ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HOW TO LEAVE YOUR LIFE BEHIND: STORIES

Edward Daschle, Master of Fine Arts, 2024

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The stories in this collection, *How to Leave Your Life Behind: Stories,* feature characters seeking purpose and authenticity as they navigate queer worlds and queer identities. In the titular story, you learn how to disappear into a new life through the process of jumping off a building, a magical escape from a dull life that creates complications for international and personal relations. In “Thistle Land,” an old woman seeks to return to the portal fantasy world she explored in her childhood while navigating the emotional baggage of her mother and daughter who respectively saw her and see her as failing their high intellectual standards. And in “Who I Am Dead,” a dead boy making an existence for himself in the afterlife seeks to discover who he was when he was alive, and what knowledge of this past life might offer him, if anything. These stories alongside three others match purpose with aimlessness, authenticity with conflicting identities, and fantasy with reality. Throughout the collection, there is trauma and pain, but always with the acknowledgement that what they are experiencing is not all there was, is, or will be.

HOW TO LEAVE YOUR LIFE BEHIND: STORIES

by

Edward Sebastian Daschle

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PREFACE

Artist Statement

I believe that in queer fiction there is true freedom. Freedom to explore sex honestly (the complications, ugliness, and beauty), freedom to explore authenticity (unencumbered by societal standards of what should and must be), and freedom to explore beyond boundaries (to push and break genre and other conventions). I find joy in this freedom, but also uncertainty. I worry about authenticity, about portraying myself correctly, about how I am perceived and being unable to control these perceptions. I worry that in defining myself, I diminish myself.

The authors from whom I draw the most inspiration tend to be those whose work encourages me to embrace queerness and reject boundaries, to consider definition and do with it what I want. The literary works of Garth Greenwell, Carmen Maria Machado, and Ryka Aoki offer me resonant portrayals of queer life and love. These are stories I return to whenever I am reminded of the urgency of queer acceptance and visibility: whenever I see a phrase like "smear the queer" is trending, whenever politicians suggest queer people should be sent to live in fenced enclosures, whenever beloved public figures reveal themselves as enemies of queer existence. Queerness, however, is a quality that doesn't sit neatly within even the vast boundaries of personal identity. There is queerness in storytelling unconstrained by genre essentialism, queerness in the vein of unknowability, unfamiliarity, and the uncanny. I return to authors such as Carmen Maria Machado and Ryka Aoki, for this form of queerness, but too I find inspiration in the fiction of Karen Russell, Angela Carter, and Haruki Murakami. Their stories serve as guides to the unmappable continent of literary potentiality.

Throughout my MFA experience at the University of Maryland, I've consistently returned to the idea that it is in production where I can best find authenticity. What stories keep me coming back to the page, the screen, the thought spiral? Which experiences matter enough to me to preserve? It is my goal for my stories to be unbounded, queer not as restraint, queer as freedom where I can explore authenticity and purpose, reality and fantasy, fear and love.

Table of Contents

How to Leave Your Life Behind

by Edward Daschle

This isn't an instruction manual for suicide. That's not to say choosing to jump is without risk. The following steps will work to minimize this risk, though always remember only you are responsible should you proceed.

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1. You must be dissatisfied with your position in life.

But, and this is important, not with life itself. If you jump with the intention to no longer exist in this world, that is likely what will happen to you. You will not disappear and reappear elsewhere in the world, instead, like all falling objects, you will hit the ground. The correct mindset is essential to a successful jump.

Your mind might wander wondering about where you'll end up. You've watched the movie *Fall Season* many times over—a big hit, a classic, though not realistic in the way the couple managed to live undisturbed for all those years after they both popped back into existence and met each other in Maui. In real life, the "rebounders" from the Relocation Agency would get you long before—but the movie can't be your only inspiration. Truly, you must be dissatisfied. Right down to your bones.

So you've been working in your same administrative position for years now. Years and years, always with the promise of promotion hanging over you, a promise never delivered on.

Because you manager, Chad, is a big you-know-what. He really, really is. He might not know he is, but he is. He hangs this promotion over you like you're a donkey and the promotion is a carrot. The problem is that even if you get the promotion, you won't be happy, not completely. You'll be making a bit more money, which will buy you a bit more time—you have your eye on this apartment which will cut your commute time not only in half but down to a quarter of what it currently is—but the promotion will also mean you'll have to work a bit harder. You'll be better off, but more tired after work. So it's a carrot with a low nutrient value.

And also, you're starting to lose any feelings you once had for your boyfriend Aaron. The thing is, Aaron's essentially perfect. Just what you always thought you wanted out of a significant man in your life. He's taller than you, makes more money than you, and speaks softly to you. And yet, you feel so little for him in fact you sometimes don't even know if you can feel attraction. You've looked up asexuality so many times and only don't use the term to describe yourself because porn still gets you going, and you don't want to figure out if that's allowed under the label.

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2. You must remember you are not alone in this.

Consider the history of jumping.

People have been killing themselves since the beginning of people probably, but only in the 1950s did the first verified reports of jumpers appear. When the Great Depression hit twenty years before, some people who lost everything jumped out of their office windows so that their

life insurance money could go to their families. Later, after the insurance companies largely amended their policies, people kept jumping, though less frequently. They'd get fed up with their work and their lives and there they would go, launching themselves off particularly high buildings or bridges. Most often it was the building where they worked.

But after the second World War, once the men had returned home from overseas and the women had returned home from their work and the country created for itself the myth of the perfect, nuclear family—a dog, two kids, a picket fence—only to realize this narrative didn't guarantee happiness and satisfaction, some people who leapt from their office windows instead of hitting the ground, as they likely expected though clearly hadn't wanted—their intentions and desires revealing themselves in the results—vanished to be transported to another part of the world entirely.

At first, only the tabloids reported on this phenomenon, the big papers not wanting to disrupt post-war tranquility or risk attracting the scrutiny of Cold War paranoia. They enjoyed the mystery and excitement but offered little more than idle speculation as to why the world had changed in this way. But by the 60s, jumping had become a movement nobody could divert from mainstream attention.

There's a news broadcast—a clip from which you and millions of others watched after it was uploaded online—of the "Jumper Parade." People lined up along two sides of the same long stretch of a New York street, some in working clothes, others wearing just the sort of getup you'd expect out of a countercultural movement. Cars honked at other cars stopped in the road, drivers curiously rubbernecking up at all these people. The version of the clip you watched is accompanied by indistinct 60s music, but in the original broadcast the only sounds are the from the city itself. To this unremarkable sonic backdrop, the people jumped, dove from the rooves as

though into a pool. The final death toll of the Jumper Parade was six. But it's speculated nearly a thousand jumped that day. Draft dodgers and dissidents, fed up and overworked employees, and others with motives nobody would likely understand.

It's important to remember those who died intended to die. Or at least they desperately didn't want to vanish into a new existence. Intentions are difficult to speculate over. There are a handful of documented cases where a jumper survived after their jump didn't go the way they'd thought it would (which you can access through the Relocation Agency's public database, though you will need to submit and have approved a FOIA request for certain cases and full details), but not a single one of them was able to identify precisely what they'd been feeling in the moment of the jump.

The speculation now, still unproven, but with mounting evidence daily, is that the jumping has something to do with nuclear fallout. Specifically, the dropping of the first bomb. The bomb changed the world in scientific ways the world is still trying to understand; in political ways the world acknowledged it couldn't feasibly untangle; and, if a relationship to jumping is concretely established, in stranger ways the world might never understand.

Acknowledging this history, that you are not the first nor will you be the last, should reaffirm for you that this is a serious endeavor and not one to be taken on lightly.

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3. You must be able to keep a secret.

Make sure not to talk to Chad about your intention to jump. Or anyone else at work, especially not anyone in HR. Chad will certainly report you, though he is not obligated—there are laws that protect him from culpability over your choices of course (activists worked hard to ensure these protections, some even lost their lives)—though HR will be required to report you.

This one time at work you watched a man in the building across the street step out of his window onto the ledge, bothering a couple disgruntled pigeons. He was wearing this exquisite suit; clearly, he was going about his jump in style, no expenses spared, or maybe this suit was just an emblem of the intensity of his working environment, the sort of intensity that would push him to jump in the middle of the work week, not even a Monday, the most common day for jumping. You watched him as he fell, limbs flailing as though he had changed his mind. But just as he'd likely planned, he disappeared halfway to the ground.

Chad didn't even look up. He sat with his back to the window, oblivious to any distractions. That's just the kind of guy Chad is. And the sort of worker you'd have to be if you want the promotion.

Normally, you wouldn't have said anything, but you were feeling empathetic that afternoon—you'd watched a few videos about rescue animals on the lunch break you multitasked through at your desk. This was when Chad explained to you his philosophy about jumpers and jumping in general. How he preferred to not even think about the situation, to not even consider it could be a possibility. Not for himself, not for anyone. The moment you started thinking about it, even idly, he explained, no matter what your intentions were, your thoughts would start to go all wrong and get in the way of the important work you do at Evil Corp.

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4. You must be resolute.

Your friends might try to talk you out of it, the ones who like having you in their lives—the ones who don't will attempt to talk you out of it too, but only because they are jealous that you have ambitions of making a change, that you might end up somewhere better than where you are now, somewhere better than where they are now. And of course, Aaron. What would he say? He'd probably blame himself for this, not knowing who else there is to blame, not realizing that the working world doesn't offer the same satisfactions to you as it does to him.

One thing you could do, if you are feeling guilty about it all, one thing to shore yourself up is to give yourself a mission. Sure, you don't feel much for Aaron. Still though, he's good for what he's good for and kind enough besides. He deserves someone once you leave him behind. So here's what you do: create accounts on a plethora of dating apps. Not for yourself, but for Aaron. The best pictures you have of him and a selection of cute one-liners and descriptive passages depending on the app. But be careful as you build his profile. In each picture, you see a reminder of why you began dating in the first place. In attempting to make him appealing to potential matches, you're risking making him appealing to yourself. It would be easy not to, so much easier not to jump. You could stay here with Aaron and…but a whole life of this boredom? Of all this emptiness? Soon enough it would hollow you out, you are certain of this.

When you make your matches, or rather his matches, you'll be at something of a crossroads. Do you immediately reveal what the situation is? Or will you string the deception out a bit longer? It will depend on the person. But if you're too quick, the date will come before you are ready to jump. Best to be careful, find the perfect match. Give yourself the time you need.

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5. You must consider where you might end up.

You cannot know where you will end up once you reappear after your jump. Or at least you can't know with any precision. It will be better than whatever place it is you left. That's what everyone says—you can confirm this by looking through, again, the Relocation Agency's public records. You've had conversations with your friends about where you all might like to end up if you did jump. These are late night conversations, vulnerable, honest, and tentative. Some of your friends have said they would love to reappear on a tropical island somewhere, while others have said this would make them feel claustrophobic, and that they would worry about the potentially dangerous animals and ease at which they would be found out in a small community.

Right from the beginning, governments have detested jumpers of course, the way jumpers prove the mercurial nature of international borders and laws. Many nations have attempted to set up "magnet zones" with little to no effect. The purpose of these magnet zones is to attract jumpers, make them easier to collect and return to their original lives where they can be slotted neatly back into the economy. Even apart from building magnet zones, a great deal of international relations resources goes into governing and attempting to control the flow of "jumper migration"—or so it's called in official documents, though some have attempted to legally denominate jumpers as refugees.

Consider your own situation. Your job is dreadful, it sucks the life out of you, and doesn't pay you enough to live the way you would like. And why? Because where you live is

prosperous and because it is prosperous it is expensive, your wages don't stretch very far when groceries just about clean you out and rent certainly does. Elsewhere this is not the case. Workers are struggling to make ends meet, and whole communities struggle forward on wobbly economic legs, like their whole economy has gone in for leg day at the gym unprepared. Your own government worries over the political and economic situation of people like you ending up in places like that. But don't worry. Don't get lost in the conversational weeds over questions of gentrification, post-colonial colonization, and refugee-appropriation. Remember, your resolute intentions are important.

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6. You must set your affairs in order.

Create a new identity, set up a separate account of funds you'll be able to access under this new identity, and practice calling yourself this new name and hearing this new name called. You don't want to slip up. This will be difficult, creating a new identity. You'll need to hire someone to help you, someone shady you'll find deep inside the internet, though better still off the internet. It's far too easy for anyone looking to track your internet history.

What will be just as hard is setting up your new bank account or other source of funds. If you aren't careful, Aaron will begin to wonder why you aren't paying on dates anymore, though previously you always split everything. He'll wonder why furniture is disappearing from your apartment. It's fortunate for his sake you don't live together at least and split the rent. Leaving him to cover alone what had previously been covered by the both of you would be a pretty dick

move and making a dick move isn't what you're trying to do here. You're trying to make your life better in every measurable way. And the way the world is connected—emotionally, spiritually, all that—if you leave Aaron too wounded there's a good chance the wounding will come back around and hurt you.

You might consider leaving a note behind, or a few different notes, one for each person who needs to know where you've gone and why. But be careful about where you leave these notes and what information you put down on paper. You must leave the notes in places the recipients will not look until a decent enough time has passed, but not so much time that they've moved on with their lives.

A suggested format:

"Dear [your good friend, your partner, your parent, your etc.]

"I have decided to jump. What I want you to know is that my decision has nothing to do with you. I have reached the conclusion that jumping is the only way forward for me through much hard thought and introspection. [Explain, in sugar-coated terms, what's been going on in your life. But not too sugar-coated, you don't want to come across as someone frivolous.]

"Considering our [long years of friendship/shared affection/love/care for one another] I know you will respect the decisions I have made for my life and future.

"I wish you the best wherever life takes you,

"[Your name here]"

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7. You must choose the proper place to make your jump.

