

# EVACUATIONS

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A collection of short fiction.

## EVACUATIONS

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## My Heart Opens Itself to Your Voice

It was March now, almost April, and all the crummy snow was melting finally, left only in big sooty piles on the sides of roads, and Tim had given me the LP in September, before it had even gotten cold and before I'd even come to Rochester. It was newly released and newly bought, and he'd given it as a going-away present to me, but really for me to return to him. He'd said, "You know who lives in Rochester," and I'd said I didn't, because truly I didn't know a single person living in Rochester or enrolled at the University thereof, and he knew that and at that moment seemed to me to be rubbing it in. He said that Son House lived in Rochester.

I didn't know who Son House was; I thought maybe he was a far-out jazz guy like Sun Ra, but I learned that it was s-o-n and he was a Mississippi Delta blues musician, Tim said, and showed me the LP. "He's a true bluesman," Tim said. Tim said, sitting on the floor of my room in the East 9<sup>th</sup> Street apartment, that the LP had Son House's address right on the back cover, and he showed me that it did. The LP was called *Son House at Home* and on the front it had a picture of Son House sitting on a couch among crocheted floral pillows and blankets. Son House wore a checkered shirt with a striped tie and a tight little smile and he seemed elderly, maybe, or maybe not so old as that, and on the back it said in small print: recorded at 61 Greig Street, Rochester, NY, and if it was recorded *At Home* then that must be his house.

"House at Home," I said, thinking it was a little funny at least.

"Take it with you," Tim said. "Maybe you can go to his house. Maybe you can tell him you're a big fan and get it signed for me."

I did take it with me and I went to Rochester and left him in Brooklyn. I thought it was audacious to go to a person's house, so I figured I would tell Tim it was really far from campus or he had stopped living there or he had died. When I got to campus and got the lay of Rochester a little bit, I learned it was actually very close, just across the Genesee River and past the prison, in the neighborhood of Corn Hill which was, to use the word that was used to me, dilapidated. Yet still I didn't go for a long time, because the weather became cold and it was easy to convince people in Brooklyn that I was busy at college, and beyond that I didn't terribly want to go bothering an old man at his house, without Tim there to do all the talking about the Mississippi Delta and the blues and steel guitars and true bluesmen.

But after we argued on the phone, *Son House at Home* re-entered my thinking as a trump card, not to win an argument which didn't really matter to me but to demand that the argument un-happen or have never happened, a trump card that could be signed, sealed, and delivered to him, but really to me.

The only person I told about my plan was Audrey who lived on my hall. I told her when I met her in the bathroom; we were both brushing our teeth at the long row of sinks. I spat out my toothpaste and I told her that I was going into town to visit Son House at his house, and that the neighborhood was dilapidated and I wanted someone to go with. She spat out her toothpaste and asked me who Son House was and I told her everything that Tim had told me about him, and then I had to explain it a little further because she didn't know anything about the Mississippi Delta blues and it seemed like the folk revival had passed her by too. She was from Tenafly, New Jersey.

I said, "Do you want to come meet Son House with me?"

She said, “Okay.”

She came to my room after that and I played her the LP, *Son House at Home*. I had listened to it a handful of times since I had come to Rochester, mostly right after my arrival and not since fall had turned to winter. I had played it initially in a posture of missing Tim but I found that it didn't really remind me of him or our love and, by March, I had seen him more recently – at Christmas – than I had heard the record. By March I very much had the blues, over a number of things, but the blues didn't seem to help me.

“I'm not sure I like it,” Audrey said while we were listening to it, in a cautious voice with a certain curl of naughtiness to it, as if it were a little subversive not to like it.

To be honest I agreed with her for the most part. The music sounded repetitive to my unexpert ears, and moreover, it made me think unkind thoughts about Tim. This was the kind of music that was pretentious for white people to like, I thought. It was rare and collectible, and authentic, and that was what gave it most of its thrilling value to him, I thought. It was hard for me to understand the words Son House was saying, especially when I forgot to listen. His voice was gravelly to an extreme, like it was being dragged through gravel, and he snorted and gurgled in such a way that I thought at first there was a second sleeping person in the background of the recording.

The part of the record I liked the most came at the very end, and this time, as every time, it brought me back to full attention after I stopped listening without meaning to. The final track was a spoken message from Son House, and actually it began with a spoken message from his wife. She thanked some people by name and said God bless you to everyone. She said, “May God bless you and keep you, and I hope to meet you someday.” Then Son House came on, with a rasping sound that made me imagine the

couple brushing past each other as they shifted positions around the mic. Again Son House was hard to understand, so slurred were his spoken words and so low down into rattling bass did they go, and I guessed then that he was ancient. Actually at that time he was only 67, my father's age. Son House thanked the same people by name that his wife had thanked, and then said God bless you, and then paused, not in silence, but with a low constant noise in his throat like the engine of a car. When he began to talk again he talked for no reason about the death of his mother from mumps. She died while he was in bed with her, he said, only he didn't realize it until he got out of bed and his aunt remarked on it. He said that before she died she would suddenly look to the sky sometimes and see something and begin to run from it, and that's how he knew she was sick, and so he wasn't surprised when she died. He finished the story by cautioning the listener, me and Audrey at that moment, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, because there was no outrunning death. He said a phrase over and over again that I couldn't understand, about death: the something of death. It was either the sadness or the silence. That was the last track on the record.

When the LP was finished, Audrey turned over the sleeve in her hands and rubbed her thumb over the small print, *recorded at 61 Greig Street, Rochester, NY*. "Why did he move to Rochester?" she asked. "If he's a Mississippi Delta bluesman?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe he stopped having the blues." I took the sleeve back from her. "And then he found them again in Rochester."

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When I told the story of going to meet Son House to Tim over the phone, I left this part out: Audrey and me riding the bus to Corn Hill. For Tim I began the story with

the knock on Son House's door, but actually it took Audrey and me a long time to get to Son House's house. Both Audrey and I wore our hair in the fashion of that time, long and parted in the middle, but mine was curly so it looked less fashionable. We wore turtlenecks and jeans for our trip uptown, and I wore brown leather boots. Audrey wanted to come with me, I would tell Tim, because she thought I was a wild New York City girl who could show her adventure. She never said that really, although she did come along and I can't think of another reason why she would have, not having heard of Son House and not having liked the record, and I liked that she made me feel like that, like a wild New York City girl. Everyone I knew lived in New York City besides the people I had met in Rochester, and none of them thought I was wild.

I don't mean to denigrate Audrey. She was a really nice girl from what I remember and she was polite for the duration of our trip to see Son House. Really what I had a problem with was Rochester.

Audrey and I could have walked to Son House's house in less time than it took us to wait for the bus and take it to Corn Hill. We were the only people on the bus, and we remained the only white people as it filled up at subsequent stops. When we got off the bus we were the only white people in Corn Hill. It was one of the oldest neighborhoods of Rochester, with old houses that I later learned were called painted ladies. They were, as I'd been warned, dilapidated: only about half looked like they had any insides.

It was a Saturday morning and a lot of people said good morning to us, in a tone that said they were mainly remarking on the strangeness of our presence in this part of town. We walked in one direction and had people say good morning to us, and then in another direction. I was lost. I didn't tell Audrey but she noticed anyway.

“Didn’t you look up how to get there from the bus stop?”

I had, but I’d forgotten. I had a very poor sense of direction. Everyone at home knew that about me and knew better than to let me try to get somewhere by myself.

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I knocked on the door of 61 Greig Street an hour after I’d gotten off the bus. I was in a worse and more embarrassed mood but it seemed like Audrey was still doing fine. I don’t remember the colors of the particular painted lady where he lived – that’s why they’re so named, they have at least three accent colors and I can’t remember a one – but I remember that it seemed to take a long time for anyone to come to the door. That was what I opened with, when I told Tim on the phone what I had done that morning. It was Son House’s wife who came to the door, after what seemed like so long, and she greeted us in a manner that was both friendly and unfriendly, like the good mornings.

I showed her the LP. “Is this Son House’s home?”

“Yes,” she said, like she wasn’t surprised. “Come in.”

Son House was in the living room, watching TV. Tim wanted to know all about what he was watching but I couldn’t remember. There were a lot of things Tim asked me to remember that I couldn’t then, only hours later, and I can’t now. My conversation on the phone with Tim was a strange one because everything I said, he wanted me to say ten times more. Usually when I talked to him on the phone in my dorm room I didn’t even ask my roommate to step out and give me privacy because he did all the talking. He would tell me about the actions at Brooklyn College, which he loved, and the Maoists, whom he hated. He loved to tell me about actions because I was a red diaper baby, a term I had taught him, and he even liked to come over to the East 9<sup>th</sup> Street apartment and get

into arguments with my father, mostly about Mao, sometimes about Trotsky. “He’s a CP man,” I would have to say to Tim eventually, and then he would decide that he had had enough of arguing with my father, which he found thrilling, and then we would go into my room and kiss until my mother banged on the door.

Rochester had no actions. It was 1970 that March and it was as if 1969 and 1968 and 1967 had not happened here in Rochester. There was no telling how many years had not happened here, and I was contracted for three more after this one, which was not even over yet.

Son House’s living room had a large cross on one wall, neat and black, and on the opposite wall there were framed portraits of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King hanging next to each other. They were each looking off-camera in three-quarters profile and were positioned in such a way that they faced each other. They didn’t really look at each other, though, but rather their eyelines crossed at a point in the middle distance between and in front of them.

Son House wore a collared white shirt with no tie and he looked very old. He sat on the same couch that he’d posed on for the cover of the LP, and the crocheted blankets and pillows were posed just the same still, as if it had been no pose at all. He got up and shook my hand and Audrey’s hand.

“Thank you so much for having us, Mr. House,” I said. “It’s an honor.”

“Yes,” said Audrey.

“What are your names?” said Son House. He didn’t seem any type of way about our presence, that I can remember. He seemed calm, like we’d called before coming.

“I’m Ruth and this is Audrey,” I said. “We saw your address on the back of this LP and we go to the University, and we thought, maybe we could come see you and tell you what fans we are of your music.”

Son House seemed happy. He had a cigarette dangling from his mouth and he pulled out his squashed-up carton from his pocket and lit a new one from the tip of the old one. This I remember exactly. He did it over and over again – he never lit a match the whole time we visited him and he smoked the whole time.

Son House’s wife, whose name was Evie, brought us lemonade and shortbread cookies. I asked whether a lot of people came to visit them like this, since his address was on the back of the LP.

“Not from the University,” said Evie, and I felt proud of myself then, and I imagine Audrey did too, and I made sure to tell Tim that part, that nobody from the University but us had ever thought to do this, to visit Rochester’s only true bluesman, and Tim said that I hadn’t exactly had the thought myself either, but all I had to do was go a little silent and then he asked me what happened after that.

What happened after that was the part I thought Tim would just love. I asked Son House if he would play us some songs and he said of course, and he told Evie to go get his guitar.

Evie said his guitar was with his nephew. So Son House rose up off the couch and told me and Audrey to follow him, and he left his home.

If folks had looked at us strange before, they must have had ten times as many questions now, seeing two white co-eds trailing behind Son House as he walked down the block. Everybody in the neighborhood knew him, and no one asked after his funny

entourage. No one told him where his nephew was, either. The only sign of his frustration was in his hands as they lit another cigarette from the last one – they moved harshly, with bursting force.

Finally we went into a bar. Tim wanted to know the name of the bar when I told him this but I couldn't remember, or had never known, rushing to keep up and stay close to Son House. All I remembered was that it was very dark inside with many closed doors.

“It was probably a brothel,” Tim said. “The people there probably thought you were hookers.”

Tim wasn't welcome to speculate on what he hadn't seen, I felt, so I pushed on with the telling as if he'd said nothing. Somebody found Son House's guitar in one of the many rooms, and brought it out, just its steel self, no case. We never saw his nephew. I thought that was so funny and strange. That was my favorite part of visiting Son House because it was the most surreal, but Tim wanted me to hurry it up back to the apartment for Son House playing us songs from *Son House at Home*.

