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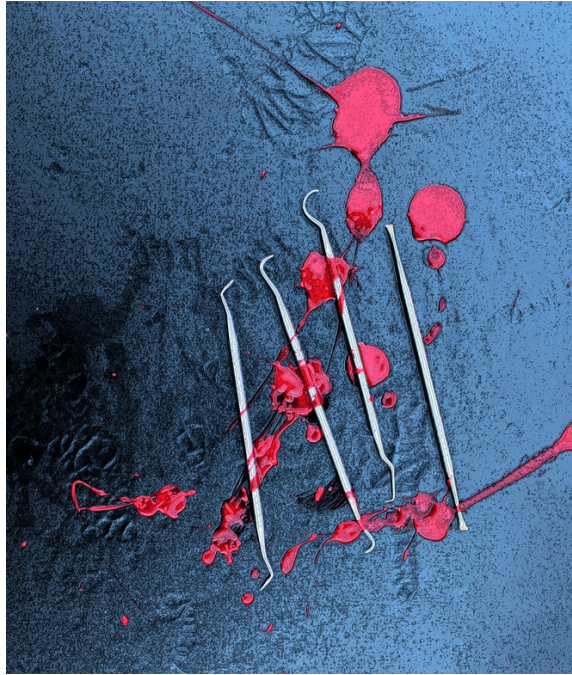
V

A **HUMAN FEAST** DISH

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I. Chisels, Hatchets, Scalars

Dental. Picks and scrapers. They decided to begin hard. It had to be torture. They set out first thing in the morning to research kits. They met in the lobby cafe of the university hotel and ate melon stabbed with toothpicks. They cut into ligamental pineapple with spoons. They used doll-sized saucers to catch the drips and sloughed off membranes and tried to keep the keyboard clean.

The younger man paused and rubbed his fingers over the keys. “I don’t know if I want these words to become part of my recorded history.”

“No worries,” said the professor, “they will be. You’ll want to be part of this, what happens next, all the way to the end.”

The professor admitted he had already searched last night and found some impressively nasty looking instruments on auction sites, tools splotted with rust and flecked with years of avid use. His chief concern, though, was the transaction — the recorded purchase of the tools, and all the self-aware chitchat he would have to endure if anyone were to discover the items of his purchase, along with all of the irresistible probing questions that come with it, so he told his assistant, "Dental." Simple. That's where they began.

They were immediately pleased to find that stainless steel picks and scrapers come cheap for the hygiene enthusiast, but luckily there's also a thin market for more complete dentistry sets, priced for those doomsday-preppers worried about abscesses beyond kingdom come. The professor's research budget was tiny — it had been tricky to couch the words for experimental torture in this day and age — so they ordered the most varied and cheapest set, unbothered by craftsmanship: plastic handles instead of metal, warped hinges, edges a little rough for clean tissue laceration. It was appearances they were interested in. Big cutting, slicing and gripping tools. The assistant offered to pick up pliers and a vise grip from the hardware store, until he remembered he had these already at home, and would bring them tomorrow.

The contract paperwork outlining the parameters of Friday's session was an essential part of the experiment. The professor enlisted the help of a friend from the English department, an Emma Lazarus scholar, to act as a lawyer. The subject, the woman they would torture, had never seen this man, nor anyone from the college beyond the professor and his assistant, only the backs of persons she'd avoided at gas stations and parking lots. So when she entered the Louis Pasteur room of the university library, she paid little attention to the man costumed in a lawyer's suit and busy stacking legal pads on the table a little too theatrically. She dropped into her chair and pulled in her legs, heels crossed and knees splayed to the arm rests. Her remarkable poise and self-possession arrested the professor and alarmed his young assistant. As if recalling a delightful memory on the sudden wind of unexpected association, she snatched out of her hip purse a small bag of apple slices, split the bow of one

with her front teeth with a pop, and tucked the mash into her cheek, chewing in the slow rhythm of a daydream. She looked up at them. She was ready when they were.

The man beside her was searching for his pen in the pit of a creased briefcase that he'd borrowed from his father, an actual lawyer. They sat around a narrow table in one of the private reading rooms off to the side. She chewed and watched them set up.

Dr. Thomas C. Hock, Professor of Thought and Consciousness and chair of the Curriculum Design Committee, along with his teaching assistant, Stuart, sat opposite the makeshift lawyer and their test subject, Ms. Veronica Samir. Hock had first been made aware of the subject by the beguiling reports he had heard of her from an old colleague. She had signed up to become a research assistant on an expedition to Ecuador, a dream quest and gathering of vocalizations made by howler monkeys. She herself didn't put too much stock in the storybook decoding of animal prose, but she had been promised a good hike. She had been bouncing around the graduate departments of George Washington searching for something. One adviser described it as an endless, neurotic self-interrogation of the nature of her desire, but it is well known that this man lacked imagination. She partook of all disciplines — from sleuthing electronic bank fraud to investigating animal mutilation — because such radical changes piqued her remarkably agile mind. She was dissatisfied with the inherent resignation of specialization. So when she saw an opening for Ecuador, she jumped once more, and made a spectacle of her time while she was there.

She double-roped to the crowns of giant ceiba trees, and when she twirled in suspension a hundred feet in the air, the gear seemed incidental. On one exceptionally windy evening, after her colleagues had rappelled down for the night, she swung over to a portaledge and called for them to send up a book and a light.

The many perils of the jungle suited her. She got up close to the backs of anacondas to examine the plated intricacy of their scales, kept jars of wandering spiders, and played one prank on the safety manager with a giant centipede. When the whole expedition was nearly shut down by ethnic conflict in Tiputini, she went out to

pick blackberries in the middle of the hot zone; the whole conflict seemed to resolve as quickly as she had emerged in the clearing, and that coincidence became a source of increasingly contentious cabin debate over cause and effect. Flash floods, bloodshed between tribes and twitchy government forces, even a nighttime earthquake, she never lost her cool, never showed worry, never looked for a retreat. She just floated. The project lead suggested she was fearless, and took the opportunity to discuss that suspicion on the flight home. He asked her if she's ever known fear, the sort of fear that makes a heart jet with blood, that ties up the cerebral cortex and sends common phobia into waves of panic. She said, "I don't know." She thought about it. "Not really." Intrigued, he set up a fear-conditioning test at the school, and after intensifying the stimuli, they found no physical markers of distress. "Maybe she is fearless," he told Hock, and maybe she would make the ideal test subject for his pet project.

She had begun to wonder if her fear response was all that unusual when the professor contacted her. When he explained what he hoped to achieve in the study, what it might do for the direction of the university, and of her role in it, she paid the courtesy of attention. When she learned the nature of the experiments he had in store for her, she began to show interest.

In the private reading room, sitting at the long, narrow table, the professor explained, "While the experiments border on the extralegal, it is important to delineate the boundaries of what we will and will not do to you." He explained that while they will deliberately set her in situations of great emotional and physical danger, they would not inflict pain or suffering directly. "That will be left to chance, and to the whims of the public."

She held a look of suspicion, less of doubt than of curiosity. "'To chance.' Go on."

"In each of these trials," the professor went on, "these experiments, these ordeals, we will depend on the variability of strangers. These will be public. People will see the straits, the peril you are in. Whether or not they help you avoid physical harm is up to them, people we don't know, the public."

The Lazarus scholar had been drawing zigzagging triangles on his legal pad, filling in the tips with points of slick, black ink. He did his best to stay in character. “Extralegal,” the professor had actually said. He wondered what else would be said in that room, with him as a witness, and collaborator.

“The public will know you are in grave danger. It will be up to *people* to do something about you. Sometimes it will be up to people to save you. And sometimes it will be up to people to stop themselves from hurting you.

“The variable,” his whole face smiled at the grand, sweeping oath he was about to make, upon the fortune of circumstance and the arrangement of words that had led him to this point, “the variable,” he repeated, “is human nature.”

The pretend lawyer stopped hemorrhaging ink and looked sideways at Veronica. She looked over to the assistant. She was grinning at the theatrical absurdity of the moment, the ridiculous conception, the delivery in a small, private room.

“What do you think?” she asked the young man sitting next to the professor.

Stuart had all this time been watching the small, minute changes in her face.

“Okay, I’ll try one,” she said.



2. Opened

Three days later they outfitted her with the bracelets. They met in the dean's personal office, a starting template of Whistler's Peacock Room, conflicted with a corporate gallery of large geometric figures in various states of decomposition. Sad circles, welled up and spilling over. A forlorn square. A complex, labyrinthine carpet tried to hold the room together, two wood frame chairs, a glass coffee table, a black desk and a blue leather chair beaded with brass rivets. Four sturdy lamps marked the corners. There were bookshelves of crushed volumes along the walls, topped with display cases of colonial conquest.

Doc was busy arranging the dentistry gear they had finally received in total, splaying picks, chisels, probes, forceps, excavators and elevators, scalars, hoes and hatchets, and his assistant's pliers and vise grip that he had brought from home. These were displayed on the glass table and illuminated so that the metal looked sharp and immaculate. Veronica sat in one of the deep windowsills at the front of the room. The assistant stood before her with a copper ring in each hand, holding the

bracelets high in front of him to show that he came in peace. She looked at him and shrugged her assent, and at his approach she smirked a little, pumped an eyebrow, dared him. She sat up and bared her wrists. There were falling oak leaves and sprays of heather lightly tattooed along the inside of her arm. He had to lean a little against her crossed ankles to slip the bracelets over her hands, squeezing the circumference, making sure by close inspection that the sensors covered the shoots of her ulnar artery. He wondered if they were tight enough, or too tight, and he looked up at her. She lifted her eyes from the bracelets. He knew already the specks and grains of her iris from the reading room of the library, but he noticed this time a stroke of black pigment that seemed to spill from her left pupil. He nodded, businesslike. “Veronica Samir,” he said.

“Samir,” she whispered. “Rhymes with *‘come here.’*”

He backed up. Doc was checking her skin surface temperature, diastolic blood pressure, and pulse rate. He recorded these for a baseline.

Stuart stood solemn and silent, as befitting the staging of a difficult operation. The room was as still as a vault.

“Bah!” she screamed. The assistant flinched like a first-time actor in a horror show. His nervous laughter, for embarrassment, had to follow.

Doc waited a full couple minutes for the somber spirit of the occasion to return.

“Veronica,” he said in a low, grave voice.

“Doctor Thomas Hock and his trusty assistant Stuart,” she replied in a low, theatrical voice.

He stared at her. She had the recollected sense that she had just gotten in trouble for talking in class. This was it. The beginning of the session.

“In the next room there is a man named Howard West. He was an adjunct here eight years ago — taught a statics engineering

class. He would stay late always, rethinking the day's lesson. He was odd. Obsessive over events that had already happened and could not be repaired.

"Friday came one week and he metroed home and walked the half mile to his old family house in Alexandria. It was the middle of March and one of those early spring nights that presage the possibility of summer. He always tripped a security light at the Redeemed Church of Christ, and every time he thought, *Someone's watching*, but this time something caught his eye. He saw two white stones up near the hedge, oblong and standing upright against each other. He took a few steps back. Legs. Lady's thighs. Knees pushed into each other ball-in-socket, out of which shins departed and spread apart. From this angle he could see one bare foot just beyond the shock of hair, the base of her foreshortened head swallowed by grass.

"She was supine, one arm across her chest and the other reaching for the roots of the hedge. Howard West stepped carefully backwards along the walk, but did not unlatch his stare. He treaded towards the church along the slate rock entrance and took two stairs, holding himself at the iron rail like it was a cordon at a historical preservation. The light remained on with always *someone watching*, and he found himself looking into a still image.

"He was part of that image, on the edge of the frame, a carefully arranged *mise en scene* of profane, sublime iconography. He slid off the railing and couldn't help himself. He moved towards her — something about the stillness and a vision's complete obliteration of every other physical sense told him he didn't have to rush anything.

"Her dress was scrunched up above her navel. He circled up the slope to approach from a higher angle, and walked around her for a reverse inspection. He knelt at her feet, in genuflection, a solemn pose. He reached out and curled one hand around an ankle, and then slowly pulled the cold foot to the outside of his knees. He did the same with the other foot, her legs now flat and open before him in the grass. He bent forward, reaching the clump of her dress that gathered like a shade across the frame of

her ribs, and from that hovering position he looked up to see her face, and that all this time she was looking down at him.

“He was shaking uncontrollably. But he tried to steady his hand and he leaned further, heavy and hovering with a long strained reach for her neck, up over her chin and the tip of her cold nose, and he pressed his fingertips into the soft tissue of her eyelids to close her eyes. But *someone’s always watching*, and besides the church security cameras a neighbor across the street was capturing the whole sordid business on video.

“He had just shut her eyes when the police arrived, and at their approach he sat back into the hedge. He surrendered. The coroner eventually testified that he had arrived well after she had been dumped into the yard by her murderer, but still he was charged with tampering, interfering with a crime scene, and violating a whole slew of state laws codifying basic human decency.

“He lost his job, served his time, and now, just down the hall, Howard West waits in a room. He has consented to help us out today. Believe me,” said Doc, lowering his voice for dramatic emphasis, “he could use the money. And with a history revealed of other deviant behavior, a long and nearly apologetic psychological profile drawn up by teams of well-meaning therapists, he will be the variable for the session today. He will be the one holding these utensils over your face today.”

“This for real?” Veronica asked, still smiling in the suspension of disbelief. She looked from the professor to his assistant, standing next to him. Stuart raised his eyebrows, and looked to the floor.

“Stuart?” said the professor, handing him two short ropes. Stuart scowled and then dragged over one of the chairs to face the door. “Take a seat, Veronica,” said Doc. “If you will.”

She narrowed her eyes upon him as she did, searching his face for some suggestion of play. She placed her arms on the rests and curled her fingers over the sculpted paws at the end. Stuart tied her wrists just behind the bracelets. He pulled back the floor lamps to the corners of the room and dimmed their bulbs by two clicks. The door opened.

Two girls and a boy entered carrying backpacks low in front of them. They took up positions behind her and she could hear zippers being drawn down.

Dr. Hock disappeared down the corridor. The assistant stood behind her. It was quiet enough to hear the breathing through their squeaky noses until a door closed hard down the hall. When the knob of the office door slowly turned, Veronica laughed a little — *This is dumb*. The man slowly ducked through the doorway. He was grotesquely tall.

He stood just inside the threshold, and they stared at each for a long minute. Veronica blinked twice. She could hear the deliberate, slow stealth of movement behind her, a shifting of positions. The assistant leaned a little against the back of the chair. Howard West looked down at the coffee table and the attractive array of shiny things. He teetered forward. His spine was so long that when he stooped over the table to pass his large hands over the picks and chisels, his back seemed to buckle on the hinge of some extra joint. One of the girls was standing at the edge of Veronica's periphery. There was a whisper, short and hurried, an exhortation to do something. West had made his selection: a hooked pick. He opened his back and stood motionless again before her, a still frame, his long arms hanging sideways, holding the pick just above his knee. He held the shocked stare as he moved one step toward her. The boy appeared on the other side. There was another sharp whisper behind her. The assistant's hip pressed a little on Veronica's shoulder.

West stopped just in front of her, leaned a little forward, one foot in front of the other, poised as a runner before the gun, and raised the pick. He was trembling. In the soft light with the hushed voices, it was as quiet as a funeral parlor or a celebrity crime scene — not for some junkie or prostitute stepped over and photographed in the glare of morning, but of a self-inflicted grand dame of Hollywood found dead in the middle of the night, or a slain judge discovered indiscreetly with another body in his chambers. Whispers, and how did this come to be?

West must have seen something in the way that Veronica was looking at him, her eyes open and watching, that tapped a memory and triggered an impulse.

“Take him from the side,” she heard. West, all this time, hovered over her, holding still in the throe of a wet stare. Another urgent whisper: “Get his hand.”

“Reverse shot.”

“Not yet.”

“Get up on the chair.”

This time there was a discernible click.

The trembling of the man’s hand spread to his arm, and his whole body began to shake.

“Over the shoulder.”

“Reverse.”

“Get a P.O.V.”

The boy rounded to the side, tilted a lamp shade to spill more light into the center, took up a position in the doorway, and snapped another shot.

The man had to stand erect again. He stretched his back, twisted on his hips, and then sat down in a chair. He was depleted.

The boy with the big lens took a couple steps closer. An optical point-of-view from West’s position. Veronica lowered her head, and slowly looked up at him — she gave him her best Norman Bates.

Doc walked in. He asked the art students if they had gotten enough footage. Stuart quickly untied the ropes, and Doc came over to check the bracelets. “Steady as a drum,” he said.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“That’s it.”

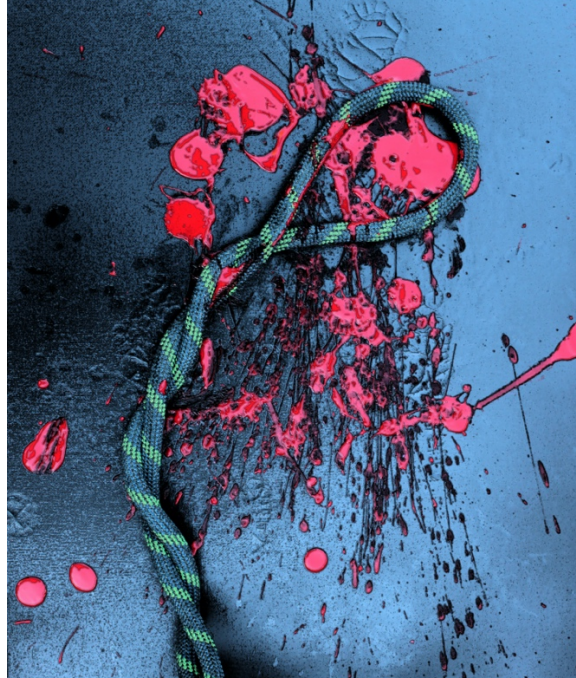
Veronica stood up, turned and beamed at the art students, stretched, and didn't know what to do with herself. They snapped more shots. Closeups of the props. Veronica stood with Dr. Hock and Howard West, grabbed the tall man's throat, kicked her leg back, crossed her eyes and stuck her tongue out to the side. They made goofy killer and slain faces.

When they were returning the furniture, Veronica smiled and asked again, "That's it?"

"That's what?"

"That's the first experiment?"

"That," said Doc, "was a photo shoot. The first experiment is next week. We are going to start by throwing you off the side of a building."