A good many buildings have jumper nets installed, buildings filled with workers who, like you, might one day decide to make a change in their lives. With the proper preparation, you could remove the nets, but better still is to find the weak point in the system. Even the most modern jumper net designs have weak points, places where you can leap between the gaps to get to where you need to go. Look up schematics online. Go deep into the forums. Clear your search history. Clear it again and again. Okay, don't worry about all that. Sure, your internet search history isn't perfect, but remember, you aren't alone. You aren't alone in jumping, you aren't alone in wanting to jump, and you certainly aren't alone in daydreaming about it. But that doesn't mean you aren't special. You've made it here. You've made it all the way to the point of trying to find where to make your jump, all the way to the point where you're worrying someone will find you and stop you over jumper net schematics on the internet.

What you remember only after this frantic business, to your chagrin and amusement, is that your office building doesn't have jumper nets installed. Not on your floor. Evil Corp was too stingy to make plans for that despite activist outrage. Don't they know, the activists have said, that even a small barrier is enough to make most people reconsider? A small barrier wouldn't make you reconsider, you're resolute, but this is a true enough sentiment. Still, Evil Corp has determined it's much easier to replace low level workers like you rather than invest in anti-jumper infrastructure. Only the floors where upper management works have jumper nets installed. Upper management would be harder to replace.

What a relief. And what better proof that your life is worthy of being left behind. So good, any window will do. Just open it and step out.

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8. You must leave your life behind.

Leave two notes for Aaron. The second note the hidden one, the one he'll find later explaining everything in more detail. But the first a breakup letter, and a schedule for the date you've found for him. After your questing through dating apps you've stumbled upon just the right person, someone you know for certain Aaron will enjoy considering how he always seemed to enjoy you. Not too cool or intense, just right, but not tepid either. Just thinking about the date the two of them will go on and the life they'll build afterward when the date inevitably goes well makes you happy. Maybe in your new life you'll take on work as a matchmaker, a lost calling soon to be realized. It's selfless working, matchmaking, watching others happily fall in love and live out their lives together. But you are willing to make that sacrifice. You get a great deal more happiness out of seeing people together than being together with someone. And it's not because—not just because—it's easier to avoid dealing with complex emotions and the fear of being left, you're just a deeply empathic person. You like the closure of seeing couples come together you can't possibly achieve in a relationship of your own. When you get with someone, the story goes on, just on and on, no satisfying end in sight, just slow burning narrative. No one wants that. There's a reason movies end with the start of relationships, with marriage, and with a fateful kiss. With Aaron, of course, you could have that. He would give it to you. He is likely planning just this outcome, living it out in daydreams. Boredom, emptiness…they aren't so far from contentedness.

But no. Breathe in, breathe out. Clear your head. Thinking about all this won't help you with what comes next. You'll risk ruining the necessary sanctity of your intent.

You are dissatisfied with your position in life; this life is better left behind.

You are not alone; many have jumped before and will jump after you.

You have kept your plans secret; no one will come to stop you.

You are resolved; change is necessary.

You have thought about where you will end up; anywhere is better than here.

You have set your affairs in order; you have placed the notes.

You have chosen the proper place to jump; your fall will be clean.

Now all that's left to do is to jump. Go on, your new life is waiting.

The Reflections

by Edward Daschle

Paul had read online that Ishøj Strand was where he could cruise for sex, if that was what he wanted. He'd taken the metro and a train from Vanløse, and then spent the afternoon at the museum. In one gallery, a cloven cow floated in a tank of blue liquid, and in another murals collaged from garbage decorated the walls. A broken wagon wheel in particular caught Paul's eye, and he took a selfie with the wheel as his halo. An early dinner at the museum was overpriced, though even after a half a year in Denmark it took him a moment to figure out what too expensive meant in kroner—he still always did a rough conversion back to dollars in his head. But from where he was sitting, he could look out at the water while he ate. At this time of year, it would be late into the night before the sun finally set. Below, blond families ran from the gray waves breaking into lacy foam; bunches of stinking seaweed sat in clumps as though baled; and far beyond, at just about the edge of where Paul could see, a rough-hewn, stone jetty cut the beach in two.

Past the jetty there was a vast thicket of scrub, scratchy, hard, and dark. But on the thin stretch between the water and the scrub, naked men on beach towels tiled the fine and pale sand. Paul made his way carefully through the scrub, watching the horizon and his now approximate goal. Occasionally, he saw men stand up, sometimes alone, sometimes in pairs. It was like a harvest of mandrakes revealing themselves to the world. When he reached the water, he hopped down the bank and stood there feeling especially conspicuous, fully clothed as he was and with his backpack making him look more like a hiker than a cruiser.

"Hvad fanden laver du?"

“Oh, sorry, I don’t speak…” Paul said in return, though it took him a moment to see the elderly man who had croaked up at him from the sand. The man looked like an overturned amphora, flaccid penis an unintentional imperfection in the craftsmanship. “Just English.”

“Strip or move along,” the man said.

Paul moved along. He wasn’t about to strip on command and set a precedent he didn’t mean to uphold. He figured he’d find an open space and set himself up there, but either way, he couldn’t walk much longer, if he did, he’d end up making a loop of his wanderings and turn back without ever joining in. Some of the men he passed glanced up at him, others appeared to be sleeping. A few were jacking off languidly, but none were actively fucking. That must happen amongst the scrub, Paul thought, in the sandpit clearings where they might find a modicum of privacy.

Finally, he found a gap where he could lay down his towel. He slipped off his clothes and then lay on his stomach, letting the cloud-filtered light have its way with his shoulders and ass. And soon enough he began to relax. He realized he hadn’t been without any distractions—no music, audiobook, or podcast—for ages. Forget fucking, forget the old men who wouldn’t satisfy him anyways, he could just lie on the sand in blissful silence. Maybe even pass the rest of his life that way.

The man who appeared beside Paul was young, he thought, though he didn’t look up at first to see, judging instead by the tanned toes and smooth nailbeds.

“Sorry, I don’t,” Paul said when the man began to speak to him in Danish.

“Do you want some company?” the man asked in English without even the light accent Paul had come to expect from Danes, and Paul turned to him. He was already undressed, his

towel draped over one shoulder, and Paul let his gaze wander up the man's body, pausing at the lovely and familiar cock.

"Jesper," the man said casually, introducing himself. But this man wasn't "Jesper" he was Caleb. He was blond, brown-eyed, tall, and pale, but even beyond the superficial, Paul would've been more than certain no matter how he introduced himself that this was Caleb. Even the shape of his penis was the same as Caleb's had been. And the same as his own. Because Caleb was Paul's doppelgänger.

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Paul met Caleb in the figure drawing class he took as a college sophomore. The first model Paul sketched was an older woman with curves and folds to her body. He'd been embarrassed at first, on her behalf for being alone in her nudity, but then too on his own for being so unaccustomed to nudity. As she danced through a series of fifteen-second poses, Paul slowly relaxed his shoulders and back, and his lines became stronger, longer, and looser. In the following weeks, the nudity of the models stopped bothering him, and he thought idly about signing up to model in the following semester when he wouldn't know the other students. It might be an interesting experience, and he'd heard it paid okay.

Though not usually late, he was late the day Caleb modeled. In his apologetic rush, he was even more confused than he might've been when he saw his doppelgänger with a fist under his chin posed somewhat like *The Thinker*. He took a lurching step and blinked, wondering if this was one of those dreams he hated where he went through all the work of a whole day and then had to do the work again after waking up.

"Take an easel, Paul," his professor said while she circled.

Paul set up his easel but found he could only hover his charcoal over the vast, blank page. While to either side of him his peers sketched furiously, long, loose lines of their impressions filling page after page, Paul stood there gazing at his naked reflection who inextricably wasn't mirroring his static stare. The experience was unnerving, but Caleb was entrancing. There was a confidence in the strong lines he made of his body while he posed. And maybe this confidence made Caleb look nothing like Paul to everyone else, because none of his classmates were leaning over to ask him if the model was his long-lost twin or something, *Parent Trap* style.

Halfway through the class, while in a pose reminiscent of *Flashdance*, Caleb got hard. His cock stuck straight out from his arched body like Excalibur in its stone. And yet, to Paul's embarrassment if not Caleb's, he maintained his pose.

"Cover up please," the professor said in a brittle, tired voice. Caleb raised his head languidly. He stepped down from the platform and hobbled across the cold, concrete floor of the studio, leaving his bobbing genitals blatantly uncovered.

"Sorry about that, won't happen again!" Caleb said with offhanded ease and a smile, while he hopped his pants up his bare legs and then shrugged his shirt over his head.

"Of course," the professor said with a gentle frown, "but I think we'd better end here for today. Alright, everyone, chiaroscuro, don't forget, due next week!"

Caleb was still tying his shoes when Paul rushed by him out the door, uncertain about whether he hoped to meet his double again or not.

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"It's been a while," Paul ventured once Jesper lay down beside him. He hoped Caleb would acknowledge the game he was playing. But instead of a revelation, Paul felt a hand on his

cock. Paul waited a moment while he got hard, but he thought he understood the rules and didn't say anything more. After a few moments of jerking him off, Jesper turned to Paul eyebrows raised. He released Paul's cock and grabbed Paul's hand to guide it to his own cock. They jerked each other off in silence for a time, the waves white noise, the sun white heat on their backs.

"C'mon," Jesper said softly and stood, hands cupped around his cock and balls to hide his erection. Paul followed Jesper into the waves, watching the other man's ass. Since he didn't spend much time looking at his own ass, it was easy enough to pretend that this was the ass of a man named Jesper. That this wasn't a copy of his own ass walking down the beach before him, a copy of Caleb's ass, which had given him so much trouble.

They dried off while the other sunbathers looked on, and then Jesper guided Paul further up the beach into a clearing in the scrub. Paul was about to say something, because despite what they had already done, sex with Jesper was not what he wanted, not until he got a better handle on what was going on. A middle-aged man, however, had followed them, already slowly jerking off before they'd even started.

"I should get home," Paul said, glancing at the man, as though this were the reason, "before it's too late."

"Too late?"

"Yeah."

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"Fuck!" was the first word Caleb said to Paul. They were both at the Halloween Pride Party. "You were in that figure drawing class. Disaster, right?"

“I figured you’d have blocked it out,” Paul said, with a casualness he maintained like a pressure sealed lid, waiting to explode.

“Nah, it was whatever, I mean what was I supposed to do, right? It was just a natural thing,” Caleb said, and laughed.

Paul nodded.

“Hey, we’re matching,” Caleb said then, gesturing between the two of them.

“What?” Paul said, pulse beating fast, constricting his throat. Was Caleb about to acknowledge what they were? And really, what were they? He’d thought in the days after the figure drawing class that he’d imagined the similarity, the result of a night of little sleep and an 8 AM class. But now here was Caleb again and here was Paul newly arrived at the party without a drink in him. And Caleb still looked to Paul like his perfect copy. Though would Caleb say he was the copy or the original?

“Frank-N-Furter,” he then said. “Great minds.”

“Oh, yeah,” Paul said and crossed his arms across his corseted chest. He was uncomfortable in the costume; it made him look like he’d had a lot of sex before, though he hadn’t. He was as fresh as they came. He’d managed to convince himself to put on the heels, the bad wig, the fishnets, and the corset because alone in his room the costume had made him feel powerful in a way he’d lost as soon as he’d arrived at the party. But now here was Caleb, lounging in all his camp glory, all that power reclaimed and embodied.

“So, what’s your major?” Paul asked, uncertain of how else to move past the disaster of the art class.

“Art,” Caleb said, the same as Paul’s, “it’s kind of my thing.” He shrugged. “So hey, since you’ve already seen my dick, want to make out?”

Paul wasn't certain he did, but also wasn't certain he didn't, and so he did. Because if Caleb had offered then maybe whatever similarity Paul saw was only in his own eyes. And besides, he'd never kissed anyone before and who would be safer to kiss for the first time than his double?

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Jesper and Paul dressed and walked back to the station, where they missed one train while Jesper bought a pain au chocolat from the 7/11 but caught the next. Two girls slipped onto the train just before the doors closed and Jesper quickly pulled his hand out of Paul's shorts. The girls took the seats opposite while Paul pretended he'd been on his phone and Jesper grinned through the graffitied window.

"I have an uncle in Texas," one of the girls said as the train pulled away. She sounded Russian, Paul thought, maybe Ukrainian or Czech, but not Danish, though he wasn't certain. "He said I could visit him. He's very American. He shoots rabbits from his back porch."

The other girl laughed. "But I heard America's dangerous. You could get lost there and disappear forever. You could be kidnapped."

"I guess, but isn't that the dream? To disappear in America?"

"Yeah."

Paul and Jesper got off at Central Station; Jesper had suggested Paul join him in the city before heading home, and Paul, still hoping Jesper might come clean, had gone along with it.

"Disappear in America?" Paul asked.

"It can happen, America's a dangerous place," Jesper said with a shrug.

"Yeah, but so is Russia, I mean they sounded Russian."

"I suppose they both seem that way, just depends where you're from."

Outside the station, Tivoli was loud and alight, tinny music playing, shimmering rides clattering by, people talking and screaming as they dropped. It was colorful and golden at the corner of Paul's field of vision, though no matter where he looked everyone was wearing black.

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"Do you think we look that much alike?" Paul asked Caleb after waking up in Caleb's bed after a party. At the party, a girl had waited until they'd taken a break from kissing to ask if they were brothers. Though they never found out what she would've done if they'd said they were, the woman dragged back into the throbbing throng by a nail polished hand of a girl who was likely her friend, Paul had gone cold at the question. Maybe she'd just been doing that straight person thing, always confusing gay couples for brothers. But maybe not. And he didn't know which was worse: that he was crazy and was the only one who saw Caleb as his double, or that he was crazy and went to parties each weekend with the goal of kissing his twin.

"Because of what that bitch said?" Caleb asked.

Lying there with his arms behind his head in the heart of his youth, the crumpled sheets like the petals of a morning glory just beginning to unfold, Caleb was not just beautiful, but ethereal. Caleb's body had lovely lines and definition to it Paul didn't think his own had. Caleb was confident, self-assured as though he'd never heard about the concept of social anxiety much less felt it. In this moment, Paul didn't think they looked alike at all.