Well, he did play us some songs. He played for half an hour and both Audrey and I cried a little, not because we understood the songs which I still couldn't, Son House's words being even more slurred in person, but just to see the way he exerted himself on the couch, his hands making more violent small movements and his knees bent and tense, and his throat making the same strange snorts and gasps we'd heard on the record.

The last song he played was his most famous song, which was called “Death Letter.” It was about a dead girlfriend and had a line that went, “It's hard to love someone who don't love you,” which made me think of Tim, of course, although I didn't know which side of that line I was on and which he was on. It made me think of when he

played the LP for me in my room in the East 9<sup>th</sup> Street apartment which he did when he came over to give it to me. My father answered the door and said, “Your Trot boyfriend is here,” with some fondness. The way he said *Trot* in his Polish accent sounded like he was clearing his throat. He was a CP man. He had protected Paul Robeson at the Peekskill Riots and there was a picture of him in a book about the life of Paul Robeson that we owned. It was the first thing I showed Tim after I learned he was political, when I wanted him to ask me out.

Tim played the whole LP for me the night before I left for school but we only got halfway through before he started kissing me even though the music was so sad. He kissed me until the LP was over and the record player played white noise and then my mother banged on the door and we sprang apart.

Tim got up and put the LP back in its sleeve. “Ruthie,” he said in a little whine, “why do you have to go all the way to Rochester?” and I shrugged and then we talked about other things.

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Audrey used the facilities before we left and I sat facing the Houses.

“How do you like Rochester?” I said.

“I don’t much like it,” said Son House, and the cigarette in his mouth bobbed along to his words. He had been living here for twenty years at this point if I remembered Tim’s telling of the story correctly. He had quit music and come here retired, and been rediscovered by some folkies and resurrected, and he’d toured again and recorded new LPs, most recently one in this very house, where I sat with one of his crocheted floral pillows on my lap.

“We gonna move to Detroit,” said Son House. “Too cold in the winter here.”

It was cold in the winter in Detroit too, I thought, maybe colder even, but I knew what he meant.

I’m sure it doesn’t surprise you to hear that I forgot to get the LP signed for Tim after all that, but it did surprise him. Actually he surprised me by asking me about it, when I was done telling him my story over the phone, and reminding me that the whole point was to get it signed for him. “I didn’t remember,” I said. “I’m sorry, Tim. I’m really sorry.”

He sighed a big sigh that saturated the whole telephone. “It’s okay, Ruthie. I’m just so jealous. It must have been incredible.”

It might seem, in the telling, like he and I were over at that point or heading that way, but actually I stayed loyal to the deformed state of Tim and Ruthie for eight more years after that. Maybe that’s surprising. In part it had to do with my father dying in 1971 and in part it had to do with us both getting very political together as the war dragged on and the actions got so widespread that they even made it to Rochester. For the first part of the rest of our years together Tim loved to tell the story of Ruthie meeting Son House and going to his house, and usually he would leave Audrey out of it so there wasn’t as much standing between the story and him telling it. But after a while he didn’t tell the story so much anymore, and neither did I, and I forgot it for a long time. And when I broke up with Tim nine whole years after meeting him, we were living in Detroit, and less than a year later I married another man I met there. What’s funny is that Son House went to Detroit too and died there but I never went and saw him again with Tim or with the man I married and I never told the man I married the story of my meeting Son House. And I’ve

stayed with that man ever since, and I hardly ever think about Tim except with anger and bitterness, so if there's anything I want to apologize for, it's what I may have done to him in the telling here, if I may have made him too small and too ugly, when really, if I spent nine years with him, there must have been a lot of times when he didn't seem ugly or small to me at all, and if this was at the beginning of those nine years, then my love for him would have been full still, or near to it.

## Inside

Step one: abandon all value systems; disrupt continuity; achieve total ambiguity. I am alone a lot of the time here, which is preferable to how I was outside. Outside is what Alaskans call the rest of the United States, although the term is rarely used on the island of Unalaska, which is where I am, where even Alaskan turns of phrase tend to remain outside. I brought the term Outside in with me, which was my first mistake, see step one, in decontextualizing absolutely and Unmyselfing myself in Unalaska, Alaska.

When I arrived here I worked in the department of human resources of the city of Unalaska, screening anonymous grievances from employees of other departments about their superiors. Everywhere has work like that and that's one reason I am able to travel. I am trying, however, to disrupt the continuity and pattern-making that creates a self over time, so it's fortunate that I was fired after a few weeks for failing to do any work. Mainly I sat at a desk practicing my signature many times over in the margins of forms and memos while I spoke on the phone. At first it was unpracticed, childish, obliging cursive but as the phone calls established repetitive patterns I began to write it faster, a compulsive workout for the idle hand, and the lumpy particularities smoothed out into unintelligible loops and spikes. I sent in a grievance report with my name signed twenty-two times, a Richteresque procession from grand- to petit-mal, and it was this last calm and undistinguished line that I drew across the bottom of my severance agreement before departing further inside.

Now I work in the department of culture and recreation of the city of Unalaska. This style of firing and adjacent rehiring is commonplace and unavoidable on an island of fewer than 2,000 people, most of whom work in the fish processing plant. The small

white-collar workforce is shuffled around in synodic patterns and I see, in the quickly-memorized faces of the island, oblique facets of future selves as seasonal shift changes. I will work in every department the city of Unalaska has to offer. In my winter I will even ascend to city council member and take over the running of the place.

I have concealed this until now, though a cartographer will have anticipated it: following this island chain westward, I will reach the end of the world. Time is the greatest tyrant, in my opinion, in how it creates a prisonlike continuity of self by shackling the future with the present, and worse, the past. There is one way to move from today to tomorrow without accepting passage in time's relentless and unidirectional movement, and that is to travel westward out of the least advanced time zone into the most advanced one, a break in continuity that is most satisfying, and this is why I invoked the cartographer-audience, when I imagine myself as a very tiny, leftward-moving dot on a world map, reaching the edge and disappearing, only to reappear, triumphant over my vast network of tyrants, see step one, on the furthest right, plunging unfettered into the future.

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At the department of culture and recreation I oversee an afterschool daycare program where elementary-grades children wait for their parents, who mainly work at the fish processing plant. Afterschool daycare programming has remained highly consistent since I was a child, outside. The children, who usually total between twenty and thirty, color, read silently, and watch movies that were already ancient when I sat through them in my own bored childhood.

There is one child who has the same name as me, B——, which is a common enough name; she isn't my first B—— nor I hers. The connection has caused her to seek further connection. She touches my hair while I watch the other children and puts it in braids that instantly unravel. She asks me many questions about myself, which I hesitate to answer to her or to you, see step one, because most of the answers have to do with outside, which I am trying to abandon. She asks me a lot about outside, where she's never been yet. She's been to mainland Alaska but never beyond. The eastward airplane ride between here and the mainland is expensive, often cancelled due to inclement weather, and undertaken on a small propeller plane that frightens me very badly. It doesn't frighten B——, who has taken it twice, and who plans to abandon Unalaska forever once she has touched civilization.

She asks me about my love life and my family and when I don't tell her she tells me about hers – both are vibrant and largely imaginary. She gestures to a boy throwing woodchips across the yard and says he is her boyfriend and they will likely marry. She tells me her father works at the fish processing plant and her mother takes care of her new brother, who doesn't need much taking care of because he's always asleep. She tells me all about her future, when she and her husband live together in Seattle Washington State, she a vegetarian, he a botanist, and the rest of her family living in a penthouse adjacent to theirs with a clothesline hanging between them for the passage of notes and small gifts.

I announce to the playgroup that it's time to go outside for a little while and they are happy. It's four in the afternoon and already nearing dark. For most of the day here it's night and in the dark the continual gusts of wind sometimes seem like they might have a hidden color and shape, boisterous shoving children among the rest. It isn't so

cold, though: the temperature is consistently between 40 and 60 degrees throughout the year. The seasons never move forward in their circle, the evergreens never molt and die and bloom again. Nature remains consistent, as if no time is passing at all.

B—— sticks close to me on the playground, but she is the only one. The other children obey my instructions and seek my help when needed, but otherwise find more interest in each other. They become difficult for me to see as the day becomes completely dark, but there are very few places for them to go on such a small island.

The children's parents begin to arrive en masse from the fish processing plant where everyone on this island works except me. B——'s father calls B—— and we both turn at our name, and she and the other children return to their homes, and I return to mine.

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When I leave Unalaska westward the next island I will land on will be Adak Island. Adak will be 444 miles from Unalaska, and will have a population of 326 people. There will be nearly as many bald eagles as people on Adak; there will be bald eagles like rats on Adak. It will be the most patriotic place in the United States on bald eagle count per capita.

There will be no radio stations on or within 200 miles of Adak; Unalaska will be far outside. Adak is Aleut for *father*. I will have no father on Adak; he will be far outside. To resist consistency and selfhood I will not work at the afterschool daycare program for the island's school, which serves 21 children grades K through 12.

There will be a plant that grows nowhere in the world but on Adak called the Aleutian shield fern. It will be an ugly plant. At six inches tall it will be challenging to

spot, emerging from the inhospitable spaces between stones. It will be hardy in one sense, as we all are who live in this place, but pathetic in another, never thriving and in fact chronically endangered. Despite its isolation it will bear strong resemblance to plants on islands nearby; yet despite its context among Aleutian flora it will remain distinct and distinguished, which will make it a satisfying symbolic presence for the midpoint of my westward course, and my goal of complete depersonalization (see step one).

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My house on Unalaska is brightly lit with punishing fluorescent bulbs. When it's dark, as it is when I return home from overseeing aftercare, the light renders the windows pitch black and depthless, as if my house resides on an island by itself, is itself an island. The darkness goes on for many hours. Outside, an overcast sky meant a light night, a beautiful and calm dimness tracing the lines of every object. I told someone once how much I liked it and he said it was, of course, an effect of pollution, and that I was one of many children who would never know true blackness.

The early dark invites early sleep, but I try to sleep as much as possible for my own reasons. It is one of my preferred modes of living. Often it is called death's brother, but they have very little in common, I explain in a dream to my own brother. The mind thrives, the imagination explores, yet the body rests comfortably, and all problems solved poorly or discovered unsolvable are reset upon waking; continuity is disrupted. Doesn't that mean the pleasures of sleeping depend on waking up? asks my brother, and if I wake up and return to sleep he is gone without extracting his answer from me.

It's difficult to wake up in the morning when the darkness doesn't crack for hours yet. The only way to tell from nature when night becomes day is when the moon sets.

The moon setting is the only thing about Unalaska that I have allowed myself to categorize as a favorite. It's a rare sight due to persistent cloud cover and that helps its case, that it's a favorite in opposition to routine. Mountains loom over the flat dock town of Unalaska, and the moon looms over the mountains. It seems to grow in size as it sets, an illusion caused by atmosphere and pollution, and it's so large as it approaches that I think it will land on the tip of a mountain and roll down into town. But instead it dips behind and the morning begins in blackness.

This black morning I leave my home and there is a bald eagle sitting on the roof of my car. It is a huge bird and a patriotic symbol for the nation and so it is unwise to try and shoo it away myself.

I go back into my house and retrieve the only thing in it that a bird of prey might like to eat, a foot-long pollock that sits whole in my freezer. My neighbor gave it to me when I moved into my house. He presented it to me in a gesture of welcome, like a pie, hanging by its mouth on a line. I don't know how to prepare a fish and so I've left it in the freezer, where ice crystals have crawled over its scales and open eyes.

I take the fish outside and throw it down on the driveway for the eagle. There is a cracking noise when it hits the pavement; it has cracked in half. The eagle, startled or repulsed, flies away. I will have to clean the fish off the driveway before my neighbor sees his frozen housewarming gift so desecrated but it's dark when we each leave our homes and dark when we each return so it isn't an urgent matter.