3. Fallen

From the fifth floor of the Ron J. Stein building, sixty feet above the cobbles and the umbrellaed tables of the Wilson Center, they surveyed the composition of the scene. They did not want to be shut down. Police were so busy chasing aftermaths of gunfire and responding to complaints of post-apocalyptic bike gangs and heated clashes over church parking that they knew, with a little fortune, they could pull it off on time. They further mitigated chances of emergency calls by dressing up the performance in vests, t-shirts, sandwich boards and banners emblazoned with the seals of the Smithsonian, the Corcoran, and the Kennedy Center. These were mocked up by the art students, Doc Hock's enlisted corps of graphic artists, photographers, painters, sculptors, thespians and set designers. They concocted a title for the show: *The Dissolution of Human Flight*, and drew up an emblem, a somewhat cartoonish figure of a witch set high on a platform, a line connecting her to a monochromatic mob below.

In the square they had wired together a bank of screens, a video installation, discreetly portaged by hand trucks and easily assembled. There was one eye-catching focal point on each of

these screens, a woman in a red flowing dress, placed high on a ledge.

Doc requested the attire. The wispy red dress, the black tights and short black heels, lipstick and black curls bunched by a black hairband: she was the magician's assistant. But Veronica left the tights in the car and kicked the pumps off right before climbing out to the ledge. "Screw that," she said, toes better to balance with. Stuart had looped and tied her wrists together with a climbing rope and checked the copper bracelets before she ducked out the fifth story window. He had forgotten to throw the rope down to the square, so he held her arm above the elbow as she crouched on the ledge, checked the landing, yelled "Rope!" and tossed the coil out into the air. She carefully stood and sidestepped along the ledge to press her back against the vertical slab of cement. He popped his head out and asked if she needed anything.

"Um, no," she laughed.

"I'll be right in here, monitoring."

"Check!" she said. She could hear herself dispersing into the void, carried away by winds that swirled around the square on a disc of pigeons circulating far below her.

The chorus of fear and balance might be *Don't look down*, but her balance was fine — her balance was duly recognized on playgrounds across old neighborhoods. She was just fine. Fear is the catalyst of a fall. Her shins itched a little for the brush of the dangling rope, and there were a few strong updrafts. With her hands tied and plunged in front of her by the weight of the rope against her dress, she thought of Marilyn Monroe on the subway vent.

She could watch Doc addressing the crowd sixty feet below her. So many were there already. A throng had gathered. He had achieved the critical mass where anything can be promised to a crowd and they'd stick around. But this was something to see: a woman high on a ledge tied to a rope, and the mechanism was all backwards, all upside down. She could only be pulled off into a free fall to an abrupt, catastrophic end. Doc, still talking over his

shoulder to the audience in outlandish explanation, walked over and took up the dangling end of the rope. “Oh,” she said, feeling the light tug he gave her. She twisted her feet a little wider and pressed her toes over the edge.

She could hear phrases drifting upward: *An entire life in one’s hands, to feel the whim of gods, the disproportionate power of one single moment, the privilege to feel in the fabric of a rope an entire life’s culmination.* All this he offered them, holding the rope before them.

Most of the crowd were watching the monitors, only occasionally peering up to verify that the subject of the video was real. She swished her hair side to side. She could watch herself duplicated across a dozen monitors. She put one leg out and then the other. There was a small time delay.

Doc held out the end of the rope to any takers. Hands raised, several of them. This surprised her. So many were so convinced that they were party to an elaborate stunt that they couldn’t imagine culpability for a woman’s tragic death. Maybe Doc was right about the participation of the public in a show. The sublimation of reality is complete. Planes never hit those buildings. Russian soldiers were paid actors and reports of school shootings satisfied 30-second spots between new ways to grout a bathtub and people dropping from ledges. Producers and audiences both feel the disappointment over tidal waves that never in video conform to the shape of our dreams, a smooth wall of dark water building from the deep into a monstrous curl, ready to swallow a city in its black, gaping maw.

The crowd beneath her watched on the bank of screens for what comes next.

She moved a leg. She brought out her arms and sent a ripple down the length of the rope. There was at least a one-second delay. She imagined herself falling in a slow, one-half rotation: She lands on her back — the crowd hears the radial, explosive clap, turns to the sound of the impact, and misses the whole thing on TV. She smiled at the comic potential.

Doc made his selection: a man in an oversized bucket hat, lost in a white sleeveless shirt and cinched into his baggy white shorts with a strap. The man was not having it, though. He didn't volunteer; Doc picked him. He swung the rope back at Doc, but Doc was insistent and so he returned it to the man's hands. The man refused again, pushed back emphatically, and threw both his hands into the air. Doc grabbed him by a raised arm and pulled him to the side for a word. Veronica watched all of this with some wonder, and pressed her toes around the edge, sending white bands of bloodletting compression across the surface of her feet.

The man in the bucket hat broke Doc's grasp and was walking a circle in fretful thought. He circled back and grabbed the rope. She felt the tug in the rope. They were now connected.

It bothered her a little that he never looked up at her. He was pulling the rope taut against her wrists and then giving it slack as if it were a fishing line, all beneath his big hat and only turning now and then to watch the monitors. He matched what he did with what he saw on the screen. Every small tug she could feel the shimmy in her kneecaps. A half rotation would put her into a dive, and so she wondered, if the tug was hard enough, if she should just step off early to enlist the crumple zone of her legs. There was no chance any other way, headfirst or the smack of her belly.

She wondered if falling victims tense up their bodies before hitting the pavement. It was so strange to think of the crescendo of all that sound by the impact and you wouldn't be there to hear it.

The man kept fishing with the rope, a slow dance between them separated by five stories, and the silence of the crowd told of their fascination. Directly below a couple of small girls — everyone is small from the ledge — were stretching their necks *to see*. That's exactly where I'll land, she thought. They'll be flattened.

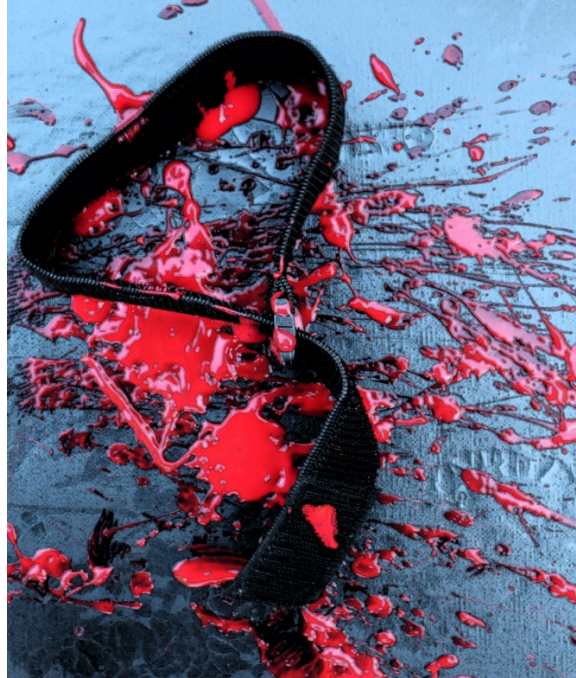
She began to question when the real tug would come when she heard a single whoop of a siren outside on 14th street. The man flung the rope and fled, mashing his hat on his head. Doc immediately seized the sandwich board and clapped it

shut. There was a frenzied agitation of key players in the crowd. The crew had been activated. The bank of monitors disintegrated in seconds. Hand trucks were loaded and banners were ripped down. The rope dangling from Veronica's wrists still twirled from being flung and it caught the legs and arms of Doc's art students as they ran by in quick, grabbing jerks. Two stout policewomen entered the square through the arched passageway. They swayed with belts of batons, revolvers, handcuffs and spray. Stuart popped his head out the window.

"Gotta go! Grab your rope!" She smirked at this, and sidestepped back to the open window just as firecrackers exploded at the north end of the square. The police felt for the sides of their belts in perfect unison. One called it in, and the other took a few cautious steps toward the volley of small explosions, scanning back and forth across the rapidly emptying square. Stuart grabbed Veronica's hands and shielded her head from knocking into the top of the frame. He snatched a bag and they ran down the service stairs in a rattle of loose handrails.

It was only when Stuart stopped to remember where they parked that he saw Veronica still hopping on her feet like she was running in place. The asphalt was searing in the sun. He offered his back. She hopped on and said, "Get!"

It took them three blocks and some laughable retracing to find Doc in the car waiting for them. He was delighted. Everything went as planned.



4. Swamped

Doc knew that if he was enthusiastic enough, the dean would let him be. It wasn't a faint, though. Doc was thrilled.

"And the art students were fantastic," he continued, nearly chasing the dean out the door of his office, a lab replete with mad ideas, schemes and apparatuses. "You would not believe the diversion we created."

"I don't want to hear any of it," the dean said, her hand held high in a pledge to functional bureaucratic ignorance. She caught herself at the door and looked over at Veronica, seated in an old aluminum webbed lawn chair that Doc had found online. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, thank you for asking."

The dean pointed at Stuart and didn't have to say anything. Stuart knew that as an accomplice to Dr. Thomas Hock, he lived in constant academic and occupational peril. He

returned to his careful study of the remarkably simple hook-and-loop action of Velcro straps multiplied by thousands.

Doc shut the door behind the dean, and swung a classroom chair between his legs, sitting opposite his test subject. He was beaming.

“You’re really having fun with this, aren’t you?” she said.

“I am! But I am because we are generating just so much material. There’s so much we can derive from it, so many psychological, social, cultural, artistic extrapolations and extensions. This is so ripe, and specifically we are generating material that we will use to repurpose and sharpen — with fangs! — our entire academic model. It’s multidisciplinary, all encompassing, life re-contextualizing substance, marrow and blood, fresh, rich air...” he paused. He didn’t know if Veronica was going to cheer or laugh at him.

“Can you swim?” he asked.

“Mmhmm,” she hummed.

Stuart looked up from his work with the straps, thankfully, as the slow methodical tearing was becoming a little grating on her ears.

“Our original idea,” said Doc, “became a little too elaborate. I began with something that’s haunted me since I was a boy. It was some comic or graphic novel that depicted in lurid detail a man buried up to his neck in the sand before a rising tide.”

“Oh, Creepshow!” she exclaimed.

“I don’t want to know, it still puts the fear in me. But we did begin research on local tides. It’s funny, I never paid much attention to the name and wherefore of the Tidal Basin, never considered its remarkably unpoetic name. ‘Tidal Basin.’ Capitalized and architecturally connoted, though, it’s a romantic place on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial and studded with festival trees. But like all the waterways out of the swamp, it was a product of design, and it was designed for a very specific utility.”

“Let me guess,” she said.

Stuart smiled.

“Yes, I know, tides, but it’s a remarkable and remarkably hidden feat of geoengineering. There are gates to the Potomac and to the Washington Channel that open and close automatically to absorb the river’s tides and flush silt from the channel with fresh water. We checked timetables and started building an apparatus that would allow us to drown you in full view of the public. You’re sitting in part of it, and Stuart is playing with the other part.”

Veronica looked down at the chair. Stuart held up the straps. Doc said, “It’s a sensational way to die.”

Over the last several nights, Stuart had rerun and embellished the scenario in his imagination.

She swims into the dappled water of the Basin, coaxing from her shoulders the shear cloth of a sleeveless Jimi Hendrix T-shirt, which opens and closes around her like a jellyfish. Stuart swims alongside in parallel strokes, pulling behind him a complex of bundled antenna poles, a folding lawn chair and mesh bag of hinges and U-bolts, all kept afloat on a thin brace of Styrofoam noodles.

There is a fundraiser happening at the Jefferson, a gala less for charity than an occasion for dapper and dolled-up men and women to sup on oysters and suck down cones of gin. The silver pointillism of the surface makes it difficult to see the two swimmers, so there’s no commotion when Stuart anchors the poles and erects the six foot stand, bolting the lawn chair on top of it, just below the surface of the water. Veronica treads, her smooth arms sweeping the water back and forth in time with the cycling of her legs. She nods to Stuart. He straps her arms to the rests with Velcro, blindfolds her with a sash he’s kept dry in a plastic pouch, and checks the alignment of her bracelets. He nods. She’s ready, and he paddles off into the illusory light.

Veronica is up to her chest in water. The tidal gates have been opened, and the natural course of ebb and flow, day and night,

spring and fall, and life and death, begins. There's a quartet playing on the pink marble base of the Jefferson. She can just hear the cello moan as the surface of the water rises to the nape of her tilted head. Doc and Stuart point like setters to notify the crowd of a thing happening in the Basin.

Small detachments of the partially-educated trim off their discussions of Barthe and Foucault and consider a woman drowning. They calculate the levels of protection afforded them by diffused responsibility. Some know the term well, though, and force themselves out of the fog of frozen wonder and confront that, yes, there is a thing happening in front of them — they'd spent the day, the week, the year, maybe their whole lives retelling events, and here, right at that moment, right now, is a thing happening. Some understand the possibility of emerging from the cast of a foretold history and to rewrite the present, to amend the present, and they begin taking off their shoes. The water is at her chin. She turns her head to open an ear to the advent of splashing. Curious. She might be able to lift her nose and still keep breathing. She knows that once the surface of the water begins lapping at her lips she will have to breathe deeply in time with the pulsing water to draw in one last breath.

By the time the first man rolls off the marble shelf and tumbles into the water, four women are rushing toward the drowning woman, submerged now, the tips of her hair curling like black fins of fighting fish. They feel the points of resistance at her side and the Velcro straps with their exploring hands, and rip the binds open. Veronica rises to the surface, and peels off the blindfold in triumphant retaliation. She squeegees the water from her wide, oxygenated eyes, looks at her liberators and laughs, "Thank you!" She kicks her powerful legs once like a scissor jack, and sidestrokes, her fingers of her lead hand drawing open curtains of water before her, parting them with her free black hair until the surface slides like a bed sheet over the dorsal of her hip. The four women escort her in points of a diamond, their blond hair trailing in the black water like dust streams of comets.

This was the scene repeating in Stuart's imagination, even as Doc explained the ridiculous complexity of the operation.

“The timing is just way too difficult,” Doc said. “Plus the construction and quick deployment of the apparatus, the depth, contour, and stability of the bottom of the basin — there’s just too much of this experiment to cut out.”

Stuart awakened. “Occam,” he said.

Veronica turned to him. “God bless you.”

“Occam’s razor.”

“Ah,” she smiled, “I thought you’d sneezed. Don’t talk so much!” Turning back to Doc, she added, “I’m not sure how long I can hold my breath.”

“There’s that, too,” agreed Doc. “And the whole diabolical performance-art serial-killer setup puts out a seriously creepy vibe. People would wonder how you came to be in that fix, who put you there, why, and most importantly, where the mastermind was.”

“We can’t be sure anyone would actually try to save you,” remarked Stuart, definitely not sneezing, but still awash in his carefully curated fantasy. He imagined that once Veronica was escorted to the ring of the Basin, he would have to carry her wet on his back to save her feet from the pebbles.

“Too much that can go wrong,” said Doc, “and the narrow margin between life and death we seek is not even approached if the tide doesn’t rise. And then you’re just some unfortunate girl left to sit chest deep in the still waters of the Tidal Basin. Unless you fear dying from embarrassment, which I doubt, it’s not going to work. Tides, topography, the constitution of silt, the timing, the proximity of the police: it’s too complicated — so instead we’re going to throw you off the side of a ship. Stuart?”

Stuart turned to the table. For a moment he stared at the item in front of him until his little reverie left him completely. He grabbed the thing. “This,” he said, trying to find a center of gravity, “is the only piece of equipment. It is a scuba diver’s weight belt.”

Doc took it in his hands. "It'll be hard to swim with it for very long. The belt is designed to counteract the buoyancy of flotation vests. You'll wear it around your waist, and after a good couple of minutes of serious flailing and kicking, it'll pull you down faster than a chimpanzee in a swimming pool."

"Chimps can't swim?" asked Stuart.

"Nope," said the doctor. "At least I read that last night. Too top-heavy."

"The same is true for all great apes," said Veronica, "gorillas and orangutans. A friend of mine works at the zoo, and she says that Waohab the gorilla can often be seen staring blankly at the moat."

"Maybe he's contemplating an escape," said Stuart.

"Or his own mortality," said Doc. "Anyway, a couple of minutes of flailing and kicking is enough time for people to process a crisis and to do something about it. We're going to have you leap from one of those dinner boats that laze about in the wide part of the Potomac south of Memorial Bridge. We have reservations for an early dinner cruise Thursday. Low 70s. Partly cloudy. Makes for a dramatic sunset."



5. Drowned

On the top deck of the *Lisa Fremont*, the pillared speakers carried the dulcet tones of a rapper who sounded bored with himself. A refrain of a subtly changing, reiterating demand for Milk Duds.

The patrons, dressed in various interpretations of ‘semi-formal,’ some men in baseball t-shirts, most in buttons, and all the women in summer dresses, spent the majority of the float out and dinner trying different angles and facial expressions that would confuse Janus. Stuart watched from the railing. He noted the photographic smile. He mused. The reflex of the automatic smile begins with the demands of parents and is likewise preserved by deep mortal yearning, to be remembered smiling. So when near the end they’ll look for evidence of a time happily lived, they’ll have their proof. But what, thought Stuart, about the half second beyond the click of a button? What of the stock smile that recoils just as fast and vanishes in consternation at the inauthenticity of the event? Record a face at the half second beyond the photograph and then we’ll see it: the flash of doubt.

He looked down the edge of the railing to see Ms. Veronica Samir, untelevised, unpixelated, the subtle movement of ages, blinking into the breeze of a full sunset. She wasn't mulling over the water she was about to plunge into, the swirling, propeller-chopped whorls and froth-tipped peaks of a highly trafficked river. She wasn't looking for an entry point into the croc-infested Nile, but into the farther vapor of the Hellenic age. Veronica's face in this era, he thought, would launch a thousand ships above the horizon, airships, new century zeppelins, inspired and electrified. He could see her profile vinyl-wrapped across the skin of futuristic hovercraft, tattooed across the ship like Hermes as heroine, her cheek bones as sleek and smooth as a Spartan helmet. Or is there in her a more Polynesian equivalent in the Capricorn cosmos? What *is* her genealogy, he wondered. This would be a good question to ask her. He strolled down the railing of the drifting river boat, and proposed the question. She didn't move but held her chin into the wind — it wasn't until he heard Doc's boisterous laugh that Stuart relented his fantastic approach and admitted to himself that he'd not stepped a foot. He remained in the same spot, a freebie cup of diluted spirits in his hand.

Doc was doing push-ups on the other side of the boat in exhibition for a number of men who left their wives to their photoshoots. The men laughed uproariously, bare-knuckle laughs, Hemingway's boasts at the bar, laughter to challenge, compete, dare and scare off the presumptuousness and subtler contest of banter.