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“Let’s get something to eat,” Jesper said while they walked across Rådhuspladsen past city hall. Temporary green walls blocked pedestrians from the ongoing construction, eyesores, though in the winter when Paul had arrived in the city they had offered welcome respite from the biting winds that ripped across the square.

“I’ve already eaten,” Paul said.

“Then I’ll get myself something to eat and we can share a couple beers in the park, I want you to tell me all about yourself,” Jesper said. He took Paul’s hand, fumbling with it for a moment before he got their fingers correctly interlaced.

“I really can’t,” Paul said, but he knew he sounded like he didn’t mean it. Somewhere between the beach and the city, he’d begun to believe that Jesper wasn’t Caleb. He’d begun to allow himself to believe that Jesper might just offer him something Caleb never had despite their shared appearance.

“You’re making this difficult,” Jesper said, neither scolding nor playing coy. “C’mon the sun is still out. We are young and you are lovely. Stay, we’ll have a good time.”

Paul looked up to the empty blue sky and sighed.

“Okay,” he said. Jesper smiled and pulled him close.

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During their junior year, Caleb and Paul took a soft break from each other to study abroad. Caleb had enrolled last minute in a yearlong art program in Rome, and though Paul had hoped to join him, by the time Caleb had told him where he was going, the deadline had passed. And so instead, Paul winded up spending a frigid spring in Denmark.

When they returned for their senior year, Caleb's art had advanced significantly and his professors both at home and abroad had taken notice. He'd even received the Rome program's distinguished student award. Paul, however, had created nothing new. Even the photos he'd taken looked like photos any tourist might take, and he deleted them from his phone and computer not long after reuniting with Caleb.

"I think I'm going for honors," Caleb told Paul late one night at the start of the semester while they lay together in bed.

"Yeah?"

"My advisor says I'm there."

Paul's advisor hadn't said anything to him about the matter, but he'd been thinking about honors over the summer when he wasn't thinking about Caleb. Paul turned on his side to face him. The light from the streetlamp was flooding through their bedroom's cheap mini blinds, striping Caleb with shadows in the pattern of a piano keyboard.

"I'd like to paint you," Paul said, and placed a hand on Caleb's chest.

Caleb held his gaze and then turned on his side away from Paul. He took Paul's hand and pulled him close, grinding his ass into Paul's crotch until Paul was hard and distracted. Later, they fell asleep.

Over the course of the semester, Paul painted Caleb. He considered painting Caleb as gay icons, as saints, and he started painting him as the major tarot arcana until Caleb told him the idea was derivative, which Paul admitted it was. Caleb was cagey about his own portfolio. Every moment he wasn't with Paul he was in the studio and yet he didn't let Paul in and didn't let any notion of what he was working on slip out.

When at the end of their senior year Caleb debuted his honors portfolio, the work was entirely new to Paul. A series of pale paintings ringed the exhibition room. The paintings featured fences, hedges, flowers, and in one a pickup truck, all covered in cloth. It was like looking at a whole world put away and protected from dust. It was not what Paul had expected, but it crumbled his insides and left him shaky. Paul had finally settled on a theme for his own portfolio: a collection of the surrealist paintings, scenes from dreams he'd recorded over the past year, his central work a painting of Caleb, blue skinned and striped, lying on a moonlit beach as though he were both the dreamer and another dream. But where Caleb's work had a cohesive vision, Paul's work scrambled this way and that, less a curated exhibition than a retrospective on his college arts career. The final piece in Caleb's portfolio took what was left of Paul's delicate internal architecture and blew it away as a puff of dust. The piece was a painting hanging alone on the last wall of the gallery depicting a sleeping figure covered in a gossamer cloth, a cloth so fine every feature of the man underneath could be seen and recognized as Paul's own, or else as a self-portrait of Caleb. The figure was striped with light and shadow. Paul thought the first thing he'd do when he had his own portfolio back from being graded was destroy it.

At the end of the night, they sat beside each other on the floor with their backs to the wall, shirts untucked and halfway unbuttoned. Paul stared at their shared likeness in the painting opposite until Caleb straddled him.

"Fucking amazing, right?" Caleb said, while he finished unbuttoning Paul's shirt. Paul didn't say that he'd wished Caleb had showed him the work while it was in progress. He didn't think he could stand to hear Caleb tell him why he hadn't. And he didn't ask Caleb how they both ended up painting such similar pieces. Because again he didn't think he could stand to hear

the answer, not that night, maybe not ever. They had sex on the gallery floor, and then not long after that the semester and college were over.

***

Through the long afternoon Jesper and Paul shared stories about their lives. Paul didn't tell Jesper about Caleb, and what Jesper told Paul eroded Paul's lingering suspicions. Such a detailed and yet mundane life could not be a lie.

"Come on," Jesper said, pulling Paul to his feet. The sun had finally begun to set washing the sky in fiery watercolors. "There's a place I want to show you."

Paul followed obediently as Jesper led him past a few gay bars he'd visited previously, places where later in the night, in the early hours of the next morning, lines of men in tight, black jeans or else tight shorts and very little else would be spooling out from darkened doors. He followed as Jesper led him up a narrow street and then into an even narrower courtyard entryway. And he followed when Jesper led him through a sturdy metal gate, unlocked by the pressing of a buzzer, and up a short flight of stairs that smelled of beer. At the top of the stairs a narrow, gray-stubbled man sat at a desk before a pegboard of keys. He and Jesper exchanged a few words of Danish too fast for Paul's inexpert ears to catch. Jesper paid the man with his card and the man handed him a couple keys, a couple towels, and then buzzed Jesper and Paul in through a second door to the locker room beyond.

In the bathhouse showers Jesper soaped up Paul's back and cock and then squeezed his ass. An older man at the furthest showerhead watched the two of them with something almost forlorn in his eyes as he jostled his own limp dick.

“If there’s no one attractive, I thought it might be fun for the two of us to put on something of a show together,” Jesper said.

Paul smirked, the same thought having occurred to him moments before Jesper expressed it, Caleb now entirely absent from his mind.

***

A week after graduation, Caleb vanished. He’d taken half of everything in the off-campus apartment, though since they shared it all even down to their underwear, Paul couldn’t say with any certainty that Caleb had taken anything that hadn’t belonged to him. Paul texted and then he called, but nothing got through or was returned. Either Caleb had set up new accounts or else he had blocked Paul from messaging him with brutal fastidiousness. He tried calling up his friends next, but they had very little to say about the matter, all offering little more than halfhearted condolences about the breakup. Only then did Paul realize their friends were all Caleb’s friends before they were his friends. It wasn’t that Caleb had taken from him, it was just that what they’d shared had started out as Caleb’s and remained so.

For a brief while, Paul thought he might kill himself. A brief while that encompassed the summer after graduation and then a couple months of the following fall. But once everyone began to talk about seasonal affective disorder, his depression began to feel trite and his thoughts about the end of the world dribbled dully into the resigned determination that he wouldn’t wait for Caleb to return to begin the rest of his life.

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After a few circuits of the darkened bathhouse halls, which smelled of bleach, cum, and cigarette smoke despite the no smoking sign Paul had noticed earlier, Paul realized that very likely he and Jesper were the most attractive patrons in the establishment and certainly the youngest. A man with a belly like a cauldron looked to be a permanent fixture where he was lounging nude on a small leather sofa. There was something compelling to Paul about this man if not sexually arousing, a mystery maybe about who he was in the outside world. In the same space, a second man was sucking off a third. They looked up as Paul and Jesper passed and gestured for the two younger men to join them, but Jesper only smiled and led Paul away.

"In here," Jesper said, pulling Paul into a private room.

With Jesper's soft, hot tongue nurturing his cock, Paul didn't at first notice the man who entered. But he didn't mind the arms that wrapped around him from behind or the soft lips on his neck. Only when a fourth and fifth set of hands applied themselves to his body did Paul open his eyes from ecstasy. Every man in the room had Jesper's face, Caleb's face, Paul's own face, his body, his body, and his own body. The room was full of him.

"What's—? I don't—?" Paul said. His dick wilted in Jesper's mouth. Jesper looked up at him inquiringly, but Paul was already on his way out, pushing aside his doppelgängers like stalks of corn. Paul grabbed his clothes from the locker room, but departed the bathhouse only half dressed in his haste, barefoot and holding his shoes as he jogged down the Copenhagen streets.

The metro at Nørreport Station came every few minutes, but just as he boarded, Paul saw himself, saw Jesper, running down the escalator. Jesper set his hand on the glass of the platform edge door and said something Paul couldn't hear, smiling coyly in just the way Caleb always had, sending a shivering spike through Paul's body. And then the metro shot away, leaving Paul alone with only his reflections.

Amelia Loves Assassins

by Edward Daschle

Amelia was destined to be an absolute protagonist, there was really no other choice for a girl like her even in this world where her competition for center stage were zombies, necromancers, and the people like her fathers who assassinated zombies. Unfortunately for Amelia and her protagonistic potentiality, a problematic event unfolded in the life she'd made for herself and the mob came for her. But before all that, she was born.

First Life: *My Deathless One*

The two assassins, Siebold and Tetsuo, were in love and spent most of their time assassinating the necromancers who terrorized their kingdom together. Other times, they bought groceries at Lidl and bickered over which movie to watch in the evening, though they always kissed and made up in the end. But in time, they began to feel killing necromancers wasn't enough. They wanted a child, and so Tetsuo got Siebold pregnant. Siebold's belly grew and grew until it was ready to burst.

"The baby's coming!"

"The baby? The baby!" Tetsuo shouted confused and then excited. "Has your water broken? Should I call the ambulance?"

"It's coming now!" Siebold said, and it was, there was no doubt about it. "We'll have to have the birth here."

He screamed, moaned, and breathed hard through pursed lips. He squeezed his husband's hand until he almost broke the bones. Amelia, just about to be born, was like a ghost, watching from above, recording this beautiful and tension-building scene. The baby came out of Siebold's

penis, the shaft and then the head bulging as the baby passed through into the world, screaming as soon it hit the air. Tetsuo cut the cord, and then Siebold's penis drooped limply again, twitching after the exertion of the birth. Never before had a penis gone through so much.

"Hush now, hush," Siebold said, sweaty hair pressed to his beautiful, alabaster forehead. Tetsuo held the child first, looking down at her lovely, slimy face. The most beautiful face of any baby that had ever lived, and with a mischievous look in her eyes.

"We'll call her Amelia," Siebold said.

"Amelia?" Tetsuo asked.

"Yes, it's just the right name."

Much to her chagrin, Siebold and Tetsuo were overly protective of their daughter. They wouldn't let her do what she knew it was her destiny to do, but only because they loved her so, so much.

"Fathers, won't you let me go kill necromancers in the kingdom of Laursica?" she asked them, her golden locks bouncing prettily about her head.

"Sweetheart, we have groceries to unpack," Siebold told his daughter. He was always the one who did the household chores. "How many do you think you can carry at once?"

"At least all of them," she said.

"Take two."

So she took three, the heaviest three and carried them into the house.

It was a house that looked as though it might have been painted by Edward Hopper beside a railroad, dark and looming. But inside, Amelia's room was pink, and out back the stable

where her horse lived—though sometimes it was a unicorn, other times a Pegasus, because it was a shape changing horse—was pink too.

Siebold kissed his husband long and hard when Tetsuo greeted him, corn and avocados spilling from the plastic bag he'd dropped carelessly on the counter. As they kissed, they grinded their bodies into each other, moaning softly, kissing with tongues, passing their spit back and forth.

"Did Amelia have a good day at school?" Tetsuo asked when he was done.

"I did, daddy," Amelia said. She was at the kitchen table painting another masterpiece that her fathers would either pin to the fridge with magnets or else send to a famous gallery in the city where a collector would look at it and assume the painter must've been some old master. The painting would sell for millions, which her fathers would set aside for her when she was old enough to spend it wisely. She wouldn't need the money for college of course, because she'd get scholarships for being brilliant, and she'd give half to charity, but the rest would go to her horses and whatever else she needed. "I passed all my tests with A+'s."

"That's very good, sweetheart," Siebold said.

"That's just what I expect," Tetsuo said.

That night, they fucked raw and hard, moaning through the walls, pulling their shirts over their heads, and ripping the buttons off their pants with the ferocity of their passion. Their nipples were stiff, and Tetsuo licked at Siebold's before spitting into his palm to ease his entry into Siebold's ass. Their sweat and cum mixed into a musky potion and when they were finished, they murmured poetry into each other's mouths before falling asleep.

Amelia knew all about this of course because she was very mature for her age.

And yet she still wasn't allowed to assassinate necromancers.

“They just love me too much,” she told her best friend, Sylvia. “If I die, they would fall apart.”

“Maybe they just don’t trust you enough. My parents let me assassinate necromancers,” Sylvia told Amelia. Sylvia’s parents were named Adriana and Tetsuo. Sylvia’s Tetsuo was an assassin like Amelia’s Tetsuo, but her mother Adriana was a queen Sylvia’s Tetsuo had won over with his daring and passion. Amelia was jealous but only for a little while, because after not so long Sylvia was grievously wounded by a dangerous Frankensteinian construct a cabal of necromancers summoned. Her parents both wept, her mother’s tears endowed with the magical healing waters of the Balencian nation. But then suddenly they all just disappeared. Even the times Siebold and Amelia’s Tetsuo had asked about Sylvia and her family disappeared, those mentions found and replaced with the name of another girl, Gemma, who was a much better friend and never suggested that Amelia’s parents didn’t trust her.

One day, Tetsuo came home bloodied and bruised. There’d been a necromancer on the bus during his afternoon commute home. A powerful one, and though he’d triumphed and claimed the necromancer’s loot, he’d been seriously wounded.