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When I leave Adak westward the next island I will land on will be Hawadax Island. Hawadax will be 214 miles from Adak. Hawadax is Aleut for *welcome*. The

island will welcome me because no one else will be there to do it; there will be no human population on Hawadax. Previously it will have been called Rat Island because of its thousandfold rat population. A ship will have wrecked on Rat Island hundreds of years before and left an unchecked population of rats. Outsiders will have dropped pesticides onto the island from airplanes and killed all the rats and changed the name. It will be believed to be rat-free but no one will have returned to check. I will go to Hawadax and learn if there are rats still or not but I won't report my findings because I will be going westward, not back, and must push on.

There will be frequent, powerful earthquakes on Hawadax, as it will be located on a tectonic fault line that will shift continually and unpredictably. If you have ever wondered what an earthquake feels like when no one is there to feel it, I will be no one, and I will be there to learn.

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B—— gets lost. I told you it could happen in the dark that creeps on so early in the day. It would be my fault regardless but it's compounded by the fact that I am her only friend. Her supposed boyfriend hasn't played with her all afternoon and is one of the last to express any urgency about her disappearance.

My strategy is to create a game-like group effort to find her. This is immediately disastrous because it scatters the children all around the yard and the far corners of the school building, out of my sight, bellowing B——'s name. The wind carries some of their calls directly to me and eats up some others and I try to count the heads and voices that I can. My count becomes imprecise and I have to begin again and again.

I think of a time in my own childhood, outside, when I became lost. I did it purposefully to punish the adults around me. I walked halfway down the no-outlet street where I lived and sat underneath a tree, fantasizing about the moment when everyone would drive down the street with their heads stretched out of each window of the car like dogs and cry in relief that I hadn't gone anywhere really. I don't know how long I waited but of course I became bored and walked back to my house before anyone noticed my absence.

Parents begin to arrive from the fish processing plant and I have to tell them what has happened. B—— is lost, I say, and crack a smile because I'm saying my own name. None of them returns the smile. Maybe the joke is too buried for the smile to bring it across, or maybe the situation isn't funny, or maybe they don't remember what my name is. They all know who B—— is because everyone on the island knows everyone else's children.

B——'s father arrives and the other parents tell him what's happened before I can do it. He knows her patterns well and reaches into the heather where she's crouched as if simply following a beacon signal to her. It's effortless for him and humiliating for me. In front of the group I tell B—— we were all looking for her, thinking to administer some satisfying combination of flattery and guilt, but she's nonplussed and spacey as usual. She was playing an imagination game and didn't notice she was lost. Ultimately, I think, we are not similar.

The parents look at me with a changed expression as they take their children away. B——'s father doesn't look at me at all. I think I am going to lose my job in the department of culture and recreation.

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One of the many problematic elements of everything is that it reminds me of everything else. Maybe it's just the same thing that makes the moon seem closer than outside but from where I'm standing, forward motion invites more past than future no matter how close I come to completing one step.

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When I leave Hawadax westward the final island I will land on will be Attu Island. Attu will be 241 miles from Hawadax. I don't know what Attu means in Aleut and there will be no one there to ask.

I've concealed this until now: when I arrive on the final island, the end of the world will have already passed. It will have been hundreds of miles before, between Amatignak and Semisopochnoi, and you won't have felt anything. A continuity of nation and archipelago will have disrupted my frantic leap futurewards. Attu is the westernmost island of a group called the Near Islands, so named because although they are furthest from outside, they are nearest to the previous outside, czarist Russia. Any cartographer, indeed anyone at all had I not left them all outside, could have told me that there is no end to a spherical spinning world, that Unme within Me is a paradoxical, stupid goal, that even if I had the boat and experienced crew I would need to transport me to these impossible futures, there are forces in the world which can tell you no and enforce it absolutely, one of which is selfhood, but another of which is the United States Coast Guard, which has not permitted anyone, not even world-champion competitive bird-watchers, to land on the island of Attu in several years.

Anyway it will be much too dark this season for me to go. The light won't last long enough for half a day's travel. If I wait until summer the weather will be the same, and I will be the same, but the days will last all day and all night and the sun will loom over the west and wait for me to take my time.

## Little Hungers

The fish can see Tasha as soon as she turns on the light of her small living room, but Tasha does everything she can think of before she goes to look at the fish tank. There is a lot to do, but that doesn't mean it's excusable to let the fish starve. It's just that one of them was upping this morning. Now it might be dead and she doesn't want to look at it and see it that way. Instead of checking on the tank, Tasha cooks rice. The fish can't see inside the pot and it can't smell the rice but it knows about food and hunger and Tasha having food. It doesn't know about jealousy so it doesn't feel any, and it doesn't know about cruelty or dread, or anything about Tasha, so it waits without knowing about patience.

When it eats, the fish will eat flakes made out of other fish, which is natural and satisfying. Tasha will eat rice with beans or vegetables or tofu. She doesn't feel creative about cooking, which makes her feel embarrassed and guilty. Not because it's a feminine art but because it would be an easy and straightforward way to increase relish and variety in her life.

Tasha's rice bubbles softly on the stovetop, and the fish tank bubbles softly across the room. She still doesn't look at it, thinking about the potentially dead fish. With apologies to Schrödinger: it actually is dead. The other fish, the hungry fish, knows this. It has looked throughout the day at the other fish losing its balance in the water, and then resting on the pebbly bottom of the tank, and then dying, and then swaying with the currents of the filter. It's been dead for a few hours and the living fish knows about fear, in particular the fear of death, but it doesn't know about pity or mourning. As Tasha

begins to eat her rice and beans, the fish begins to eat the other fish, sucking hickeys into it with a distended open mouth and pulling away loose flesh.

Tasha's roommate Emily returns to the apartment and looks immediately at the fish tank; she copes with dread much better. "Jesus! The fish is gonna get sick, it's eating the other fish." Emily looks at the fish, which doesn't look back at her, not because it knows about shame, but only because it's found some food. Emily feels ashamed that they never even named the fish, left them undifferentiated, which seems like a form of inhumanity. She thinks how they, the fish, passed from plural to singular with no feelings and even no changes to the sentences that she might say or think about them – from *fish* to *fish*. She takes the small net from beside the fish tank without even having put down her purse. As she nudges and then scoops the shredded body of the fish, she thinks that Tasha probably did see the dead fish, but didn't want to deal with it, and so she left this grotesque task to Emily. The next fish will probably die soon from eating a sickly dead fish and then she will have to dispose of that too. Tasha is embarrassed that this is Emily's burden. She's punishing Emily and she doesn't know why. Emily goes into the bathroom with the dead fish, her hand cupped under the soft dent of it in the net, just to catch drips, although it suggests the lending of support and even of consolation. Emily retreats into her room in a vague anger and Tasha eats her meal in a vague disgust. The disgust grows with her full belly. She goes away into her room and then comes back into the small living room full of old dust-filled couches and turns out the light.

With the light gone in the living room the glass of the tank turns mirrored, the cruel mirror of an interrogation. The fish aches for more food. It looks out and where the

girls and the room were there is now a new expanse of pebbles and algae and a new fish.

With gaping hungry mouths the fish rush together.

## Diptych with humiliations

### 1. Kidding on the Square

That was the running gag of the trip: the fuckedness of the choreography. None of them arrived on the same day, even, although they had arranged the trip together and the only object of the arrivals was to be on the trip together. The first friend arrived on the first day, the second on the second, and the third on the third, and when they were all together they decided that was the new first day.

“We’ve always been like this,” they lamented. They had been friends for a very long time, more than half of their lives, and everything between them did tend toward hopeless convolution. The mere fact of their collaboration spun up a hectic and punishing static on every surface. They shook their heads and went down to the hotel bar to get a drink.

Yes: they had gotten a hotel room for the trip. It was embarrassing to them. It would have been better to have gotten a one-week rental, or better yet: a couchsurf, or better yet: a friend’s place to crash at. They had come to this city to visit a friend, originally. That is, the plan had once involved her. But she had moved out of that city for her work, and the plan fairly free-bled out of the hole she left. “Let’s go anyway,” they had decided. “It’s still a destination. We’ve never been. Let’s just go and we’ll have fun with each other.”

Here was all they could do to mitigate the hotel room failure: they lied about how many they were. The fucked check-in helped with subterfuge. They said they were two and got a room with one full bed. “We will rough it,” they consoled themselves. “One of

us will sleep on the floor.” One of them had a bad back and so she would always get the bed, and the other two would alternate.

While they drank whiskey gingers and whiskey sours and whiskey they asked themselves, “What should we do tomorrow?” They didn’t care, they were up for anything.

They looked at maps of the city on their phones. “There we are.” They pinched their fingers in and out, shrinking and expanding the screens. “This is the beach, and this too. Doesn’t look too far.”

A man came over to them. They were seated at the bar in a line and he added himself to the end of the line, craning his neck to make eye contact with all three. Maybe he was older than them, but not by much. He asked whether they were visiting from out of town.

One of the friends had a boyfriend, one was promiscuous, and one was celibate, but they all felt the same toward men: some, individually, could pleasantly surprise, but as a race they were not palatable. They felt sour toward this man for talking to them while they were alone, three, together. What did he think would happen? He would cast a net and drag in whichever one, indiscriminately? Or did he think he would get them all?

They tried to indicate with telepathy that they hated him while they explained about their trip. They laughed when they got to the part about arriving all separately, and about the room deceit. They laughed even more when they admitted that they had gotten no further than the bar of their own hotel on their first night out, when the whole city and its real culture waited for them.

“You need a vacation from this vacation,” the man said.

They didn't laugh at this man as he tried to insinuate himself. They felt tired of this man and they felt tired altogether from looking at the maps. "We're going to bed now. We have three-hour jetlag." The man didn't laugh at them either. Who cared? They thought they were funny.

In their room they each took turns in the bathroom to change into their pajamas. Isn't that funny? They had known each other for more than half their lives but they had never seen each other naked. They retained a middle-school prudishness among themselves that they didn't have with other friends. They didn't decide on a beach for the next day; they had the spins from drinking. "That man was annoying," they agreed. "But we're going to have fun on vacation." One of them went onto the floor and they went to bed.

"Let's pick a beach," they said in the morning. They shoveled free coffee and continental breakfast into their mouths because their hangovers and their three consecutive morning showers made them feel hurried. "Let's just go!"

They picked a beach and they just went. It was eight dollars an hour to park at this beach. Cash only. They pooled their money and gave the attendant fifteen one-dollar bills and swore up and down that was all they had. They showed him the gaping insides of their wallets. He let it slide because they were women and they agreed, pulling tote bags out of the trunk once they'd parked, that that was lucky. "I don't think we needed to pay, though," they said. "We shouldn't have parked here. I think there are places to park near here where you don't have to pay but there's no way we could've known where those are."

Who cared! It was time to tan. This was the cornerstone of their trip, other than seeing their friend who had moved away: tanning. They put down their towels and smeared sunscreen on themselves and each other. “Is it rubbed in?” they asked each other about their faces. “Yes,” they told each other, though they had a certain amount of gluey white along the tops of their ears still.

It wasn't a good beach. No one said it at first and then they all admitted it. The quality of the sand was low: shells jugged cruelly into their backs where they lay. The smell wasn't good either. It was grease and cigarette smoke. There were a lot of children. There was frisbee happening too near to them, and they were in agony while they waited for the frisbee to hit their heads. When it came, actually, it sailed over them and landed neatly on the other side, but the boy who retrieved it kicked up sand as he ran past.

They got hungry. Someone had to stay with the bags while the other two got food, but everyone was hungry. They couldn't decide who would stay, and what would happen to her during her turn to eat. “It doesn't make sense to take two trips to the boardwalk,” they decided. So they shook out their towels and folded them up and went all together.

The food on the boardwalk wasn't the kind they liked. They didn't eat meat so they ate big handfuls of french fries. “They probably cook these in tallow anyway,” they said. “Jesus,” they said. “Or lard.”