Veronica noticed two women in kayaks windmilling their paddles upriver, the bows piercing the brown waves and bucking blankets of water into their cockpits. They rode low in the rough water and she wondered if they needed rescuing.

Doc stood behind her. "Got your belt on?"

"That's why I'm wearing this mumu instead of dressing cute like the other girls." The light green print fell from her shoulders like a podium drape. Underneath she could feel the small bricks of

weights down the webbing over her belly, across her hip, and diagonally up her back. Doc pushed his knuckle between her shoulder blades and felt for the clasp they had set in the gap above and below her reach. A cord looped around her other shoulder kept the clasp from slipping in either direction. He checked her bracelets as she scanned the crowd. Women stood shoulder to shoulder comparing tans on their forearms.

“Do you think they’ll save me?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There were some real braggarts in the crowd I was with. Care to make a speech before your tragic plunge? It could help.”

She scowled and stepped up to a storage box next to the railing, drawing the gown up her trailing calf. She balanced on the boat’s edge into the wind, the light green fabric whipping and twisting like a caught net or prayer flag. Doc thought of an impressionistic woman in no need of a parasol. He looked for any notice from the clumps of people down the deck. No one ever looks up, he thought, the only advertisements on ceilings are in cathedrals. He thought of how religiously they all stifle their insidious, latent mortal apprehensions with the daily wadding of trivial distraction, when the greater world is right there above them in the shape of a girl in the wind. He was formatting these words in his imagination, while down the port side his assistant was feeling them in a more inchoate, existential knock when they both turned from the inattentive crowd to find that she had disappeared.

They both panicked. She could already have plunged down a seam of moving water.

Veronica’s first thought was the surprising warmth of the water. When she struggled to the surface, she could only look up, tilting her head back to breathe as she kicked her legs and

furiously pumped her arms back-and-forth while foam and fabric collared her neck. She could see backlit shadows of heads appearing over the edge above her. She could see flashes of bulbs. Sound cut in and out. Someone was shouting, maybe Doc.

She could hear the drone of an engine cutting into the shouts of the man, and then only the engine underwater. Her hair lifted from her neck above her head and she could feel the fish skin of her dress gathering around her arms. She had imagined she'd see blue — blue Dickinson uncertain blue — but there's no light down here. She kicked and pushed down volumes of water to slow her slide into an invisible column. Was it 15 seconds? she wondered. Someone fearless would be able to keep count. She descended. She had been eager to see by these experiments if life, as they say, passes like a 1940s newsreel before her eyes, but she could only think in physical sensation. When can any person living ever think? Her lungs burned and she tried in vain to reach the clasp behind her, but as she stretched and contorted for it, she felt the weights slip off and bash the tops of her feet. Almost immediately she bobbed to the surface.

She spat, pulled a tangle of hair from her face, and squeegeed the water from her eyes with her fingers. Women were treading around her, three or four. She laughed and said, "thank you!"

In the stern of the ship, she sat with Doc on a storage bench. "Not a blip," he said. The crowd had returned to their stations at the bar. "Not a blip of your pulse until the moment, I gather, you hit the water and began treading furiously." He patted her head with a towel as she rubbed her legs dry. "Not a blip besides the expected spike for physical exertion, and then the line turned downward a little as you continued to sink. What were you doing down there?"

She laughed, "I don't know! Thinking, I guess."

“Thinking, ‘when am I going to be rescued?’”

“A little, but mostly about what I was thinking. I did wonder if I could reach the clasp, but when I reached my arms around, it was already gone.”

“A stranger to the rescue, in the nick of time.”

“A whole party of them at the surface!”

Doc left the towel on her head. He looked down the deck at all the people who had snapped back to their comportment, but with at least a new story to tell, or new captions. “You know, most people’s heart rates would stay at the limit not only for the ensuing wake of adrenaline, but stay just as high for all the attention they would suffer afterwards.”

She dried out her ears, folding the towel around serpentine locks of wet hair.

“We got some great coverage of this one,” said Doc.

“Mm,” she throttled with grinning suspicion.

Doc was looking at her from the side. He nodded, “Right,” and slapped a quick drum fill on his knees. “How do you feel about wild animals?”



6. Bitten

Snakes were obvious. Real Temple of Doom snakes. Big bitey creatures. Spinal cords with fangs. But it's not the fangs that kill. Most victims express disbelief, an instant trivialization of the fatal blow. Some absurdly laugh. Some yell at the creature like it's a misbehaving dog. No, it's the eventual, precipitous result, the swelling and necrotic flesh, the witness to parts of the body looking like someone else's, looking like product, like prop body parts, fake and waxy. Many die thinking of appointments they promised to keep. Horacio Quiroga tells the story of a bitten man drifting alone between black basalt cliffs trying to make it to a doctor or anyone at all who could help. His anger subsides to thinking of his calendar. He can't remember which day he's supposed to meet a man, is it Tuesday or Wednesday? It is the very last thought of his accumulating brain.

The fear of a snake bite is not just the rude, spring action, but of having read or heard about what follows. It's knowing what comes next. The fear of so many fatally injured or terminally ill,

or simply having been abandoned, comes from having heard or read about it, or having seen the movies, and the chagrin and anger at your prior self for not having invested more pity in those characters then, for having become them now — and the sick feeling of knowing that you have become an exemplar character to everyone else, worthy of a cautionary tale or just a point of conversation or quick visceral thrill.

They thought of snakes and too-elaborate schemes. Trapped in a car full of the twining, narrow things in a mall parking lot was the most straightforward, but someone would have to procure the snakes in the first place, and Doc was terrified of them, hated them, thought that their inclusion in the universal scheme of things was an insult to their maker — and that's why they became instruments to ancient religions and mythology: they were a rude mistake that needed some higher calling.

Stuart was asked to check out the range and availability of the creatures in local shops. He couldn't take his eyes off one yellow python, its big head grinning with a smelling tongue and its dead permanent stare. He pictured the muscle of it wending its way across Veronica's smooth brown shoulders and down her arm into an open palm, a sumptuous Frank Frazetta painting.

But, no, snakes are too cagey.

Spiders are even less reliable. They're small and fidgety and it requires a multitude to induce real panic. Doc had hatched one plan. He had read about a particularly vengeful species that, when brushed off a branch or shelf they shoot up a spindle of silk and return by the thread to attack the aggressor. Survival by revenge. Macaques have been seen festooned with them and mummified in a reverse-process silken cocoon, a soup of fur and body. They thought if they could set Veronica on top of a scaffold and swipe off enough of these avenging creatures, and give people broomsticks...

Most of Doc's plans begin as absurdist jokes until he finds enough pins to give it shape, but this one remained a fantasy.

Besides, Stuart didn't want to think of Veronica festooned with spiders, not at all. He may have nurtured one vision of a black widow tiptoeing the circumference of her medallion tattoo in the crease of her back, but this woke him up in a clawing panic. The thought of its tiny lancets of legs on her skin was too much.

They considered bats, naturally, and thought of anesthetizing some woolly one and entangling it in her hair as she lies in a public park, but even with a long pair of shears there's little hope for rescue. People will follow instructions to deliver a baby or land a plane, but they won't go anywhere near a bat.

All of these they delighted in telling Veronica, among a whole dustbin of ideas — to tell how far they were willing to go — but when they began to flesh out the scheme of an entangled bat, she just shook her head. Besides, she told them, she had kept up her titers from her rabies series, a requisite from her stint in animal sciences.

Stuart listened to her, imagining her lying like Elvira under an album cover of moonlight, with one live bat barrette holding a towering nest of hair.

"We thought of birds," said Doc.

"Birds!" she laughed. "Like Melanie Daniels? I'm going to be your Melanie Daniels?"

"You know your Hitchcock."

"Hitch was required viewing in my family," she said. "My dad owned whole anthologies. We watched the entire catalog, from Sabotage to Psycho to Frenzy."

Next to Veronica all this time was a grinning Rottweiler, ropes of saliva hanging from its pink jowls. She kneaded its fatty neck as it sat there like a porch ornament leering at Stuart. He watched and listened to the clap of its jaws and thought maybe there is no imagination in humankind. The source material for all horror is a dog named Judge.

“Strange,” Doc said. “How does a fearless girl watch horror films?”

“I like to see where they end up.”

“What do you know about Tippi Hedren in the making of *The Birds*?”

“Only that she was one of Hitchcock’s favorites to torture.”

“Do you know the trauma that Hedren experienced on that set?”

“I know there are stories. I had a film teacher who was a real fanboy and would tell us stories, but we just parked our attention while he carried on between scenes. Sometimes during scenes. He once stopped *Rear Window* as George Thorwold walked up the steps to Jimmy Stuart’s apartment.”

“L.B. Jefferies and his flash bulbs, yes! What a brilliant device to slow down the attack at the finale.”

“Now you sound like a fanboy.”

“Just required viewing.”

Judge was dozing under the patterned undulation of her fingertips.

“You remember the climactic bedroom scene, when Melanie Daniels made the grievous error of following a hunch into an upstairs bedroom? Birds dropped through the broken ceiling and massacred her. Throughout the shooting of the film mechanical birds had been used. Sometimes they were painted frame by frame on the celluloid. For this scene, however, to really get the

most out of the day, Hedren was told that the mechanical birds had stopped working, and that they'd have to use real ones. She was placed in the room, which itself was enclosed in a cage, and bird handlers wearing thick gauntlets hurled ravens, doves and pigeons at her. Some were tied to her clothing as she lay helpless on the floor. She suffered five days of relentless pecking, and only when she nearly lost an eye did she call it quits. She broke down into heaves of sobs, and no one approached her. She was left alone in that room, a bundle of a used-up actor, sobbing."

Veronica shook her head. "I had no idea it was to that extent."

"Now we thought to have the art students construct a bedroom cage, but immediately we abandoned the idea for failing to figure out how to make the experiment public. But the idea I want to impress upon you is why Tippi Hedren was traumatized. It's because she wasn't Melanie Daniels. That trauma was not Melanie Daniels', but Tippi Hedren's. Tippi Hedren knew it was a film set, that the birds do not possess the mysterious impulse to peck into soft skin and draw blood. She knew it was a set, and that a film crew surrounded her: colleagues, supporters, hair stylists. But they turned on her in the monomania of producing a show. Sacrificed on the altar of art and entertainment. The repeated tossing of the ravens, thrashing in hollow-bone, beak-and-talon remonstrations for survival, was specifically contrived for a climactic scene. The camera operator must have watched with occupational satisfaction the raised flesh of her arms, tintured with small cuts, her expression of legitimate horror consisting of confusion, betrayal, and the runaway velocity of true crisis. She had woken up that morning in the bliss of a new day, maybe opted for grape jelly on her toast — and suddenly there were men with gauntlets up their arms standing over her, men whose first names she knew. The birds were as much a device as the flash bulbs, the cameras rolled upon carefully laid tracks, all under the direction of a storyboard. What caught Tippi Hedren was the unblinking monomania of *The Show*. Maybe there isn't recourse, no high court of humanity, nothing sacred about being Tippi Hedren at all — instantaneously, in one gross, grotesque turn of the crank, she, too, had become just a morsel. For art's sake."

"And they got their climactic scene."

“They did.” Doc watched her shuffle her fingers up the rottweiler’s neck. Its face muscles relaxed. It dozed. “That dog you’re holding by the scruff. It has a history of biting and is one nip away from destruction by the state. When we borrowed it from a fed-up colleague in Anthropology, we agreed to keep it in a muzzle. It lunged at us like it wanted to eat our throats out. But you give it no fear to agitate its instinct. You have subdued it. It is a dog again.

“So no zoophobia. No snakes or spiders or bats or birds.

“How are you, then, in tight spaces?”



7. Buried Alive

The darkness buried in a box is absolute. If there were a planet, a star, corona, the cloud-reflection of a city below the horizon, or candlelight in the next crypt, just one errant particle of light, the pupil would seize it like it were the last post to hitch onto. But without it, over time, nothing can stop imagined terrors from sloughing out of the murk. The darkness first starts to orbit in rippling, swaddling fractals, in falling black curtains six feet to a pile. It becomes impossible to know if eyes are open or shut. Shortening periods of breath become willed, voluntary, sporadic. There's a bass movement of tectonic sounds like the moan and swallow of dirt. The victim of being buried alive dares not move, because once she begins to work her feet against the sides of the box, or her elbows and fists of knuckles against the lid, claustrophobia kicks in. The sick, nauseating ache of being locked in place and time completely contingent upon someone's rescue. It's this abandonment that terrifies most. It's at first an outrage: how have I come to this? Who will answer to this? And then the spirit decays to resignation under the staggering unfairness of it all. It's always been put forth by polemics and in

cocktail conversations that there's no cosmic justice, but to have it *confirmed*, and so completely?

Even if you could appeal to someone to dig, where would they dig?

"That's why we are going to give you an intercom down there," said Doc. "Bells for dead ringers is so 1850."

"No one knows what bells at night mean," said Stuart. "Who wouldn't now think they are battery-operated or remotely activated instead of tied to the wrist of a person alive in a grave? And besides, engines and other amplified noises this century are way too much competition for bells."

"So that's why we are going to amplify you — your direct appeals."

"We really have forfeited all subtlety this century," she said. "So I am going to be buried and have to call for help."

"You can make any appeal you like. You'll be buried in loose dirt no more than two or three feet under in a dog park in Old Town, only about four blocks from King Street on a Thursday night. There will be plenty of people around to make your appeal, but not too many."

"That's the trick," said Stuart. "Too many and no one will answer, they'll attempt to laugh it off, and there are no heroes if there is any chance of embarrassment."

"We will have to do something about your voice, though," said Doc. "It attracts too much attention."

She laughed. "What?"

"It does this thing," said Doc, "it has this sort of musical humming quality that might too easily capture the attention of bystanders. It is better in this case that we amp up the creep factor and convert your voice to a more approximate call from the grave."

“Doc wants to make you sound like a demon.”

“Really? It’s not enough that I am asking people to dig me up?” She looked at the intercom Stuart had on the desk in front of him. She drew an impish smile. “Let me hear it.”

Stuart turned on the intercom and plugged in one of the speakers. She brought it to her lips and intoned, “This man is not my father.” Amplified beyond what could now be called her signature hum and lavish voice, the speakers discharged a diabolical, electrified screech from some backwoods hollow or 80s budget devil film — a tinny, rasping, pitch-distorting, phase-shifting effect.

“Oh my god!” she laughed.

“We can tamp it down a little,” Stuart assured her.

“Yeah! Give me a chance!”

“We’ll dial it down, then, at least a bit.”

“Will I be able to hear it?”

“We don’t think so. You’ll be in a tight box under a few feet of earth and sod. We’ll have three speakers scattered across the park, hidden in tree branches some distance from the grave, although you’ll be somewhere in the middle of that triangle. You’ll have to direct someone to the spot to dig.”

“With what, their bare hands?”

Doc laughed. “I think you overestimate people. Saving a life is one thing, but getting dirty is too much. No, Stuart, why don’t you place a spade nearby?”

“You’re just now considering a shovel?”

“No, we thought of a shovel,” said Stuart.

She looked at him. He was standing and adamant they'd thought of a shovel. At least he thought of a shovel. She looked back at Doc. "How long until breathing becomes a problem?"

"We asked around about that and made some calculations. The box is a little smaller than we wanted. The art students design more for aesthetics than utility, and they've fashioned something between the travel-coffin carried by Nosferatu and a cowboy's pine box. It's a meager affair of wood — but that means it should be porous enough to leach some oxygen from the loose dirt. It's tough to tell, there are so many variables."

"You don't know?"

"Between one to seven hours, we think."

"You'd fall asleep before anything else," Stuart added.

"And what if the coffin implodes?"

"Stuart sat on it. I sat on it. We both sat on it."

"Well, I'm glad you tested it."

"It's pretty solid. But you do have some points we need to consider. It's terrifying!"

"Yes," she said. They all paused.

"My niece's birthday is Saturday," she said. "I'd like to be there."

Doc nodded. "That shouldn't be a problem."

She looked at Stuart. He was fiddling with some wiring now, trying to look busy. "What do you think, Stu?"

"It should be fine," he said. He was rolling the wire around his finger.

"Okay. I can say whatever I wish?"

"Whatever you wish."



The sod was rolled over a cover of plywood to a carpet finish. Underneath was a cool clay trench of 110 cubic feet yawning in earthworm darkness, with spade-severed roots shanked off like butchered bones across the ribbed sides of the pit. “Good work, Stuart!” she said when he allowed her a peek underneath the temporary board. “How many nights did this take you?”

“Two. The art students helped me. They couldn’t stop giggling.”

An old stone pedestrian tunnel leads out of, or into, the northern edge of Windmill Park. Limestone water leaks through the confederate stone walls into dripping locks of moss. Stuart and Veronica had towed the coffin through on a wheeled kayak rack. Pedestrians grinned furtively on the chance of an inside joke they did not know. *Freaks.*

Before they dragged the coffin up to the site of the rumpled sod, Stuart stopped by the volleyball courts along S. Union Street. He wanted to show her inside. “The space,” he said.

“My crib?”

“Yes, your digs.”

She crinkled her nose and shook her head, but allowed a smile for the effort.

He lifted the lid and shined his headlamp into the space. Creased into the body-length groove was a red-and-white-checked blanket. “From home.” The pillow was pink and small, a little larger than a pin-cushion. “It’s a camp pillow with a double-wrapped pillowcase.”

“Pink!” she exclaimed.

“I’ve included some other things in here for you.” Under the side of the blanket he showed her an array of items meant to cozy up the place. “A little fan. I replaced the batteries last night. I don’t think it should get too warm — the ground is cool, but I’m not sure how much body heat will radiate in there.” The night was still humid for September. She wore salmon gym shorts and a black sleeveless Slaves UK band shirt with two stick figures sharing the same skull.

“All of these we’ll place near your hands. The switch is right here.”

“Thanks!” she said, looking at the next item in his palm. A small plastic dome. He switched it on.

“A light?” she asked.

“A light.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Doc doesn’t know. He doesn’t need to know.” He fiddled with a button on the side. “I don’t know why it’s stuck on purple. It is supposed to rotate through different colors.”

“Groovy! Thank you, Stuart.”

“And this!” It was a shim of plastic loosely connected to a white honeycomb cylinder. “An old MP3 player with a little speaker. I thought you could listen to music while I bury you. Maybe you could use it to tell time before you start using the intercom.” She glanced down at her wristwatch. “I’ll need about five songs to drag up the big trash cans of dirt and topple them into the grave.”

“Five. Got it,” she said. “Doc doesn’t know about this, too?”