“My love!” Siebold cried, not even caring that Tetsuo’s blood was getting all over the floral-patterned, pink apron Amelia had bought for him on Mother’s Day since she always got Tetsuo presents on Father’s Day and couldn’t give them both presents on the same day. Siebold cradled his lover’s head in his lap and wept, though his tears were not imbued with the healing waters of Balencia. “Run, sweetheart, go grab the bandages from the medicine cabinet. Be quick, your father needs you now.”

Amelia was very quick. She ran up the stairs, three at a time and threw open the medicine cabinet door, tossing aside manticore anti-venom, basilisk paralysis balm, and chimera burn cream. And then she ran back downstairs to where Siebold and Tetsuo were kissing tenderly, exchanging their spit, Tetsuo's hand raised to gently caress his husband's caring face. Amelia would draw this tender scene later to many accolades and much appreciation.

"Will he make it?" Amelia asked.

"He will, sweetheart," Siebold said. He delicately unbuttoned his husband's shirt, exposing his bloodied chest. He bound bandages around and around, unspooling the white fabric until Tetsuo's chest was nearly covered, one strip over his shoulder to keep the bandages in place. He then took one more strip and wrapped that like a headband about Tetsuo's forehead, staunching the bleeding there. Again, her fathers kissed, oh so tenderly.

"I think you should train me," Amelia said. "If father is injured again, I couldn't bear it."

She knew it might not be fair of her to ask this when her father was lying prone on his husband's lap, but life wasn't always fair, and she was certain she would make a good assassin. Her fathers exchanged a look.

"Meet me by the stables at six AM tomorrow morning," Tetsuo grunted.

"Darling," Siebold scolded. He sometimes scolded, but it was always gentle, and he was always right to do it, even if it did make Tetsuo annoyed and make the sex they had later rougher than it usually was.

"I'll be fine, I heal quickly."

And he did too. By the morning, the bandage around his head was gone and the blood stain on the bandages about his chest was only a small circle of red.

“The first thing we will learn is how to move with the shadows,” Tetsuo said. “It is an ancient and arcane dance, passed down through the generations, a skill that most would take decades to master. Though I have a feeling you will master it far more quickly than that.”

“But I want to learn how to kill,” Amelia protested sweetly, golden locks bouncing.

“When you can come on your foes undetected, you can kill with ease. First—Amelia, come back here!”

But Amelia was already gone. If her father wouldn’t teach her the powers she hoped to learn, she would find someone else. She walked in through the back door, out through the front door, and along down the street to where the necromancer Sycorax greeted her at the bus stop. Together with Sycorax, Amelia took the bus 666 straight to the Vestibule of Hell, Sycorax’s castle.

Amelia got a pretty sick makeover, tended by reanimated hairstylists and clothing designers. The stylist straightened out and dyed her golden ringlets white with a purple streak, the makeup artist went all out with dark eyeshadow and black lipstick, and she got a sweet new corset and a black lace minidress from the designer. When the zombies saw her, they celebrated her transformation with the baying screams of the damned. Amelia’s fathers could probably hear the unholy chorus while they shopped for frozen broccoli and chicken at Lidl. She put her middle fingers up at the thought of boring suburban normies.

Sycorax’s castle was full of bats and rats with red eyes and all the accoutrements of necromancy. Amelia was still an assassin at heart, but she figured she could give it a go, see what was up in the world of necromancy.

“For your first lesson, we’ll be commanding the shadows,” Sycorax told Amelia. “The normies hate the darkness, so you have to learn to embrace it.”

“But I want to learn how to make a zombie,” Amelia protested, staring balefully at Sycorax with her Burton-sized raccoon eyes.

“You know what, fuck it? You’re right, shadows are lame, we’re summoning zombies,” Sycorax said.

“Sweet,” Amelia deadpanned.

They set about raiding the nearby graveyards, but because the normies were so entranced by Amelia’s death goddess-like beauty, they all volunteered to do her bidding and dug up the corpses for her. Two of the boys professed their love for her, but she wasn’t about to do *that* with them. But when she reminded them that they were actually in love with each other, they set about making out, exchanging spit between their two mouths with the bits and pieces of bodies they’d dug up strewn all around them. Amelia crossed her legs and sketched the boys quickly. Though she probably could’ve sold this sketch for millions, she just crumpled it up and threw it away. And when the boys were done moaning and making out, they loaded up her cart and followed her with it back to Sycorax’s castle.

“Not a bad haul,” Sycorax said, sifting through the arms and legs and torsos. “Now take your thread and…”

Amelia was basically a prodigy.

Her zombie construct lumbered about the castle bailey, its many arms flailing in super cute salutes every time it passed Amelia, and its many legs shuffling about as the construct rocked and tipped, but never fell. That was part of the test, seeing if it would fall. But Amelia always got A+’s on her tests, always. So that was that.

Or not quite that, because of course her dad had to come in just then and ruin everything.

"Daaaaad!" Amelia complained as Tetsuo set about dismantling the construct with quick flashes of his twin daggers. "You're ruining it!"

"Sweetheart," Tetsuo said, stabbing an arm that was attempting to crawl away into little, bit-sized pieces. "Your father and I talked things over, and we just don't want you summoning the dead."

"You never let me do anything," Amelia said, and then used her new shadow powers (which she had learned and was really good at, by the way), to open a demon portal and send her dad far away to Balencia, where it would take him days at least to get back and ruin things.

"Can you believe my dad destroyed my construct?" Amelia asked Sycorax. Sycorax would understand, she was completely understanding. Sycorax stirred a cup of necromancer hot chocolate, which was pretty much like regular old normie hot chocolate, except she used shadow magic and Dutch-process cocoa so it was extra dark. The marshmallows were black too.

"Dads fucking suck," Sycorax said, just in time for Siebold to appear out of the shadows and smack the hot chocolate out of her hands. The mug shattered on the floor.

"Stay away from my daughter with that poison, necromancer," he said, drawing his daggers. "Honey, I know you sent your dad to Balencia with a demon portal, and that's just not appropriate. I'm going to have to ground you."

"Oh Jesus Christ," Sycorax said. She really liked Jesus after Amelia told her about him. He'd only come back to life once, so he was still just a novice really, though he did have a massive cult following. Sycorax's eyes went white, the hygge candle flames in the window and on the table went blue, and ghouls rose from the shadows. Siebold was the second most skilled

assassin in all of Laursica only behind his husband, but he was no match for the necromancer in her own castle.

The shadows led Siebold to the build-an-abomination slab in the basement, and then tied him down, helpless. Amelia would've gotten involved to free him, but once he got himself out of this mess and made it home again, all this drama would get Siebold all hot and bothered and they'd have hot sex basically everywhere.

"Now that you've caught me, what do you intend to do with me?" Siebold asked.

"I'll show you just what I intend to do with you," Sycorax said through a super evil grin.

Amelia watched from where she sat on the basement stairs wrapped in the coat the shadowy servant had given her as Sycorax raped her father's ass over and over and forced him to enter her as well, just raping him and raping him, cackling maniacally as Siebold shouted in what could almost be mistaken as pleasure. But actually he was super hurt, and it would take all of Tetsuo's care and love to make him better again.

Amelia returned home with her wounded father, the effort of escaping unnoticed from Sycorax's castle wearying her and sending her into a deep sleep. When she awoke, the new day would bring a fresh start. She could erase the last terrible chapter of her life and go back to when things were good and there was no raping at all.

The next morning, Amelia's fathers took her with them grocery shopping where they were bombarded with fans who loved their work assassinating zombies and grocery shopping. But when the fans saw Amelia, they began to throw rocks at her they'd all brought in from outside on the off chance that they'd need to stone a perfectly innocent girl they didn't like for some reason.

"Problematic!" they shouted, as they stoned her.

"But that never happened! I mean it happened, but—!" she cried, even as a stone struck her forehead and made her bleed. "I'm not that old Amelia, I'm someone completely different! I'm a completely new Amelia! Today's a new day!"

While all the people stoned Amelia to death, her fathers made out by the produce, tomatoes and zucchinis rolling across the floor where they'd knocked into them in the carelessness of their passion. They exchanged spit, grinded their hard-nippled chests up against one another, and moaned in pleasure.

Second Life: *Assassinating Fate*

In her first resurrection after the stoning, Amelia had made for herself a life so far removed from the original version of her story that she felt nobody would ever find her, even though she still did look the part of the protagonist, blond ringleted and all. She was a nurse now in World War II, no magic here at all.

Lying beside one another in a foxhole, ready to die in a blaze of glory as bullets flew around them, Amelia's fathers in another life, Siebold and Tetsuo kissed, exchanging spit. Despite their names they were actually both American. They weren't on the problematic side of things, but Amelia worried that that was how they might be perceived. What else was there to acknowledge to get herself out of hot water should the mob return with their stones? Okay, so Tetsuo's family were interned in the United States, which was bad, but he'd signed up to fight thinking it would look good. And then Siebold, his family was German, but from a longline of American Germans. He could read the enemy transmissions. That's what he could do. They'd met and fallen in love when the rest of their division discriminated against them. And they'd

befriended Amelia when they found out she was actually a woman disguised as a man so she could fight for justice and freedom against the Nazis. Found out, she'd become a nurse instead, discovering she had an innate talent that even impressed the doctors. In fact, many of the doctors turned to her for assistance with especially tricky procedures.

But barely halfway through her first big battle, before she'd even had a good chance to admire the love Siebold and Tetsuo shared, the mob found her. A different sort of mob it seemed. They didn't appreciate anachronisms. The stones they threw weren't so sharp or heavy as previously, but even so these stones bloodied Amelia's white nursing dress with the cute red cross and knocked off the little hat perched jauntily on her head. She died with hardly even a whimper.

Third Life: *Assassins Beyond*

Amelia resurrected into a body that was totally devoid of defining features, pretty much just a generic assassin girl. She was part of a crack team of assassins led by Tetsuo and Siebold and they had a corpofascist necromancer to take down. This necromancer was this big asshole named Joebob and he spent all his time resurrecting dead companies so he could control small island nations with all that undead cash.

"On my signal?" Siebold asked.

Tetsuo nodded and when Siebold gave the signal a whole team of black-clad necromancer assassins darted through the brutalist streets, corpofascist zombies with heads of concrete blocks falling like dominos.

Actually, the blockheads were really bad guards. And actually, Joebob was pretty pathetic. So it was an easier and more boring mission than Amelia expected. She felt as though she'd gone to all that trouble to put on the disguise of this life for nothing.

She pretended to dive in the way of a Joebob's final, vengeful strike, and died saving Siebold. Though really Joebob was already dead and hadn't moved at all.

Fourth Life: *The Forgotten Envelope Project*

Amelia resurrected into the body of an old woman, aged 34, so nobody would recognize her in her beachy whites while she read the postcards Siebold and Tetsuo had written one another centuries ago, before they'd become legends. These were the postcards they'd sent to each other one winter when they were taking down different assassins on opposite sides of the kingdom, the postcards that had finally made them admit their love to each other after not-actually-literal-but-figuratively-literal eons of romantic buildup.

Siebold to Tetsuo

13th Day of the Eclipse Tide, 1086, Winter

It's no fun here without you.

I spent all day baking croissants, and it's true what they say, you really do have to keep the butter cold. I ate them until I felt sick even though they weren't very good. See? No fun at all. It took me ages to clean up the mess I made. If you were here, I could've just made you do it. But you weren't. And then a zombie broke in through the sliding door, so it was back to scrubbing. You'd think I'd be better at getting blood out, wouldn't you?

The weather's been nice at least…

Tetsuo to Siebold

18th Day of the Eclipse Tide, 1086, Winter

Adriana and I have been DEMOLISHING zombies here in Balencia. Or I guess I have. She's been doing her queen stuff, which sounds ABSOLUTELY boring. You'd probably think it was interesting though, because you…

Siebold to Tetsuo

21st Day of the Eclipse Tide, 1086, Winter

It really isn't any fun here without you.

Tetsuo to Siebold

23rd Day of the Eclipse Tide, 1086, Winter

Hey, what's wrong? Your last letter made me worried. I hope you're not sick or anything. I know they get bad plague up near where you are this time of year, and that recovery process is a total beast. It killed my whole family you know and then I had to kill them again when they came back. Did I ever tell you about that? It's why I became an assassin in the first place. But I guess we all have stories like that. We probably wouldn't be doing anything so crazy as being assassins if we didn't have stories like that in our pasts.

Adriana doesn't have any stories like that. But she's a queen, so she wouldn't. The worst thing that ever happened to her was her uncle getting assassinated—I guess there are assassins in everyone's backstories!—but it turned out he was a secret necromancer and he was plotting to marry her widowed mother so he could claim the throne, so it was really for the best actually.

Have you gotten better at making croissants?

Tetsuo to Siebold

33rd Day of the Eclipse Tide, 1086, Winter

Are you okay, dude? I'm really getting worried.

She was just getting to the point in their exchange when they expressed their deeper feelings for one another when a stampede trampled Amelia to death, no stones needed.

Fifth Life: *Amelia Loves Assassins*

Amelia resurrected one more time, no disguise, no nothing. Just her as she was supposed to be. But this time, in this life, she would be careful, and she would make hard choices.

The first choice was to leave her fathers behind. They had a beautiful life together that she was only endangering by living beside them. She'd introduced something awful, something she didn't fully understand, but something she knew was awful into the lives when she was their daughter. She couldn't do that to them again. At least she still had the memories from her perfect, golden childhood. The horse/unicorn, the paintings in galleries, the loud, blisteringly hot sex that rocked the walls, evidence of two parents who loved each other deeply.

The second choice was where to go. It would have to be somewhere she had never been, where some little slip wouldn't ruin her disguise. Not Lidl, not even Target or Ikea would do. She considered venturing into Balencia, but that country felt too unfamiliar and too quaint. All those fairies flitting about. Gag her already. What was the point of all this if she had to suffer anyways by living in Balencia? No, she would go north.

"What I don't understand, my love," Siebold said, warrior prince of Danmarvia, a man who grew up thinking his small nation was the last living nation in the world, a man who had never been and would never be her father, "is how you think to deny me."