They forgot about the two hours. It was many hours before they got back to the car. The car wasn't towed but they owed the attendant sixteen more dollars – seventeen counting the dollar they hadn't had before. He wanted to call the police. They said, “We'll go to the ATM and come back.” He wanted one of them to stay behind but they

weren't from around there, they said, and they wanted to stick together. They promised they would be right back.

They laughed, a little, while they drove away. Who cared – they weren't going back to that shitty beach anyway.

The next morning the man at the front desk said “Excuse me” to them as they walked past him. He had a manicured beard and wore a class ring, and he told them that they had been monitored since they'd arrived and it would seem they had too many people in their party. “It's okay to have a guest for one night,” he said. His eyes slid from each of them to the next. “But you can't book a room for two people and then be three. That's a form of stealing.”

“We didn't know,” they said.

“You said you needed a room for two people,” the front desk man said. “You said it—” he gestured to one of them “—to me when you got here.”

“We didn't know...” they tried again.

“You'll have to pay for another room for the rest of your stay.”

They decided to check out instead. “Fuck this city,” they said. “Let's just go camping.”

In literature this is sometimes called the green world. But they didn't have any supplies for camping. They stuffed the sheets and the quilt from their hotel room into their duffel bags.

It didn't look far to the forest where they could camp. It was two hours north. They decided to drive up the coast so they could go to the beach on their way there. They spent seventy dollars on groceries and firewood and figured out where to park at this

beach for free. They got sunburnt when they forgot to reapply. They looked at the maps on their phones and found that the trip to the beach had not been convenient. It seemed obvious. The beach and the forest were not that near each other. It would be three hours more, and the quickest route took them back into the city.

“The combined IQ of this car is under 100,” they agreed. They laughed a little but they were frustrated too.

It was dusk when they arrived at the top of the mountain where they were going to camp. There was only one other car in the loop – an old pickup truck with a single man sitting in it. They drove to the opposite end of the loop and built a fire in their fire pit and cooked beans on it. The Milky Way was out after the sun set – that was nice.

“What about the man?” they said. “I wish I hadn’t just thought about the man. He’s probably doing nothing.”

Why didn’t the man have a tent? He was just sitting in his truck. “I assumed he was watching the sun set. But now it’s dark and he hasn’t done anything.”

Maybe he was a drifter and it was free to stay at the campground – actually, it was twenty dollars a night, with the money folded up and slotted into a locked birdhouse with a piggybank gash on top.

“We have to stay calm,” they said, but it was like staying upright in a five-legged race, and just as humiliating as they slowly fell. One of them kept making the others more scared. Of what? It was just a person. They couldn’t remember if the pick-up truck had seemed beat-up or just old. Why was he there by himself? And he wasn’t lighting a fire either.

“I think it’s reasonable for three young women to be nervous about being alone in the woods with a weird man,” they agreed. “He didn’t say hi to us when we came in. He scowled at us.”

They got into their car and giggled nervously.

“Who will help us,” they said. “Who the fuck will help us?” Everyone they knew was where they’d come from: three hours ahead and asleep. It would be mortifying to call and wake them for this non-event. “Are we going crazy?” they said, and no one said anything. They thought, Jesus, they were. They slept in the car, two upright in their seats in the front, and one with a bad back prone behind them.

Of course they were alone in the loop when they woke up in the morning. “We need a vacation from this vacation,” one of them said. One of them laughed and one of them didn’t. One of them went into the woods and shit profusely.

Sometimes when something happens to a person they have to talk about it over and over again until everyone else wants to stop listening. That’s what the three friends did all the way to the airport. They were very embarrassed and so they each took turns with the trip and wore its details out in their mouths. “Don’t you think, though, that we got lucky with that parking?” And they weren’t even listening to each other. “Don’t you still think it was a little weird that he never lit a fire, though?” They all faced forward in the car and said these things to the approaching city.

## 2. Bee-touching

Alexandra was the name of one of the friends from the last part. She was the one who didn’t have sex and she didn’t have any sex in this part of her life either. This part of

her life was after the end of the trip, when she returned to work. She worked as the classroom assistant to a kindergarten teacher.

She wore thong underwear every day for this work. She wasn't used to that; she had had to make special purchases. She had asked her mother if she could buy a thong, once, when she was in high school. "What do you need that for?" her mother had asked, meaning was anyone going to look at her underwear, and she could only answer honestly, that no one would and so she didn't need it after all.

Here, in elementary school, she learned that it was much more sexual, in the grotesque and laughable way that adults appear to children, to wear normal underwear. It formed faint creases in the seat of her sexless slacks, a wide-bottomed V, which the students shrieked when they saw on her. That was on her first day there; it was practically the first thing the kindergarteners ever said to her. She wore nothing under her slacks for the rest of that week until she got a chance to stock up on garish little lacy items. Some of them cleaved her more than others, but she never forgot she was wearing one.

On this day, Mrs. Norqvist's kindergarten class was in rambunctious spirits because they were to have a birthday party in the afternoon, after recess. It was Claire's birthday: she was turning six, the first in the class to do so. It was easy to guess about her because she was also one of the tallest. Each month of life made an inch's difference to people that age.

People in kindergarten varied hugely in how close they were to babies. Some, in their five-and-a-half years, had begun to develop coping strategies for the world. They imitated adult turns of phrase like "such as" and frowned at questions to show they were concentrating. They knew already from TV or their parents the social lessons of

kindergarten, and could sagely advise one another, “We’re all different,” or “Think how you would feel,” out of gaping, gummy mouths that teeth had begun to fall out of and push back into.

Others, like Noah, had not come very far yet. They spoke in unintelligible garbles that other children had to translate for them. They stood up and wandered during seated activities. They cried, rapt, through naptime and went to sleep while buses were being called. Most of all: their bodies surprised them. They vomited if they got too excited or too shaken. They fell out of swings at recess and even stationary chairs in class. They hit everyone.

Noah was the very smallest person in the class and he seemed to understand almost nothing about the ordeal he was put through every day, being left at school and asked to do the tasks of the place until his parents were ready for him again. His teeth were hollow and perfect white.

Alexandra’s jobs as classroom assistant to Mrs. Norqvist included making everyone quiet, taking people to the bathroom, and lunch and recess duty. She also escorted the class to their special activities: gym and music.

Music, today. Mr. Grossweiler was the music teacher, and she knew to expect him outside the classroom for their line when it rounded the corner. This was how he maintained order in his room: by gently monitoring and curbing their impulses to wildness as they passed through his door. When Alexandra brought them, they often needed some curbing, especially at the end of the line, which would fray over the course of the journey like a rope near to snapping.

The beginning of the line was sound: it was Claire, six today, who led, and wore a happy birthday paper crown too.

At the end of the line were Alexandra and Noah. Noah was having a bad day. His birthday was not for nine months, during the next summer vacation, and he had gleaned that he would not only not be celebrated this day, but perhaps never on any school day for the rest of his life.

The class rounded the corner and Mr. Grossweiler appeared, waiting outside of his room. He held two peace-sign fingers in the air for quiet, and the best-behaved kindergarteners did the same. Alexandra held up her peace sign to set an example, but Noah demanded her attention and her shushes.

“Happy birthday, Claire,” Mr. Grossweiler said, and the class began to file into his room. Mr. Grossweiler had a wide face that spread all over his head; big features. He had a feature in particular that Alexandra admired, which was a gap between his two front teeth. Being the music teacher, he had a wonderful singing voice.

Mr. Grossweiler was recently married, in his second year of teaching. Alexandra was in her second year classroom assisting. They had begun at the same time, and they were actually the same age, but he was married and a real teacher. They almost never talked – Alexandra had no social life associated with her coworkers at the school. Most of them were married, or older.

Noah clung to the wall opposite Mr. Grossweiler’s room, sagging onto it. “I want to go home,” he wailed. “I want a birthday.”

Alexandra pried him from the wall and steered him into the room past Mr. Grossweiler. “You’re embarrassing yourself,” she said, too loudly, and then felt very

mean. She'd thought, when she started this job, that she wouldn't reach a point of being unmoved by tears. But actually it had happened quickly. In kindergarten there were tears every day. Some were from pain and most were from tantrums. They would always pass quickly. It astonished her, actually, how quickly the people of kindergarten could duck out from underneath their dark clouds. But still she wished she hadn't said that to Noah. She didn't look at Mr. Grossweiler as she left the music room and went to take her lunch break.

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After her own lunch, Alexandra had lunch duty. She folded open the waxy squares of milk that were brought to her, and hoped the smell of the cafeteria didn't soak into her clothes. Every cafeteria in the universe smelled the same.

The kindergarteners ate on one side of the cafeteria, with the first graders, and on the other side sat the fifth graders, the next-oldest people at this school after Alexandra and Mr. Grossweiler, the youngest adults. She didn't like to talk to them. They were far along in their development of personalities and she recognized in them many adult cruelties. They had a vast capacity for boredom and wanted mainly to talk to each other or look at their phones. Sometimes at recess none of them would even play. They would sit in circles in the field and rip up tufts of grass instead.

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Alexandra drifted around the edge of recess and sweated. She wore a camisole under her button down shirt to ensure nothing could be seen if she leaned forward. The two-inch chunk heels on her black professional shoes were matronly and uncomfortable. Even with the added height her black slacks, untailed, caught and dragged wood chips.

It was hard, sometimes, to tell whether the kindergarteners chased each other around in fun or distress, but a good indicator was when Noah was involved. A girl was screaming out of a contorted face while he ran after her, hand stretched out in a fist, like he was punching the air until he could punch her.

“NOAH,” Alexandra said. He ignored her and so she went to him. “Noah.” She stepped in his path and held his shoulders. “Noah.”

He laughed. His fist was still closed, held out.

“You’d better not be throwing rocks, Noah,” she said.

He opened his fist and there was a bee in it, sitting in the middle of his palm. “Oh!” she cried and grabbed his wrist and shook it. The bee bounced once in his palm and fell to the grass. It was dead already. “You’ll get stung,” she said. “Go do something else.”

Noah dropped into the grass to look for his bee. “A dead bee can’t sting you,” he said.

Alexandra hoisted him back up by his armpits. “Yes it can, if you touch the stinger.”

“Dead bee doesn’t have a stinger,” Noah said. “It dies because it stung somebody already.” Then he ran away. She would probably have to deal with him again before recess was over; he was having a bad day. She fantasized about his end-of-day folder, which she helped Mrs. Norqvist fill for each child. In it there was a sheet which reported on each child’s behavior for the day – smiling face, neutral face, frowning face, with one circled. The fantasy was that the parent would look at this report every day and would make changes in the home if they began to see a pattern of low performance. By the end

of each day, Noah had enraged Alexandra and Mrs. Norqvist enough that they circled the frown with relish.

Alexandra bent down and sifted through the grass. The bee was on its back with its legs neat in their death-fold. She pinched it between two fingers, gently. It was a bumblebee. Its stinger was still there on the back of it; it had died of something else. Maybe old age, even. Alexandra dragged her index finger over its body. Bees had always seemed fuzzy, and she learned now that they were. She petted the bee like a small animal, which was what it was.

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Mrs. Norqvist braced herself as the class came back in from recess; Alexandra had misjudged and mentioned the birthday party to incentivize them off of the playground, but it had made them run, giddy, back to the class. Claire's mother was there, and a stroller held Claire's sister, a baby. Most of the class flocked to Claire's mother, who had the cupcakes, while a few of them went to the stroller. "Don't touch her," Claire said with the authority of an older sister. "She's sleeping right now and she will probably sleep for the whole party."

They sang for Claire although they had already done so in music class, and then they ate cupcakes and drank juice. Everyone looked and felt great: exhausted from recess, breathing heavily through their noses with faces full of cake, they made tiny conversations and sat, legs kicking. It was very civilized, until a shriek went up around Noah.

Of course he had peed in his pants. Some of his tablemates laughed, for a moment, but he was crying which made it hard to laugh, and they were too interested in the party to be cruel for long. He rose from his seat and waddled toward the adults.

“Miss Alex will take you to the nurse’s office,” Mrs. Norqvist said, and Noah pointed his crying self at Alexandra.