“No. He has terrible taste in music. Listens to Genesis. I loaded this with The Spectres, a psychobilly band from Seattle. I thought your sense of humor would appreciate it. The first track is ‘Scratchin’ at Coffin Lids.’”

“Yes!”

“Do you know the band?”

“I know psychobilly. I should have worn my Cramps shirt.”

Stuart beamed.

“Okay, now the most important piece of equipment of all.” He brought out the cube of yellowed plastic that looked like an old baby monitor. “The intercom. I’ve been worried about this part. You won’t be able to reach it if it slips down toward your feet. So I’ve attached to the bottom of it a long piece of red cord that we can drape around your stomach, chest and legs. And in addition, I’m going to tape the unit to your hand with surgical tape.” He placed the receiver in her hand. “Try it. Make sure to press the button *before* you talk.”

“I know, I know.”

“I’m serious! There’s a sequence to this. Press the button, do a little nod, then talk, nod once more, then let go of the button.”

“Can I try it?”

“Yeah! But not too much. Someone might spot us in the dark, think it’s a trick, and that would be one less savior.”

She lifted the receiver to her chin. The oak-leaf tattoo on her forearm fluttered a little as she squeezed the button. She nodded at Stuart and closed her eyes in the dark. She spoke softly, “Someone want to get up here —” but before she finished the sentence, she gaped with laughter, her eyes the size of casters, and even her laughter sizzled off in the tin wash of the voice effect. “That’s awful!” she yelled, and the fizzy trail of ‘awful’ reverberated with a hiss.

Stuart laughed and grabbed at the intercom. “Shh! You have to let go of the button!” Her thumb popped up between the nest of his fingers and released the button.

“That just sounds wicked!”

“I dialed the effect down as much as I could. There’s not much of a range.”

“Stuart, no one’s going to come.”

He looked down into the coffin for an answer but couldn’t find anything. He was still holding her hand over the intercom and the second had passed for a natural letting go. He needed to grab something else, so he used the red cord lashed to the receiver for a swap. “Someone will come.”

He looked at her. She was still smiling at him in inquiry. She bit her bottom lip.

“I think I can change the pitch a little remotely. I’ll make it better. I think someone will come.”

She pursed her lips, dropped her head an angle. “Mm.” Her chin crinkled.

“There are so many people walking around here, Veronica,” he nodded. “You just have to talk to them. Call them to you, tell them to *come here*.”

“Okay,” she squinted in suspicion. She didn’t look away. She wanted something more. Stuart worked at the cord in his hands, looping it loose and free.

“Ready?” she asked.

Stuart positioned the coffin in the trench and turned on the little dome camping light. The space illumined in purple glow. He pulled at the middle of the blanket to smooth out the folds for her back. He switched on the little cicada-wing fan and placed it next to the MP3 player on one side. The lining of the blanket curled over, the space was so tight, and this he folded back upon itself. The intercom was placed on the other side, with rings of red cord wedged between it and the coffin wall. The little camper pillow was placed at the top, pink and smooth as taffeta.

“My bed for the night,” she said. He looked up at her. She crouched down, put her palms on the edge of the sides and swung

into the coffin as if it were a kayak. Stuart pulled at the sides of the blanket to keep it from folding over again. She was as tight as a pike. She looked like a figurine in the light, a purple cherrywood santos, her legs straight and kissed together.

“Now everything is within touch, right?”

She looked into the sky and felt for the fan and then the radio at her side, and for the intercom on her left hip.

“Oh!” Stuart disappeared from the arrow-slit of open sky above her, and after rifling around a duffel bag, returned to grab her hand. The stretch of skin between her thumb and finger was so smooth. He wrapped a strip of surgical tape around the back of her wrist and the base of the intercom. “Now, if this gets loose,” he was saying as he poured the red cord over her midsection, waist and hips and up and down her left arm, “just use your fingers to pull back the receiver.”

“You’re really worried about this, aren’t you?” she asked.

“It’s just the most important piece. That’s why I think you should keep the light on.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Okay.” He surveyed the space. He remembered to check the bracelets. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

“Let me try the intercom one more time.” He grabbed her hand and pushed down on her thumb. A blip of breathy static issued across the park. A bead of sweat dropped off his nose and splashed on the inside of her elbow. He quickly smeared it dry with his fingertips. “Okay, can you feel the fan?”

“Yes, Stu!” she laughed. “Let’s do this!” Deep in the hole, her teeth and big eyes looked infrared in the purple light.

“Okay.” He remembered to check the bracelets. “You’re comfortable?”

“Yes!”

“The blanket’s not folding up beneath your back, is it? Nice and flat?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” He looked up and down the space of the coffin. “Okay. I’ll be out here. I’ll do something about the voice effect.”

“You’re not being very scary, Stuart.”

“I know, just making sure the experiment goes as planned.”

“Close the coffin lid, Stuart. I’m getting hungry.”

“I can go get you—”

“No, Stu, I was just kidding.”

“Okay.”

“I’m ready. Let’s do this. I want to see how it goes. I thought about what I’m going to say last night.”

“Good. Music on?”

She hit play. The first chords of “Scratchin’ at Coffin Lids” tested the tiny speaker and the train-beat snare filled the narrow confines.

“Leave the light on?” he asked.

“Lights off,” she said, and clicked off the switch. It was impossibly dark. Not even a hallucinated afterglow. *Buried me down in the ground so deep*, the band played.

Stuart disappeared once more. A skinny trapezoid of wood preceded his return.

“You’re good?”

“Yep.”

“Want to say anything?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

He could see her teeth again.

He took the leading edge of the lid and lined it up on the side. *Nobody can hear the sound as I’m six feet underground*, and he shut her in with an unintended clap as the cover fell to the other side. *Trapped inside within, with the darkness closing in*. The music was muffled. The lid hadn’t cleared the rim at the top. He formed a fist out of his shaking hand, held it a second over the pinewood and popped the lid into place harder than he wanted. The music stopped at *Good Lord it’s getting hard to —* Silence. He evaluated the stillness of the coffin. Just a car horn in the distance. Then the low bass wobble of a loose sedan on S. Union Street. He stood up and wiped his dirty hands on his black shorts. It was time for the burial.

The first trash can of dirt was under the dogwood trees between the park and the bike path. He dragged its caught wheels over the grass and tipped it over into the grave. A doughy pile of dark wet loam fell in on itself across the foot of the coffin, rolling into the black creases at the sides. The three-quarter moon lit the edges of torn paper clouds, and he could see his work. He knelt down and pushed the fibrous, twiggy dirt into the creases like a potted plant.

“They Won’t Stay Dead” was the next song, and after that “Howlin’.” The songs aren’t long, but the coffin was as still as a beam and silent. Why was it completely silent? The foot of the coffin was tucked in and buried with the first trash bin and Stuart rose from the shallow grave and peered across the meadow. At the far end of the dog park a woman followed her loping yellow Labrador. It coughed as much as it barked. Stuart could see his work, which meant he could be seen. He had considered erecting

a construction light and donning a municipal yellow vest in the overt-covert methodology of vandals. In the 21st-century men and women have learned to take their crimes out into the light because with surveillance the dark had become too risky, and the tedium of everyone's daily toil was a far better cover.

Stuart wondered if being shut down would be such a terrible advent. He looked out to the street below. Couples followed each other silently along S. Lee and S. Union in the automation of date night, swinging their arms on some invisible axel. He watched a man on a bike sprint into the tunnel, and from the side it looked like he had passed through the wall.

The doctor didn't know what his assistant was doing. In the backseat of his car through the tinted back windows he watched through stage binoculars. "*What are you doing?*" Doc popped out, issued a sharp whistle. His assistant bent over to clutch the shovel and grabbed the handle of the empty first bin and dragged it back down the slope as loudly as morning. He estimated she was already listening to "I'm Your Zombie." Stuart had to hurry.

He pulled up the second bin, tipped it over and filled in the sides with less dirt. "This is stupid," he thought, sweating into the grave. He rose from the diminishing trench with the shovel, and wheeled the second empty bin down the slope, staking the shovel into the pebbled sand next to the bike path as percussively as a knife strike. He yanked hard on the third bin and zigzagged with its broken wheel back up to finish the grave. He spread the dirt over the head of the inert coffin.

The doctor ran up behind him with the shovel. "What are you doing? First you're too slow and now you're throwing everything around." The doctor knelt down. "Help me." They spread the dirt evenly to a flat soft finish and rolled the ready sod back over the fill. The doctor paced out 15 steps toward the waterfront and sheathed the blade in the grass, its handle vertical as a signpost. "Gravedigger" was the last track. They hurried back to the car. Doc sat in the back with his phone and laptop behind the tinted window and Stuart took the driver's seat with the window open.

All was quiet. Couples marched in lockstep. Stuart could see the woman with the white dog, ticking back up S. Lee. They looked as if they were on a tabletop horse race, mechanized.

“Why is she not saying anything?”

“Did you test the intercom?”

“Yes, we tested the intercom.”

“I know. I heard you.”

Minutes passed by in silence. A man stood at the entrance to the tunnel.

“Why is she not saying anything?”

“Relax,” urged Doc, “She has at least five hours of breathing space.”

“One to seven. You said one to seven hours.”

“It’s at least five. We want her to express fear, recall?” Doc turned in his seat to look back through the rear window. “What took you so long?”

“We had to get the blanket right.”

The man at the entrance to the tunnel stood still. His silhouette against the light of the tunnel blotted out any distinguishing features, any mark of recognition or personal significance, just a human post at the entrance of a tunnel at the north end of a park in which the shining teeth of a woman and her narrowly confined body were buried and sodded over in a trench.

He was an insignificant man.

Some don’t know it. Most don’t know it. Someone depends on them, a little, the salt of them electrifies their part of the great daisy chain of a self-important species, or they serve some transient essential function in the subroutine of a larger system, economic or political, the last remaining systems of any

regard. Someone has to key in the data for someone to project to a team of concurring others before the enterprise succumbs to its own gestating irrelevance. This insignificant man was well on his way for a double latte and a box of moisturizing tissues, when in the tunnel he saw it: the unmistakable, nerve-pinching sensation of a glance allotted to him. Eye contact. That the glance was from a young woman should have invigorated him — such a look can gussy up the spirit to whole new dynamics of body circulation. He could purchase from a single look a couple more years to tack onto his life span. Such a look will sustain a man for days, will haunt him pleasingly at night as he assures himself she must have seen something. Such a look will yolk the fodder of a long and wistful conversation at a bar with old chums. But this particular look had snapped from an animal sense of a perceived threat, because *she stepped out of the way*. He could have luxuriated in the idea of being a dangerous man, some tough nugget or a real hard case of a man treading the dark alleys of his share of Gotham. But he didn't feel like it. She had no reason to fear him. So why look and step out of the way? He was on a path to a warm cup of coffee and box of tissues. He couldn't hurt a fly. She had no reason to fear, or to acknowledge him at all. He was an insignificant man on a shopping trip, and he resented her for trivializing his Thursday evening. He stopped in the middle of the path outside of the tunnel. The most he could claim is a minutes-long, two-foot-square reservation in the time-space continuum. A cyclist passed through. He only swerved a little from the man in the middle.

The binoculars paused on the man before Stuart dropped them to his lap. "She's not saying anything."

They heard a voice, or the simulacrum of one.

"Stu..." The voice issued with a long, trailing vowel, pitch-bending and phase-shifting.

"Stu..." "Stu..."

Doc was bemused. "What is she doing?" Stuart scanned the park.

“Ahem,” the voice continued. “Excuse me, but there are two men sitting in a car on South Union Street who like to conduct strange, sick experiments on young ladies.”

“Jesus!”

“They’re probably slumping in their seats right now...” This was true. “Isn’t that so, Doctor?” The pitch of her voice rose a half octave.

The man standing at the entrance of the tunnel looked to the dog park. The effect on the voice occluded the validity of its contents. It was a car stereo, nothing more, a music he did not recognize or seek to understand.

Still, Stuart noticed, “That man remains.”

The man at the entrance to the tunnel had lost all inertia on the hook of a reckoning. The clocked-in barista would not notice if an insignificant man failed to appear in line. Every box of tissues, every shelved item in every store sits in an eternity of motionless circulation. In the photographic stills of a security cam, purchased boxes never leave.

He could, if he wanted to, actually hurt a fly, he thought. The next person that approaches his entrance of the tunnel he could lunge for. That’ll give them something to swerve. He could give her something to look at. He could start wearing black denim. Big shit-kicking boots. His footprint should be bigger. He has the cash. He should buy that big honkin’ pickup. Modify the engine. Split the muffler. Conceal and carry with a bulge. Raise your right hand — I solemnly swear. But he’s past the age. He remains, standing there, inert and irrelevant, listening to a voice that passes through him.

“Stu...”

“What’s her heart rate?”

“It’s fine. Flat and steady. She’s having fun with this.”

“She’s not going to get anybody to...”

Doc brought up the telescopic lens of his camera. “Look at that.”

Stuart brought up the binoculars.

“Up by the tunnel.”

“He hasn’t moved for ten minutes.”

A neck tattoo would work, thought the man at the entrance to the tunnel. The moon had dissolved into a thick orange chowder of city light. Something flashed in the west. I could blow shit up, thought the man. Vigilante style. The Texaco tanks off route 29. The circuit court. Thunder.

“Are you kidding me?” asked Stuart. Doc looked at his watch. “It’s going to storm on our buried victim? This night?”

“35% chance,” said Doc.

“Doc, no one’s going to come if it’s pouring. No one’s going to be... entreated to dig up a buried woman with the voice of Damien.”

“Stu...” the voice persisted. The effect dispersed any intended tone into a horror of trailing static. He couldn’t tell if she was having good fun or desperately pleading.

“How’s her heart rate?”

“It’s fine.”

“Can I look?”

“It’s fine!” the professor laughed, pulling the monitor away.

A crack sounded over the speakers. Another. They were hits, distorted and pinched into high treble by the condenser.

“Those are hits, or kicks,” said Stuart. Thuds of exploratory kicks on the close inner walls and low ceiling. The streets, S. Lee and S. Union, were dead. “I’m turning the converter off.”

“Look —” Doc had his lens trained on the entrance of the tunnel.

The man was facing the speakers.

“Come for me.”

Stuart swiped off the effect.

“Rescue me.” It was pure again, no longer squealing and tinny and strafing the block with cutting metal. This was a voice alive, a musical one, no giddy pop song, but a deep, exotic, provincial score. Her voice.

“I will tell you where I am.”

The speakers vibrated in subbass intimation, those big discs throttling behind the mesh with a voice near midnight, disembodied, speaking unwittingly to someone close.

“I am in the middle of the park.”

A prank, the man thought. He looked around him. Couples ran from King Street as lightbulbs of raindrops plummeted from the

lowered sky and singly exploded across the park. The first volley of an impending storm stopped as quickly. Leaves were left stirring in the hush of a warning.

Doc and Stuart pushed their lenses out of the windows. It became still again. The interval between flash and rumble was still long and diffuse.

“If anyone is listening,” said the voice. The speakers exploded with three sharp reports of kicks, hard kicks. “I am trapped in the middle of the park. I need your help.” The man turned his head from street to park and back again. He wondered, Is anyone hearing this? Am I the mark?

“In the center. I’m here in the grassy middle,” said the voice. “This is part of a cruel and twisted experiment to see if anyone will help a stranger in distress, and I have been put in distress.”

The man watched a dog walker and two wolfhounds walking quickly down S. Union. The leashed man looked toward the trees containing the speakers, but he and eight legs of dog centipeded off in a scurry. The insignificant man looked back to the middle of the park. The voice spoke to him. Its vibrating hum timed perfectly with his standing there. He looked up to the speakers hanging in the tree.

“I will tell you where I am. Please come.” The words held long, the diaphragm of the speakers trembling in the warble. The man looked to the middle of the park, straining to see in the dark.

“I am in the middle of the slope. You will find a wooden post in the grass.”

The man took two demonstrative steps into the open meadow to convince and commit himself. Stuart fixed the binoculars on the

edge of the half-opened window, sweating into the eye cups. Doc checked the weather, and they didn't dare one hexing word between them. A few more steps and the man stopped, and took out his phone. "Shit," they said. He was checking the time, but when the numbers faded the man stared into the black glass: This was a definite thing happening, and it was happening to him. So much of his adult life had been burnt in the circuitry of adjunct entertainment. He was always a part of a national audience; he belonged to million-strong events — and for all the drubbing in fly-swarm pixelation he had been convinced like everyone else that all small, anomalous experiences alone are meaningless. In this backwards state all these years he had been dying on the inside.

But this was speaking to him, and to him alone.

"There is a post, a stick in the middle of the slope," the voice intoned. He walked toward the middle.

"I am held captive. It is all part of an experiment," the voice repeated, "to see if a stranger will help someone in distress. It is perfectly safe to rescue me. I am in the center of the park. In the middle is a post."

The man was holding the post. It was a shovel. He tilted it toward him until it fell into his other hand. He took it up.

"The post in the middle of the field marks where I am. Just walk up the slope a little, find the bed of uneven grass, pull up the sod, and dig. The soil is loose. I am down here."



Once the last song had elapsed, Veronica had turned on the little purple light. Above her she could see a little split in the bottom of the lid, a crack, little chevrons of flaking wood unclasping like little jagged fingers. She raised her forehead to the lid and peered down the length of her purple shirt, purple shorts, and purple legs. She inspected. Just the one crack above her face. She switched off the light. She reasoned that the lid had sustained the heaviest of the pressure and held. She thought to lie there in repose for a while. She thought in sensory deprivation and in such a state she would be tremendously introspective. She thought of the nine-piece puzzle she had bought her little niece. She thought of the construction of coffins. Are there any shaped like tubes or torpedoes or little space pods? She thought that would be something to look into down the road. She wondered if now would be the time of recalling memories lost in the wash of repeating years, Tuesdays and Wednesdays that always stayed Tuesdays and Wednesdays, filling in for themselves. This is the perfect time for life passing before one's eyes, but nothing surprising came to mind. The sawdust made her sneeze, and she hit her head against the crack, cried, "oh!" and laughed at the smarting pain.

She thought it would be fun to mess with Stuart. She turned the intercom toward her and pressed the button. She smiled at the thought of Doc freaking out at the mention of their names. She wondered if Stuart had turned off the voice modification.

She felt a quick run of sweat or water race across her forehead. She wondered if the lid was leaking. She turned on the light, carefully slid her right arm up her chest and slid her fingers across the surface of her forehead. In the purple light, with her fingers so close to her eyes, it was tough to tell if it was water or blood. Maybe she had cut herself. She tapped one of her fingers on the tip of her tongue. Yep, she cut herself.

