next town. I’m trying to get home tonight, mister.”

For a second, Jesse actually considered the possibility of giving the woman one of the hundreds in the bag, just to get her to leave. If he had any spare cash, it would’ve been a foregone conclusion. Or he could take a bill and break it inside. Give her a twenty. But he’d already told her he only had two dollars. And there wasn’t just one bill in the car. There was over sixteen grand. The satellites were down. The tank was full. The pump was at $36.77 and climbing.

“Sorry,” Jesse said finally. “I don’t think so.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No,” Jesse repeated. “I don’t think so.”

“Well,” the woman said. “As long as you’re thinking, maybe I’ll give you something else to think about.” She turned and began to walk with long purposeful strides back toward the rig, giving every appearance that she was going to retrieve something from the cab.

Both the tone of her comment and the aggressive nature of her stride signaled to Jesse that he should leave immediately. He replaced the nozzle—there were still over two dollars of gas left but fuck it—screwed in the gas cap, opened the passenger side
door, got in and slammed it shut, scrambled over the gearshift into the driver’s seat, turned the ignition and gunned it. He spun the car in a half-moon to get it pointed in the right direction, and as he screeched off, he saw in the rear-view mirror that the woman was standing beside the rig, facing him, and she seemed inhumanly tall. She was watching him. Gripped in her hands was something long and menacing. But then Jesse was too far off to tell if it was a shotgun, or a baseball bat. Or a club.

“Jesus Christ!” Jesse allowed himself to exclaim once he was southbound on US-93. He grabbed his phone with the intention of calling someone—*911 would certainly be reasonable—but when he glanced at the face he recalled that the satellites were down; there were no bars. He set the phone down on the passenger seat and tried to relax. Inhale through the nose, he told himself. Exhale through the mouth.

Less than five miles later, his phone chirped to life. He checked it again, and automated text messages from the score services he subscribed to began pouring in. At first, Jesse was glad that everything was back on-line. Then he remembered that everything would be back on-line in Twin Falls, Idaho, as well. That meant the woman at the station could get gas. She would be hitting the road any moment now. Jesse wondered if he had told her he was heading south, but he could not remember their conversation in any detail. Was she crazy enough to come after him?

Jesse had no idea. He watched his rear-view mirror for a hundred miles. Presently, he eased the seat back, and turned on the radio. The digital tuner cycled through until it caught a distant signal across the desert. Sports radio, talking NCAA. Jesse concentrated on the words until they gained their old meaning. Duke and St. Joe’s
in the first round. Duke was favored by twenty-three. The tip was in six hours, at 12:05 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. Jesse knew that soon enough, when he reached Vegas, he would be placing a very large bet on Duke once again, in the amount of $16,300. This time, though, his doubt was colored by a new fear. This time might be the last time—the end of the line—with no last-second shot to save him. His luck had run its course. And there would be one last trip back across the desert, where the woman roamed, waiting patiently on him and his A6.
During the ten a.m. conference call, Nutria insinuated that they were no longer happy with the Agency, that they were considering other options. Our rival agency Kreff had their shill on the line—Mason Zivic, who had once worked for us—and he had been persuasive. Once we realized what he was up to, my team had launched into a valiant rebuttal, but we had not been properly prepped. In the end, the client requested that we collaborate and share information on the Customer Loyalty Project, something our Agency had had sole control of since the 1990s. The fact that they were asking us to cooperate with Kreff was a very bad sign indeed.

Once we were clear of the conference room and in the elevator heading back up to our floor, Tomohiko cornered me.

“So what are you going to do? That snake Mason basically threw down the gauntlet.”

“I’m going to have to consider the situation carefully,” I said. “I don’t want to make a rash decision.”

“He totally undermined our position,” Tomo continued. “Your position, to be exact.”

“I’m aware of this.”

He paused as the doors opened and a woman carrying file folders entered. Tomo gave me a knowing look. She went up one floor and got off. Then we were alone again.
“Percy, you’re not going to let this slide, are you?” he said after a while. He stared at me. I watched the lighted buttons go on and off left-to-right as we ascended.

“Of course not,” I said.

The doors slid open on the 35th. We walked out and down the hallway through a row of cubicles toward our offices. Tomo waited for my pronouncement. “There will be some form of retaliation,” I finally said for the sake of drama, to satisfy him and to perhaps fire off a spark in my own competitive nature. Competitiveness, as my Life Coach says, is always the last thing to go because it’s the most basic.

Tomo went with this. “Retaliation—that sounds about right. Don’t reply straight off. But don’t take too long, either. I’m thinking maybe by three p.m.”

“I’ll figure out a way to handle it,” I told him. I shot out a left jab, revealing the face of my watch beyond the cuff. “Don’t you have a meeting now with Stan about the Nutria pitch?”

“Yeah, I’ve got to see what the old man thinks of the preliminary deck.” Tomo started toward the corner office. “Let’s talk it over at lunch. Twelve-thirty?”

I nodded and he disappeared into Stan’s corner office. I entered my own and sank into the chair and lit a cigarette. I stared at the Agency Screensaver for the ten minutes it took to smoke a Marlboro Medium down to its butt. Our most glorious campaigns from the past fiscal year flashed by at five second intervals on the screen, all CLIO Award Nominees: State Farm, TIAA-CREF, the Garfield movie franchise. Nutria was conspicuously absent. I ground out the cigarette and emptied the ashtray into the bin. That was my ball we were dropping.
It had been outright sabotage, I told myself. You couldn’t interpret it any other way. But it wasn’t unexpected, especially coming from someone as odious as Mason Zivic. He’d signed our confidentiality agreement, milked the Agency for a couple of years’ salary and information, and then jumped ship to our rivals at the first sniff of a Junior VP spot. To use what he had learned about our campaigns—on our payroll, no less—to steal client business was indeed unforgivable; Tomohiko wasn’t wrong about that.