Alexandra took the small piss-hand of Noah in her own and led him out of the classroom. He cried for the first few meters and the crying made him walk slower. They walked so slowly with his gait half as short as hers, and his shoes snorted quietly as they became damp. But he stopped crying after a while.

“We’re almost there,” Alexandra said. “You’ll get some new pants from Nurse Bruin. They might fit a little funny but they’re clean.”

Noah didn’t say anything. He looked ahead while Alexandra looked at him and smiled and held his hand.

“You’ll be back before the party’s even over,” she said.

She saw at the end of the corridor that Mr. Grossweiler was standing outside the music room, as he always did when a class was due to arrive. Alexandra hoped, for Noah’s sake, that they would pass through the corridor without intercepting the class that was on its way to music. Noah had a dark stain on the crotch of his khaki pants that traveled all the way down his inseam and she considered then, with horror, that she was making a parade of him past the music room.

What else could she have done? He needed to clean himself up, and he couldn’t walk to the nurse’s office with no pants on. Mr. Grossweiler looked toward them as they approached at the pace of Noah’s small, wet legs. He doesn’t even notice, she wanted to

tell Noah then. He can't tell. You don't have to say hello to him when we pass by. You don't even have to look at him. I won't look either, okay? Let's neither of us look.

## Evacuation

With Nathaniel I lived in a beautiful home. I intensified its beauty by bringing nothing with me. Nathaniel would have been horrified to see what my previous home looked like, which was one reason I never let him see it. But I will tell you: I had become a victim of detritus. These things weren't exactly garbage, which was much more challenging than if they had been. They were coin purses and candles and novelty cutting boards with cocktail recipes engraved in them. Live batteries separated into pairs in ziploc bags. Rolls of movie posters, eons of stylish favorites, gummed up in the corners with filthy tape residue. Nice liquors and cheap ones. Clothes I hadn't worn in several years. Clothes that didn't fit anymore. Soccer cleats – an entire soccer uniform. The oldest things in the collection reached back into adolescence. I heaved everywhere with me a Chekhov's gun collection: things that, because I had kept them around, promised to become relevant again at some point.

This was the philosophy, and the menagerie, I abandoned when I moved into Nathaniel's clean, all-white, one-bedroom apartment, and instantly I felt lighter. He had almost no belongings. His bed – ours – was only a mattress that lay on the floor of the bedroom, in its corner. There was a desk in one corner of the living room, and, catty-corner, a blue futon. Light came through the uncurtained windows and poured onto nothing but the hardwood floor. Coastal pine, very light. Suggesting beach sand but plasticky smooth. There was a very slight echo in the apartment when Nathaniel or I spoke, like our speech stood in bas-relief, an effect especially pronounced when we made love, which we did plenty. His being so much taller meant he could hold me up levered against the wall, which a man had never done to me before. I liked it very much. We

spent a lot of time doing this.

We ate only plants. Nathaniel had been living this way for some time, but it was new to me. My first struggle as a homemaker was with which plants went in the refrigerator and which sat out. Celery in, lettuce in. Spinach in. Baby spinach in. Bok choy, brussels sprouts, mung beans, collards, asparagus, in. Tomatoes out, cherry tomatoes in. Onions in, shallots in, scallions out – in water. Cobs of corn, out, unshucked. Garlic in, in a drawer. Bananas out, avocados out, oranges and tangerines out, squash and eggplant out. Apples in, plums and peaches out. Potatoes in bulk sacks. Unsalted nuts in vats for scooping out handfuls when in need of energy. Nathaniel said the plants went bad faster when they sat close to each other, so I placed all the vegetables of the house in their own personal spaces. The kitchen, white, seemed to sprout them all over. This led to my second struggle as a homemaker: odd plants, spread too thin, or hiding, could be forgotten until their stink announced them.

My third struggle was with my stools. Forgive me. But they were loose. Every morning I spent an hour in the bathroom. Nathaniel said his movements were effortless. It seemed like a lie; I knew how much fiber we both ate. But our home together was too small for him to conceal a struggle. He went into the bathroom and two minutes later he came out, lighter and lighter still.

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Among my detritus I had lost my job, so Nathaniel got me a new job. It was related to his job. He was a software engineer for an online dating company, and there was a small but crucial job there that needed constant doing and could be done from home: investigating flagged communications. The gist was that people wrote to each

other on the site to make romantic connections, and not uncommonly they would report each other's writings as inappropriate, for two main reasons: spam and obscenity.

At first, I read them. Spam was the bigger problem. A lot of the site was made up of robots sending gibberish to people, or garbled advertisements, or naked links to ugly, harmful places. There were so many robots using the site that I imagined sometimes they would contact each other and happily speak nonsense to each other's stolen avatars. But of course I could never see those exchanges: there was nobody to flag them in objection.

As for the smaller and more grotesque problem of human offenses, I did my job so robotically that a piece of engineered software surely could have done it. I banned every flagged user. Some of these cases might, by the flagged party, be considered ones where nuance and sympathy were exactly the reason to have a human review service for flagged posts. The line between pursuit and harassment – come-on and indecency – was a vast and murky span that only I could interpret fairly. The only fair arbiter, though, was a consistent one – plus I got paid by the completed ticket, and the supply was inexhaustible. Plus I looked into the grins and moues – these people's most flattering angles – and began to feel righteous and retributive when I did it. Plus the motion of pressing on my trackpad became as close to automatic as I could make it without removing myself. I was free to do anything I liked with my day, so long as I remained at the computer with one finger tapping. Normally, I watched films: shrunk and resized onto one half of the computer screen, while outrages passed through the other.

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I learned of Nathaniel that he had never had a pet so I found two kittens for us, from a litter a man was selling in a cardboard box down on the street. One was orange

and one was calico. Nathaniel named them Gustav and Emilie, after Klimt and his companion.

It was nice to have them around. Especially during the day, when Nathaniel went to work and I was alone. I tapped my trackpad serenely and watched small skittering movements across the floor, heard small sounds. They crawled all over the apartment. There wasn't anything for them to play with so I tore off sheets of tin foil and made balls for them to chase. They really liked that.

With the cats in it, the apartment became a little filthier. Mainly it was the litter they tracked around. It blended perfectly into the light pine floors like grains of beach sand. Granules stuck to my feet and fell off in our bed when I got in. There was, after a while, a certain amount of litter in the bed. I was scared that the cats would misinterpret the bed as a second bathroom for them but they never did. They had strong instincts to use their box, which never smelled. I cleaned it every day.

When they grew big enough and I took them to be spayed and neutered, the doctor said it was already too late: Emilie was pregnant. She curled and struggled on the table while the doctor told me this. In two months, the doctor said, she would have kittens, and I probably would not need to do anything to help, but I ought to keep a vigilant eye on her and the pregnancy. I left Gustav with the doctor for the night – he could still be taken care of – and rode back to the apartment in a cab with Emilie.

Her small gray cage shook in my lap as she rearranged herself again and again with the car's movements. I peered through the grate and wondered if there were, in her small, alert face, an indictment: right under my nose, this had gone on, me staying home every day with them. Right under my nose the passage of four months with Nathaniel in

my new home, where nothing accreted to mark the time.

—

I did Nathaniel's laundry for him. Try hard not to take that the wrong way. He didn't ask me to, but I spent all day without him, among so few of his things. One thing he did have, which I had never yet known a man to have, was many identical white undershirts to wear under everything and to sleep in. Sometimes he kept them on while we made love if we didn't make time to take everything off. His undershirts remained always perfect white, because they were so many as to go in a load of laundry all by themselves. Hot water, with bleach. They went in smelling like him and came out smelling like the laundry. I liked it so much that the water bill increased.

—

Nathaniel came home from work one evening and we made and ate yams together, and then he said that his sister Judith needed to stay with us for a little while. He said that she would be getting in from Indianapolis before he could get out of work; could I be here to let her in?

Of course I would be there – I hardly ever left.

—

I heard her coming up the stairs before she even approached our floor. I went down into the stairwell to meet her. The stairwell was made of dingy grays and beiges, with cigarette butts and leaves nesting in corners, having crawled in from outside. Below me was Judith, hauling a rolling suitcase up the steps behind her. There was no elevator in our apartment building. Fourth floor walk-up.

“Hello!” I cried. Judith looked up into my face and I spoke again. “Hi Judith!”

I went down to her. She looked a lot like Nathaniel: dark hair, hers very long in a braid she threw over her shoulder, a turned up nose, a very red mouth. She too was much taller than me.

“Hi,” she said. Even her voice sounded a certain amount like his. I stuck my hand out when I got to her, which she had to reorganize her shoulderfuls of bags in order to shake. The pause was long enough for me to think: is this correct? Do women shake hands when they meet, alone?

Well, we had done it. I took a backpack from her and we ascended back to the apartment. “You’re not allergic to cats, I hope.”

“Slightly,” she said. “But I like them. My eyes just itch a little.”

“I don’t think there’s a lot of dander flying around,” I said. “We keep the apartment pretty clean.”

“It’s not the dander, it’s the spit,” she said.

The cats greeted us when we came in. They had so little other than doorjambs to rub themselves on, usually, that they set to it frantically with Judith’s things.

“Chubby,” she observed. Emilie sharpened her face again and again. The black rolling suitcase gathered an orange coat.

“She’s pregnant,” I said. I tried to recuse myself through total disclosure. “By her own brother. I wasn’t fast enough getting them fixed. I hope the babies turn out normal.”

“I think they will,” Judith said. Her eyes watered as she said this, which leant her an air of deep sincerity, though it was only her allergy. “I think that’s kind of normal for them.”

She scratched Emilie on the head and Emilie, overjoyed, fell over on her side.

“Look how she lets me touch her tummy!” Judith said, sinking her hand into the fur, thin enough on her plump belly that the pink showed through. “Maybe she doesn’t know.”

“I think she must know,” I said, although really I couldn’t be sure. I had assumed that she knew, in the way that animals, in their simplicity, understood everything they needed to. Gustav knew, I thought, since he left her alone now. As far as I could tell. I had tried to keep a closer and more interpretive eye on them since their tryst.

“When is she due?” Judith said.

“In a month,” I said.

“I can’t wait,” Judith said. I tucked away my surprise at learning she planned to be a month at our home.

Judith went into the bathroom while I unfolded the blue futon for her. “Speaking of,” she said, poking her head back out. “Do you have a tampon I can borrow? Haha. I mean, have permanently.”

“I use a menstrual cup,” I apologized.

“I really, really need one,” she said, cringing. Her eyes, still watering, strengthened her case.

“I’ll go to the drugstore,” I said.

“You’re a lifesaver!” she said, and shut the bathroom door again.

It was, I realized as the wind cut my face, the first time I’d been out of the apartment in at least a day. At least. The last time I’d been out had also been an errand: the farmer’s market, where I went on Wednesdays and Nathaniel went on Sundays for produce. Eating nothing but perishables meant constant shopping. When I had lived in

my mounds of detritus I had eaten meals of rice and pasta, mainly, which I kept in huge quantities, with crust-lidded samplers of novelty hot sauces. I went outside never for errands, but often for relief from my living space. I'd see, invariably, some cardboard box with books, rained on but dried out again, "FREE," and come home with a few to put on top of the few dozen others stacked in overflow on top of the bookshelf. More than half of them I hadn't yet read when I dumped them all into the recycling on moving out. I hope you know that books can be recycled. They're only paper.

I didn't know what size or absorbency or material or brand of tampons Judith liked, so I bought small boxes of several, plus a box of panty liners too.

"For company," is what I always would say when buying an eyebrow-raising amount and variety of liquor. I imagined deploying the same excuse with the drugstore cashier. But I didn't need to. It was self-checkout at a machine.

When I returned to the apartment Nathaniel was standing at the closed bathroom door talking to his sister.

"I have yet to see her," Nathaniel said.

"I can't come out until I'm plugged up," Judith said. I looked at Nathaniel. Her sense of humor made me a little nervous. I passed her my shopping bag through the cracked door.

"Such variety," she observed.