She thought it was as good a time as any to start making her appeals. Stuart better have turned off the stupid effect. She heard the tectonic rumble of the closest thunder coming for her through the ground. She turned off the light to listen. In abject darkness a rolling bead raced into her right eye and she closed them both — and why not? There's nothing to see. She wrinkled her nose and tried to squeeze the glob from her eye.

She kept making appeals, giving directions. She decided to reveal it was part of an experiment, just to piss Doc off a little, and because it really was a cruel and twisted experiment, but also because she was getting hot and she thought it might help. She redirected the fan a little to blow a stream of air up the side of her shirt. She gave more directions to anyone who would listen. She heard rumbles, deep sonic earth adjustments, and cracks of wood.

She recalled an article about avalanche victims trying to figure out which way to dig. Opposite the spit on their cheeks: clever. The blood ran on her forehead in all directions. Seriously? she thought. This is so stupid.

She had heard a rumble or thumps or hits above her. She had thought to keep her eyes closed. Strikes of a shovel. She thought now it was getting really hot, and she could hear the wood was splitting. The loudening shovel had sensitized her. The last twenty minutes of a transcontinental trip is the longest.

She had thought, This is it, when the point of the shovel hit the lid. She anticipated the figure of her savior.

Doc was busy recording vital signs when Stuart launched from the car. The storm held, and couples were doggedly returning to King Street in single file. Stuart swerved into a passing cyclist, and she caromed into the side mirror of a pickup. He automatically apologized and reached for her arm, but she

sprinted like a racer down the street, elbows up. He ran up the slope to the grave.

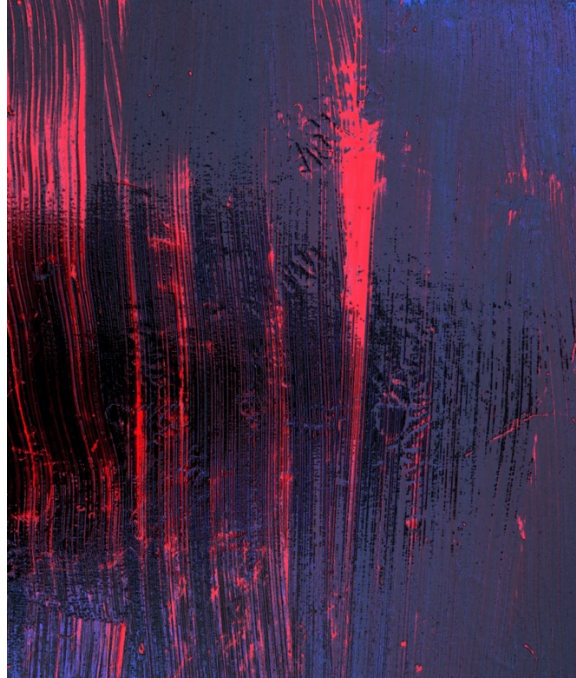
She had waited long enough. The sounds of the city were obviously just outside the door. She kicked the lid. She thumped it with the heels of her palms. It budged. She hit it hard and the lid sprung off and a flush of dirt fell into her just before the lid snapped back on again. Now she really couldn't breathe, the force of the breaking point seized her and she felt herself ejecting from the box. Her torso sprung out, and she laid back in the dirt. She wiped the blood from her face, peering up through the narrow frame of roots and overhanging sod and into the city-orange clouds silently passing above her. No one was there. The space above her was vacant. She watched the clouds. She could see the tip of the shovel, left lying over the edge of the trench above her. A few bulbs of rain spun into the open grave, clearing little craters of skin in the blood of her muddy face. The sound of wind. It was cooler.

She heard running footsteps.

Stuart peered over the edge on all fours.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."



8. Schemed

Doc was pissed, and why shouldn't he be? The Associate Dean of Research and Operations had caught wind of Dr. Thomas Hock's experiments and was concerned. Doc always paid little attention to the man. He refused to call him by his name, only by his title. In Doc's view, the Associate Dean of Research and Operations was a quirk of the organizational chart, his accidental superior. "The Associate Dean of Research and Operations wants to talk with me," he told Stuart a few days after the burial. "The Associate Dean of Research and Operations wants to shut us down."

"Can he do that?" asked Stuart. "I thought you had 'latitude.'"

"The Associate Dean of Research and Operations is never explicit, never direct, never — god no — confrontational. He just inflicts us with a thousand small tasks. Rubric design. Performance benchmarks. Data collection schemes to monitor the intellectual contributions of our Hegelian philosophy candidates.

The man has no vision, his worldview is completely stymied by measurable goals. He flagellates himself with yardsticks.”

“We’re through? What about Veronica?

“No, we’re not through. I told him how straight down the line we are heading with this.”

Doctor Hock told the Associate Dean of Research and Operations where they were heading. Toward a vision, a manifesto, a mission for the greater portion of the university. He told him in a demonstratively tidy office, where the Associate Dean of Research and Operations sits back in his dimpled chair and affects the posture and stylings of a black-and-white holographic business executive cast out of the last century, with wet chromatic hair and a white lapel.

“Fear is the new curriculum,” said Doc. “The end of the last century we declared war on terror. A quixotic and laughable objective for a military, paradoxical and unabashedly Orwellian. Fire with fire. It’s always been the poets, the bards and novelists, the playwrights, the philosophers and theorists, the cineastes and the critics, the journalists, the historians and curators, whose vocation it is to confront the deep existential crises that threaten to bury the human spirit.

“We need a return, a redemption of that mission — we need the address of fear on every assignment, rather than fools’ errands and the continued manufacture of myopic half-human professionals who retreat anxiously into their daily errands, who sink headlong into mass political, social, and economic terror and into a constant nervous state of unspeakable dread.”

The associate dean wore his most practiced professional grimace.

“Until we reset ourselves, re-ordain ourselves to confront, contextualize, historicize, visualize, name and understand fear, and stop cranking out people who make our weapons, finance our self-destruction, code and manipulate our prejudices, network our amusements, and keep us going day by day until the end of days, we will have given up this institution’s higher calling from its origins — monks hunched over manuscripts in continuous —“

“Yes, Thomas,” interrupted the associate dean. “What about the girl?”

“The woman who has no fear will be our emblem and seal. Our Helen of Troy. Our Calliope—”

The associate dean had switched to his most practiced air of careful consideration.

“And we need her for our slick brochures,” Doc continued, “and for our social media presence and buzz. We need to get people excited. We need stories.”

The associate dean closed the sleeping laptop on his desk. He felt the drain of his resolve with the onset of intellectual fatigue. The faculty always raise their eyes and say Doc brims over with pseudo-intellectual bombast. He talks too much and is largely full of it. But no one denies he believes in it.

The associate dean sized up the situation and looked for a way out. Doc had finally sat down. His legs were crossed but he bent aggressively forward. His expression was indignant. The associate dean took a long breath. He raised his eyebrows and smiled. “Still doing triathlons?”

“Now and then.”

“Give me 40 push-ups and I’ll approve your little vision quest.”



Stuart dropped the bracelets on the table. “Did you really do 40 push-ups?”

“Yep. Tried not to sweat. When I left I did a hammy bow because I was so out of breath, couldn’t say anything.”

“So we’re back on?”

“Never left.”

Stuart nodded. “I’ve been thinking.” Doc took a seat. “Why don’t we just make it up from now on? We just round-table with Veronica when she comes over and invent some pretty great tales.”

Doc shook his head. “We can’t do that. Fiction no longer travels, and it certainly doesn’t stick around. Besides, all the stories have been invented. What’s left is to provoke and contort daily life and see what this marvelously crumbling universe reveals behind the old facades. Besides, fascination in this century is too broad, too indiscriminate. Everything and nothing is enthralling. The majority of our daily correspondence consists of links, dumps, and screenshots so we can say See! We’re all giggling Cassandras hoping to assuage our inveterate anxiety by throwing watch parties to the same cataclysmic events. No, we need something big and real, something to hit people in the gut, something vivid and spectacular. Debord had warned us 70 years ago about the spectacle. But we know what warnings do, don’t we?”

Stuart fell to busying himself with Veronica’s bracelets, troubleshooting the tiny buttons with the tip of his finger or just tracing the contours.

“From sci-fi dystopia to bioethical conundrums to political jeremiads, when you warn the public about the future, you have just predestined it. It becomes the place in which people live, and they start jockeying for positions. We need out of this wasteland to show people fear in a handful of dust, but then see who, and what kind of person, comes out of the grave unfazed.

“By the way, did you find anything about the man from the tunnel this weekend?”

“I went back Sunday and Monday night at the same time, but no luck.”

“That’s okay, who needs him? One of the art students snapped his picture. It’s great. Just a silhouette backlit by the light of the tunnel. It looks like a Billy Wilder picture. And we have snapshots of the coffin, before and after.”

“Great,” said Stuart, coupling the bracelets and laying them on the table. “So what’s next? Something spectacular?”

“I think so,” Doc smiled.

“Clowns, crowds, disease, ghosts?”

“Serial killer.” Doc flashed his eyes.



9.

Shot, Bludgeoned, Stabbed

There is a funny piece of lore endemic to the counties west of the Potomac River. In the era of lead gasoline and medicinal cigarettes, a deranged man had escaped from prison transport into the woods above Clifton, Virginia. He used train tracks like a sick animal on a logging road. He killed easy prey. He threw old blankets on scurrying creatures, cottontails mostly, and stabbed them in the spine with a rail spike. Encouraged, he shifted to bigger, easier prey, children mostly, abundant in the woods in that era, employing the same methods. How he came into possession of an adult-sized rabbit costume in 1948 we'd have to invent out of bourbon and campfire, and why he'd wear it — to ingratiate himself with the herd? To lure nearsighted children? — is left to the invention of children. Why he would desiccate their hides by hooks in a country-road tunnel beneath the tracks is left to their older siblings.

“But the rabbit costume is the spectacle we need,” explained Doc. “It is complementary. Gruesome murder, hanging hooks

and corpses on display are nothing without the warm, albeit ridiculous counterpoint of a bunny costume.”

“Why do I imagine it as pink?” Veronica asked, kicking her legs from the top of Stuart’s desk and allowing the heels of her white tennis shoes to bang into the metal front.

“I do, too!” said Stuart. “Why are cartoon rabbits pink?”

Veronica swiveled, and with the mash of apples filling her cheek she widened her eyes and spouted at him, “Blood!”

“You know, I was thinking,” said Doc, “you wonder with a costume like that, if a child, in the last moments, would cling to the felt of his killer.”

They contemplated this. “Geez, Doc,” said Stuart. “That’s awful.”

Veronica snapped off the top of an apple wedge. “The costume would be matted with gore,” she said. “Pink.”

“I grew up in Maryland and never heard of Bunnyman,” said Doc. “We had a goatman.”

Stuart pointed at him. “We had a goat man! Up in Stroudsburg! He carried an axe and also hunted along the tracks.”

“I know Bunnyman,” Veronica said. “It’s stupid. Why is American lore so dumb? The killers are always loners driven by some juvenile fetish. So many are dolled up in thrift store merchandise and their motives are always unaccounted for. Give me Scandinavian, or any northern European monster, any day. They come out of folktales, they’re hairy and bare-chested

and carry conventional weapons of war. They kill for ancestral revenge or to reclaim the descendents of lost kin.”

“Krampus!” said Stuart.

“Well, that’s one example,” she said, “but there are better, less ridiculous examples.”

Doc interrupted. “Bunnyman is the legend here, and people know it. So we stage an event.”

Veronica allowed a long “cool...” before she asked, “but what’s the scary part?”

“The scary part,” Doc explained, “is that I think I’ve found a way to not only attract a possible killer — or at least a seriously deranged man with a history of violence — but also provide him with cover, as he pursues the trophy of a 5’8” woman with large doe eyes.”

Veronica smiled. “You’re insane, and also full of it.” And he was, but Dr. Thomas Hock could be convincing on a good day, and he rehearsed the preview with his teaching assistant that afternoon.

“First, we enlist the art students to build some buzz in the right communities.”

Stuart knew this part was true.

“They’re aces at it, and they know mobs of people who wouldn’t deny themselves a chance to be in the pictures of an event. We’ll build the buzz and set a date in the area of the purported killings. We’ll invite everyone to come in their best cosplay rabbit costumes, white, pink or bloody, and promise them pyrotechnics to light up the lenses of their cameras and

phones. The irresistible part, though, the piece that will bring them out in droves. The promise that Bunnyman himself will be there, and active.”

“Mmhmm,” smiled Veronica, “you are best buds? You have each other’s numbers?”

“I do,” Doc grinned. “I have his number.”

Stuart knew this part was true, too. Hock had contacted the Historian-Archivist of the county public library. His name’s Sean Muldoon, and he worked in the Virginia Room of the Fairfax City Branch. The frequency of queries about the Bunnyman had steadily increased over the last 15 years, and Muldoon was piqued. He had heard the story himself when he was younger, and now with a rising number of young, inquisitive, seemingly unabashed teenagers asking questions about a ludicrous tale, Muldoon decided to table his historical maps, plats, and handwritten accounts detailing antebellum property disputes. It was a relief.

He set out to put the story of Bunnyman under the scope of methodical historical inquiry, placing the weight of his post-grad training to bear upon the thin latticework of local lore, all the magazine and television reports that bait audiences with ranked lists of the scariest places on Earth. He began with lists and tables. He followed references to archived newspaper articles. He cross-referenced court records. He knew that most tall tales begin with the seed of some unusual tragic happening, and he turned his attention to criminal records and indices, applying filters to pare down the surprisingly hundreds of murders and suicides in the farming village, cutting out all those committed with sensible motives and executed by reasonable means. Hewing to the most common tropes of the tale, he filtered for animal mutilation, which for an agrarian community did not reduce the numbers as much as he wanted, but then

selected for child murder, which thankfully did. He managed to bring the possibilities to three likely candidates.

A one Charles Holbrook who used the occasion of a mud-bogged car to pick a fight with his wife, and then that occasion to plug her point blank in the temple and left breast with a ready pistol. That she should be buried in the same soft mud with their infant daughter was another opportunity. That the infant should be buried alive shows he didn't have the heart to do anything more. He was committed to a state mental hospital down south.

Leonard "Lenny" Boebert bludgeoned to death a woman and her two daughters with the base of a lamp during a home invasion, which had occurred to him a sensible idea for a Wednesday morning in the summer of 1943, when his car's timing belt had snapped and there was no way he could make it to work. The boss who had threatened Boebert with one last chance the week prior knew the youngest victim because of her cleft palate, which they called a harelip in those days, and her sweet, squeaky lisp.

And Joseph Hindley in 1938 tied a twelve year old girl to a railroad signpost with the strings of her apron, and slit her throat. When he was arrested trying to steal a Lincoln coupe outside the post office, his shirt and the front of his trousers were stiff with dried blood, and his face was tiled with scratches. He wore an expression of permanent surprise.

All three men in the stretch of time before their executions lay in awe over what possessed them on a single ordinary day, or fixated without answer on the impish nature of children.

All of this so far was true. Stuart watched his boss strut and narrate with swooping arms. His eyes closed in ellipses and flashed in punctuation. Veronica had moved over to a cloth chair and bounced one leg on the other in the perfect pose of "uh

huh...” and Stuart had to wrinkle his nose and nod at her because, so far, all of it was true.

“It is my hypothesis that sons and grandsons of killers who writhe immortal in the public’s unremembered dreams take one of two paths: either they live to interrogate their deadly forebears, as Hawthorne did, or they express their shame in commensurate deviance, a more common disposition of the guilty man. It’s the defiance of eternal judgment through the exercise of sin. Vice on display. To them, that’s their only atonement. They call it freedom.

“And of the three executed men, Muldoon found that only one left a trail of descendents, and that’s Hindley, the one who stabbed that poor girl in the throat. Hindley’s grandson still lives in Clifton.”

“Too perfect,” said Veronica. “Go on.”

“This boy is a character. His name is Jake, and he still carries his family’s name, Hindley.” (True.) “He has a past. He, too, has a court record. He, too, has killed.” (True...)

“Oh, really?” She crossed her arms.

Stuart looked to the floor. “Tragic story, actually.”

Doc told the story of when Jake, age 12, shot his brother. “Hunting accident. They were across the river shooting small game, anything that scurries — squirrels, birds, and rabbits.” (True! There are plenty for enterprising boys.) “But they weren’t too careful, and when his brother, who was quite a bit older, maybe ten years, ran up from behind to outflank some poor varmint in flight, Jake squeezed off a shot and caught his brother in the stomach. The police report described a most confused little boy. He’d remained crouched at the same spot for

an hour or more, though it was timeless to him, with nothing but the alternating tempo of cicada wings and the heavy sighs of his big brother.

“Investigators and the court had a tough time reconciling the second shot, however. They allowed it was an act of shock, or mercy, or a twisted lesson on shock over mercy, but at some point Jake stood up, walked over to his brother, and shot him down the groove of his eye. The sheriff’s office found the corpse under a pale green canopy of a busted off branch.

“Jake was given a year of court-mandated therapy and home check-ins. His mother left one evening after washing the dishes and never returned. His father never showed a trace of human emotion. Jake attended school sporadically, on whims only, and has since become a bit of a creep in the region.” (True.) “He sets himself in plastic lawn chairs outside of old classmates’ houses, leering at the front door. He sets trash across the railroad tracks and lights it ablaze at the approach of commuting trains — a funny sort of nuisance — and still hunts little anythings, leaving their little bodies on the sidewalk in front of the ice cream shop.” (True, true, and that happened only once.)

“We did a reverse lookup and found his contact information,” said Stuart, and this was also true.

“Did you contact him?” Veronica asked.

“Doc did.” (True.)

“What’d he say?”

“I sent him an announcement of ‘Bunnyman Horror Night, a night of wrath, revenge, purgation, and hedonistic abandon.’” (Regrettably true.)

“Okay,” she laughed. “It’s a little long. Did you get a response?”

“I did, the following day.” (False.)

“And?”

“Just two lines. ‘Who is this?’ and ‘what do you want from me?’”

“He didn’t! Unbelievable.” (It was.)

“I wrote again and told him that I’m a promoter with a radical arts collective and we are sending out email blasts looking for authentic local talent to scare the bejesus out of people and do as they please, no holds barred, anything goes, everything imaginable.” (True, he did send this second message to a silent Jake Hindley.)

“And did he respond to that?”

“No. But we’ve made contact. I’m actually sending out others. I have leads to other odd characters in the area. Muldoon is finding me information and local beta. Now I’ll trigger the art students to produce the event. I’m drawing up logistics. I think I can put people in the right places with the right impulses. The ambition is to establish the perfect Hitchcock scenario, the classic thriller setup.”