He was speaking to the woman he loved, to Amelia. He was beautiful, alabaster-skinned and bronze-haired, and his voice was calm, but he was dangerous. Strong and possessive. He took what he wanted and his will was inevitable, like a pig at slop. No, like a tide at the shore. Yes, like a tide at the shore. And what he wanted was Amelia. He had an arm wrapped around her waist, and his face was close to hers.

"I would not deny you, prince," Amelia said, glancing demurely to the earth, "but I fear for…for…for my brother! He is young, and he was taken by a necromancer. I promised I would save her—I mean him—but I fear that it is too late."

"Then we will save him," Siebold said, voice strong and self-assured, "that will be my wedding gift to you."

And so saying, he released her, his passion put aside for a time. He donned his armor and strapped his sword to his belt, his sword redly imbued with zombie blood, that corrupting, magical substance.

The keep where Amelia's sister Gemma—no wait, brother Gavin—the keep where he was kept was guarded by the dead of previous battles fought and lost. Siebold and his host lay

low on the ridgeline so that the dead would not be able to pick them out until it was too late, and his warriors were chopping their limbs to pieces and their torsos to bite-sized chunks—no wait, into lumps the size of bouillon cubes. On Siebold's silent signal, the warriors charged. They did not shout out battle cries, simply got to slashing zombies.

"The necromancer's chambers lie just ahead," Siebold said to Amelia. Her blond hair, which might have given the warriors away in the dark with its luminescence, was bound under a dark headscarf and armored, leather cap. And yet she was still subtly lovely. There was no way Siebold could resist her, even here. "I can smell the stink of dark magic."

"Please, we must be careful," Amelia said.

"There is no need to worry about me," Siebold said. He spoke calmly and without bravado, what he said was simply the truth. He pulled Amelia to his body where his hard cock—though no, she didn't do *that.* But his hard cock! But the necromancer! "Stay behind, I will deal with this necromancer. You will have your brother back."

"No," Amelia said. "I will not leave you."

She was devoted to Siebold, she would do anything for him. But still maybe not *that.*

"Oh fuck," the necromancer Sycorax said. He—no wait she, no wait, it wasn't Sycorax, and it wasn't Endor or Joebob, it was the necromancer Fafnir. Actually, it was just the avatar of the great necromancer Fafnir. Fafnir was a necromancer of the Forgotten Isle of the Far North, and would never venture anywhere south of there where his frozen body might thaw. But he would certainly be down for making things tough on Siebold. He didn't have prophetic powers—that would make him way too overpowered—but he could probably tell that Siebold would end up being super dangerous to necromancers everywhere once he met the roving assassin Tetsuo. No, wait, that wasn't this Siebold's story, this Siebold was in love with Amelia, he'd never meet

Tetsuo. Siebold was Amelia's caring man and together he and she would become immaculately dangerous to necromancers. "I mean—come to die, have you? I could always use more fresh bodies for my army. How generous of you to offer yours."

"We have come to save my brother, Gemma—I mean, my brother, um—" Amelia said.

"You mean this brother?" the shadowy avatar of Fafnir said, opening his patchwork cloak of stitched-together human skin. A small boy hung there, a dead, small boy.

"No!" Amelia screamed, and Siebold had to hold her back from rushing headlong into the necromancer's trap. Her emotions were so high. But even with her emotions so high, her face was quietly lovely, her blond locks falling free of her headscarf.

The dead boy's eyes were stitched shut, but his mouth hung open and from it emanated a sudden scream. Siebold readied his blades, but even as the boy screamed zombies poured into the chamber, it was a total trap. It seemed as though they would be overwhelmed and together they would fall in a blaze of glory.

The world seemed to freeze in place as Siebold brushed Amelia's cheek and leaned in to kiss her—or actually maybe it really had frozen in place, because how else would the zombies not have reached them. He had beautiful lips. And inside, his mouth was pink like grapefruit, and probably as sweet as sugared grapefruit which she sometimes ate for breakfast. Oh this was…it was…

And then Tetsuo leapt through a shadow portal and started just obliterating zombies, arriving as he always did just in time to save Siebold who was his greatest love—no wait, Siebold was her lover and not her father. He had just kissed her. But right in front of Tetsuo? No, it didn't matter, because Tetsuo wasn't actually here. That would be totally deus ex machina if he were and everyone knew that was no good. But there was no way he'd let Siebold die, right?

And Siebold's lips looked so beautiful. Amelia wanted to kiss them again. But also she didn't do *that.* Tetsuo accepted the kiss in her place. He and Siebold kissed chastely. They were in danger, surrounded by frozen zombies after all, they couldn't get carried away. But Siebold was her lover—not her father—and she did want him. She did. But Tetsuo wanted him more. And they really were so good together, him and Siebold, and she didn't do *that.*

She watched as they kissed, still so chastely, before stripping off their armor there in the necromancer's fortress, surrounded by the dead. Tetsuo kissed Siebold's neck, kissed down his clavicle, down his chest, circling his nipple with his tongue. Amelia loved the way they loved. This was the way things should be. If the stone-throwers came for her, so be it. She could die if it meant her favorite assassins could love as they were supposed to love. But while they fucked, she set about killing zombies, finally the powerful assassin she'd always dreamed of becoming.

Who I Am Dead

by Edward Daschle

It wasn't just Crash Test Woman's body that made her one of my least favorite clients, it was that she always wanted everything from me. Her legs pointed in the wrong directions below the knees; her jaw was a lumpy mass of flesh, shattered bone, and teeth; she had a crushed eye socket and smashed nose; and her rib cage under her torn breasts had been bowed in to resemble a half-eaten watermelon. This was how she looked when she removed her mask and casing which together gave her some semblance of wholeness. However you died was how you'd remain in death until the end of time. And because I'd died undamaged, my body was a pretty hot commodity I could sell how I liked.

Crash Test Woman clutched at my buttocks and waist with her crooked fingers, pulling me down to her, and though I despised what would come next, I knew what she wanted. I kissed down her shattered face, down the striated tube of her throat, down to her chest where I lingered on her exposed ribs. She liked when I took the shattered bones into my mouth, liked watching me do it though I didn't think it could feel all that good. My favorite clients didn't have me do any of this shit; they only wanted to admire me or pose me like an action figure.

"Fuck, yeah," Crash Test Woman moaned, as I gently licked her exposed intestines. To get through this, I snorted a hit of babel and lost myself in the flashing memories of life the drug offered.

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"How much is it?" Dalton asks me, casually leaning sideways into the locker next to mine under the stairs. "For, you know. I'm not gay, but I've heard…so how much?"

Looking at him, my heart is just going crazy, beating in a circuit through my body like it's in a chariot race. I've had a crush on Dalton since seventh grade Spanish class. Neither of us were any good and the teacher wasn't either, but he thought I was smart, so he asked me to do a group project with him.

"I dunno," I say, hoping he can't see how my insides are trembling and my outsides are burning red.

"Come on man, my girlfriend's not putting out and I'm really backed up, you know?"

"Okay, just meet me in the bathroom by, um, Ms. Garcia's classroom," I say, already anticipating how his cock will taste and his cum. If I hadn't overheard Corey telling a friend of his that he paid me to suck his cock, I wouldn't have known what Dalton was after. I don't actually go around accepting money for blowjobs. But I guess Corey had to cover his ass somehow after a couple popular girls saw us together under the bleachers. He was the first and only other guy I'd ever been with. I couldn't have expected that because of him I'd get a chance with Dalton. I know that maybe I should hate myself for this and hate Corey too. But honestly, I can't think of anything I want more…

…later, Dalton ignores me when Corey pushes me against the lockers. Then Corey says something to Dalton and they both laugh. But at the end of that same day, Dalton pays me to suck him off again. I want to tell him he doesn't have to pay me, that maybe this could be something else, something more meaningful. But I know too that if he didn't have to pay me, he probably wouldn't want to be around me at all…

…later still, my dad's pacing and my mom's sitting there on the edge of my bed, biting her lip. I'm standing in the corner. I'd leave the room, but I've already left the living room and they'd followed me into my bedroom. This isn't me coming out to them. I've never done that. This is them after they found out about Corey and Dalton and then Terry, Alex G., and Alex M. Maybe they didn't learn about all of them, but they learned about what was going on. Maybe I can run away and go into porn.

When they're done, I start the car in the garage and let the fumes suffocate me.

***

Crash Test Woman wanted to cuddle, but since she hadn't paid any more than she had the time before, I pulled away and stood from the dark slab that served the place of a bed. I called her Crash Test Woman because of the way she told me she'd died but also because other than the moments preceding our deaths, we dead did not remember our lives. We were nameless and most of us aimless. With each hit of babel, we witnessed flashing moments from a different life, never certain if this one as opposed to the one before or the one after were the memories of our own lives, the lives that had ended in our deaths. It was a cacophonous haunting, what babel offered us, a tantalizing reminder of beating hearts and warm flesh. Undeniable, addicting. And each time I took a hit of babel, I appended the memory of my own death—the car, the garage, the suffocation—but I couldn't know whether any of my babel flashes matched my death or if I was just bashing them together, hoping they'd slot into place.

I allowed Crash Test Woman to admire my bare, immaculate ass as I walked to the window of the room she'd rented high in a Burn Ward tower that looked to be built of stacked

coal briquettes. The sky was stalactited with a heavy sheath of pointed, dark gray clouds, flashing occasionally with purple and silver sparks of lightning, and distantly I could just make out the crystalline gleam of the Tower of Babel. It wasn't an optical illusion, the way the Tower was always there in the distance, but death was not life.

Visiting the Tower was the only thing I wanted. The only thing I felt was worth wanting. My first client, the mutilated man who introduced me to babel, had told me the Tower could make your dreams come true. I figured if the drug could offer a glimpse of life, maybe the Tower could give you the real thing. But the only way to find out was to pay the Ferryman for my passage there with whatever I could squeeze out of desperate dead like Crash Test Woman.

"I have a job for you, if you want it."

"A job?" I asked without turning.

"This is a big job, primo cash. And I'll get a referral fee if you take it."

"Let's hear it then," I said.

"There's a party, the host wants an immaculate," Crash Test Woman said. I could hear her moving behind me and felt her crooked fingers as they brushed my lower back and found their way gently between my buttocks like a collection of caterpillars.

***

Halloween I've snuck into this college party where a faggot is flouncing around the living room in makeup and a dress. He's pretending to sing this song that's playing, some girly pop shit, while everyone cheers and pretends he's doing something special. But whatever, the beer's

free, the music is loud, and the girls, they look hot. Even if they're mostly already dancing with their boyfriends, big, beefy, frat guys.

"Interesting song choice," a guy says.

"What?" I ask, when I realize over the music he's talking to me.

"The lip sync song, it was political," he says. He can't be more than a year older than me, and he's tall. Stupidly tall, the kind of tall that doesn't make him look good, just makes everyone else look bad.

"Sure, whatever," I say, taking another swig from my bottle, looking around to see if any females might've wandered off from their mates.

"Nate," he says, holding out his hand.

"Corey," I say, taking the hand, because that's just what you do.

"Want to dance?" Nate asks. What the fuck? At a frat party? Sure, there was a drag queen, but that was entertainment. Who does this fag think he is?

"What the fuck? I'm not a…I'm not gay," I say.

"Sorry, no problem," Nate says, holding up his hands, but I'm already gone…

…later, I'm making out with this tall, hot chick. She has thick hair down to her waist and more makeup than anyone I've ever met. Outside, behind the house, it's dark. The bonfire where a bed is burning along with a couple chairs is turning everyone into silhouettes. Anyone could be anyone. And I guess I know she isn't a chick. I guess I know that, but it's dark, and I don't *really* know I know that. But what I do know is that no matter what, I'm not a fag.

"What's your name?"

"It's Corey," I say.

"Jackie, Jackie O. Lantern…"

…later still, the world is spinning. I'm driving and the road keeps on curving.

Still, I'm a good fucking driver and I make it home no problem. My parents will never even know I was out. I push the button for the garage door, and as it comes down, so does my head. I'm fucking exhausted and the car is warm and humming underneath me. It's just humming and humming away, filling the garage with its sweet, musky exhaust.

I let the fumes suffocate me.

***

I took the gig Crash Test Woman found for me. Even if this mystery woman paid half of what Crash Test Woman had said she would, it would be more than I'd made in all the time I'd been dead. This must've been some big player. She even sent a palanquin for me, or rather one picked me up where Crash Test Woman had told me to go. There weren't cars in death, there wasn't gasoline or electricity. Just rocks and all us dead.

"Welcome to our humble abode," the mystery woman said, arms spread wide, mouth splayed open in a leering grin. She was standing before the golden gates to a vast, gray estate, brutalist and imposing. Unlike the building, she was delicate-featured and gorgeous. I wondered who she'd been in life, maybe a movie or T.V. star, though she could've been far older than any of that. I wondered too if that was how she'd gotten where she was, wielding her beauty as power. But when she turned, with a crooked finger telling me to follow, I saw her back was a blackened mess, melted strings of flesh not quite hiding her exposed skull.

"Strip please," she said once we were inside. We weren't alone, but the only other dead were a couple bodies that had been blindfolded and bound into the shapes of a chair and a vase,

the vase sitting there, bare assed, open mouth raised to the ceiling, throat filled with pebbles and intricately shaped metal flowers. These ornaments were a show of wealth, but not the most extravagant I'd seen. This one time a client had taken me to her house, and she'd touched me delicately while the walls built from stacked dead sang a stupid little song I couldn't get out of my head for ages. In death, just like in life, power meant doing whatever you wanted with everyone else.

"What should I call you?" I asked while I stripped.

"You won't call me anything," she said. She looked me over, lifting my arms to check underneath. "Very good, immaculate. How did you die? Suicide?"