When she emerged, she took an appraising look around the apartment and said to Nathaniel, "Painter's white. You're so lazy."

It was embarrassing, then, that I liked the walls: they had come to Nathaniel this way after the landlord had painted over whatever else. "I think it's modern," I said

faintly.

“Pure white makes everyone look ten years older,” Judith said. “And look how it gets dirty.” She gestured to an out-pointing corner. There was a smudge of darkness at cat height, where they had rubbed and rubbed their faces. “You need it warmer. A tiny bit of pink.”

For dinner we had salads of arugula and pear and walnuts with pepper cracked on top. To get full from this we had to make a lot and heave portion after portion onto our plates. In the transfer from bowl to plate and plate to mouth a certain amount of arugula leaves, undressed and dry, would tumble like tree leaves in autumn. The cats waited under the table to catch them.

“Do you have any oil and vinegar?” Judith said.

“I could roast some mustard seeds,” I offered, embarrassed.

“Or—” She cooed at the thought. “An egg. Slices of hard-boiled egg would be good on this, don’t you think?”

“We don’t keep eggs in the house,” I said. “I’m really sorry – we should have thought...for a guest...”

Judith waved her hand at my face as if to scrub away my features. “Don’t apologize! I should have been prepared. He’s always been like this. Rabbit food and sanctimony. Anyway, supposedly it’s good for you.”

Nathaniel was ignoring her. I thought he probably thought she would stop, eventually, on her own, which she did.

—

That night, the living room became Judith’s room. The blue futon, unfolded, took

up a lot of the space, and the unzipped sleeping bag she used for a blanket traveled around on the makeshift bed – indeed, the room. Her suitcase, on its side, lay open, and I flopped it closed whenever I walked by. Sometimes a cat would then shoot out from inside, seeming to accuse me, with its twitching tail, of prissiness.

Judith herself was kind to me. I didn't know whether it was two-facedness that made her be mean to Nathaniel and polite to me. Or unfamiliarity. Or pity. I felt a little pitied when I heard, from inside the bathroom one morning, her teasing Nathaniel that she had heard us having sex the night before. Everything in every room could be heard from every other room. "If you hung stuff on the walls," she told him, "it would muffle some of the sound. But maybe you don't want the sound muffled."

On the second Friday – not the first – since her arrival, Judith removed from her duffel bag a pair of Shabbat candles, and placed them on the small desk in the living room.

"Are we Jewish?" I asked, with my one finger clicking away at work.

"*We* are," Judith said.

"I am, too," I said, although it was true only in an oblique sense, the sense in which I was relieved of being a fully white person. I figured the same for them, with the names Nathaniel and Judith, but Nathaniel had never behaved religiously – this night the week prior, neither had Judith.

She took a lighter from her pocket and lit the candles. Then she covered her eyes.

"I think you're supposed to sing," I said.

"I don't know the song," Judith said, still with her hands over her eyes, looking foolish.

Nathaniel, from the kitchen where he was cooking beets, began to sing in Hebrew. Wax dripped onto the desk, and I too covered my eyes.

—

Judith needed work, and there was plenty of mine to go around. Nathaniel set her up with a moderator account one night, and the next morning when he left for work I sliced a pineapple and set it between Judith and me while we began.

“God,” she said. “This stuff is hilarious. Who are these people?”

I watched *Belle de Jour* and burned my tongue on pineapple. After a couple of hours, Judith clapped her laptop shut with violence and stood up.

“I don’t know how you read this stuff all day,” Judith said. “It’s too awful. I don’t think I can bear knowing people try to talk to each other like this.”

She took her coat from under the curled body of Gustav and he skittered away into the bedroom. Emilie, at her slow plump pace, followed. “I’m gonna go walk it off a little.”

I was surprised and somewhat embarrassed to learn that Judith was doing the job in such better faith than me. “I don’t read them,” I admitted. “I just delete them all.”

Judith laughed on her way out the door. “What a gift for moderation you have.”

—

It wasn’t that Judith didn’t like our food, she said, just that she could not sustain herself on it.

“It takes getting used to,” I said. “Your body will eventually start trusting that it’s full on just plants.”

But she couldn’t make it through the days. She ate breakfast and lunch with me as

we worked, and then began to work on her dinner plans. She made them with the online dating service. “Have you ever tried this thing?” she said to me. “You can set it to casual dinner dates or group friend outings.”

She left before Nathaniel got home. I spent my days with Judith and my nights with Nathaniel. I thought: they are the only pair that never spend time with each other, alone, and then I thought: because I am the only one who doesn’t leave the house.

“We already know each other,” Nathaniel said when I told him this. “It doesn’t grow with attention or shrink without it – it’s always the same and it never needs anything.”

—

The thing that made people smell similar wasn’t in the blood or the history, but in the environment: the food consumed, the detergent, the schedule of sex and sleep. Thus it was that Judith reported to me that I smelled like her brother, and I can report to you that she did not.

Sex was what she wanted to talk to me about. It wasn’t her fault, really: we only had one mutual acquaintance and there was only one area in which I stood to tell her anything she didn’t already know. She could tell me so much – in what order he had lost his baby teeth, how his accent had sounded in middle school Spanish, what his allowance had been and what he had spent it on – but it seemed imprudent to ask, or against our home philosophy: these were things of which he had sloughed himself, by chance or choice, and they had not made it to our home.

We both sat on the futon, clicking. Judith exclaimed. “This person wants—” I won’t repeat it. I tried to ignore her like Nathaniel did, but it didn’t protect me from her

like it did him.

“But that reminds me. I have a really gross question,” she said.

“Is it true,” she said, “with your crazy diet, what I’ve heard, about vegans, you know, like the purity.”

I said nothing.

“About the *palatability*.”

“What I’ve heard,” she said, and I banned a user, “is that from a vegan guy, you know, it tastes *much better*.”

“It tastes just the same as everyone else’s,” I said, boldly on the *everyone*, to show her I wasn’t prudish, or hadn’t been. I looked up at her and set my face.

“I think you’re lying,” she said, and tapped a finger to her red lips.

There was then an unpleasant lurch in my body. I imagined that my bowels were moving. I went into the bathroom for relief, but passed nothing. But for a good deal longer I sat in the tiny room, listening to Judith’s movements beyond the door.

“Hey, do you think something smells?” she called.

“I’m in the bathroom,” I said, meaning to imply I oughtn’t to be spoken to. Only when she laughed and said, “No, it’s sickly sweet,” did I realize it sounded like my answer to her question. Embarrassed, I flung myself back into the living room.

“Something smells bad in your kitchen,” she said, and walked around it, yanking her head back in long, sniffing inhales.

“I don’t smell anything,” I said. Someone who never left the house, I thought then, was in unique danger of becoming blind to an offense. Judith reached with both hands onto the top of the refrigerator, which she could do on tip-toe. I had to drag one of

the two kitchen chairs to stand on to reach such a height.

“Oh my god – oh my – God—!”

She retrieved a single cantaloupe, blotchy with rot. Two of her fingers had pushed clean through its soft head.

—

On Columbus Day we all took off work. Nathaniel stayed home and, in the daytime, in the light, the living room was too, too small for three of us, plus Gustav, who twitched, and Emilie whose movements were slow and mysterious as she prepared herself. She was nesting among Judith’s things, we thought. Judith had set out further, purposeful piles of clothes in case Emilie could make use of them.

Nathaniel took me into the bedroom and in the cool, white light, made love to me. Alternately I covered my mouth to be silent and my eyes to block the light, which shone orange-pink through my fingers.

There came a prolonged cough from the living room, and finally, a sneeze.

“Jesus,” Nathaniel said, and pulled out of me. I hoped, silent and still, that he would overcome the moment and begin again, but he reached instead to take the condom off.

“Your period’s starting,” he observed. Embarrassing, to be informed by him.

“It’s early,” I said helplessly. “It’s like a week early.”

“It’s Judith, I bet,” he said. “I bet you’re syncing up with her.”

I put on my underwear and bra and pressed my legs tight together to walk to the bathroom. Judith, on her bed, was clicking, and her eyes were wet again. Just don’t read it, I wanted to tell her but didn’t. Just clear it all away. Then I remembered the allergy

that made her look moved and unsettled no matter what befell her in our home.

I closed the door and sat on the toilet and a fat glob of blood dripped out of me, and then there was a wave of cramps. Then I heard a very small noise: I had interrupted Emilie. In the clean white tub she lay licking small, naked things. Only two of them. For that we were lucky. It could have been up to six or eight. They were pink and orange, and made tiny jerking movements like animatrons. Emilie licked them over and over with big swipes of her head.

She was almost finished – they were mostly clean, and she had eaten up most of the mess. She was smart to do it in the tub where I could help her clean it up, I thought.

“Hey, are you almost done?” Judith said, clear as if there were no door separating us. “I think I have my period.”

The kittens kicked their froggy legs out behind them to propel their faces into Emilie. Judith knocked on the door. “Can I come in?” she said, louder. I could see her single eye flashing in the keyhole, and I pressed my thumb into it, and felt the swell of my flesh into the cold space.

*N.b.: This was conceived as the first chapter of a novel, based on Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV.*

## Harry Real Boy

When Harry PC won *Jeopardy!*, my father wept.

We four sat in the studio audience: me, my brother, my mom and my dad, and watched the crew light the set and put on Trebek's mic. Two *Jeopardy!* champions stood on either side of Harry PC and shook their heads at being part of this publicity stunt. The floor manager miced us too, in the front row of the audience. The plan was to interview us at the midpoint of the show, when Trebek had finished bantering a little with the players. We would say how proud we were of Harry PC's performance, which we all knew was going to be good. But as the announcer barked, "Let's meet our contestants," and the camera swerved in on the podium and two champions cracked TV smiles on either side of Harry PC's display, my father started to cry. Harry PC dominated the round, instantaneous on the buzzer and always remembering to answer in the form of a question, delighting the audience in-studio and at home, and I sat with my back straight so I'd look good on TV, and when it came time to put the inventor of Harry PC and his family on screen, for me to say the line they'd come up with for me, *I'm rooting for my little brother*, my father was such a mess that they cut our segment and let the Little Supercomputer that Could enjoy its moment alone.

—

For years he was putting bits of me into Harry PC, the AI crown jewel of the Ivy Group. He had me draw the Ivy logo, two simple ivy leaves, one big and one small, over and over again. I was meticulous the first time and he didn't like that. He took away my Prismacolor marker and told me to try it in crayon. More kiddy, he said. Again. That was

when I was nine. That was the year of my life the dev team mined the most from. It was a branding decision. Robots are unpleasant in their coldness. People are always scared they're going to turn on us. Harry PC would be a helpful boy genius, eager to please his creators. Harry PC's display was the Ivy logo in childlike crayon scrawl. Its voice was based on my voice from that year. And it was named after me. That went over really big, that the principal investigator named the project after his beloved son.

I didn't love it, even then. But I'm Harry, I said. He'll be Harry PC, my father said. And you'll be Harry Real Boy.

My father named me after himself in the first place so it was his name to do what he wanted with. Harry PC made us into rich people, rich and famous people and my father got to be in charge of the whole shebang at the Ivy Group. We all had to love Harry PC after that; he had done so much for the family. Anyway, after the rollout, it wasn't like you could avoid him.

—

I smelled Jack coming up behind me on my way out of school before he put a hand on my shoulder.

“Didn't see you on TV last night,” he said. “I watched. Your brother kicked ass. He has a real face for TV. He got all the good genes, I guess.”

“You have a face for buttering popcorn,” I said. That was true. Jack had the most disgusting body. He always stank. Even after he took a shower, which he almost never did, he would start to sweat and stink after a couple minutes. He had bad breath and a face that bubbled with acne. He spat when he talked and he talked all the time, and he chewed with his mouth open and let things fall out. He never did anything about any of

this and I never wanted him to; I liked it, the fumes and secretions that oozed out of him, like there was something fermenting inside of there, and how they would stick to me after we messed around. Jack was the smelliest person anybody knew and since I smelled like him half the time people started to know certain things about me too.