“An ordinary man...” began Veronica.

“It will be extraordinary. But the scenario we seek is more of a classic setup. A person is trapped at the approach,” Doc loved that word, ‘approach,’ “the approach of her killer.” He rested his chin on his palm. “So we need a rabbit.”

She looked at Doc, and then over to Stuart. “Everybody will be there?”

“Well, spread out, yes.”

She munched on her apple, separating the flesh from the skin, which she flicked into the trash. “I’ll need a ride.”



10. Two Skulls

The short, fat wheels of electric mopeds are too tiny for the pits that rash the streets of DC. Twice they were nearly bucked from their seat, and she let him know it by an open-handed smack to the helmet and a squeeze of her legs. The third time she sat up, let go, and with arms akimbo looked to the side. “Mm.”

“Have you got those bracelets on?” Stuart yelled into the wind.

“I’m not worried. I’m mad. Let me drive.” And so Stuart promised they’d switch once they sped a little further north.

Nights earlier Doc had sent Stuart a message, telling him that he’d met with the art students and that it will take a month to set up Bunnyman. He suggested that in the meantime he take Veronica out on some “small adventures. See what’s out there. Make stories.” Stuart forwarded the message to Veronica, and as he watched the screen for a response, he began planning.

He thought of tachophobia first. He rented a moped. When she had emerged from the diagonal shaft out of the deepest station in the city, Stuart slammed on the brakes of the small scooter, just managing a short skid on the sidewalk, almost flipping back into a shrub. He screamed, “thrill ride!” and she shook her head of evenly parted curls. She remembered to bring a bike helmet.

“Should we wear helmets?” Stuart asked.

“We should wear helmets,” she said, gathering her curls into a band low in the back and leveling the helmet. She swung her leg over and hopped on behind him.

“Fearless but sensible!” he sang out, accelerating. “Let’s ride!”

“Woo,” she said, which was much more thrilling than a scream.

They shot up Connecticut and into Kalorama, bolting left into the Heights, sweeping past fairytale villas that piled into each other down the road, past clumps of embassies hushed and elegant in spy-charm, and the dioramic front gardens of Thailand, Turkey, Cameroon, and Belize. Ivy hung from black balustrades. The streets were smooth here, tithed and paid for. They whirled past statuette men in stationary black SUVs guarding against invisible enemies, trained dogs and their walkers, and the ever-present threat of a lost vagrant. Stuart still managed to find potholes to jam the front wheel into, or sunken sewer caps or lifted metal grates, which were the worst. She plunked him on the head. When they switched and Veronica took over, the speed increased, and it was only once that she forgot to let go of the accelerator to apply the brake. They compressed the whole front suspension before she came shuddering to a stop just before the curb. She howled with laughter. It scared the hell out of Stuart, and he bit his lip to catch his beaming grin.

“I won’t do that again,” she assured him, before they tacked back through the byzantine streets and toward the sirens of the middle city, leaving the prudent rich in their walking death masques, faded nuptials, and security footage. “You do it,” she said at the south gates of Malcolm X Park. “I want to look around. But don't be stupid, Stu.”

It was irresistible. There is a ritual wail of bike gangs on U Street. Knobby skeletal petro smokers, ATVs underpinned with wheelie bars so women slung off the back just sweep the pavement with their hair. Rumbling, caterwauling assault dune buggies and alien roach machines gyrating in eddies at every intersection. Stuart couldn’t resist diving in the maelstrom with their little electric scooter. Veronica remonstrated a little, but just for show. She pointed out the thin kid in the sail of a white shirt standing on the back of his seat while doing a wheelie on a purple-sparkled chopper. Police officers stood between parked cars, gagged and glad for it. There are no-pursuit orders across the city, so much of their time is spent telling offended college boys and their indignant dates to just stay on the sidewalks.

They scootered and weaved through traffic and over the yellow lines, circled and returned against the current, pushing out waves of revelers who washed in and out of pubs and sugar dispensaries. Past clubs and basements of amassed bodies stiffening and slackening by the order of the drum, all unweighting sticky floors on the same detonation, as lights rotated in shafts into clouds of stage smoke and dark calypso friction, jigsaw bodies and the biting of earlobes.

Stuart stuck to his plan and bent toward the next quadrant and phase of the night, down Florida to H Street. They traversed trolley tracks at acute angles and swerved past neon bar fronts where posterred vamps blew kisses behind plated glass. At a stoplight they saw a doped-up man fall face first onto a subway grate. They wondered if he was okay. The man smiled in blood

and a tilted disc of teeth and waved at invisible people somewhere beyond them.

They raced up Bladensburg, past unmarked after-hour speakeasies and onto blocks rimmed with razor wire.

“Are we lost?” she asked.

“We are not.”

Left onto Mt. Olive at the bottom of the cemetery, where the planned grid of city streets begins to noodle around and over undulations coming out of the city, persistent little hills that have escaped the graders. At a light at the bottom of a bend between two abjectly functional buildings, Stuart felt the sense they had gone one street too far. He hoped she had felt it, too, those spiritless places that grout the interstices of cities. Duplicate houses, stoops and ankle-high yard fences, but mottled by decay, the historical archives and evidence lockers of Upton Sinclair.

“You just want a Wegmans,” said Veronica when Stuart tried to describe the mood of the place. They had stopped at an intersection. That morning Stuart had studied a map that displayed clusters of violence in the city over the last six months, heat maps of slayings and assaults, and the reddest cell of all radiated out of Trinidad. “A single block registered seven shootings in the last couple of months,” he whispered.

“Why do you want me shot?” she asked.

“I don’t want you shot. We’ll just explore, just a little bit.” They raced down Orren, across on Queen and around the jukebox arc of Penn and Holbrook. “Pop, pop, pop,” Stuart mouthed as they drifted on two remaining bars of battery into an alleyway. He stopped. He honked the clownish horn twice and yelled, “Hey!”

“Shh!” Veronica smacked his helmet. “You’re being a nuisance. Families live here.”

They stopped and wheeled out the scooter to Lewis St. They sat down on the curb. “I remember this place being scarier.” He sounded dejected. Over their right shoulders, a man sat on his porch. The lights were off and he sat there invisibly but for one orange dot burning between his fingers.

“This isn’t a theme park, Stuart.”

“I know.” He tried to explain the scene he had intended. The setting, the mood.

“*Your* mood,” she said. “You’re just affected because the business of gentrification has for now passed over this place.”

He smiled. She was right, and he said so. They heard the man behind them shuffle. They turned and he stood. Stuart waved. The man came to the railing, rested on his long arms and breathed out a cataract of pale yellow smoke. He nodded. Stuart turned to the street. She watched him put his face through a series of contortions that seemed to denote some serious thinking. She liked when he did that. His Thinking Man profile amused her.

She looked down at the pebble she had been rolling with her unsandled toes. Around her feet squirmed a rotating game-board of roaches.

“Stuart.”

He saw them. “Let’s get bikes and go downtown.”

“Yes.”

The man on the porch withdrew from the light and repositioned a child's bike so it stood more upright against the railing. He stood there above the steps for a pensive minute, and flicked his cigarette into the street.

Downtown was buzzing. The first thing they saw was a carapace of armed police. They had spun and threaded their way through traffic — pedaling past dead-stare drivers mouthing silent obscenities — just clearing sideview mirrors by the widths of their fingers and coasting down the tilted city towards the monuments. The calves of Veronica piston-pumped the pedals but above she floated, while Stuart took to pounding curbs with the 30 pound rental.

Tonight was the President's speech. An address to a perforated nation quickly coming apart. Protesters filled the streets, alive with anger, with righteous, exasperated, invigorating anger. Counter-protesters were there, but they were comically indignant, caught in the thrall of a cult assigned with defending the world order, ready to die, in principle.

Veronica and Stuart rode under the curlicue spindles of firework smoke and tinge of tear gas, whipped into swirls by roller-derby girls waving flags of an alternative typology, a new order that the old one couldn't possibly understand, and one it mortally feared. At the corner of K and I5 they both stopped to process an unusual formation of shields and bodies. A shell of Swiftian guards, circling in overlapping armor an invisible center. Next to Stuart was a woman screaming.

He asked her, "What's happening?"

"They're protecting *him*."

"Who?"

“That man.” There must have been a man ensconced in the swirl of police.

“Protecting him from what?”

“From us!”

Stuart looked at Veronica. She was just as bewildered.

He asked, “What did he do?”

“He hit that man.”

Stuart followed the sweep of her hand. ‘That man’ was lying prostrate on the ground under the weight of two policemen. They held onto him like a raft. They looked like they would drown if they let go.

Stuart pointed to the man on the ground. “That man there,” and then pointed to the man enclosed by the spiral formation, “hit that man?”

The woman turned to Stuart, clearly frustrated. She looked him in the eye. “That man,” she said, pointing to the man on the ground, “is with us. The man in the middle of the police drove up in his car, jumped out, and coldcocked our man in the face.”

“And now they’re protecting him from you?”

The woman shifted onto the back of her heels and put her hands on her hips, glaring at Stuart. Veronica put her arm around him. “We should go.”

Blocks down, the sound of vuvuzelas underscored air horns, car horns and truck horns. The President’s speech on the South

Lawn had begun, and the people were determined to drown him out.

They docked their bikes and skipped down to a swell of people and noisemakers on I5th. Cherry bombs. Blasts of sound strafed the South Lawn, and the promises of a threatening commander-in-chief came out weak and muffled. An auxiliary building next to the White House caught fire. The basement of St. John's Episcopal Church sent out beards of black smoke. A go-go band appeared on the flat of a tractor trailer and the clacking rhythm of the go-go beat in particular demanded a correlation of movement, so they danced in the horns' wail, the sirens and the cherry bomb reports off boarded-up windows, in firework smoke and riot smoke, stage smoke and disco search lights, calypso, go-go, techno, neon specters and presidents speaking in piebald tongues. All institutions of the globe were swelling in edema under the heat of a collective, hallucinatory, commodified, marketed, pontificated, reverberating fear, where under the vamp stare and by her blessing the only ones who pass undiminished are the ones swerving and careening in between time.



The next morning Veronica sent him a text. "Tonight's phobia?"

He couldn't check the spelling fast enough. "Enochlophobia." He stared into the screen. She was looking it up.

"Fear of crowds?"

"Fear of being trampled, specifically."

"Same metro, same time?"

“5:59.”

On the escalator she looked down at her white shoes. *I will have to wear shoes from now on.* The escalator is long at Dupont. The handrail rotates slower than the steps, so that everyone up the column seems to turn automatically back towards the tunnel. She skipped up the last twenty feet, passed through the gate, and scowled a little when the skull-painted face at the entrance grinned at her. “Hello,” it said.

“Oh-my-god,” she said quickly. “Hello, creep.”

“I’m a skull.”

“I see that.”

“I bought a mascara pen.”

“Well, that’s eyeliner, and you bought it for touch-ups?”

“No, for you.”

She batted her eyelashes with a smile upon the pedestal of her hands. “Not enough?”

Stuart thought of a half dozen responses, but punted. “You might want something a little extra.”

They undocked an electric bike and Stuart took the first-generation beater that was left, sweating mightily to match her up the hills.

Skulls lined the sidewalk atop bodies in order. The line snaked down the block and just began to taper in front of Howard University Hospital. Big bodies, little ones, fat and skinny, it was

a Dr. Seuss march of the dead. “Tonight,” Stuart announced triumphantly, “we take in a show.” He bowed a skeleton valet’s bow.

She looked down the line. “Are girls allowed?”

“There are girls.” He saw none close by. “Everyone’s a skull anyway.”

“That’s very true.”

“Death does not discriminate.”

“Is that what the eyeliner is for?”

“I can draw in something for you. I studied pictures this morning.”

“Give me it.”

She walked over to a parked car and in the glass dragged lines across her cheeks and blackened the tip of her nose. She turned and smiled.

“You’re a cat.”

“Uh huh.”

He laughed, “nice!”

She began to walk toward the back of the queue. “Where are you heading?” Stuart asked. She gave him a cartoonish smile of confusion, cocked her head towards the hospital, and pointed her thumb in that direction.

“We don’t stand in lines,” said Stuart. “Besides, the opening band is terrible. The Queens of Gangrene.”

They grabbed a couple of burritos from a food truck and sat on the sidewalk, opposite the queue of the dead, their backs against the wall. Taken together, Stuart had made it to heaven.

“So who are these guys?”

“Children of Orcs. They instigate the maddest mobs of any band now touring. Luckily for us, they came to play this week.

“Adventitious,” she said despite a mouth full of chips.

“See this bump on my nose?” He tapped it. “Children of Orcs. I was kicked.”

“How were you kicked?”

“Somebody was flipping over, and they went down bucking.” He looked at her as she sucked a spot of salsa from her thumb. “Are you at all anxious?” he asked. “The whole place erupts with mad energy.”

She looked down the line and slurped Sprite out of a can with a paper straw. “There must be pockets. Besides, some of these guys are pretty small.”

“They’re the ones with high knees and elbows!”

“Well, you’ll just have to be there to absorb them for me.”

Stuart scowled down the line, a little at himself.

“Actually,” he said, “everyone’s pretty nice at these shows. I’ve tried to figure out exactly why that’s so. I’ve been to festivals

billed with troupes of devil-worshipping bands. Riots commanded by hellish oaths and axe guitars, some sick with minor chords and strings of witch-core, long-haired, goateed Albrecht Durer dudes who arrive in vans with satanic puns and acronyms on their license plates. A couple of years ago in Richmond a van actually had straight “SATAN” on its plates. And never, not once, have I ever seen a fight break out. An actual ‘I mean to inflict great pain upon you’ fight. Last summer I had to go to a rodeo in San Antonio, and I counted three outright brawls in the parking lot.”

“Ugh, give me a satanist over a cowboy anyday.”

“But why is that!”

“Because they hate themselves.”

“Yeah, but the self-regard of a lot of these fellows here isn’t sky high. I’ve tried to figure it out. Why all the fights in baseball stadiums?”

“They’re just drunk.”

“So are these guys! And more.”

“Maybe it’s the more.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. There’s something more artistic, cultural, psychological. There’s the music, the scene, this fetish with the dark and sinister. It’s dystopia, and there’s always been an irresistible charm, an aesthetic in dystopia that makes people think: If I can live here, and make a place for myself, I won’t have to wait for paradise.”

Veronica shifted a little on the wall to turn to him. “Maybe that’s why I like horror so much. They’re much too contrived to

be scary, but the settings are always so attractive to me. I want to live in the pale gray suburbs of Stockholm as a vampire and feed on the bodies that my handler brings me.”

“I’ll be your serial killer!”

She smiled and ate the last unbroken chip from the bag. “I’ve never heard you talk so much.”

“I love sidewalk conversations. Plus Doc isn’t with us to suck all the air out.”

The doors to the club opened. The orderly queue of the dead began to file in, reaching for their wallets.

Stuart continued. “There’s a blues to dystopia that seems to satisfy people. You know, like a down-on-his-luck blues man sitting on a stool with his slide-guitar, growling about the unfairness of it all, really wailing like he’s pissed off about it, and then you realize he’s singing the song of everyone in that room.”

“What are you talking about? Country is full of the blues — Merle Haggard. Johnny Cash. They were full of heartache.”

“But they weren’t angry about it enough, and that was old country. Country and pop have commingled and everything’s been reduced to a love song again. You know what a love song does to people like this? It diminishes them, reduces them, leaves us behind. There’s nothing so lonesome or damaging as a love song. The punks, pimpled and shaven, banned it. They knew that life is a sucker, it’s full of rejection, abandonment and betrayal.”

“You sound so film noir.”

“Maybe!” he laughed. “You know the best noir was written during the Red Scare, when the whole world turned on those guys. All they had to project on the screen was the world left to them — and it turns out the whole world recognized it, too.”

“And that’s why cowboys hit people?”

“Exactly! A noir world terrifies them, and so they try to punch it in the face.”

“Hmm, maybe. But didn’t you say it’s violent in there? You have a bump on the bridge of your nose.”

“I thought of that, too. There’s a definite catharsis. Few people fight in a mosh because everyone’s too busy pushing and shoving, getting knocked down and picked up. It’s exhausting, while at a line dance you’re just twinkling your toes and getting heated over the way the guy next to your girl is moving his hips. There’s just raw, dumb energy, and it’s all corked up.”

Veronica watched the queue of the dead slowly inject itself into the club. Most of the skulls wore black concert shirts. Cannibal Corpse. Napalm Death. Genitorturers. Deicide. Thrill Kill. Cat Rapes Dog.

“But then there’s this whole ethos that people discount. The revenge fantasies that all people carry with them take on epic proportions here. Highly inventive scenarios that require complex imaginations, theatrics, unusual weapons, daggers and hooks, complex setups, new moons and testifying ravens, and impossibly timed schemes to lure their victims out in the open.”

“Don’t forget hatchets, pitchforks, chainsaws, machetes, or telekinesis.”

“Or long teeth!”

“It’s exhausting!”

“So they play it out in their heads and that’s enough. But a corked-up cowboy just comes out and hits someone in the face. Or shoots them.”

She looked over at Stuart and had to laugh at the sight of a skull drinking from a can of Sprite.

“They just live there,” he said. “And I think if you live in evil long enough, instead of fearing it always, you see its gradations, its levels, its nuances. In the dark you can actually see the big bad world outside. You start to think, maybe evil’s not all so bad.”

She was looking at him, at his black grooved eyes and painted cheekbones and a little red mark of salsa on his chin. “They’re not different,” he said, “all of them. They want something immense to share with at least one other person. Not some staged event promising something immense on a Saturday night, not something planned that is sure to disappoint, but something that happens unexpectedly on a Tuesday, when buying black licorice at a grocery store or a big tub of sunflower butter — and you think, this is unexplainable — this ridiculous happiness, this weird energy, and here is this other person who seems just as thrilled next to me — and it’s all because this person is just as stupidly thrilled to be picking out a tub of sunflower butter with you.”

He looked down the line. “All the evil people.”

“Sympathy for the Devil,” she said.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Frankenstein. Edward Scissorhands.”

“Every cop is a criminal, and all sinners saints.”

“Wait, what’s that from?”

“Sympathy for the Devil.”

“Nice! You remembered that?”

“I know music, too.”

He hopped up, brushed off his hands, and smashed down the litter into a ball. “Okay, let’s dance!”