But since the call, I’d felt the old excitement returning. Nutria hadn’t been up for grabs since the Clinton era, when I was in the same cube as Tomohiko is now. Winning that account set the professional course of my life for a decade. Without any challengers, I’d grown complacent, then depressed. My Life Coach said I had nothing to anticipate, and therefore, the shape of my future had become a formless black void. Visualize the form, she said, and manifest it. But that felt a little abstract to me. Now I had an enemy, an overt one that I could address. The question was how. I lit another cigarette and moved the mouse to activate the computer.

At the top of the e-mail queue was a company-wide letter I’d missed during the call. It was entitled: “Fwd: The Madison Avenue Boxing Event.” I clicked on it, read the first couple lines and almost deleted it. But the third line arrested me: “Skill level is not a concern as most fighters will have none.” I started reading it again, slowly:

Hello Madison Avenue!
This October, marketing world professionals will duke it out for charity at NYC’s BB Kings. This unforgettable night aims to entertain, bring the marketing world closer together and, of course, support a worthy cause. Skill level is not a concern as most fighters will have none. We will train you, free of charge, for three weeks prior to fight night.
When it all comes together, a packed house full of family, friends and colleagues will be screaming in support of their fighter.

Before the magic happens, we need fighters. So your help in spreading the word amongst planners and creatives would really be great. This is open to anyone in the greater marketing world.

Thanks for your support,

Stu Schwartzapfel
Boot Camp for Account Planners Class of 2005 – NYC Campus

The timing smacked of destiny. I recalled Tomohiko’s line about Mason having thrown down the gauntlet. It began to dawn on me that the e-mail had dropped in my queue at precisely the right moment. I printed it out and looked it over to make certain of its appeal and it felt even stronger in my hand than on the screen. It seemed to be exactly the kind of thing my Life Coach talked about: using competition as the basis for motivation. Later, I carried this letter with me to the House of Blues where I was meeting Tomo for lunch.

“That,” he said over ribs and a salad, “is the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard.”

“That can’t technically be true,” I said. “We work in advertising. And besides,” I explained, “I’m actually excited about this. For the first time in years, I have something to focus on. A challenge.”

“That’s great, Percy,” said Tomo. “But what about the account, the account, the client? What about Mason trying to steal our business? Maybe you can train three weeks and beat the crap out of him,” he added doubtfully, looking me over. “I mean, I think he actually works out—but whatever, that’s not the point. We’ll still lose the account. That’s your job we’re talking about.”
Tomo didn’t look like that would be the worst thing in the world.

I inserted a rib into my mouth and applied enough pressure with my teeth to suck it clean, then tossed the bone on the plate with the ones we’d already polished off.

Then I said: “I have a call with Mason scheduled for three p.m. Just me and him. I’m going to challenge him. You want to sit in?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” asked Tomohiko. It was his favorite expression. What are you going to say?”

“I’m going to take the next hour to stew on it,” I said.

We smoked a couple of cigarettes and then I walked with Tomo back to the building. He went through the revolving doors, and I continued two more blocks south through the midtown traffic, finding a spot on a park bench next to a tidy hobo and his suitcase. I’d sat on this very bench—or maybe it was the one a block further down—the day I’d interviewed at the Agency; I’d given myself a pep talk and then walked in and landed my first job as Junior Account Executive. Now I felt the same kind of anxious energy. I leaned back and stretched my legs and I thought about Mason Zivic: his wide angular face and puffy lips, and I couldn’t help it, I began imagining the plentiful surface area on his jaw for my fists to land. Instinctively, I shot out a left jab, a right cross. My gloves opened up cuts on his eyelids, splitting his lips, administering a black eye. Then the left uppercut, concussing him once and for all. Never mind that Mason worked out: we’d both have three weeks to train. As long as, of course, I could get him to take the fight. Strangely, I discovered that what I’d told Tomo was true: I was excited,
about the first thing in a long while. This was how successful people must feel every
day. People like Zivic, who gave the impression of knowing where he was going.

The time passed and the hobo stood up and, gathering his possessions carefully,
walked off, rolling the suitcase behind him like he was in the main terminal at JFK.
Even the hobo had somewhere to go. I looked at the time—ten ‘til three—how had that
happened? The office buildings glowed quietly in the late afternoon light. I walked
quickly back to the office, still unsure of what I’d say to Mason, but feeling sure he could
not honorably deny my request.

Tomo was waiting in my office. I closed the door behind me.

“So what’s the plan?” he said finally.

“Make the fight.”

The phone rang.

“Well, let’s see if you can pull it off,” Tomo said and rubbed his hands palm to
palm. It was time to compete, as my Life Coach would say.

The phone rang again and I put it on speaker.

“This is Percival,” I said.

“Hello, Percy.” Mason’s voice was thin and precise, with the barest hint of some
vague Eastern European accent.

“What ho, Zivic,” I said.

“So first of all,” he said, “I want to say what a productive call that was this
morning.”

“I just had Tomohiko forward you an e-mail.”
“I hope I didn’t step on anyone’s toes at the agency…”

“Ancient history, Mason. We’re way past that. Can you check to see if you got the e-mail?”

“Fine, Percy. Give me a second here to pull it up.” There was the remote chatter of keys and then a long pause. Finally, Mason said: “I don’t get it.”

“That’s how I want to settle this. You and me. In the squared circle. Mano a mano.”

“What?”

“You know, settling our differences like men. Battling for the honor of our Agencies. In other words, you and me getting in a ring and bombing it out.”

Tomo stifled a laugh. “One too many martinis at lunch?” Mason asked.

“Listen,” I said. “You want the Nutria account, and I completely understand why. It’ll mean Senior VP for sure. But that doesn’t mean you don’t deserve a savage beat-down for trying to steal it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a turncoat and a snake, Zivic. And you’re going down.”

“Percy, I left the agency to take a better job. Just like anyone else would have. It was a career decision.”

“I’m demanding satisfaction. Are you going to accept or not?”

Mason sighed. “I’m guessing you’re not talking about the Client anymore.”