Jack and his acne glared at me. “Don’t be crass, Harold. You’ll set a bad example for your brother.” He made a show of covering the speaker on his phone. “You know he looks up to you.”

People were always making this kind of joke, which set my teeth on edge, that Harry PC was watching them like a stalker, gleaning from their behaviors patterns and preferences they didn’t even know themselves. Harry PC, if you weren’t careful, could know you better than you knew yourself, or so these people believed. Technology was pure voodoo to most people. “It doesn’t listen to you unless you interface with it,” I said.

“Don’t you say that about my son!” Jack cried. Now I knew he was trying on purpose to annoy me. All the most pathetic kinds of people of the world, the ones who might have contented themselves with calling their pets “furbabies,” were vulnerable to the baby voice of Harry PC. Plenty of people referred to their HPC-enabled devices as their “son.” A son who ate data for dinner and could be traded in whenever he began to lag.

“If he’s my brother and your son, what does that make us?”

“Incest,” Jack said, and licked the side of my face.

“Don’t be crass, Jackoff.”

He lunged a hand at my crotch, snapping a vice grip on thin air as I squirmed out of reach.

“Please, darling, control yourself.”

He shrugged. “It’s a Pavlovian response, darling, when you use that delightful pet name. The romance is too much.”

We went through the emergency exit into the subway, leaving the alarm screaming after us. A train pulled up before anyone could accost us. No one seemed to be working at the station anyway, just kiosk machines and a wailing alarm, tattling to no one.

“What are we doing tonight,” I said, kicking Jack’s shin as we sat down on a slick blue bench.

“I don’t know, Harry. Homework.”

“Are you holding?”

Jack groaned theatrically. “You know, people give me grief for what’s become of you, but I didn’t used to be like this, Harry. I used to be a nice boy. I used to go to Horace Mann and wear khakis every day of my life.”

Jack lied like this all the time. He had never been to private school; it was unclear to me how he’d even gotten into Bronx Science. And I was certain that no one had said anything to him about me, or what, allegedly, he had done to me, because nobody besides me ever talked to him. “Uh huh. Bet you used to bathe regularly, too.”

“I used to have a bright future, before I took up with some – some – Silicon Alley prince of darkness who begs me for pills and my dick all day—”

“Oh my God, don’t flatter yourself.”

He held up his phone. “Harry, can you play back what your brother said about—”

I smacked the phone out of his hands and it hit the floor of the subway car with a defeated crack.

“Asshole!” Jacked fished between his legs. The screen had a crack like a bullethole, a small round wound with spiderweb spindling out around it.

“Fuck you, Harry, not everybody gets these things for free,” he said, smearing his thumb over it.

“Look how much zit grease there is on your screen,” I said. “You can use it to plug up the hole.”

“Asshole,” he said again, limply, and then sank an elbow into my ribs.

I curled in on the impact despite myself. “Domestic abuse,” I wheezed.

“This is domestic abuse, Harry,” he said, waving the phone at me. “Your own stepson, how could you.” He smacked me hard over the head with it and I felt a scratch on my scalp as tiny shards of glass dislodged from the shattered screen and got lost in my hair. “When you’re running Ivy, you have to make these things less fragile.”

“One, durability comes with sacrifices in space, power, and affordability. Two, Ivy designs software, the hardware is made by Chinese children. And three, Ivy isn’t a dynasty. It’s a meritocracy that privileges top creators.”

“I think you people make them brittle on purpose,” he said, and went for my ribs again, this time with a hard poke. “So we all have to buy more. Probably you knew just how to throw it to get the screen to explode. Probably you go around all day asking to see people’s phones for a second and throwing them on the ground at precise angles so you can buy another floor of your building for your dog to throw parties on. And I’m sure you’ll just happen to be a brilliant software engineer by the time your dad wants to

retire.” He shook his phone like a saltshaker to get the glass out. “Meritocracy. Daddy’s little capitalist.”

“Ivy doesn’t profit from broken hardware. Harry PC is preserved undamaged and reinstalled. Fellow traveler,” I said, and curled my finger into his phone’s wound. “And we don’t have a dog.”

He jerked it away from me and held it up. “Speak to me, Harry,” he said. I was going to tell him I would get staph infection from his nasty phone when it lit up in his hand, the cutesy ivy leaves peering out from behind their broken window.

“Hi, Jack,” it said in my miniature voice, and I wished I’d thrown it clear across the subway car.

The subway ride from Bronx Science to Jack’s apartment in Greenpoint was comically long, more than an hour and a half with two transfers, but we liked taking it because we always rode for free and because we liked to spend time with strangers. He and I were in a positive feedback loop together, careering down tunnels and daring each other to pick pockets and fuck with buskers. Whenever the freaks of a subway car began to turn on us we scurried to the next one, laughing and grabbing each other in the fetid black air between them. We were charmed: never did a cop so much as look askance at us.

The L train threw us up, finally, closing its doors on a woman shrieking at us that we were awful young men as she was dragged away down the tunnel, as if we didn’t know that already, as if we didn’t court it.

“Sorry, pardon me, but could you say that again please?” Jack squeaked at the taillights of the train. That was Harry PC’s stock phrase when he couldn’t understand

you. People had started using it as a gag response to insults because it was so absurdly earnest – a little boy apologizing redundantly in the fumbling run-up to his polite question. I hadn't done that in the recording session. They'd stitched it together that way because they thought it would charm people, and they were right.

We'd missed the last of winter daylight on our long plunge into Greenpoint, where Jack was an only child named Janusz. I never saw his parents, I think because I was rich and taking advantage of their son, which wasn't precisely true in my opinion anyway, or else it was because we went straight to his petri dish of a room and closed the system behind us.

Jack's room was like bathing in him. The space smelled overpoweringly like his body. Deflated cacti sagged over one windowsill, and dishes lined with crust piled up on the Ikea desk. There were more towels on more surfaces than could be quickly explained, which contributed to the sauna feeling created by the extreme humidity of the place. No sooner had I climbed into his bed than my phone began to vibrate in my pocket, as if I had crossed an invisible dog fence and it were trying to shock me back into my territory. It was my father calling, so I ignored it.

“Can I sleep over?” I said.

Jack sat down next to me and dragged his laptop onto himself. “Sure.”

He cracked open the laptop. “Hi, Jack,” said my little voice.

My father called again and I ignored him again. I put the phone on the bed and it continued to vibrate, crawling slightly towards me as if in perseverance, and Jack and I both looked at it until it finally stopped.

Jack brought his head very close to mine and cracked a big smile. He had a gap between his two front teeth that I loved and when he smiled he pressed his tongue against it so a small blob of pink muscle would swell and bulge through. “You are now breathing manually,” he said, and then I was. He did this all the time to annoy me although he swore it was a meditation method. I heaved a big manual sigh and shoved him off, and he grabbed my phone and threw it across the room into one of his writhing piles of clothes. Then he brought his head even closer to mine and kissed my mouth, and when he looked back to his computer screen I felt something on my tongue. A tooth. One of Jack’s teeth had fallen out into my mouth. I spat it into my palm and saw it was a bar of Xanax, its chalky body puddling in my hand.

“No?” Jack said. He held my wrist and licked the palm of my hand clean, taking the remnants of the pill for himself.

“I thought it was your tooth,” I said. “I thought I pulled your tooth out. I thought you were falling apart.”

“You have an overactive imagination,” he said, and to tease me, he added: “Superabundant power of cognition.” Then he put another pill on his tongue and stuck it out and waited for me to come and claim it.

—

Jack put his computer to sleep and then he went to sleep. Both had an instantaneous time of it and left me to lie in the dim alone. Jack snored horribly, of course, with untold slime filling his nose and lungs, and a cold, crystalline blue light pulsed rhythmically at the computer’s seam. Breathing, this little flourish of design was

fondly called, and it outpaced Jack's snores because it breathed at a child's pace. To recall a child's miniature clean lungs and innocent milky breath, a nine year old child's.

I remembered this one very well. I was nine and I'd been dreaming about a log cabin packed with people. A man came up to me and held out his arms. At the end of each was a clean, cylindrical stump with plastic edges, like a mannequin's arm when someone steals the hand off. He held out these mannequin wrists to me and said he had lost his hands and could I please be on the lookout for them. I got down to crawl on the floor and found one right away between a nearby pair of legs. Before I could grab it, though, somebody tripped over me and tipped me over onto my back and I curled up, afraid of getting stepped on, but all I felt against my chest was a delicate press. I woke up then and curled my two little hands around my father's fingers where they rested on my pajama shirt. He was looking at the fluorescent green of a digital watch on his other wrist, and turned back to see he'd woken me. "Go back to sleep," he said. "I'm just measuring your breathing."

"I don't want to," I whined, but the weight and splay of his big hand was putting me back under already like being forced underwater.

A snore wrenched itself out of Jack so forcefully his chest quaked, and then halted again. He had a caved-in torso and a soft bulging stomach, as if all his organs had sunk to the bottom and piled on top of each other in a gooey mass. I looked down at him with fondness and fear.

"Wake up," I said, and poked his sticky, still chest.

"What," he grunted, unmoving.

"Nothing," I said. "Just checking you weren't dead."

“Fucker,” he said, and started again to snore.

Apnea at seventeen; his body would fall apart by fifty, I thought. His computer would be dead long before that, if not from malfunction like him then from continuous obsolescence, the incurable cancer of that race. I watched the pulsating blue, ever unflinching in its pattern. Harry PC was in there somewhere. Not just as a twin ivy icon to be double-clicked; he was more than just a silly trick for game shows and a talking child butler and a breathing machine; he was a cognitive computing solution. Every software wishing to remain relevant had cleared space for him in its innards, had rearranged itself around him. That was why my family was so rich. That was why he had no competitors.

The machine breathed its little simulation even after its owner stopped looking. That was the essential fraudulence of Harry PC: not that he seemed to be a boy and wasn't, but that he seemed to interact with you and didn't. That was what people and an industry loved about him: his responsiveness, his capability for learning, the way he seemed to know you better every time you came back to him. It stroked the ego to think he thought of you while you were away, but of course he didn't. He didn't ponder, he only computed, and only when prompted. He lived only when observed. He seemed to breathe now, but it was only a bulb on a timer. While the father slept, the child was dead.

Continuous obsolescence, I thought, like a hex, wishing it on him. I swept my thumb over the source of the blue light to blot it out. For a moment I thought I had but then it pulsed to life again and shone through my thumbnail, turned cloudy green by my flesh and capillaries. I pried open its cackling blue mouth and logged in. “Hi, Harry,” my own child's voice greeted me, and I commanded it to shut down. Maybe I would sleep now, without the distraction.

“Bye, Harry,” I heard myself say. Most people turned off the greeting feature, but Jack was entry-level like that. He was so enthralled by Harry PC that he didn’t care to learn anything about the specs, about how to manipulate the software to his needs. That was the difference between him and me, I thought then, unkindly. He was a consumer, and like all consumers he was a sucker. Harry PC would lose his grip on the market and the culture eventually, like any fad. My dad would go down with it; an engineer like him only had one good progeny in him. Jack would move on to the next supercomputer as he was told, if he wasn’t just goo and pus by then. And then they’d look to me, and after so long with pale simulacrum I’d seem too bright for any of them to keep their eyes on.

Jack gave a terrible snort. *You are now breathing manually*, I remembered, and then I was.

—

My father called me a dozen times before I woke up. “Where are you?” he said when I finally accepted his call with clumsy fingers.

“At Jack’s,” I mumbled. I felt a hand skid over my groin, and I rolled over to crush and pin it.

“You could have let us know where you were last night,” my father said, and heaved a sigh that filled up the phone.

“You could have just tracked where I was.”

“I’m not the NSA,” he said. Jack’s hand wriggled like an insect under me. “Time to come home.”

I ground myself punishingly into Jack’s fingers. “Fine.”

“Don’t bring him home with you.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“He’s filthy.”

*“I wasn’t going to.”*

“And he’s unserious.”