Inside, The Children of Orcs do not care that you can see their big stomachs. Big pubic-garlanded stomachs that pull in their spinal cords and cock their small shoulders back on a brace of shapeless legs, bare in woodsman cutoffs. They are sloven men propagated out of peasant fields, the rancid fruit of earth. Sloven man survives! He cannot be killed. He is the beginning and the end, the darling of life finding its way. The battle axe that the lead of the band carries, the one-horned helmet, the boots — these are not his costume. It is the body itself, primal and coarse — and boy, when he bites into the ball of the mic, can he howl. He does not suffer restraint.

At the intro, the place convulsed in electrocuting light. The walls drained in streams of condensed body heat. Everything was conductive, shoulder to shoulder, through stacks of bodies. When they came in, Stuart led Veronica to the bow’s point of the balcony, above the sweating, ululating brood, and tried to glean her impression by the reception of her eyes. In the flickering light, she seemed electrified, too. He tried not to yell in her ear.

“Give me your bracelets!”

She appeared confused for half a second, and quickly pulled them off. He placed them deep in his pocket.

He was glad the music had finally started. That's when all the shoving begins and spaces open up. It becomes organized. One giant circle forms in the middle and two on the side become its satellites. A DC-specific rotation of bodies began swirling at speed, a circle pit, and Veronica yelled, "They're running laps!"

"It's actually safe if you can keep your feet!"

Maypoled dead center in the whorl of bodies and skulls stood a tall man in a white stole. His hair was long and it curled just over his shoulders. He wore a scraggly beard and in the probing light, his white shroud and outstretched arms seemed to shine. Veronica pointed, "It's Jesus!" But his peace could not last. If you're not moving, you'll be flattened, and the man went down hard, sandals in the air if he was wearing them at all. Immediately two skulls yanked him up and all of them were shoved to the side and reabsorbed by the buffer, men crushed and standing wide with their arms out, trying to keep balance on the arms and shoulders of each other.

At the first explosive refrain, the rotation disintegrated in a mad, boiling frenzy. Stuart watched and considered. Compared to anywhere else, he thought, this scrum is the most egalitarian, most sympathetic place on the planet. He thought in gradations of good and evil, of lost souls found, of a boy in the woods trying to figure out what to do about his laboring brother.

Stuart looked over at Veronica. Her mouth was wide open and smiling. "Ready?" he asked.

"Okay!" she yelled.

He gapped between bodies upstairs, hopped two at a time down the stairs, and cleared out a channel of air space through to the great circle in the middle. They jumped dead center in front of the back buffer of absorbing bodies — it's safer there: you just watch for bodies falling backwards.

"Good?"

"Good!"

He dove into the middle of the scrum and hopped and cleared a little space to do a little skank before he was creamed by a volley of bodies. He spun back and opened the spot again and resumed the stomp before again he was spun like a pinball. He looked back and saw her dancing, too, elbows up and ready. Ah! A sight to see!

He was shoved head first and sent like a mortar into the packed columns of skulls pressing into the front of the stage, and he had to stomp backwards hard to return to the middle. He looked back. Veronica was gone.

He ran along the circumference. He jumped in the air searching for the bump of her hair, the only non-skull, cat-whiskered pretty face, but in the strobe light he found nothing but snapshots of skulls. He ran hard into the circle and looked for signs of speculative satanists clearing space for a fallen peer. But she was nowhere, and he started to swear in panic. He felt the imperative self-calming-down to sluice off the adrenaline and think, think, *think: find her.*

He ran to the bathroom and could just see her cupping bloody paper towels over her split-open nose, wrenching open the faucet to rinse away the red splatter across the basin. He stopped at the door of the women's bathroom, hoping this vision came out of fear. He waited two breaths and popped it open to see. Inside, in

front of the mirror were only three stout women (there are girls here!) washing away their melted skull faces. They stopped and turned to him in unison, faces dissolving but rapidly offended. Stuart dropped to his hands and knees on the sticky floor and looked under the stall doors. Just a couple of legs in high chrome boots.

“What are you—”

“Sorry,” he ran back out.

He swam through the crowd. They thought he was moshing but he was fighting to find a face. The pig-man was swallowing the microphone. All these songs sound the same. There was no security, no tubs of men in yellow jackets, which assured him a little. No one was reported crushed. He pushed his way outside. Skulls talking in the dank night. One had peeled off his shirt to smear off his face paint and stood there, smeared, bare and steaming. Had she left? He fished out his phone and couldn't unlock it because his fingers were so wet. There was a black slick of sweat across the screen, and all the numbers were lighting up phantasmically. He ran back in, splitting the jam of bodies and hopping for visibility. Maybe if I make a nuisance of myself, she'll find me, he thought: I'm the searching skull. He pushed and hopped against the waves diagonally across the floor. A search pattern. Songs overlapped without respite. Maybe they are trying to kill us.

He caromed back through the middle and during a bass and drum bridge he heard two skulls yell, “Jesus!” and saw them pointing to the center of the great circle. “She's going to get nailed!”

There she was. Dead center. Hopping in pogo time, arms swinging to the double-pedal drum and her head floating left and right in the thunderous groove of the bass. Stuart plunged toward her, but the skulls began to circle again. He was swept up

and spiraled inward. He could see her eyes were closed and her cat whiskers had not run. On a disc of writhing bodies, he watched.



“What’s next?” was a question that delighted everyone.

A couple of nights later she met Stuart outside a cafe in Adams Morgan. She had been in the city already, having dropped in with an old school friend for a quick tour of the galleries, the Renwick and Hirshhorn.

“You will need to put these back on.” In his palm were the bracelets.

“Oh.”

They stood outside of the Caged Bird Sings cafe.

“Doc is inside.”

“Oh.”

They stepped inside.

Tall thin tables cut into the mural walls, dotted with colorful mica hightop chairs. A portrait spanned the long side wall. The profile of a woman in dreamy repose, lying on her outstretched arm with a DC double-black-bar and three-stars tattoo on the inside of her bicep, a halo of black hair pumping out jets of rising specters, black paisley eyebrows over contemplative eyes, a soft nose and small chin set on a long, Nefertiti neck.

“Hey, it’s you!” Stuart pointed.

“It is not!”

Doc was at the far table next to the stage. A lone stool stood in the blue spotlight behind an old radio broadcaster’s microphone. Doc’s arms were dog-pawed over a closed laptop. He wore a gray gym sweatshirt, the ties of his hood short and knotted. He looked like a sparring partner.

“What are you having?” he asked. “I’ve been holding off.”

A stout, a lager, and an IPA with a cup of water.

A tall man brushed by them, leaped over the two side steps of the stage, and slowed his approach to the ball microphone as if he were going to ravage it. He stopped just short, and placed his palm on the top of the dome with an amplified thud. The chatter and clink of dinnerware died down. He began slow and rhythmic, “The dark typhoon waters... drowned men... tied together... our fingers plump...” His voice rose with the pace of enjambed lines. “We knew where to find them / The corroded fetters / Jewels of servitude / Treasure marks the cache of bones.”

Doc was watching Veronica. She felt his glance. He was smiling and nodding. The poet culminated in three standalone words, “Night. Fall. Remains.” The “S” trailed off into silence and the audience knew he was finished. They slapped their tables and hollered their approval in one logarithmic crest, and then returned to their conversations.

“Every ten minutes there’s another,” Doc explained. “How are you, Veronica?”

“I’m fine,” she said. “And you?”

“Busy, but productive. Do you want to see the flyer?” He opened his laptop and walked his fingers over to the window he had ready.

A spiral-eyed, maniacally grinning man in a pink bunny suit, hooded with long, flopping ears broken in the middle. The cutout figure hovered over black-and-white layers of tangled tree limbs. In spiky red comic book lettering, there lifted and glowed the header,

THE EVE OF BUNNYMAN

Below the big, curling mud-splattered feet blazoned the subhead:

Join the WARREN
to call the ghost of
BUNNYMAN

Banjoes, harmonicas, bluegrass and metal
Bunny costumes required*

Mystery GUEST: the real son of Bunnyman
*Will you find him
before he finds you?*

*Costumes sold at local Party Centers
Discount Code: “BUNNYMAN”

“What do you think?”

“It’s good!” she said.

“I’m not keen on the name. We came up with others.” He brought up alternative flyers.

BUNNYMAN’S EVE
NIGHT OF BUNNYMAN

FESTIVAL OF BUNNYMAN
BUNNYFEST
BUNNYFEST 500
SEARCH FOR BUNNYMAN
HUNT FOR BUNNYMAN
HUNT OF BUNNYMAN
THE RETURN OF BUNNYMAN
REVENGE OF BUNNYMAN
THE BUNNYMAN SPECTACULAR
PICTURES WITH BUNNYMAN

“None really spoke to me,” he said. “But so far we are generating huge interest. The art students have been careful not to announce this with local promoters and events organizers. We’re outside the usual channels. They want only the right people to show up. Word of mouth garners just that, and so far, they tell me, it’s working.”

“I called a few Party Centers,” said Stuart, “and they knew before I could say it that I was looking for a bunny costume.”

“This is crazy,” she said.

The stage light intensified. She and Stuart could feel the heat of it on their necks. The place hushed as a small, bespectacled, curly hair woman approached the stage.

Doc leaned over and tapped Veronica on the hand. “I’m glad you’re still wearing the bracelets.”

The woman mounted the steps carefully, watching her feet follow each other, careful to step in the middle of the two giving planks. The place was silent, all eyes.

She held in her hand a piece of folded paper. She lifted it in front of her and held the corners with her jeweled fingers. The

paper steadied a little. Someone coughed. A clearing of throats. They were waiting, willing her. A man laughed, "Okay, girl, you got this!" Light applause. The tall poet before her jumped onto the stage to lower the height of the microphone. He stepped away and leaned against the side wall. She unfolded the paper again, and looked into the eyes of the crowd, the blue light glinting off the edges of her hair and casting a shadow across her cheeks. "One," she began. "Oh." The volume surprised her. She looked down at the trembling paper. Stuart's face flushed red for her and he took a small, quiet sip.

"One," she began again.

"Two..."

"Three... four..." The numbers were pronounced slowly and meekly, as uncertain as questions.

"Five..."

Someone adjusted their chair. Eyes narrowed or closed involuntarily. They didn't want her to have to suffer their combined stare.

"Six... seven... eight..." She paused.

"Nine..."

"Ten... eleven..."

"Oh, no," Veronica thought, worried for her.

"Twelve... thirteen."

“Thirteen?” She looked down at her paper. It was wet at the edges. She raised her head to the microphone. Everyone was worried. “Fourteen,” they all thought.

“Actors in foreign films,” she said, “in action and in horrors, in thrillers and in martial arts films. They count.” She dropped the paper and reciprocated the stare of the crowd. Her expression had changed. “They count out loud. They count for their speaking parts. They count in their own languages. They are told to count because they understand that in foreign markets their voices will be dubbed over. Now I can say that my baby girl shouldn’t have to wash her hair in fecal coliform, or that my little son should draw race cars / instead of police cars / stick men with soccer balls / instead of stick men with raised guns / I can tell you about underfunded education / and toxic air / about dreams deferred / about rats and cockroaches / but all anyone hears me saying is 7,8,9 / 4,5,6 / 3...” She sidled up closer to the microphone, head cocked, a lock of hair suspended in the blue light... “2...” Lucid eyes, steady as a compass needle. “One.”

She didn’t move. The small, packed audience brought up their hands, but waited. She nodded. A giant, tumbling wall of cheers fell through the place.

Stuart eased back in his chair, raised an eyebrow to Veronica, breathed again. She held a fascinated grin. The poet sauntered back to her table, nodded, and softly high-fived her girlfriends.

“Alright,” said Doc, “we have ten minutes.”

“Before what?”

“Before the next one. Stuart, are you good?” The drinks were still nearly full.

“Listen, I’ve heard back.”

“From who?”

“Jake Hindley.”

“Bunnyman,” they said.

“Grandson of Bunnyman. But yes.”

Stuart looked skeptical. It was left to Veronica. “And?”

“He’s interested. He wants to know more. I told him that we were looking to add a little something to this event and we needed local talent, especially a notorious celebrity such as he. I explained that in a universe of must-see events, we now need something raw, something extraordinary or appalling, something real to compete for market share. I told him that I knew about his tragic past. That I’d seen his police filings and incident reports, and that someone with such a unique legacy should have a chance to make something of himself, that notoriety is now indistinguishable from fame. Everything is on the same level now. There is only recognition or invisibility, significance or irrelevance.”

Stuart was frowning. “You wrote all that to him?”

“I did.”

It was Stuart’s turn to prompt: “And?”

“He wants to know if there is any money in it.”

“Is there?”

“Five hundred honest dollars! For a guest appearance from Bunnyman himself! I sent him a flyer. He’s interested.” He looked at Veronica. “I described to him what his job would be.”

“Is this why I’m wearing bracelets?” Veronica asked.

“You should always wear the bracelets. But this is what I told him: I said that the story would go out that Bunnyman was in the area, and that he had attacked a woman locked in an old caboose north of Pope’s Head Creek. There’s actually an old caboose left to the side of the tracks. It had been converted to a schoolyard or park piece, with its sides cut out for large bay windows, but it never sold. Muldoon told me about it, and showed me where it is. I told Hindley that rumor is best when borne out of fact, and that we needed something close to an actual attack, or half attack. That we had in our troupe a highly trained performance artist,” he nodded at Veronica, “who is well known for encouraging and bearing attacks made upon her. That her specialty is *aggravating* assault.” He paused for reaction. He thought the wording was clever.

“Mm,” she said. “He can’t possibly be that stupid.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge. He asked what he’d have to do. I said just enough to play along with the performance, to roughen her up. He asked, rather astutely, why he would do something that would so easily make him vulnerable to arrest. And I said that he has these messages now, and so I would be an accessory to any crime. He asked why he doesn’t just turn in these messages to the cops now, and I told him, ‘Exactly. Now we have a bond of trust. We are now colleagues.’”

“Unbelievable.”

“He wants \$800. And he wants to meet me in person. I’m going to Clifton on Monday.”

“You better have a number for a lawyer,” she said.

“I do. So what do you think?”

“I think it’s dumb.”

“It’s our climax,” he said. “And you’ll have whole hosts of bunny people looking for you, at the same time as Jake Hindley is coming for you.”

She looked at Stuart. “What are you thinking?” He looked uneasy. The lights were coming up on stage. The man who had gone first jumped back on stage to raise the mic a little. He consulted a note.

“Introducing: Ms. Veronica Samir.”

Doc was grinning. Stuart turned from the stage to her. He looked pained, apologetic.

“He mispronounced my name,” she said. People began to look around for the next speaker. Veronica didn’t budge. She looked down and slowly rotated the IPA in a pool of condensation. She took a sip. She stood, looked at Doc, who nodded at her.

She took the bracelets off, placed them gently on the table, grabbed her purse and swung it over her shoulder, and walked through the silent, watching audience, past her lookalike mural, and out the door.

The crowd wondered if it were a trick, part of the performance. Some who knew better raised their eyebrows. When Stuart finally ran out, he thought to head south on I8th, because that’s the direction she came from. The sidewalks were packed so he took to the street where he could dodge traffic and speed along,

searching sidelong down the big pedestrian belt, way down past the taverns and over the flower-draped barriers that protect diners from vehicular strikes. A car door almost flipped him on his head, a truck's side view mirror popped him in the shoulder and the driver bellowed deliriously before nearly striking the car in front of him. When the driver slung his head out the open window to glower at his trespasser in apoplectic damnation, Stuart was already down the street, past the basketball courts and the popsicle trucks and the corner bar that sells intimacy in fluted glasses. *I'm always looking for her*, he thought. At least she's not minced under a riot of skulls. She's strong, she's independent, and he didn't know if he was on Doc's errand, the university's, or his own.

He searched all the way to Florida Avenue, and he could have kicked himself for not checking the metro station first. She still hadn't responded to his text. He stopped to stare at the screen, where the little red pinprick of a notification appears, and he said "now" in the incantation of a conjuring. He really wanted that to work. He sent a message to Doc. "Nope," but refused to elaborate. He cut through a corner of the basketball courts.

"Hey, creep."

Stuart took a long, deep breath. She was sitting on the utility box letting her heels fall against the front panel. "What took you so long?" she asked.

"I got hit by a truck!"

"Stuart, did you know that was going to happen? The put-me-on-the-spot at the cafe?"

"I did, Veronica. I'm part of the experiment. I work for the school. I thought it was a clumsy idea to effect glaucophobia or glossophobia or whatever phobia it is."

“You could have just given me a poem and I would have gone up there and read it. It’s the waiting to be called that creates the anxiety anyway.”

“I know. Doc thought it might trigger something if you had to come up with something on the spot.”

“I should have just walked up on stage and called you names.”

He nodded in agreement. He fell in beside her, next to her knocking feet. He thought it would have been funny if she had taken the stage to call him names.

“Tell me more about this Jack or Jake man,” she said. “The Bunnyman guy. Is Doc really setting this up? Is this for real?”

Stuart turned to the street. He saw the man in the six-wheel pickup. He still looked flushed with corked-up rage.

He looked sideways at Veronica. “I wouldn’t worry too much,” he said.

“Okay. Why not?”

“I just wouldn’t.”

She let her heels fall against the panel, one-two, one-two, one—

“Will you go?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “It wouldn’t be a night without me.”

He laughed. “Now that’s the honest truth.”

She pulled her purse higher over the shoulder and hopped down from the metal box. “You want to mosey with me down to Dupont?” The question was unnecessary.

At the entrance to the station, she asked him, “Do you want to know what I would have said? On the stage? I thought of it when —”

“Wait!” he yelled, and led her to the tiny triangular median north of the circle. He sat on the bench and, in perfect audience, asked her to begin.

“Okay.” She cleared her throat, thought for a bit, and searched the sky for the memory of it. “Give me an artist who wipes down the counters.” She counted off something, and began again.

Give me an artist who wipes down the counters,
A poet who pulls hair from the drain,
A romantic who understands amortization points,
And a playwright who replaces the kitchen light.

Stuart was nodding with a wide grin. “That’s great!”

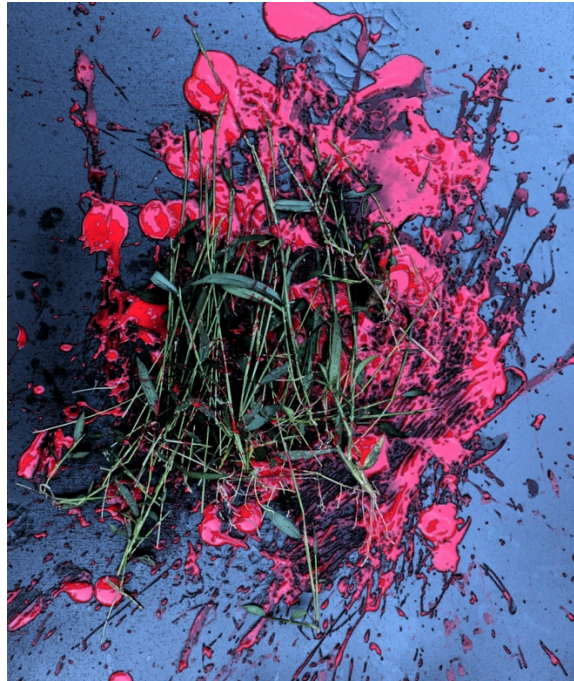
She slapped her hip and stomped. “You’re supposed to snap your fingers!”