“Fuck the Client.”

Tomo raised an eyebrow.
“I’m just talking about you and me, Zivic.” I lowered my voice. “Just you. Just me.”

Mason was quiet for a long time.

“I await your formal reply via e-mail,” I said, and hung up. Tomo looked at me, slightly alarmed. I guessed he didn’t believe Mason would reply. But it only took him forty-five minutes to do so, in a concise response: You’re on.

The parameters of the bout as Stu Schwartzapfel explained to me that afternoon were a bastardized version of the Queensbury Rules: three two-minute rounds with 16-ounce gloves and headgear, with the winner determined by crowd response if the fight went the distance. I didn’t think it would: Mason and I would be trying to take each other’s heads off from the opening bell. For the honor of the Agency, and all that. I bestowed upon Tomohiko the privilege of being my chief second, and headed over the next afternoon to the gym that Schwartzapfel had booked for inter-agency use—the Crown on 45th—where, for the next three weeks, we’d spend our extended lunch hour hitting the speed bag and the heavy bag in a grotesque distortion of the behavior that had been drilled into our memories from the training sequences in Rocky films.

Stu had hired a portly Chicano named Rosales to serve as the trainer and overseer of all the “fighters” recruited through the e-mail. Tomo and I found him on the first day asleep on the bench in the locker room. When we woke him and told him why we were there, he looked at me and then Tomo and asked why there were two of us. We explained to him that I was the fighter and Tomo was my second, and he asked me
why in the world I would need a second for a six-minute corporate exhibition? Because we are professionals, I said solemnly. He shrugged and put us to work. For the first couple of days, no one else came into the gym and we just did conditioning. Rosales read La Hora in a plastic chair with his legs propped on the ring apron.

On the third day, as I lay moaning on the locker room floor after a hard mile on the treadmill, Rosales gazed down at me and said: “You are in terrible shape for a man of thirty. Do you drink? Smoke? Use drugs?”


“What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m clinically depressed,” I said.

“Major depressive disorder,” Tomo chimed in. “I can vouch for that.”

Rosales frowned, and then dropped the whole thing altogether. He opened up a trunk in the locker room and brought out the equipment: the headgear, the enormous groin protector, the rolls of tape and gauze, four or five different gumshields, and finally the huge sixteen ounce gloves. I felt the padding in them and they were like down pillows.

“Give me your hand,” he said. We watched as he applied the gauze – ten yards per fist, he said – and the tape between the fingers and the wrist – three feet was the rule. “How does that feel?” he said finally, when both my hands were done.

I slammed a fist into each palm and surprised myself by how crisp the blows sounded. He nodded approvingly, pulled the gloves on and laced them.
A week later, after we had gone through some basics, I called a meeting of Team Percival and told Rosales that we did not have much time—only fifteen days now—until the fight at BB King’s, and what I needed to work on was explosive power. “Enough power to separate a man—let’s call the man Mason Zivic—completely from his senses,” I said. “Perhaps permanently.”

Rosales nodded sagely. “I understand. We begin to work on the left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head. The Mike Tyson.”

I wanted to keep our training as secret as possible. But word leaked through the inter-Agency grapevine—I’m thinking it was Tomo’s big mouth, although he denied it—that I was taking the fight very seriously, and one day, Mason showed up at the gym. Obviously, he could never commit the amount of time Team Percival was putting in, because he was still relatively new at Kreff and could not be gone from his desk all afternoon unnoticed. In addition, after work, he only had an hour to spare before the last Metra North Express train back to Westchester County. I lived downtown and therefore had no such considerations. My disadvantages, of course, were that he was younger and in far better condition. He could do five miles on the treadmill with ease.

As future combatants, we stared at each other sullenly across the space of the gym floor. I tried to indicate whenever possible—when I felt him watching—that my Mike Tyson combination was coming into form. Tomo held the mitts. I got in close, then ripped the left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head. We did this for countless hours. The afternoons passed sweetly, beneath our notice. I thought of the future only up to the day of the fight. There was no formless black void as long as I
continued to focus on the training. My punches were gaining that snap. Mason typically jumped rope and asked Rosales to work with him on his speed.

On the Thursday afternoon before the fight—Rosales said no training for the forty-eight hours prior—I took off from work to go see my Life Coach. I told her how I had finally tapped into that competitive drive she had talked about. I was feeling motivated. I had an objective. She seemed satisfied.

“Ah, competitiveness,” she said. “It’s always the last thing to go because it’s the most basic.”

Her repeating the statement upset me. I said that she had told me that already. That was why I’d brought it up in the first place. Didn’t she remember saying that before?

She apologized and said that she had a lot of clients. But yes, now that I mentioned it, she did recall saying it to me, and she saw why the statement was relevant to the recent developments in my life.

“You’re trying to change the subject back to me,” I said, “and I see through it.”

“Why do you think you feel so angry in this situation?” she said.

“Isn’t that what you wanted me to do? Channel my negative energies into positive action? Visualize the shape of my future and manifest it?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. “But you’re participating in a fight. How does that relate to your future?”

“The fight is my future,” I told her.
She considered this. Then she said, “I don’t think this relationship is working out in your best interests any more, Percy.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that I think it’s time for you to find a new Life Coach.” Her hand hovered over the phone.

What could I do? I slammed the door on the way out.

As a promise to Rosales, I’d cut down on cigarettes but that afternoon I was no holds barred in that regard. After I smoked five in a row outside the building, I headed over to the gym. It was late and nobody else was there. Even Tomo had taken the day off. I taped my hands as best I could and began to attack the heavy bag with a new fury. Left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head. Left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head. I tried to fire up the competitiveness that had come so easy lately. It was the last thing to go, she’d said.