"Heart failure," I said with a shrug. It was what told my clients on the rare occasions they asked. Most dead hated suicides. They were resentful and jealous of the privileges some types of suicide gave you. But a congenital defect? That was just bad luck in life, good luck here. That was easier for most of the dead to accept since it meant you hadn't cheated. And though they almost certainly knew "heart failure" was likely not what had really happened, mostly they preferred to believe anyways.

"Heart failure? I doubt it," the mystery woman said. "Still, no scars. We can use you."

***

Valerie's going to be fucking pissed. Valerie fucking Marsh. But I need her to write me a good letter of recommendation. What the fuck am I doing this internship for if not to clear my way to a good school and get out of this shithole town? I know I wouldn't have gotten the internship if I weren't dating Valerie's daughter, even with my 4.0 and all that other bullshit I've

got going. She's a congresswoman, she doesn't need a high schooler to be her gopher when she's back in her hometown, pretending like she still cares about where she came from.

"Dalton, thank God almighty, I needed this more than you can know," she says when I hand her the Dunkin coffee. That's what she says, but her other hand squeezes the shit out of my arm. The marks her nails leave will remind me not to be late again.

I think I could cope with everything better if somewhere in my life I got a break. But when I'm not picking up her coffee, I'm at school, when I'm not at school, I'm volunteering to get my hours in for honor society, and when I'm not doing any of that shit, I'm watching fucking Christian television shows with my frigid girlfriend who won't put out…

…later, Emerson's sucking me off in the bathroom by Ms. Garcia's classroom and I have to admit he's good even though I'm not into guys. I mean, not really. I wouldn't want to date one, but fuck, I need this. My theory is that guys are better at blowjobs because they have dicks too. They know what it feels like, so they know what feels good.

"Okay, get off," I say, after I cum down his throat. He wipes his lips with the back of his hand and stands smiling all goofy. It's disgusting. When I give him the twenty, I make sure his hand doesn't touch mine…

…later still, I've just come home from dinner at Valerie's. I acted like the complete gentleman. I laughed at all Valerie's corny ass politician jokes, and my dick didn't give me any issues when my girlfriend tapped her cheek for me to kiss it on my way out the door. What's fucked is that after all this I still have like fifteen calculus problems to get through, an essay to revise, twenty pages of history textbook to read and annotate, and a lab report to crap out for AP Physics. I'll get it done, but first, I take my focus pill. The guy who sells them to me never calls them by their market name, but I know what they are.

When I'm done with my work, the night presses in heavy as anything. I can't take it. I head to my parent's garage, start the car, and let the fumes suffocate me.

***

At the party, a couple burly men, masked and robed, but clearly mutilated underneath, bound me and strung me up on the wall. I would be St. Sebastian that night. It was this whole Catholic theme they had going. Sometimes I didn't understand how death could be like this, how I would be here forever and ever until the end of time. It didn't seem fair. Depending on who I really had been in life, it seemed like a fucking travesty of justice.

The masked men rammed golden arrows through me after they strung me up. Hurt like the hell I was in, but I breathed through it. The arrows wouldn't leave any scars of course, and once they were in, if I didn't move, I wouldn't feel much of anything. There were a few other dead pinned up and differently arranged throughout the hall. I couldn't remember how the various saints had died, but there was a woman being pressed flat between the wall and a rectangular block of stone the same size she was; a man with skin pulled out and pinned to the wall like a butterfly in a case; and another man heavily burned, blackened with melted features, a red-hot grill bound to his chest.

The guests arrived in a shambling mass. A few were immaculate, or at least had disguised however it was they'd died with especially clever scaffolding. Others rode on the backs of servants, broken bodies hidden under piles of gold and heaps of cloth harvested from the scraps worn by recently dead, mountains of wealth, so that I wasn't totally certain every guest I saw was a guest and not in fact some new decoration. A few stopped to admire me. One delicately

probed the places where the arrows pierced my body, fingering these new and temporary holes. I hissed as he jostled the arrows, but I didn't say a word. I did my job.

"A toast to our hosts," a man said in a heavy and uncomfortable voice, sieved through a mangled mandible. There was of course no drink with which to toast, but he raised a hand, the white glove he wore unblemished despite the filth of death. The other guests followed suit; hands raised throughout the hall.

"You're a lovely thing," a lumpy woman under a collection of pale shrouds croaked up at me. She was being carted about by a couple mutilated servants. A set of spindly arms extended out to me, fondling first the arrows, before reaching for my chest and groin. "So whole, so immaculate. Almost…alive."

***

My mom's told me the stories of how when she was the age I am now, my dad used to pick her up in his Datsun, that shiny old torpedo perpetually parked in the garage. They went to drive-in theaters projecting retro, black and white horror onto vast screens, to make-out points on the edge of town, to roller rinks, and all those other places parents are always saying they went to as kids. The car's mine now, ready for me to make memories of my own with some lucky girl, maybe buy her a corsage and take her to prom. I don't know how to tell them I don't have any interest in finding a girlfriend. I'm pretty sure, a solid 90% chance, they'll be cool with it or at least won't kick me out. But it's hard to remember that when Representative Marsh stops by my parents' bed and breakfast brunch place every time she's in town—it's a town staple after all, quintessential all American.

I guess what I'm more worried about is navigating the new way people will look at me once they know I'm…not interested in girls. Mostly, I don't want to be noticed at all. If I could, I would just melt away and wipe my existence retroactively from the world, like in my mom's favorite Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life.* "Terry, who's that?" people would ask, and nobody would know.

…later, I'm wearing my band tux, sitting in the front seat of my too-cool car, ready to head to the high school winter band concert that evening. My clarinet's in its case on the shotgun seat, and just for a moment I have this image of myself getting in a crash and the instrument shooting through the window to skewer some unsuspecting bystander. But I can't laugh. My self-pity—and I do know it's self-pity, I know it's an impotent feeling, but it feels so good, this sadness that builds a lump in my throat—it stifles my ability to make my face into any shape other than totally neutral.

But when I start the car, I don't hit the button to raise the garage door. I just sit there in the Datsun and let the fumes suffocate me.

***

"Come now, I don't bite," the spindly-armed woman lied—she seemed like the type who absolutely would bite. "Take him down boys, I want to enjoy my little St. Sebastian."

Her servants set about unhooking me from the wall. I didn't say anything, but I tried to tell them with my eyes that this wasn't allowed. A few other guests had gathered around us, watching the procedure underway. They left the arrows in but laid me out on the table as though I were the otherwise absent main course. The woman gestured to her servants again and they

lifted and laid her atop me, her body pushing the arrows aside, the tips grinding painfully against my ribs and through my internal organs. Still shrouded, I couldn't tell how she'd died, but it seemed as though there was nothing solid inside the woman's body. Nothing solid other than the bones in her arms. The mass of her was like a large tongue or a sphincter, caressing me, enveloping me. The hand of another guest stroked my hair, the tongue of a third on my toes.

***

Everyone at school calls me Alex G. and they call the other Alex, Alex M. I don't mind though, not at all, but I know he does. I watch him and I can see how much he hates it. Every time someone appends the "M" to his name there's this little twitch at the corner of his eye. It's endearing, it's adorable. I could watch him forever, though if we didn't share the same name, I don't think he'd ever look my way. I figured he's probably even a bit homophobic, considering who is aunt is, but that's hot in a way. Like the scenario goes: he's beaten me up after finding out I'm into him, telling me to "fuck off faggot," but then he breaks down and instead of punching me again he's kissing me, crying and telling me he wants me though he knows he shouldn't. Who doesn't love forbidden love?

Emerson helps me get my mind off Alex M., but the fifty dollars he charges me for each blowjob have really added up fast. So mostly I just masturbate. I masturbate constantly until I'm drained dry. When masturbation isn't enough, I choke myself. I tried a belt when that was a thing everyone was doing, leaving my head light and floaty, my cum just flying out of me like a ketchup bottle. But what I found was the belt left a mark like a hickie, and I had to wear collared shirts for a week. So mostly what I use is a plastic bag.

My head is flying through space. My dick is hard as diamond. Alex M. is there begging me to fuck him. The world is retreating, look, it's as small as a marble, and my chest is so heavy, like it's made of lead…and then I come.

…later, after the bruising around my neck heals, I'm trying out something new, jerking off as the garage fills with exhaust, suffocating me with the fumes.

***

I felt excruciating pain as a guest slid the last of the arrows up my ass. Still, I was good. Ever since I'd arrived in death, I knew I could do shit like this, and I was right. I didn't say a word, didn't scream or anything. I just let them all do what they wanted and watched the white swirling of fine robes and veils as the guests had their way with all us ornaments.

"Enough," a loud and heavy voice announced from somewhere overhead. I craned my neck, but I couldn't see the mezzanine from where I was splayed on my stomach. "It's best not to fill up on appetizers when the main course is still to come. Follow my attendant into the next room and our adventure will continue."

One final hand stroked my cock and squeezed my balls and then I was left alone. Adventure was such a bullshit word for all of this. Were there people doing things like this in life, did death make people even bigger assholes, or did it just give them the tools to do what they'd always wanted to try out anyways? There might not be anyone who could answer that, no one at least I'd want to ask.

After a set of masked attendants unbound me, I lay there for a time, before slowly, carefully, reaching around to remove the arrows. It hurt like absolute hell, but once they were out

the pain was over and I knew I would look none the worse for wear. The attendants led me and the other ornaments through a door opposite the one the guests had taken, and there the mystery woman met us.

"You all did very well, excellent showing," Mystery Woman said, smiling that far too wide smile. "You'll find your clothes and your pay by the wall. Get dressed and get out. Oh, and we're trying to maintain some level of exclusivity here, so don't go telling anyone about this. If you do, we'll know."

***

"She's Minnesota strong," my dad says insipidly on the TV screen, in response to the interviewer's question about his sister's campaign. My parents talk about moving us to D.C. after the TV announces that my aunt Valerie's won her race. But I know we won't. We aren't going anywhere even after she leaves us behind…

"…Jesus Christ," my day is saying later, though it takes him a few tries at different angles to get the remote to turn off the television. My aunt has just said gays should be sent to special places, and when the interviewer asked if she meant, like, internment camps, she said yes, just like that, didn't it make sense? It would be better for everyone.

"Maybe you should talk to her," my mom says.

"Some of the stuff she says is so out of pocket, but it's not like she believes it," my dad says. "She just likes to rile people up. It's how she always was, even when we were kids. My mom used to call her 'Little Miss Scarlett.' You know, like from *Gone with the Wind*."

I'm asexual, not gay, even though I did pay this guy in my school to suck me off once when I heard he was doing that, just to see if I liked it. I think my aunt thinks I am though, and I know my parents do. My mom keeps hinting at it and buying me rainbow socks and shit. I think this is her not-so-subtle way of getting back at her sister-in-law, but I kind of hate it. I hate that everyone has all these ideas about me that aren't true. It's such bullshit. The world is full of bullshit like this. I don't want any part of it, but it's not like I have a choice…

…later still, in the middle of the workday, my parents' garage is the quietest place in the world, dust caught in the square beams of light falling through the dirty, mullioned windows. My parents are at work and meanwhile I've decided to skip school for the day. My dad always takes his car to work, but unless my mom has a meeting, she takes the bus, leaving the minivan in the garage. It looks a bit like a hippo resting there, only absent a muddy pool, but with the same bulbous front and slightly rounded rear end. I can go wherever I want so long as I'm back home before they are.

But today, I start the car without raising the garage door, and settle into the shotgun seat, uncertain how long it will take for the carbon monoxide to suffocate me, but willing to wait…

***

The Ferryman didn't believe me when I said I had enough to pay for the trip to the Tower. What they insisted on doing was counting each misshapen coin, weighing and measuring to assure I hadn't counterfeited the coins from more common stone. When they finished, they beckoned me to follow with a hand that had either been frostbitten or burned in life, leading me

through a crude tunnel under the dark wall at the edge of the Babel Sands, the vast ocean of shifting dunes that surrounded the tower. It was this sand that necessitated the Ferryman.

"Oh shit," I said as a sharp gust cut into me through the gap between the end of the tunnel and the open hatch of the Ferryman's turtle-like craft. At a distance, the sand appeared white, a stark contrast from the darker stone that otherwise defined death. But a handful of the cutting stuff revealed each grain to be clear like glass or quartz, like the Tower of Babel. Inside the ferry, a crew of dead turned great wheels, propelling us all slowly across the sands. The Ferryman had climbed above, where the sand would cut them to pieces, but where too they could lead our way.

In death, where so little changed, and where memory was a bog only babel could sort through to occasionally reveal glimmers in the muck, time was unstable. But the trip across the sands felt interminable in a very specific way. It was as though I were passing all the eons of time inside the ferry, waiting for the sand to finally erode the hull and deposit us into the dunes where we too would be eroded even as our death-stabilized bodies rebuilt themselves. With nothing else to occupy myself, I began to think back over the memories I'd gleaned from the babel I'd taken. Out of all the boys, I don't know who I wished had been me. Whoever had been me had died and wishing death on someone, wishing them where I was now, was an absolute cruelty. Likely the others were still alive, spending their lives fruitlessly searching for meaning or answers to whatever it was haunting them, just as they were haunting me. They couldn't know, and shouldn't know, that no matter what they found, this was where they'd end up.

"Halt, come no further," the armored guard said with a palm raised against me. I'd reached the crystal tower and now here was this fucker saying "halt" as though that was a word you could just say. The Ferryman had taken half of what I'd had, but since I didn't have any

intention of returning, I didn't mind giving it over. But the guard didn't seem to be persuaded by currency.

"Okay, what do you want?" I said, my voice on the edge of exasperation and desperation.

"There is nothing more you need to give," a woman with pomegranate red hair and a voice like rippling water said. She had not been standing beside the guard before, and I had not seen the carved, crystalline doors of the Tower open, though now they stood ajar.

"Nothing?" I asked.

"Nothing," she confirmed, and smiled, before welcoming me in.