He laughed and looked at his hands. “My fingers can’t do that.”

Before she descended into the Dupont station, she said, “See you at the Eve of Bunnyman’s Gala Revenge and Festival Night.”

“I’ll pick you up in Doc’s car,” he called.

She took her hand off the handrail and waved like the queen.



II. Bloodbath

One of the undergrad art students was given the job of responding to all inquiries. She would message Doc with questions, and he would message her back. Another student suggested that she simply produce a FAQ, but she said she had no time for that, busy as she was responding to all the inquiries.

No, there will not be a food truck.

Yes, the live music will be provided by anyone who brings their own instruments. Feel free to bring whatever you like. We know there will be banjos.

Yes, we request that everyone wear a rabbit costume. Pink or white is preferred, but there is some wiggle room.

No, there are no parking lots. These are country roads. We recommend carpooling, drop-offs, and walking in.

No, there is no specific address. Most of the activity is expected to occur around the railway bridge on Colchester Road.

Fireworks are permitted, but remember, only you can prevent wildfires.

No, there are no camping facilities.

No, we do not have a drugs and alcohol policy.

No, we do not have any waivers, per se. Practice responsibility in moderation.

No, we can't tell you if there will be any distinguishing marks on the Bunnyman because we don't know either.

No, we do not have a policy on inclement weather.

Yes, we are for real. Are you?

Doc sent Veronica a message. He said there's so much chatter that he regrets not charging a fee to cover the cost of Bunnyman appearing.



Stuart picked up Veronica in Doc's car.

There were bunnies along the road, walking on the grassy shoulders and down along the drainages. The car lights lit up their white oblong bellies and shined in their faces below hoods of floppy or sky-high ears. They both were amazed and delighted at the panoply. Uniformly costumed but faces from all tribes, nations, pockets and diasporas. All hail the bunny horde. They could be seen in the trees, hurrying in all directions, some carrying backpacks and speakers, playing death metal, black metal, rockabilly and psychobilly, alt country and provincial bluegrass, Deliverance, Zombie and Ministry. The hills of Clifton were alive not just with music, but with creeds, philosophies, aesthetics, styles and comportments of the globe. Some carried six packs, twelve packs, backpacks of skinny cans and little baggies. Bars and trail mix.

They parked the car on the side of the road, tipping into a switchgrass field, and started walking south. Stuart wore his bunny suit from the waist down, bunny legs cut at the boots, with the torso, hood and ears wrapped around his waist below a black t-shirt. He wore a headlamp and had given one to Veronica, who also wore bunny legs beneath a black midriff. Doc asked her to wear a gothic black dress or virginal white one, and she laughed him off. She wore a black hairband that rallied into a spiral bun with escaping wisps, tongues and tails of fan blade hair. She did wear the bracelets. Doc was back at the trunk of an art student's car, monitoring and managing through a cartop workstation of laptops and handheld radios to pierce through the signal-less, tangled woods. His troupe of art students were to report back anything of note. Doc demanded a quick word with his assistant when they passed.

They could see flashes in the woods above the road. Photos, fireworks. Loud shells of fireworks, magnesium strikes and disappearing galaxies into pockets of black fog. Photographs in

clearings. Up on the tracks two bunnies with banjos were followed by one with a washboard. Veronica said, "Look at that!"

On the opposite side of the road a short bunny with his hood off was trying to console another who was vomiting on her slippers.

Down around the bend, they saw a bunny running gleefully down a slope of thorns and thistles yelling that she'd seen Bunnyman. Her small company was busy trying to find an earring or some tiny lost thing in the leaf litter on the side of the road. One combing his hand through the debris yelled they'd all seen Bunnyman.

They heard three quick reports of firecrackers that sounded like bombs. Two pickups raced up the road leaving a wake of machine-gun guitar riffs, trailing off into the distance.

Stuart walked with Veronica all the way down to the town itself, over the railroad tracks and up Main. The town was empty. The ice cream shop and pizzeria were closed. A woman walking her dog retreated down a lane and onto her porch. They could see her standing in the dark, watching them, the dog barking in small, high yips. They turned north again, up Chapel towards Cold Point Road. They could hear distant pops and scatter shots, muted and lengthened by a couple of miles. There were no bunnies here. They turned left opposite the entrance of Cold Point, into the brambles, high-stepping over cables of thorns that grabbed and tore the pink felt of their legs, and up the rocky incline of the railroad tracks. From here it was three hundred yards to the old caboose.

The sound of the rock pile under their boots was like the clinking of glass, and some sections slid out into little avalanches down into the woods. They stepped into the middle of the tracks and

Veronica stopped. They could see a pinpoint of bobbing light behind them in the distance. "Do you think it's following us?"

Stuart watched. "Is it moving?"

"It's definitely moving."

"It's probably a drunk rabbit using the tracks to try to find his way back."

He wished she hadn't said anything. Now it was freaking him out. They continued walking, two little circles of light, letting the intervals of wooden ties stretch out their gait, walking as couples do down the aisle of a church.

"It's probably just an axe murderer," she said.

"Would you stop?"

"Maybe you should wear the bracelets."

"I'm not the subject."

"Tell me what you know about Bunnyman. Is Doc making it up?"

Stuart was quiet, which had become unusual for them. He was now accustomed to thinking thoughts he had once formed in the closed chamber of his imagination to thinking them aloud with her, a paradise in limbo. She stopped again and looked back at the small pinpoint of light. "It's definitely moving."

"The caboose is right in front of us," said Stuart.

There was a skyburst of chemical light. The rails shined black in both directions to their vanishing points. The caboose was cast

to the side of the tracks in a hastily built platform of beams and gravel. They were back close to ground zero of the circulating bunny horde, the concentric, interlaced framework of late night mayhem, the bursts of light, the feature event, the bridge. Doc had asked Stuart to lead her up the tracks from the south.

They approached the defunct caboose. "It's actually in pretty good shape." Stuart cradled the padlock in his hand and reached in his pocket for the key. Veronica looked for movement of the pinpoint light down the tracks. "Stuart," she said, as he unstuck the thickly painted door. Inside was a clutch of boxes and gear that only gained shape and color by their probing flashlights, like the piled clutter of a shipwreck discovered in a trench.

"Here's your classic Hitchcock setup," he said. "Trapped in a tight space."

"And with a slowly approaching killer," she said. "Stuart." He turned to her and his handlamp caught her in the eyes. He looked down and to the side to reduce the glare. She took off her headlamp. "You're not going to let me come to harm, or let harm come to me, are you?"

He was looking at her bracelets.

"I'm not really a specialist in aggravating assault," she said. "I'm not emotionless. I do register fear. Maybe I don't process it like others, I don't know why. I just don't freak out that much. But I do know what it feels like. I don't know how I'd be able to function without it."

"I wouldn't worry too much," he said.

"Why?"

"I just wouldn't."

“Stuart, I’ve known from the beginning that you are the stranger.” He looked up to watch her speak. “I knew how close you stood next to me during the torture session. I could feel you leaning into me the closer Howard West came. And I knew when I was out on that ledge that you weren’t inside monitoring my pulse, because I knew you were the stranger on the other end of the rope, wearing that ridiculous hat. I could tell by the way you walk — and you couldn’t have been in the room because you didn’t stick your head out of the window when I called for you. And I knew it was you who released my weight belt in the river because who else would know how to do it, and also, you weren’t there when I came back to the boat. You’re always there. And when I was in the grave I knew you were the one who dug me out because when I kicked open the lid I saw no one there.”

He was watching the movement of her throat in the circle of light.

“So tell me what’s happening now.”

Stuart grabbed the lens of his headlamp to cover the light with his fingers. Through the skin and capillary blood, the light gleamed in layers of red and yellow across her face. He wanted to see her without blinding her.

He took a breath and shook his head. “It’s all made up. All of it. There’s nothing to worry about. Howard West only wanted to pull that murdered woman’s dress down to cover her up. He’s not some sick-o. Doc’s been pulling strings. He contacted Jake Hindley but he never heard back. That’s probably Doc down there with the light. He didn’t tell me much, only to bring you up from the south, put you in place and check the bracelets.”

She shot her light in his face. She covered the lens with her fingers to reduce the glare.

“Everything’s cool,” he said.

“Okay.” She bit her lip. She smiled. “This is stupid.”

He laughed. “It really is.”

“Lock me in,” she said.

“Okay.” He moved some boxes around. He found the lamp that the art students had left for him.

“I’m supposed to turn this on.” He fumbled for the switch. Found it. The caboose bathed in a yellow cartilage glow.

“That’s cozy,” she said.

“It’s to make you visible.”

“To my killer.”

“And to the art students outside so they can take pictures.”

“Oh-my-god.”

“So sit up and look pretty.”

“Sure,” she said.

“This seat is the best angle.” He dusted off a box.

“Of me?” He shared the smirk and nodded.

“I’ll be up fifty yards up the tracks.”

“I will see you soon.”

He repositioned the lamp on a higher box and turned to the door. He asked if she needed anything more and she said, “chips and salsa.” He stepped out. “And a bag of popcorn.” He looked down the tracks and closed the door. He threw the padlock into the tall grass.

She took her position. “Sitting pretty,” she thought, and waited for the approach.



The bunnies in the woods saw blood, and upon seeing it, they could taste it like a busted nose. It was self-fulfilling, a fiction that manifested itself out of retribution for having thought about it for too long. These are the basic principles of horror, and all horror begins and ends there, for having thought about a thing too long. A bunny they called Goldilocks for the flaxen braids she wore in place of her floppy ears was spooked by a bunny who had lunged at her from behind a tree. He accidentally tripped on a rack of thorns that snapped forward and lashed her face. If she had not been thinking all day to watch for a theme-night bunnyman in the woods, she might not have recoiled the way she did and clawed at his face. Such reports only intensified. A boy down the road flung a rock into a thicket of yard clippings and sliced open the temple of a bunny who had taken flight and hidden there. Herds of bunnies set out to find the girl in distress and they found suspect bunnymen instead. Branches became a defense and rocks from little Pope Head’s Creek were made ready. There was a hail of skipping rocks on Colchester Road and the only respite from being scalped by the ricocheting discs

was to run deeper into the woods, where anything might happen and anyone might be there. The overlapping soundtrack scored by speakers in backpacks kept narrowing the cusp between speculation and neck-slicing authenticity with strumming, beating repetition. This was always the promise of the night, to be hunted in a fascination forest of their own design, bombs bursting in air.



Veronica would rather have sat in the dark. The lamp only cast the windows into two-way mirrors. She could hear the ruckus, pops and explosions outside, but she could only see herself in the glass. This is how the pictures will look in Doc's book of fear, she thought, preserved in time.

She heard shouting, but like all the sounds outside it was distant and abstract, until a blast too close set her lunging for the switch of the lantern. Sitting in the dark, she could see outside.

She could hear the clinking of rocks. She stood and stepped to the other side, opposite the tracks, but those windows, too, contained nothing. Just the gray trunks of trees. Someone was outside, she knew, and she smirked at the thought. Doc, or maybe it was Jake Hindley pumped up with nerves. She thought to spook whoever it was, just slip outside, tiptoe around, and scream bloody murder.

It could be Stuart, bored and mischievous, but she thought that boy should know better. Maybe it was some big, drunken hare, also terrified by the high-strung scenario and the mystery of the box in which she was held. She stepped to the other side, looked

up and down the tracks with her forehead pressed against the glass. "Have at it, man," she thought.

She heard voices before the second shot. Low and incomprehensible, although she held her ear to the window trying to make out the words. There were two men. Three? It was low until someone shouted, "Watch it!" and she heard one clear pop. She held her breath in the silence that followed. There was another footstep, or something that dropped in the rocks. She stepped back a little and stood in the middle of the caboose. The third shot cracked like overhead lightning and she instinctively dove between the boxes. She listened to the sound wave roll over the hills. Rocks collapsed all around the caboose.

They were standing outside the windows. Large men. Mesh cap and big belly men. Sloven men. Rifles and shotguns slung over their shoulders. They discussed moving north, widening the perimeter. Another agreed, said his house was up there. Another cursed his friend for sitting down on the rails, said the night had just begun, going rabbit hunting. One asked what to do about the big black rabbit.

The door to the caboose opened. "Hey there," she heard.

A beam of light caught the tips of her shoes. A box was shifted and she was exposed. The man stood over her and reported, "We're securing the area." Someone outside said, "the girl in distress," and another exclaimed, "Ah!" The man — he was a boy. 17? He wore a stretched, pale green shirt, and had a bobbing baby chin. A flashlight from outside caught up to his face. He was grinning. He stepped to the door and leaned out, checking. He stepped back inside. "I'll leave the door open. Watch out for this one when you get out."

The lot of them trudged through the rocks and started up the tracks. They talked about sending someone back to guard the

town. Someone said that there are enough men in front of the store already. Veronica vaulted up and ran outside, around the front and onto the tracks. She ran back to the rear of the caboose and there she found the body.

It was a six-foot charcoal gray rabbit lying on its side, wet and spreading a blackened pool across the rocks. She bent down and hooked her pinky around the edge of the saturated hood. He looked bewildered. She slid her fingers into place on Doc's warm throat. His rabbit ears had been shorn off. There still was no signal and when she dialed 911 the phone retorted with three dull beeps.

She whirled around again and ran back up to the tracks, narrowing her eyes to see where the men had gone. Where Stuart should be hiding. She didn't know where or when she had dropped her headlamp. She walked at a quickening pace over the ties. She could see the light of the men scanning the woods. They were in good ol' boy formation, just walking, looking, and cracking jokes. One of them was singing out, "half-rabbit man!" and another barked in a high, cartoonish voice, "here, half-rabbit, half-rabbit, half-rabbit," and the first in a movie trailer voice-over announced, "He's not a man, he's half-rabbit man."

She was running now. She found him on the tracks. She knelt down next to the body, and touched his shoulder. His black shirt was soaked and heavy and his left rabbit leg clung wet around his thigh. She could just make out the features of his face. He opened his eyes.

"I'm playing dead."

She lowered her face to him. She put her palm on his forehead.
"*Come here.*"

He stiffened a little and tried to roll to the side. "I don't think I can move."

"Well, you're going to have to, because no one's coming, and you'll be dead in the hour." She stood, stepped over his head, grabbed him by the armpits, and heaved him to a slumped position. He was on his feet. He took a half step forward and found some balance.

"Yeah," he laughed, and took a few more steps down the tracks, halted, and turned abruptly right. "This way." She caught him.

She steered him by the waist and they stumbled through the switch grass, thorns, and ivy all the way to the road. The security light of a house on the other side snapped on reflexively. Stuart looked down at Veronica's swinging arm, which alternately pressed the wet shirt against his stomach.

"You're bleeding all over the place," he said.

"Funny. Don't talk so much."

They cut a corner across a field and four bunnies came running. One screamed, "They're shooting people! They're shooting —"

"Can I get a little help here?" Veronica asked. But they were already down the road. Ahead they saw six or seven white pickups on the side of the road. Stuart was fumbling for something in his pocket. At the first truck he stopped and dug deeper.

"Come on," she said.

"One second."

He held in his bloody hand two red cylinders with fuses. “Doc was giving them out.”

“Come on.”

He nodded to the open window of the first pickup and pumped an eyebrow. She said, “Can I see these?” grabbed the little cylinders and threw them on the road.

They hobbled past the convoy, down to the intersection and around the corner to where Doc’s sedan was parked.

“Do you have the keys?” asked Stuart.

“Oh-my-god,” she said, more perturbed than anything else.

“Doc has them.”

She slumped his body against the rear wheel and he slid off her. He looked up from his tilted head. “I’ll just wait for you here.”

“A jiffy,” she said, and stepped back onto the road as three police cruisers roared by. She raised her hand, but they did not stop. She jutted the wrath of her middle finger into the red afterglow of the lights. “I’m covered in blood!” she yelled, before storming back toward the scalped costume and slain body of Doc, just through the woods and down the tracks.

Stuart dozed. He blinked in and out of sleep and consciousness. He thought if he could just squeeze in a little power nap he could tell her what he thought of patriots on the way to the hospital. He also had some ideas about octopus brains from an article he’d read that morning. He watched a movie she’d recommended last week, a Scandinavian horror. He wanted to talk more about the poem she didn’t recite on stage, and a

band they should see this weekend, called Headscrew. He needed to tell her a thought he'd had about the cycling of time based on a poem by William Butler Yeats. He had so much to say, so much he had stored up to tell her.

He fell off and half awoke to the reports of fireworks that sounded like absolute carnage. Diminutive rabbit men ran around the car. His own legs were magnified, stretched out into the hard grass and clear across the field. He tasted metal in his throat.

He swore he saw a boy crouched down in the grass next to him, telling him to stay awake, *please stay awake*, cradling a shotgun that was too big for him. He dreamt of satin pillows and coffin lids and of a fan he couldn't get to work.

When he woke up, he thought he'd wet his pants and then he remembered. The car was whipping around curves, and he let his body slide back and forth across the slick back seat. He held onto the car handle.

"Play us some music."

She had found a signal and connected her phone to the console of Doc's car to bring up a map. She had called the hospital to tell them to get ready.

He drifted. When he woke up they were speeding down the straight line of Route 123.

"Play us some music."

"I'm driving," she said. She pulled off the bracelets. She fumbled for her phone. She wiped the blood off the screen with a dry patch of shirt underneath her armpit. She brought up a playlist Stuart had made for her and pressed a button.

It's Koffin Kat!

I'll bring you back from hell.

I'll bring you back from hell.

Damn! Listen to that boneyard bass! His ears tingled. His whole head tingled to the song he knew.

He watched her eyes in the mirror. Steady as a drum. He wondered about her pulse. There was something in the lyrics that reminded him of something they should do together on Wednesday. He noticed she was wearing eyeliner. Funny, he thought, those eyes of all eyes do not need eyeliner. He couldn't remember, though. The thing they were to do together, was it Tuesday or Wednesday? He was sure. He couldn't know. It was tough to tell. Maybe Tuesday.