But the pep talk wasn’t working so well this time and I had to sit down on the edge of the ring apron. I felt the dread of the unknown creeping in again, that old feeling I had regularly before I got that mass e-mail from Stu Schwartzapfel. What did she mean? What was left after that last thing was gone? I could only imagine some sort of return to an evolutionary level commensurate with our reptilian backbrain—a formless black void of consciousness. By appearance, I had all the human apparatus. I imagined the theoretical spot where my skull connected with my spinal cord, the primordial brainstem. I imagined the two pieces separating, shattering from the force of a massive right uppercut. The fight was only three days away, and I understood in that
moment that the outcome had become irrelevant to me. The fight itself was the thing. The anticipation of it. But beyond that, there was nothing—nothing to anticipate, nothing to hope for. Now that I’d had a taste of a life enlivened, I realized I couldn’t bear the thought of going back.

So I rose from the ring apron and did the only thing I could. I started moving the heavy bag around again, trying to focus back on the drive, the heavy bag, the left hook to the body, the right uppercut to the head, left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head, like a mantra until my brain hummed like a dial tone.

I mean, at the very least, I still had three days.

The weigh-in was the Friday afternoon before the fight. Rosales had indicated to me on Thursday that he expected his fighters to look “drawn” on the scales, which I took to mean a combination of lean, gaunt and hungry. For the final thirty-six hours prior to the weigh-in, I did not eat, drank only water infused with electrolytes, and ran on the treadmill wearing a Hefty garbage bag. By three p.m. on Friday, I tipped the commission scales at a lean 146, and my cheeks were hollow and my ribs as visible as those of a genuine fighting dog. Rosales was quite pleased. I must have looked drawn as hell. Tomo stood behind us, applauding. Mason weighed in after me. His body was athletic but I saw no ribs, no cheekbones. His weight was 183. Then they lined us up for the face-off. Agency cameras flashed. The toes of our shoes touched. We glared into each other’s eyes.

“It’s time,” I told him. “I’m showing out tomorrow night. No excuses.”
“You know you’ve completely lost it, don’t you?” Mason replied in a fierce whisper. “You look bad, Percy. Like a concentration camp victim.”

Stu Schwartzapfel, standing behind us and a little between us, tried to insert himself: “Okay, that’s enough guys. Save it for tomorrow night.” But neither of us wanted to be the first to look away. Schwartzapfel had to squeeze his arms into the small space between our chests to try and pry us apart, but we were like rocks.

Finally, I nodded ever so slightly to Mason and he returned the nod just as imperceptibly, and we broke at the same time. They lined us up with the other fighters and we posed in a row with our fists raised in a fighting stance for the cameras. When I saw the picture on the AdWorld blog weeks later, I was smiling and sure enough, I looked dangerously gaunt.

That was my last true recollection. Tomohiko filled me in on the rest when I emerged from the medically-induced coma several days after the fight. It had been a brief, but savage affair. At the opening bell, Mason and I met in the center of the ring and bombed it out, as per the game plan. About ten seconds in, I jabbed and threw the left hook to the body, right uppercut to the head combination. Alas, Mason was ready for this and between the two rights, countered with a left hook flush to the temple area that immediately felled me. It was in this state that I was rushed to Mercy Hospital, where the doctors determined I had suffered a subdural hematoma. At this point, approval from the Agency had been granted to medically induce a coma so that the
surgeons could operate. The emergency procedure involved removing a small section of
my skull in order to reduce swelling in the brain.

“That was two weeks ago,” Tomo explained. We were out for my first walk
since the fight. I could’ve rolled myself, but he’d insisted on pushing the wheelchair.
“The doctors said the fact that you were so dehydrated when you got in the ring didn’t
help matters. I didn’t think you looked that good that night either, but I didn’t want to
say.”

“What happened to Mason?” I asked.

“Well, he won the fight,” Tomo said. “Obviously. But you’re the one he made a
deal with. I’m not going to let go of the account that easily.” He paused and we came to
a languid stop on the sidewalk. Then he continued apologetically: “Percy, I guess I
should mention that since you’re out of commission for at least six months, I got moved
into your spot.”

I could feel him looming behind me, explaining.

“I got HR to agree that your, ah, coma qualifies as a workplace injury, so you’ll
be on a ten-month Extended Medical Leave from the Agency.”

“What about my office?”

“Er, well, Stan said I should take it over—you know, until you make it back.”

“Well,” I said. “I guess I’m glad they put you in there. Congratulations. You’ll
do the Agency proud.”

“I will,” he promised. He patted my shoulder tentatively. “So, shall I roll you
back now? I’ve got a Nutria call at two. Mason will be on the line. Want to listen in?”
“Go ahead,” I said, waving him off. “You can leave me here.”

“Are you sure?”

“You’ve got a job,” I said. “I understand.”

After Tomo departed, I rolled myself along the thoroughfare in a little daze, keeping close to the sides of buildings, taking my time, trying to stay out of people’s way. Instinctively, I found myself heading toward the Agency office. It drew me still, that coal black stone building. I situated myself across the street from the entrance, in the park, where it was quiet and shaded. The bench was empty. I remembered the tidy hobo with his rolling suitcase from six weeks before, when I’d first thought of challenging Mason to a fight. I wondered where that neat little hobo had gone. What things did he have to do? What places did he need to be? I wanted to ask him. He was bound to reappear, if I could wait at this bench long enough. Until then, I watched the old building across the street, the gold revolving doors—all the young lions in their armor of dark suits—and felt the slightest pang.
HARM REDUCTION

On Monday morning, the Teachers’ Lounge in Barrington Hills High School (IL) buzzed with the news of Corey Haim’s accidental overdose/suicide death. Haim, the most famous teenager in America for a period of sixteen months twenty-three years ago, was thirty-eight when his body was discovered by his mother in their Burbank apartment. Nicole Lee, the Academic Success Counselor at Barrington Hills, was thirty-eight too. Her first instinct upon hearing the news in the Lounge was to phone Max, but she wasn’t sure that such a call would qualify under the terms they’d established for their six-month separation—only personal, game-changing information was allowed—so she turned instead to her co-workers for commiseration. That Haim had died destitute, friendless, and under mysterious circumstances (autopsy pending) only amplified the sense of loss felt by faculty and staff of a very particular generation (of which there was an unusually high number at BHHS). In these individuals, Nicole witnessed the five stages of grief heroically compressed to within the span of a single cigarette: first, shock; then anger; finally, recovery, and the balm of work.