Death was distorted through the crystal walls, the shapes of everything wavey or strangely angular depending through which facet I looked. I ran my hand along the wall, reveling in the coolness. Most of death was tepid, not cold enough to be completely miserable, but not warm enough to be comfortable either. A spring or fall day when you'd forgotten to bring your sweater. A crystal stairway spiraled up endless around the walls of tower, and following the woman I thought might be Persephone, I climbed for at least as long as it had taken me to cross the sands and then longer still, a lifetime or maybe many eons.

"Welcome to the Haunting," Persephone said when I emerged into a vermilion room, a rose on the crystal stem of the tower. Beside Persephone, there stood a second woman in blue, the perfect image of the Virgin Mary from my babel memories of life.

"What do I do here?" I asked.

"You understand," Persephone said, while the Virgin Mary looked gently to the side, smiling sadly and saying nothing. "Here in the Haunting, you will learn who you were and how you came to death."

"Oh, um, I mean, wow," I said, though I felt distinctly underwhelmed. "It's just…I don't know if you know, but there's dead out there selling…they call it babel? It lets you remember life. So is there anything else I can do here, or…?"

"I know you may not think much of what we offer, but unlike that simple drug we will give you truth; you will know everything you've ever wanted to know about your life," Persephone said.

"What the fuck," I whispered. And then I shouted it. I didn't care who they were, how many people worshipped them or once had worshipped them. They were running a bullshit operation. "What the fuck do I do with the truth? So I learn who I was and then I just go back out there knowing I was some stupid shit who killed himself because he couldn't deal with all his little feelings? That's what I do? You can't…I can't…is this all there is?"

The Virgin Mary went on smiling, but shook her head ever so slightly.

"Then tell me! Please! This isn't fair, you have to know it isn't fair."

"You are not here to be punished or rewarded," Persephone said, "what could be more fair than that? No matter how long or short your life, no matter what you did or didn't do, your slate is wiped clean here in death to share a collective eternity. But now you have a choice to make. If you like, you can bring some true unfairness into the equation. You can remember who you were. Once you know, you will become your guilt or your innocence and death will change. I've seen it happen before."

I wanted to kill her. I wanted to rip her red hair from her pomegranate head and watch all the read seeds spill out her ears. But this was death, and she was a goddess. I knew there was nothing I could do, no power I could enact over her.

“Everyone comes here, to death?” I asked, thinking of Valerie Marsh, that specter in the background of so many of my babel flashes. “Without exception?”

“Without exception,” she affirmed, and the Virgin Mary nodded.

“Then what is the purpose of life?”

“To extend itself.”

“Then where is life going?”

“As far as it can.”

I asked questions for an eon until there were no more questions I could think to ask, and then I told them the story of my time in death, all in hopes of postponing the decision I would need to make. None of the boys whose lives the babel had shown me had done anything all that bad, really. They were lusting and loathing, all while their stupid little thoughts rolled through their minds making them feel guilty and self-righteous in turn. Nothing so unusual or awful. With certain knowledge I was one of these not so terrible boys, I could leave the Tower valorous in the unjustifiable suffering I was experiencing in death. Though did it matter—

“Am I still guilty if I don’t remember what I did?”

“That’s a silly question,” Persephone said, laughing for the first time that I’d heard. It was a laugh that while it lasted I felt might solve all my discontent. When the echoes faded, she spoke again, “But it’s time to make your decision. Will you leave the Tower remembering your life, or leave the Tower as you entered it?”

“What should I—?”

The Virgin Mary shook her head. The decision would have to be mine. I felt as though I’d been beaten into submission, though this was the greatest peace I’d experienced since I’d died. These two women had pulled me apart and left me with no other option but to obey.

***

I departed the Tower of Babel the same way I'd entered, down the crystal stairs for one eon and across the dunes for a second after handing over to the Ferryman what remained of my earnings. I had made my decision, discovered who I'd been in life. All too obvious really, the way the memory of my death slotted into place with the flashes babel had offered me, and all too pointless at the same time. There was nothing left for me now, nothing but all eternity and a single red seed. A seed Persephone told me to eat once I'd discovered not only who I'd been alive, but also who I was dead.

Thistle Land

by Edward Daschle

What my daughter had uncovered deep within the house I had inherited was a manuscript she believed to be her grandmother's lost magnum opus. My mother, her grandmother, the great and infamous author, Helen Donovan. In truth, however, what she had found were the journals in which I had recorded the stories of my adventures in Thistle Land, the magical world I had not visited since I was a child.

"The notebooks were in a bit of a mess," Molly explained to me over dinner, "but I've begun piecing together something truly…interesting. I remember her telling me about it the last time I saw her, but this story…it's different from what I expected. I don't want to say commercial, but this story has a broader appeal than her previous work. Just as ambitious as anything else she ever wrote, but wouldn't it be wonderful if her last novel became a mainstream bestseller? Not to be gauche, but this might be my ticket to tenure. My colleagues will absolutely scream nepotism, but I can't keep *Thistle Land* from the world now that I've found it."

I found in this moment that even if I wanted to, I could not speak. Could I tell her that I was the author of these notebooks she had found and not her grandmother? And might this then dash her blooming enthusiasm, my writing pyrite to my mother's gold? I sat there at the dining table mouth bobbing open and closed like a fish until my daughter noticed, took my arm, and led me to the living room where I could sit more comfortably until it was time for bed.

***

Barthance was a changeable city of opulent sounds and smells, considered by its denizens to be the greatest jewel of Thistle Land. In Cordelia's first visit to Thistle Land and to Barthance, she passed merchants bartering from their glittering stalls, twisted red poles indicating they were sanctioned sellers and not imposters peddling illegal goods. One stall sold fruits of all sorts: apples and quinces, lemons and oranges, cherries, melons, and raspberries; peaches, mulberries, cranberries, crabapples, dewberries, pineapples, blackberries, apricots, and strawberries. So much fruit, it took a second stall to contain the fresh grapes and pomegranates, dates and bullaces, pears and greengages, damsons and bilberries, currants and gooseberries, barberries, figs, citrons, and—Cordelia recognized very little of what she saw, but understood this all as a great abundance.

She lingered longingly beside a third stall from which wafted the saccharine aroma of fresh pastries, before her attention was drawn away again to a fourth piled high with sumptuous rugs rolled and draped, a fifth selling runed tiles for some game she did not recognize, and a sixth selling shining glass globes turning the stall's merchant into a backlit silhouette. When the periwinkle door reappeared, Cordelia was reluctant, but finally gave into the gravity-like pull.

On another sojourn, she encountered children playing games in the cobbled street where the market had previously stood, now cleared of stalls, hung instead with great, red banners, announcing the birth of the new sorcerer prince. The games the children played were so similar to the ones Cordelia knew she wondered if she wasn't the first to make it to Thistle Land.

And on a later sojourn still, the wide street was boisterous and noisy, not from merchants and customers, but from crowds of purposeful people going this way and that, navigating between carts pulled by boisterously cawing palancraxes, the ostrich-like birds the people of Thistle Land used as pack animals in place of horses and donkeys.

What Cordelia found, was that she could never predict what Barthance would offer her. And she felt certain even if she never explored anywhere beyond the city's boundaries to see what else Thistle Land contained, the wonders would never end.

***

When I was a child, it was Proserpina who introduced me to Thistle Land. She was one of those women, fans of my mother's work, who would at some point begin to call themselves Helenites after my mother. The found power in my mother's language, strength in the careful arrangement of her prose and the messages her stories and novels contained.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Proserpina had asked me.

I nodded, because at this time in my life I had a great deal of difficulty speaking, a speech impediment that mushed my r's, turning every sentence into an obstacle course.

"This is not the only world there is," Proserpina explained. My mother was seated in the walled heart of the small bookstore, signing copies of *Grenadine Princess* for other women who all looked like Proserpina with their long hair, long skirts, and unsupported breasts. "There is another world, though maybe you already know. Has your mother told you? I don't suppose you're old enough to read her books."

This time I shook my head. No, I was not old enough, and no, my mother had not told me. Regardless of what she wrote, my mother did not believe in magic. Later, she would explain, and my daughter would affirm through her own analysis, that her fiction transformed reality to encounter it more complexly. Magic wasn't real, but that didn't mean magic couldn't reveal.

“She hasn’t named this world, and it only exists in hints and fragments, but what we call it is Thistle Land,” Proserpina said, the gesture she made encompassing all the women who filled the small bookstore. “It’s a beautiful world, but it has its thorns. To get there, all you have to do is open the right door. It’ll be a door you think you know, but if you open it in just the right way, with all the right thoughts in your head, and if it lets you, you will find yourself in Thistle Land.”

Again, but more slowly, I nodded. Did Proserpina believe what she was telling me, or did she just see a small girl alone amidst women? It hardly mattered, because regardless of what she believed, once my mother and I returned home, it was not my bedroom I found on the other side of my periwinkle blue bedroom door, but Thistle Land and the bustling streets of its great city, Barthance.

***

A week before my daughter arrived to sort through the documents my mother had left us in the wake of her passing, I woke from a dream of Thistle Land to a splitting headache, the sort that had become far too common lately. Navigating the dark, tight halls of my childhood home delicately, I made my way to the kitchen. By the streetlamp light pouring in through the dining nook window, I cleaned a glass from the sink and downed a large, cool swallow. The water softened my throat somewhat but did nothing for the headache. I searched the cupboards for some Advil or Tylenol, but I came up empty of anything that might relieve me. This always seemed to be the case, me not finding what I was looking for.

I’d inherited the house and all it contained though I’d not stepped over the threshold for nearly fifty years, and she, it seemed, hadn’t made her home here for a decade or more, spending

her time either on book tours or in her New York apartment across the country. The house had served as storage since, filled with unopened boxes of the books her publishers had sent her over the years as well as a good deal of her correspondences. Knowing how important my daughter would consider these papers to be, I'd been careful not to throw out anything over the past month. Once she'd wrapped up the classes she was teaching that semester at the university, my daughter would join me.

"I have this one colleague who calls my research 'an exercise in literary nepotism,'" she'd explained to me once, "but everyone knows what his deal is, so it doesn't bother me. Besides, grandmother's work is far too important in understanding mid-20th century feminist fiction for me not to teach and study her."

What I needed out of the house, however, wasn't anything my mother had written, instead only a key. In my childhood, when I turned the key one way in the lock, the periwinkle blue door led to my bedroom but when I turned the key in the opposite direction the door led to Thistle Land. My mother had given me the key on my sixth birthday not with any belief in a magical other world, but instead with the hope a room of my own—in the tradition of Virginia Woolf—might nurture a literary mindset to match her own. Now that every room I occupied was my own and otherwise empty, I felt I might like to return to Thistle Land.

My husband, James, had passed away less than a year before my mother, after which I'd been unable to sleep soundly in my bed, alone in that large house we'd chosen together so long ago. The cold had gotten to me more than anything; I'd had to move myself into the guest bedroom in the basement. I'd realized too that without James, I had very little to say to our old friends. I had become half a person, and talking to half a person was a disconcerting prospect. And of course, my daughter had long since left me, James and I empty nesters for years before

he passed, well-settled into her university career. Considering all this, I had the feeling the world didn't have much use of me. I could disappear and who would notice? People hardly noticed me now. My new neighbors didn't wave to me when I was out pulling weeds, and more often than not, the bus passed me before I could flag it down. No, I was better leaving the world behind.

***

Barthance offered Cordelia so much excitement in just the span of a few market streets she almost always forgot to be afraid, despite that Thistle Land was a place of frights and dangers. Only on one fateful sojourn, when, after a long and tiring day of chasing an escaped palancrax chick through the winding streets of Barthance, the perwinkle blue door did not appear as usual did Cordelia suffer the first inklings of fear. She retraced her steps, back to the point where she was certain she'd arrived, but there was no portal leading home. At least, she thought to herself, she couldn't be blamed for what would be a late return home. Magic was to blame, not her own poor time management. Though she was certain her mother would not appreciate nor accept this answer.

With no form of currency native to any nation of Thistle Land, as the days passed and her stomach tightened into a knot, Cordelia was forced to steal food and then take up work as a cleaning girl in a small bakery. Every day, she wandered the streets of Barthance seeking a way home. She ignored the merchants whose wares she couldn't purchase. And the cries of the palancraxes had begun to sound eerie, reminding her of how trapped she was.

***

My mother only struck me once, and even at the time I felt certain the slap was what I'd deserved. After my first sojourn to Thistle Land, I knew I would never have enough of this world, that I would never tire of its color, sound, and magic. While my mother wrote her maximalist novels full of lush descriptions, convergent generational trauma, and European wars that spilled out into the wider world, I spent my time in Thistle Land. I would lose whole afternoons this way, and became totally oblivious to time even once I'd returned to Earth. The occasion of the slap came the day we were bound for London, the first stop in my mother's European book tour. Not thinking about Earthly travel, I had turned the key the opposite direction in the lock and tripped through the periwinkle blue door to spend the morning in Thistle Land, returning to find my mother frantic, unable to find me, certain we would either miss our flight or that she would lose me and therefore be accused of poor motherly behavior.

"Don't you know I can't make mistakes like that?" I remembered her telling me, my cheek still pink and stinging. She already had the notoriety of being a single mother in this time where the nuclear family predominated with the power of the nuclear bomb. She couldn't afford to be seen as a bad mother, failing the one task society asked of her, her authorship tossed into the burning slag heap. A bad mother was hardly a woman, a woman hardly worth reading already, or so she feared the critics might think, if not explicitly say. It didn't help that she had a sharp tongue in interviews, forthright when she was expected to be demure, biting when she was expected to be gentle. I had not known all this at the time precisely, but I knew enough to feel guilty for my carelessness.

It was in London that she met the man who would nearly become her second husband after my absent father. He was an American, not quite an ex-pat, but someone who traveled

across the pond often for work. What she liked about him, or at least what I believed she must've liked about him when I thought back and attempted to puzzle out their relationship from my piecemeal girlhood memories, was his willingness to match her wit. "Match," the pivotal word. Not "entertain" or "test," but precisely "match." He was an intelligent and successful man and understood her to be the same in a woman's form.