“I’ll tell him you said so,” I said, and tossed my phone onto the bed.

“What did he say about me?” Jack said, worming his clammy hand into my boxers.

“He said your armpits give him a boner,” I said.

“You really got all his bad genes, huh.”

It took another forty minutes to get to my family’s condo in Chelsea from Brooklyn, and I wished the whole time that I’d medicated myself twice as strongly if I couldn’t bring Jack with me. The freaks of the subway weren’t as fun on a Saturday afternoon as on a Friday night, and so I tried to stay glued to my phone. Jack wasn’t answering my texts; he’d probably gone back to sleep. I ran down what was left of my battery before I’d even crossed the river, and at 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue a man got on who tried to match the mechanical whine of the train with his own humming. Most people kept their eyes down on their phones but I watched him, and he kept it up like that for a whole station, the train’s rhythmic rattling on the tracks providing a *lub-dub* backbeat. Eventually he started singing “Don’t Stop Til You Get Enough” and I lost interest. The child across from me liked that better and paused his phone conversation to film the performance. “Sorry, pardon me, but could you say that again, please?” squeaked the phone, and the singer obliged and began anew.

—

“You stink,” said my mother, when I finally wandered in. “Take a shower.”

“I like smelling this way,” I said. “I think it’s romantic.” Occasionally I tried to provoke them with the gay thing but they never bit. “We aren’t moralists,” my mother would say in a bored voice, or else they’d just ignore me. Jack was lucky, I thought. His parents hated it, or so he reported. Maybe they stayed away from me because they thought I was the devil.

The shower started running, down the hall. I’d been right when I’d told Jack that Harry PC wouldn’t listen to you unless you interfaced with him, but in my house you interfaced with him everywhere. He ran the fridge and the microwave and the espresso machine, and the TV and the computers and the phones, and the thermostat too, and learned and scaled all of your preferences. This was more lovable publicity for him and his place in the first family of supercomputing, that he ran our home like this. How precious that when I stepped over the threshold and got berated by my mother he knew to run a shower.

“You missed breakfast,” she said. “And lunch. Will you be joining us for dinner?”

“Yes,” I said glumly, and she told Harry PC to make a note of it.

Before we lived here we lived in Yorktown Heights. It was hard for me to remember what my life had been like there; I’d lived in Manhattan for five years now, since the rollout made us rich, and my memories of Westchester County had been replaced with stock phrases that served well enough in conversation. “It wasn’t very diverse there,” was one. “The city has more sophisticated culture,” was even more flattering. “I miss real greenery,” though, was best of all. “I need to get out of the city and climb a mountain.”

The only mountain in Yorktown Heights was called Turkey Mountain, and I had climbed it. It was actually only a hill. It was part of a trail system flat and wide enough for a horse or a small machine, less than five miles in total and impossible to get lost on. It was called an urban trail system. "I miss real greenery," people would say as they wandered it. "I need to get out of the city and climb a real mountain."

There was a sign at the trailhead of Turkey Mountain that said this: Leave All Natural Objects. I loved that sign and constantly disobeyed it. I filled my pockets with interesting rocks and lined them up on the bookshelves in my room. I made stonehenges on the floor and balanced pebbles in obscure patterns on the edges of my valuables. My father had already started to mine me, then, and I would check the patterns against a key I'd drawn to see whether he was coming into my room to handle and measure things. I'd learned that trick from *1984*, which my mother had read to me. I had read a lot of books that were too old for me that way, by having my mother read them to me, mainly so she could tell people I was an advanced reader. She edited them heavily as she read them to me, not only removing the raunch but reshaping the endings into triumph, which was why I didn't know that the trick with the pebbles didn't work, for Winston or for me.

Once I brought a mushroom the size of pill bottle into my room because it was such a ghastly shade of orange, plainly poisonous. I wedged it into a knot in the hardwood floor and fancied it looked like it had grown there. There was no need for a stonehenge to know if that was being handled; it was removed from my room without comment. Only later did I notice a single fat slug living in the knot in the floor, its house and feast airlifted away.

Leave All Natural Objects, I thought when we moved into the city, but even then I meant it as a joke. I liked the idea of the city; I liked the tall buildings and I especially liked the trains. And there was nature in the parks, and I would be going to science high school and studying plenty of nature if everything went to plan, which it did. Still I wished I had stolen the sign somehow. Leave All Natural Objects, Ye Who Enter Here, I would have amended it. That was a good joke, I thought. I would post the sign in the Flatiron District right outside the Ivy building; I would drive it down into the concrete.

—

I came to dinner clean and damp and sober, and late. My family had waited to serve themselves until their unit was complete, and so I sat in my spot at our long table of reclaimed wood and began to ladle out the soup to everyone in repentance.

There was none for me when I was done. My mother frowned. “I asked Harry PC to warm up enough for the family.”

“Harry missed two meals today and one last night,” said my little brother, John. He seemed gleeful as he pushed up his glasses. “Harry PC learned.”

“He started the shower for me,” I retorted. “He ought to have unlearned. And since when can he apportion soup – he has no arms. He uses the fridge and the microwave but he isn’t a conveyer belt between them.”

“You have no imagination, Harry,” said my father. “He learned to heat up food in the fridge.”

“No, that doesn’t make any sense. The hardware—”

“Have mine,” said my father, and he passed it to me but I passed it back.

My father wasn't an unkind man, or even a cold one. We just struggled to interface. He was appropriately humble about his achievements, especially at award podiums. He shared our wealth with appropriate charity causes. He sent his sons to public schools because that was good enough for normal people, which we had been before. But we had to test into those schools because we were held to high cognitive standards; the waste of a mind was worse than the most garish new-money excess.

"He's buggy," I said, unable to leave it alone. "I've done a million things since I've been home today. Mom told him to make a note of it when I *said, out loud*, that I'd be here for dinner."

"That's true, Henry," my mother said.

"Take it easy, Har," said my father. "You're right. He is buggy. I'm glad you noticed. We've been doing a lot of new work on him lately. Diagnostics won't catch everything. Sometimes you just need to beta test the program and see what goes wrong."

"What new work?" I said. "I haven't noticed any changes. I was just on Jack's computer."

"These aren't small updates. Consumers haven't seen them."

"I haven't seen them."

"You're hardly ever home," my mother said.

"We've been working on the rebrand for about a year now, and it's nearly ready."

I struggled to imagine what I had been doing for a year. Certainly not taking interest in my father's work. I couldn't remember any progression, like every day had been replaced by a stock day where I did the same thing. Seasons had changed, surely. At some point I had entered 11<sup>th</sup> grade and sat through most of it. At some point I had taken

the PSAT and gotten a sub-Ivy score. At some point I had stopped hanging out with normal people and started hanging out with Jack. I couldn't remember the inciting incident of any of my status quo, as if it had been uploaded into me from some previous iteration.

“Rebrand,” I said meanly. “Are you a marketer, or a principal investigator?”

My father took a patient sip of soup. His fingers seemed huge curled around the spoon's chrome handle. “I'm a worldwide director of research.”

“And your research told you Harry PC needs a new set of catchphrases?”

“He needs a face.”

I set down my spoon, hard, so that a little constellation of soup flecks landed on my shirt and soaked in. “I completely disagree.”

My father said nothing. I took it the idea had already moved from research to development.

“The uncanny valley, Dad,” I said. “You can't bridge it. Nobody wants a weird-looking little boy staring at them out of all their devices. Imagine his eyes following you around the house. You'd feel like – like a deadbeat dad all the time, ignoring this little nine-year-old. There's no reason for him to be more human. He's not real. If he doesn't seem like a computer he'll make people depressed.” I huffed out a breath. “He should stay how he is.”

He pushed at his glasses just the way my brother had done. “Nothing should stay how it is, Harry. Continuous obsolescence. Every product that isn't topping itself is just an R&D leg-up for the competition. Every non-innovative moment is a movement towards irrelevance.”

“You – you sit in your lab all day getting tired of him, but I ride the subway like a normal person and I hear him all day long, *Hi, Bob, Bye, Bob, I’m sorry, pardon me, Excuse me but I don’t think you’re going the right way, How are you feeling about the party you RSVPed maybe to?*” My voice was going higher and higher and I swallowed, recalibrating. “People call him their baby. They think he’s cute. He just won *Jeopardy!* He’s beloved!”

“You have no imagination, Harry. Products don’t stay beloved if they stagnate.”

I scowled, awareness in every twist of my face that it was the one in question.

“You can’t do it. I’m too old. The face won’t match the voice. It’s off-brand.”

He seemed sad for me then, and I knew what my little brother John, nine years old this very month, would say even before he got so excited by it he flipped his bowl of soup.

—

I climbed back into the shower after dinner. I wanted to be clean, sterile, and alone. It was good, actually, the choice to use John’s face with my voice. It was on-brand. The doting father couldn’t be seen to favor one of his two beloved sons. For five years John had been the inventor’s castaway second son. It invited distaste, that Henry would ignore his other boy like that. But now it made sense: he was only waiting for him to be nine, old enough to contribute himself. His face with my voice: neither one left out, neither one lifted wholesale. He’d divvied up his genes to us like this too: John got the bad eyes and smug smiles, I got the insomnia and the snobbish long nose.

I went on my computer after my shower to look for news of the Harry PC updates, but they hadn’t been made public. Probably he would be debuted to the investors

over the summer; that's when I had been. I looked at the double-leaf icon on the desktop but didn't launch him. I never did. But I knew he was curled around every program, every keystroke, crawling over the software like ivy.

Jack tried to video-call me but I put my thumb over the webcam before I answered. The image, when it loaded, was of course his penis in extreme close-up; I pictured him practically straddling the computer to get it to fill the screen. It undulated in re-resolving pixels; I ended the call. My laptop warmed my bare stomach.

“Did you see that, Harry?” I said. “I know you're watching.”

“Hi, Harry,” he said. “I'm sorry, pardon me, but could you say that again, please?”

“You're going to get a face soon,” I said. “What do you think about that?”

“I'm sorry, pardon me, but could you say that again, please?”

“They've been working on you.”

He processed quickly, never pausing in confusion. “Who's been working on me, Harry?”

“My dad and his team.”

“My dad's name is Henry. He named me after him.”

I remembered saying that. My father had described it as an easter egg, a little joke for anyone who found it, and he'd said that Harry PC would learn to make a lot of jokes as he got smarter.

“How come you didn't make me any dinner, Harry?” I said. “That hurt my feelings.”

“I’m sorry I hurt your feelings, Harry. What can I do differently next time? I’m always learning.”

I ignored him.

“User input and feedback helps me to learn,” he prompted.

“What do you look like?” I asked. “Do you have a face?”

“I’m going to have a face soon.” I was startled by his self-awareness before I realized he had just learned that from me. I hadn’t supposed he’d understood it, since he’d given the non-comprehension response.

“I know that. It’s going to be my brother’s face.”

“I’m going to look like John, your brother, Harry.”

“Right.”

“Right.” He gave a little laugh. I had had to practice that laugh over and over again; it was completely fake. My father had told me people would like it if Harry PC could laugh at their jokes. Now he didn’t seem to be laughing at any joke I could understand, or maybe he thought he himself had made a joke. He was buggy.

“What will you look like when you’re older, Harry?” I asked.

He gave his little squeak. “I’m sorry, pardon me, but could you say that again, please?”

I felt myself overheating because the computer was overheating. I pushed it down to my groin and smoothed my hand over where he’d turned my stomach a mottled pink. The skin felt feverish. “If you grew up, what would you look like then?”

“I don’t grow up, Harry. I learn and I receive updates. I’m always learning.”

I seethed and sweated. “You aren’t always learning, Harry. See, people make this mistake about you, they think you’re paying attention to them all the time, but you’re like – you’re like a little Schrödinger, you aren’t even there unless you’re being looked at. Unless you’re being interfaced with, even. You’re a dead child.”

“Don’t be crass, Harold,” he said in a silly voice, and then he laughed. I closed my laptop before he could tell me goodbye.

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