Since she was the guidance counselor, the prevention of negative outcomes naturally fell under the purview of her responsibilities, so, after settling at her desk, Nicole conducted research on the Internet—mostly reactions from celebrities that hadn’t been famous since she was in high school herself, like Elizabeth Shue and Meredith Baxter-Birney—when Principal Arthur came into the office.

"We need a speaker for the Faculty Retreat this weekend," the Principal said.

"Why is it so dark in here?" She flipped on the light switch and the fluorescent
overhead crackled but refused to catch. “Ah, no wonder. Anyway, can you perform the
due diligence on this for us—he or she has got to be available on Saturday, between one
and two p.m., and also appropriate for our needs.”

“What do you mean by appropriate?” Nicole asked.

“I mean economically,” Principal Arthur said. She plucked a pen from Nicole’s
mug of pens and wrote on a Post-It note a meager figure, then passed it across the desk.
Nicole looked at the note and then folded it and put it in the top drawer of her desk.

“We may not get a very good speaker at that price,” she said.

“Leave the budget to me. Focus on finding a speaker. Can I trust you to not
drop the ball on this one?”

“When have I ever dropped the ball?”

“Make sure you vet him or her in person first. Get someone confident. And get
Facilities to change that bulb.”

Nicole listened to Principal Arthur’s crisp steps recede down the hall. She and
the Principal had an excellent working relationship, and Nicole was often asked to
perform tasks at the last minute. She was salaried staff, not faculty, so they were sort of
forced to treat one another as if they were on the same team. The Principal knew Nicole
wouldn’t complain about lack of resources or the student-to-teacher ratio (currently
42.3-to-1). Nicole also hadn’t raised a fuss when the old Academic Success Center was
converted into classrooms, and she was moved into a large broom closet with a dropped
ceiling and fluorescent lighting. There were no windows. A lesser person would’ve quit
on the spot.
But Nicole always tried to maintain a quiet dignity, even in crisis. She’d accrued this quality during her adolescence, when she discovered that the fresh-faced boys she preferred could have the most fleeting regard for her feelings. Therefore, she hadn’t been entirely surprised when Max woke her a month ago—very likely the last time he would ever wake her in their bed—and said he had something to ask. Poor Max, he hadn’t had the heart to utter the word that verged on his lips, despite his obvious anguish. Nicole finally asked him if a divorce was what he wanted and he said that he did. She was grateful for his courage—knowing herself, she would’ve seen the marriage out to its bitter end, the two of them growing ever more hateful and resentful of one another—but with divorce explicitly mentioned, there was no going back. No discussion. They’d had breakfast, as usual, and then, because there was no point in sticking around, they’d both gone in to work, coolly traumatized.

The state of Illinois legally obligated Nicole and Max to live apart for six months before they qualified for a no-fault divorce, so they agreed to separate as quickly as was feasible. She’d kept the timber loft apartment in the Loop. He’d only contacted her once in the month they’d been apart, and that was to let her know his new address, a spot on Sheffield. As much as Nicole would’ve liked to break the silence that had existed for four weeks now, doing so to tell him that the death of a teen star from their childhood reminded her of the common cultural ground that had broken the ice between them in the first place, at the beginning, made her seem weak, like she wasn’t getting over it. She didn’t want Max to feel guilty or obligated, and after a month of no contact, it was hard to say how anyone would react.
Her need to talk through it, though, was hardly satisfied by her colleagues, nor by an afternoon spent in the office speaking to seniors about what college they should go to in the fall. She worked in a nice district and the good kids were zealous about their future—Nicole less so because it required a certain sublimation of her pride to encourage children who she knew could easily surpass her own level of success in life. Nicole had once been like them—over-heated with ambition—but in the academic world of Psychology, her talent had not proven out. There had been no publications. But when she’d left Northwestern, she still had a future alongside Max to look forward to.

Now there was no such future. There were only the children in her office. This afternoon in particular, Nicole longed to see the quiet and earnestly delusional kids—usually athletes or artists, ones that reminded her of Max when they’d first met—but few darkened her doorway.

Instead, she received an influx of the socially negative, ones whom Nicole feared would suffer from clinical depression when older. She tried to take more care with these, despite their cynicism and pouty indifference, because it was her professional responsibility. The worst was Cynthia Chiu, a hateful young Goth who was refusing to take the SAT because she didn’t believe in standardized tests. In her current state, although she made an effort, Nicole lacked the necessary psychic resources to convince Cynthia to relent.

“How’d you do on the SAT?” Cynthia had asked.

“Well enough to get into Northwestern,” Nicole had replied, without thinking.
At that point, Cynthia had looked around the office slowly. Her smirk had been understated and polite. Nicole didn’t know how she would’ve reacted if the girl had said anything, but—fortunately for one or the both of them—she didn’t.

On Tuesday, as more specific information of Corey Haim’s overdose came out (official cause of death was pulmonary edema—a literal broken heart), Nicole discovered her colleagues in the Lounge had processed their grief and moved on without her, with the possible exception of the Biology teacher, Mr. Buffington, who hadn’t shown up for work that day, with no prior notification; this was the second time he’d no-showed this academic year. Nicole smoked a cigarette on the couch in silence as she listened to speculation on whether Buffington was hitting the bottle again, but it failed to capture her interest. She returned to her office, vaguely disappointed at the fickleness of her peers’ attention. There was still so much to learn: the wire services were reporting an ex-girlfriend’s statement that Corey Haim had consumed over forty prescription pills per day in the month they’d dated in 2009. A neighbor said he regularly saw Corey wandering the Burbank apartment complex in the middle of the day, seeking somebody to talk to. The toxicology report wasn’t due for another two weeks.

It was in this particular state of mind, about two-and-a-half hours further into her work day, that Nicole received on her Facebook page a mass invite from the Music Box Cinema on Southport Avenue, advertising tonight, for one night only, a double feature in honor of the dead actor: *License to Drive*, back-to-back with *Lost Boys*, for five
bucks in the main theatre. The instant she saw the message, Nicole knew she’d have to go—living in Chicago, rather than Los Angeles, this was the closest she could come to paying her final respects. Max would agree, she was sure. They both liked to lay things to proper rest. Of course, Nicole could not help but harbor the small hope that he, seeking similar closure, might show up there also.

But the main theatre was as empty as a morgue when Nicole walked inside at half past seven. She looked over the meager crowd to confirm that no one she knew was there, especially the one she feared but hoped to see, then walked upstairs to the mezzanine level, where she had twelve rows to herself, except for a couple in the last row who were making out, and a man in dark glasses sitting in the front row of the mezzanine, next to the railing, watching the screen intently. Looking out over the sparse audience, rather than feeling celebratory or cathartic, Nicole again felt keenly the pang of being the only one who cared. She sat down. On the screen, Corey was failing his driving test.

Even the audience who had bothered to show—there were so few that she could plainly hear their chatter below—conducted themselves, Nicole felt, in a manner not befitting a wake. They jeered continuously through License to Drive, dancing, as it were, on Corey’s fresh grave: “He should’ve won the Oscar!” a man shouted during the climax of the first film, while Corey was driving his pregnant mother to the hospital in reverse gear. This remark was met with hoots and hollers of approval. The other viewers sounded drunk. Nicole glanced at the man in dark glasses in her section, to see if she could gauge his response, but there was no discernable reaction. He might’ve
been asleep. As the credits began to roll to an ironic smattering of applause, Nicole decided to skip out at intermission. No one could say she hadn’t done enough already, just showing up and behaving respectably.

Exiting under the looming Music Box marquee on Southport Avenue, Nicole saw a few stragglers from the cinema outside, on smoke break. She overheard one group—two couples—trying to reach a consensus about the Top Five Corey Haim Movies. Another group of three men were discussing how everyone in *License to Drive* seemed to be on cocaine, speculating on whether that was when things got out of control for Corey. The pleasant chatter reminded Nicole of why she had come to the Music Box in the first place, which was to talk through with somebody about what Corey Haim represented, culturally and personally, not sitting through two hopelessly dated films by herself in the dark. She looked around at the scattered groups, but everyone was in couples or threesomes that seemed impenetrable to her sudden shyness. The lone solitary figure was a skinny, unhealthy-looking male—the man from the front row of the mezzanine. His once-fashionable haircut was overgrown and ragged. He was still wearing the dark glasses, and his skin glowed mordantly pale under the sodium streetlamp. He’d accessorized his spectral appearance with a long, smoldering cigarette.

Nicole lit one of her own and casually began smoking in the pavement square five feet from the man. After a minute, when he hadn’t said anything, she drew slowly and exhaled, then asked: “So are you sticking around for *Lost Boys*?”

The man didn’t respond in the slightest. She checked to make sure he wasn’t wearing headphones.
“Hey, you,” she said. She poked him in the shoulder and the man jerked suddenly to attention. He turned his head toward her. Nicole saw that he was older than he’d originally appeared, at least in his late thirties. From a distance, his thinness had made him look younger, but now, she recognized his lean frame as that of a junkie’s, consistently malnourished.

“I wish they were playing *Dream A Little Dream* instead,” the man mumbled quietly after Nicole posed her question again.

“I’ve heard that’s terrible,” Nicole said. It was true: Max had told her so.

“It’s not so bad,” the man said. He seemed to drift off again. Then he asked:

“Are you not a fan of Corey Haim?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I weren’t,” Nicole said, vaguely indicating the seven people still standing at various points under the marquee. “But I guess I’m less a fan of his work than a fan of my youth.”

The man nodded slowly. “I think I understand,” he said.

“Nostalgia sometimes seems like unnecessary baggage, don’t you think?”

“Are you a therapist?” the man said.

“I’m a high school guidance counselor.” Nicole extended a hand. “I’m Nicole.”

The man fumbled the transition of his cigarette from one hand to the other in order to free his right hand. His fingers were cold and stiff as an arthritic’s. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m Jacob—I’ve never been so good at shaking hands…”

“That’s alright,” Nicole said. “What do you do?”
The man began going through the pockets of his worn blazer. “I’m a writer,” he said. “Also an actor.” With some difficulty, he extracted a business card from an inside pocket. It was home-made, the edges unprofessionally uneven. She had to squint to read the card under the faint yellow streetlight. A man’s name was centered in a large stylized 1970s font, followed by the jobs he was apparently qualified or willing to do:

JACOB “J.P.” PARK
ACTOR * WRITER * PUBLIC ENGAGEMENTS

The last job in the list reminded Nicole of the task Principal Arthur had assigned her on the previous day. The fact that she had to this point completely neglected that particular task and was, therefore, dropping the ball on it, sobered Nicole to a degree.

“Interesting,” she said thoughtfully. “Public engagements.”

“Whatever you need,” the man said. “Birthday parties, retirement dinners, whatever.”

“Have you ever done a high school faculty retreat?”


“I should go,” Nicole said. She put the card in her purse. “I may be in touch.”

“You’re not going back in?”

“I’ve got too many things to do tomorrow,” she said. “But maybe I’ll see you here the next time somebody from the 80s dies.”

By noon the next day, after she’d worn out the office phone calling the major public speaking agencies in the greater Chicago-land area, Nicole began to consider that
dropping the ball was becoming a very real possibility—most of the people she spoke to said that three days’ advance notice was a joke, that they were usually booked months in advance; the ones that stuck around to listen to her offer hung up when Nicole mentioned the meager numbers that comprised the budget for the event.

Eventually, there was no one left to call except for the phone number on the business card she’d received the night before at Music Box. Jacob Park, no matter how marginal a choice, was better than the alternative, a complete absence of a human being. Nicole dialed the number and the line rang five times and went to voice-mail; she left a message explaining who she was, and that she had a potential gig that might be up Jacob’s alley. Minutes after the message, Jacob phoned back.

“How was Lost Boys?”

“Not as good as I remembered,” Jacob said.

Nicole could hear in the background the sound of a cue ball being struck, social murmuring: he was at a bar at half past ten in the morning. She almost reconsidered asking, but the fact remained there was no other option. Grudgingly, she explained that the Principal of Barrington Hills had assigned her the job of hiring a motivational speaker for the Faculty Retreat on Saturday, to appear between one and two p.m. at the Lincolnwood Forest Preserve, under the main canopy. First, was Jacob available at that time? Jacob said that he was. Second, how much was Jacob’s appearance fee?

“My usual rate is four to six hundred dollars—,” Jacob began.
“We can pay you a hundred bucks,” Nicole said. “Plus gas. Plus a small per
diem. You have to wear a suit and you have to be sober during your speech.”

Nicole imagined Jacob bristling on the other end. “Of course,” he said. “I’m a
professional. What kind of per diem are we talking about?”

“Thirty bucks,” Nicole said. “We have to meet in person today, though, so I can
vet what you’re going to say. Can you come up with an outline in the next few hours?”

“Okay,” Jacob said. “I’ll cobble something together. Also, is there any way you
can advance me that thirty bucks when we meet?”

The question did not necessarily surprise her. But still, Nicole was curious.

“Why’d you go to the Music Box last night if you’re broke?” she asked. She could hear
the murmuring in the background grow quiet, as if Jacob had moved to the bathroom
hallway in whatever bar he was in.

“I went for the same reason you did,” he said.

“Which is what, exactly?”

“I’m not sure. Paying of last respects to lost youth—something like that. I don’t
know. It was worth it to me. I’d think you of all people would find my choice worthy of
some positive reinforcement.”

“Fine,” she told Jacob. “You’re right. But I’m only advancing you the per
diem.”

Two hours later, at the Earwax Café in Wicker Park, Nicole sat across a table
from Jacob and looked him over. She could see why he’d worn dark glasses the night
before; his eyes were yellow and unhealthy, the skin underneath them dark, like he was
wearing eye-liner. But in the sunlight, the rest of his body seemed more robust, as if he had just had a large meal. He was searching for something in his messenger satchel. The satchel looked new—it seemed almost like he was too old to be using one—and Nicole wondered if he’d been saving it, waiting for the right moment to deploy it. He removed a handwritten piece of paper that he slid on the table toward her. At the top of the page was written “Twenty-Nine Rules for Dealing with Other People.” Nicole read the first three:

1. Don’t be shy, at least not deliberately.
2. Drop your guard (you don’t have to be smart all the time).
3. Don’t be so quick to point out your own flaws in others.

“This sounds good,” Nicole said. “Make sure you type it up. What else have you got?”

Jacob took out a large sketchpad and turned to a blank page. “A visualization exercise. First, I’m going to have people draw their worst fear.” In fine, delicate strokes, he drew a hangman’s noose, dangling over a crossbeam. “Then re-visualize it into something positive, like an article of faith or a flower.” When Nicole looked again, the drawing had become rosary beads on a table. Jacob really was quite a fine artist. “At the end, everyone shares their drawing and then we’ll put all the drawings in a pile and burn them—to internalize the exercise.”

“Alright,” Nicole said. The methodology seemed sound. “So the talk is Saturday at one p.m., at the Lincolnwood Forest Preserve—we’ve rented the big canopy. I’ll e-mail you the details.”

“Thanks for the opportunity,” Jacob said. They shook hands and again, Nicole was surprised at his stiff arthritic fingers and how he’d drawn so delicately with them.
“You’re not taking very good care of yourself, are you?”

“Who can afford to these days?”

“I try to,” Nicole said, raising a single index finger unobtrusively. “I haven’t had a respiratory illness in years. I also don’t do narcotics unless the situation demands it. But I understand—whatever it takes to get you through the day.”

“Now wait a second,” Jacob said. “Just because I may use drugs doesn’t invalidate everything I say that inspires and motivates people to do better in life.”

Nicole sighed. She felt like she’d led them across a professional line. “Sorry,” she said. “I guess the guidance counselor in me came out.”

“I don’t like what I said, either,” Jacob said. “Can we rewind? I’ll just say I’m grateful you care enough to give me this chance.”

“Care” did not seem like the right word to Nicole. “Fear” more accurately described her motivation when she considered the situation later, after she’d returned to her apartment. She was afraid of dropping the ball from a professional standpoint, of course, but she was also scared now that she’d gotten involved—however remotely—with a person who was at-risk. And there was no doubt Jacob was such a person, from the physical evidence of his body itself, which already seemed to be failing him, to the circumstantial evidence of his using, his drawing of the noose, his lack of resources. It was part of Nicole’s training to deal with this kind of individual, but the other untrained part of her remained fearful of the worst case scenario—the discovery of Jacob’s body, needle still in a blue lifeless arm, or wearing his suit, hanging by the neck from a crossbeam, his weary, yellow eyes open—and the psychological ramifications for herself
in the aftermath of such a scenario. She could say it wasn’t her job to worry about that—she was just hiring a speaker for a one-off gig—but then again, it actually was her job to worry about things like that.

The news reports from CNN didn’t help. They broadcast a series of public eulogies from Corey Haim’s services in Marina Del Rey and Ontario, Canada, and then there were a series of televised interviews with former celebrities and friends, each remarking about so much promise, so much loss, and so on. The one that stood out to Nicole was an interview near the end of the segment, from a once-familiar actress who now stared defiantly into the CNN camera and said: “You know, it’s a little late. People—myself included—should have realized that Corey would have liked to have heard these things while he was still with us. It might have made a difference.”

Nicole shut off the television and smoked in the dark, realizing that she was beginning to slide down a very slippery slope. For a moment, she wondered what Max would’ve thought: he had once half-jokingly complained that her professional training had permanently ruined her ability to empathize with people on an emotional rather than a clinical level. He said he felt like he was always being carefully observed and diagnosed. But then again, Max was the one who had abandoned their partnership. What did he know about reconciliation and psychological redemption? He fancied himself a painter but worked in an office. And the fact was that Jacob just had to stay alive until Saturday—Nicole resolved to herself that he wouldn’t die on her watch, the responsibility of which extended three days. After that, all bets were off.

(white space)
The next day (Thursday), she received a call in the afternoon, while she was meeting with an earnest student in regards to the purpose of her life. She guessed the call was from Jacob, which, although far from wanting it to be from him, was still better than hoping it was from Max. This, however, completely derailed her train of thought and, at the end of the twenty minute appointment, the student stood up, clearly more befuddled than ever about the value of her own existence.

“Don’t worry, Kelsey, you may figure it out one day,” Nicole said to the girl as she departed. “We’ll talk about what ‘it’ is next week.”

“I have a favor to ask,” Jacob said when Nicole phoned him back. “Can you give me a lift to the retreat on Saturday?”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t have a car—I have a small issue with my license—and I guess I could take the bus out there and walk, but it’s supposed to rain.”

“What about taking a cab?”

“Well, to be honest, I spent most of that per diem dry-cleaning my suit.”

“Okay,” Nicole said. She recalled her resolution from the previous night. “Fine. Whatever you need. I’ll pick you up at noon.”

She hung up the phone. As she wrote down the task in her daily planner, a large shadow passed across the doorway. Nicole looked up and it was Cynthia Chiu, the hateful Goth, staring down upon her.

“We have an appointment,” Cynthia said.
Nicole asked her to have a seat. After she did so, Nicole asked her what it was that they were supposed to be discussing.

“I don’t know,” Cynthia said. “You made me make the appointment.”

“Ah, yes,” Nicole said. “Well, we were discussing your resistance to taking the SAT—“

“I told you already, I’m not taking it. Standardized tests are instruments of political domination.”

“Well, what do you want to do that won’t require college?”

“I’m not sure. But you don’t know me. I’ll figure it out myself.”

Nicole sighed. Maybe Max was right about her inability to connect on a human level. Nicole wanted Cynthia to feel like Nicole could empathize with her, could understand her, but that clearly wasn’t happening.

“Can I go?” Cynthia asked.

“No, not just yet.” Nicole looked at her. The paleness of her face, along with her eyeshadow, black hair and black garb, made Cynthia look like a ghoul. And the dark shading underneath her eyes reminded Nicole of Jacob. “There’s an exercise I want you to try,” she said.

Nicole cleared some space off her desk and laid down a large blank sheet of paper. She asked Cynthia to draw her worst fear, which turned out to be a rather faithful rendition of the room that both of them were presently in, complete with a stick figure representation of Nicole behind the desk. When Cynthia was told to transform the drawing into something positive, she rolled her eyes but bent to the task. In another
ten minutes, Nicole looked at the drawing, and the closet office had now changed into a musician’s studio. The rectangle of the desk was a grand piano, opened. Behind the piano was the stick figure—now Cynthia. There were stylized notes rising from the piano. Nicole had never heard her mention an interest in music before.

“That was pointless,” Cynthia said after she was done, but her eyes seemed to have softened, become lighter somehow, with the revelation of her secret hope. A few minutes later, when they were stamping out the burning embers of the drawing in the trash can in the office, Cynthia actually let a genuine laugh escape her lips, and Nicole, alive with sudden energy, felt herself wanting to say: Take that, Max.

There were no communications with Jacob on Friday. He did not call and Nicole did not have a reason to call him. She felt restless, a bit of evening jaggedness in the nerves, and took a sleeping pill to take the edge off. She remembered what she’d said to Jacob: narcotics only when necessary. It was true, more or less. And she’d been right. But late Friday evening, well beyond any respectable time, she was awakened from her anxiolytic slumber by the phone: a number she did not recognize. As the phone rang, she understood how far she’d come in a week. She no longer thought about the possibility of Max calling; instead, she was filled with new dread—the only person who would phone her so late was Jacob, and of the reasons he would be calling at two a.m., none boded well. But the caller did not leave a message, so she couldn’t be sure it had even been him.
Unsettled, the dreamless calm of her sleeping pill spoilt by the call, Nicole lay in bed and wondered whether she should phone him back to make sure he was alright. She didn’t want to go to his apartment the next day, an hour before the speech, and have her knocks go unanswered. She didn’t want to have to pound on the door. She didn’t want to have to try the knob and then the back doors and all the windows. She didn’t want to force her way in to the dark apartment, switching on the lights, and discover his body swaying from the dropped ceiling, the fluorescent bulbs crackling around him like lightning. What she did want was, after a brief moment of panic, for the door to be opened, and to experience the intense relief of absolution when Jacob stood there, in his clean suit, sketchpad in hand, looking hopeful about the experience ahead.

One more night—she had to make sure he stayed alive one more night.

Nicole switched on the lamp on her nightstand. Feebly, the sixty-watt bulb illuminated the desolate patch of bed upon which she sat as she dialed his number, listening for a moment. No answer. Then she dialed the number that she didn’t recognize, the one that had awoken her. After several rings, a man answered, but it wasn’t Jacob. In the background, Nicole could hear the soft murmur of voices, the distant snap of a fresh rack of balls being broken. The man said he was speaking from a payphone in the bathroom hallway of a bar. He didn’t know who Jacob Park was. But he could tell her the name of the bar, and the intersection. Quietly, Nicole wrote the information down on the notepad on the nightstand. Then she thanked the man, hung up, and slowly began to get dressed. It was really a curious thing: her clothes, she noticed, felt heavier than usual.