For a time, as he followed us through Europe on tour, I dreamed about calling him my father one day. To me, fathers were the fourth in a quartet with the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Santa Claus. Where Santa had his red hat, white beard, and black boots, fathers had gray hats, gray suits, and brown briefcases. My own father sent me gifts at Christmas, gifts my mother always told me she was putting aside for when I had deserved them. Later, I would wonder if he ever did send me gifts. If he ever thought of me at all. If maybe this was a story my mother had spun to allow me some semblance of fatherly love in my early life.

Love, however, could not forever sustain my mother's relationship with this American man once we'd returned home and left Europe behind. Or maybe their relationship could not sustain love. They began to argue. At first only a few words tossed here and there, and then great shouting matches, which would send me scurrying back into Thistle Land, out of the path of their storm. And yet despite the way they fought, maybe because he was so often away and she was so often buried in her work, their relationship lasted through the publication of both *Yggdrasil at the Heart* and *Through the Forest Obliquely.* It was the interview in which my mother proclaimed religion to be the greatest sort of fantasy that proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. Though he had been able to put up with her often lascivious prose, as a Catholic he couldn't bear this public rebuke of religious faith. I never found out if it was him who broke my mother's arm, or if she truly had fallen down a flight of stairs at a university where she was giving a talk while

foolishly attempting to balance more than she could carry. Either way, however, I did not see this man again, and my mother remained unmarried.

***

"The semester's going well, yes," Molly said distractedly over the phone in our last call before she flew out to see me. She would never complain about her work, but I knew the way her voice sounded, I could read every note. She never apologized either, not for anything. It wasn't because she never felt guilty, only that she never felt like she should make excuses. She'd explained this to me once, it was one of her philosophies for living well. I wondered if she kept a little journal full of these philosophies. Maybe she could publish the journal as a self-help book, not that she thought much of the genre. "Nearly to the end now. And you know? I had quite a good crop of students this semester. My feminist literature class really connected to *Yggdrasil at the Heart,* which is always a bit like fruitcake, they love it, or they hate it."

I listened to my daughter talk a little while longer about her students while I massaged my temples, staring at the nubbly, white ceiling. I longed to find something motherly inside me, magic not like the magic of Thistle Land, but more mystical still, something that would turn her voice into a balm. But instead, the headache only darkened, thundering and heavy as an anvil.

Shortly after inheriting my mother's home, I had considered inviting my mother's neighbors over for dinner, people who had likely grown accustomed to my childhood home standing quiet and unoccupied. But the thought of the work this would require, the cooking and tidying, overwhelmed me. I believe now this feeling was a premonition of the debilitating headaches I would later begin to suffer. James and I had once been consummate hosts. I'd

reveled in organizing a dinner party, a graduation ceremony, and even, once, or maybe twice, an intervention. It wasn't that I had enjoyed being the center of attention, but I appreciated knowing I could organize the world, and put everything I had to good use—those nice plates we didn't normally eat off of during our quiet, family dinners, the ones I'd sold when I moved back into my childhood home; the banners, candles, and paper hanging letters that had such particular uses; and my own time, usually spent on cleaning, cooking, shopping only for the three of us in our little family, extended to be offered to a wider array of guests. How nice it was to feel useful. But without James, even beyond the work involved, I worried I would not at all be able to navigate the social juggling a gathering of neighbors would require. Instead, I left my neighbors to their own dinners, waving while I was out gardening, only to be ignored. A shame, it seemed to me, that neighborliness was a notion relegated to the past.

The next morning, while I sat outside gardening, head pounding, soothed only by distraction and protected from further pain the sun's glare promised by the wraparound sunglasses I'd purchased I didn't know when, but which regardless had found their way into the house and remained there like so much else, the neighbors looked to be setting out for a big road trip. I watched as they loaded their minivan full of bags, and then backpacks, and finally a large umbrella. A beach trip? A good deal of supplies for the beach. But then, some people preferred to fill their lives with things, maybe as protection. I supposed I could understand that.

I waved to them, fruitlessly, I was certain, but hoping at least to be polite—

***

"Did you see anyone come this way?" a sorcerer asked her one day as she sat in the alley behind the bakery. In the couple years since her arrival, she'd grown resigned to her life in Thistle Land and somewhat more knowledgeable about the way of the world. Despite being just about covered in dirt, and despite his youth—not much older than Cordelia was herself—she could tell this boy was a sorcerer by the deep red of his robes.

She shook her head. What she learned later was that this young sorcerer had ended a fight between a bully and a younger scholar at the school where he learned to tie the intricate knots of Thistle Land magic. But in this first meeting, Geth didn't explain himself. What he did do was offer her a knotted spell.

"It's for wayfinding," he said. "You look pretty lost."

Cordelia nodded, and in exchange handed Geth the sweet bun she'd received for her midday meal. She had allowed herself some hope in this moment, and in this hope felt generous despite how ravenous she always seemed to be, astounded at just what a driving factor hunger could be without her mother's well-stocked kitchen. But his spell proved no good for finding her way back.

"This is very good; did you make it?" Geth asked through a mouthful of pastry.

"No, but I'm learning," Cordelia said, voice creaky with unuse. Children who washed dishes in bakeries were meant to be helpful, not heard. "How did you tie this?"

"This? It's just a simple knot, well I guess not that simple for someone who's not a sorcerer, but I can show you I suppose," he said. He untied the knot, undoing its magic, and then retied it again, slowly so Cordelia could see. After a bit of coaching, she managed to tie a clumsy version of the same spell.

"Wow, you got it! That took me ages to master," Geth said, genuinely pleased. He was always genuinely pleased for Cordelia, as though jealousy was a skill he'd never learned. "How about I teach you how to tie knots and you give me the sweet buns you make in return?"

"I think I'd like that, but just so you know, my buns aren't very good."

Geth laughed, and then he was gone. But he kept his promise. Slowly, Cordelia learned the magic that would make her into a true sorcerer of Thistle Land, despite her unlikely origins.

***

My longest sojourn in Thistle Land spanned, for me, many decades, though when I returned to Earth, I found I'd been absent from my mother's house for mere hours. I returned no longer the middle-aged woman and sorceress I had become, and instead once again the twelve-year-old girl I had been. I knew magic was real, but I could no longer reach it. I did not scream, did not cry when I understood what had become of me. The key's magic fizzled when I attempted to turn it the other way in the lock, there, but weak, needing time and maybe something more to allow me to return. And so instead, I wrote about my sojourns and memories of Thistle Land, wrote and rewrote, doing everything I could to set my story straight and make sure I would not forget. But I was also writing because literature, I assumed, was how I might persuade my mother to see me as a rational person.

"Living as a woman in this world is pain," my mother said, after skimming through the pages of my work. As she spoke, she gripped my arms tight enough so that later bruises bloomed as yellow and purple pansies. At first, she had thought the writing was evidence of my newly burgeoning literary ambitions, but foolishly I had revealed to her this was not the case. These

were stories of a life I had truly lived. She was certain it was my fear over the onset of womanhood that had prompted what she assumed to be delusions. Just as much as she disbelieved in magic, she believed that any mental struggle could be overcome by force of will alone. “Don’t make the world harder for yourself by living with your head in the clouds. Do you understand?”

Clearly realizing that though I might understand her words I did not accept them, she took the key from me and locked the periwinkle door, leaving me to spend the remainder of my youth in that house sleeping in what had previously been the guest bedroom, though more accurately the storage space for everything my mother didn’t consider to be essential to her daily life. The Helenites were a comfort for a short time. They spoke of fate and destiny. They told me about wicca and witchcraft and read my future in tarot cards. They understood magic could be real, and explained to me how I might reclaim it even though I had lost my access to Thistle Land. But after her readings, my mother would only scoff, explaining to me how these women were perfect examples of how not to live.

Much later, once I reread my mother’s oeuvre after her passing, I wondered if and began to believe that she had written her novel *Lips Canyon* in response to the expression of my trauma. In this novel she described a self-serious, obtuse, and ridiculous group of women who danced and sang ineffectually as the world fell apart around them, even unwittingly aiding in the rise of a nuclear-arms-obsessed dictator. At first, it seemed the Helenites might forgive her this betrayal in the same way Christians could forgive God the hardships He set upon their shoulders. But slowly, they began to peel away, replaced by a hard-talking set of theory-bound feminists. Women who would pat me on the head and remind me that I would be living in the world they

were building for me. These were intelligent women and I respected them, though I couldn't love them as I had loved the Helenites.

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—tremors coursed through the fault lines of my body, threatening to tear me apart. In the darkness, this was all I had, a wild bucking mount whose mane I gripped with all my strength for fear that if I fell off there would be no getting back on. It was as though a tornado had passed me by, destroyed my house and flung my possessions into the distance, broken and unredeemable, leaving me alive but exposed to the elements.

My daughter's face swam into my field of vision like a fish magnified strangely around the edge of curved bowl, forehead furrowed. She spoke, but I couldn't hold onto the words that rained down on me like arrows. Eventually, I managed to understand that I had suffered a stroke. My neighbors had seen me collapse in my garden, and had had to delay their long-planned-for trip to the beach to send me to the hospital. My daughter had received a call shortly after and had come as soon as she had been able to, thankful her semester was over, though she'd been frantically grading finals on the long flight.

"You're lucky to be alive," she said, the first words I understood entirely.

When I tried to speak, I found my body had been transformed into a strange, untrained dog that would not accept my commands. Even after the tremors had largely ceased, my strength did not return; it would be a long road to any semblance of recovery.

What I first learned, or rather relearned, working hard to capture a skill I thought I'd mastered in infancy, was to raise my head and then carefully, jerkily move my extremities. I

wished then I had access to Thistle Land's magic, magic that might knit my mind back together once again. Though even if I had, I would not have been able to tie a spell, that sort of fine motor skill well beyond me. I discovered a new level of humility when my therapist had me hobble between two narrow bars as I learned to walk again. I clenched my fragile fists around these bars and tightened my body until I ached all over and began to feel like I was splitting open. Worse, the work was both slow and unsteady, every morning a roll of the dice to see what progress I'd maintained from the days before and what progress I would need to recapture.

"I've started to organize her papers and tidy everything up," my daughter said to me over lunch in the hospital cafeteria, me practicing lifting a spoon to my mouth, struggling as though I were attempting to break a wild palancrax, "but I think once I'm done we need to look at moving you into assisted living. I know you'll say you don't want to be a bother, but I don't think it's tenable for you to live in that house indefinitely and certainly not alone."

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"The magic is old, and the fiber decayed, but I think I can read the knots," Geth said, fingers dancing delicately over the vast web of ancient, still unbroken fiber, the knot at the center not only a spell, but the end of a story. He and Cordelia were deep inside the tomb of a lost queen of Thistle Land, hoping to uncover magic that might protect their waning nation from its militant neighbors. "This story is familiar, something I heard as a child…the details must've drifted over time and this version is far more complex…"

While Cordelia could read the knot with similar alacrity to her companion, unlike him she didn't recognize the story it told. She'd spent most of her life in Thistle Land, but there were

still parts of this world she would never know and never know she didn't know. In that moment, she felt the whole history of the world laid out between herself and Geth, separating them despite the decades they'd loved one another, as though they stood on opposite sides of a vast desert.

"How does the story go, the one for children?" she asked.

Geth turned to Cordelia and smiled, a smile she'd watched delicately shift with age for decades now, the memory of which she would hold onto carefully like a decorated palancrax eggshell once she'd lost it. He offered the story eagerly, this enthusiasm one of his aspects she loved most. It was just as he concluded his telling that the web of this ancient knot broke, one strand after another like a spiral of dominos. Untold eons locked away, eons in which the knot could've come undone, only for it to break just then, unleashing its magic. The thread should've long ago decayed. But this was an ancient spell, complex and knotted with expertise Thistle Land had long since lost.

A perwinkle blue door opened even as it shimmered into existence. Cordelia felt something like gravity pulling her in. She saw the decorated stone walls of the tomb buck like a sheet being shook free of dust, and then she fell through the door and out of Thistle Land.

***

Time began to pass strangely once the Helenites left me alone with my mother, years slipped by as though the world were attempting to balance out my allotted lifespan after all the time I'd spent in Thistle Land. I met James as a sophomore in college and when I returned home during the summer break before my junior year, I told my mother I planned to marry him, that he'd asked me and that I'd said yes. It would be unfair to him and to myself to some lesser

degree to admit that my acceptance of his proposal felt predetermined, the event already a memory even as it was unfolding, not something I had any control over. Though with time speeding by the way it was, that was how it had felt.

"Do what you like, but you do not have a place in this house so long as you choose to throw out everything you could be," my mother said to me in response, or something similar, but with a tone I knew was meant to cut. I, however, was made untouchable by the swiftly moving passage of time, gone, married, living in the suburb of the city where James would start his career before my mother's words ever landed.

As Molly grew up, I found that like her grandmother, she was a skeptic. She never believed in the religion of her father, even going so far as to berate him with her silence after an especially heated debate. During this gap in their relationship—the two otherwise always so close, my James and Molly—she instead turned to me, asking about the choices I had made in my life. I didn't believe she was attempting to form a wedge between her father and myself in any conscious way, but when she asked me why I'd never returned to finish my college degree after I'd married him, I understood her. She thought he'd somehow constrained me, prevented me from coloring in the full picture of myself and forced me to be the housewife I was all throughout her life. I didn't know how to tell her that the choices had all been mine, or at least that it hadn't been him keeping me from returning to school. I certainly didn't know how to tell her this in a way that could exist logically alongside her sense of how the world was and should be. How, she might've wanted ask me, could I be her grandmother's daughter?

***

“There’s just so much here, a whole lifetime of writing! Mostly older drafts, but I did find something especially interesting,” Molly told me one night while she loaded the dishwasher, clearly excited, the news held back and then released like a burst dam. Released from the hospital and into her care, for a short while longer, she and I would be living together in my mother’s house. “It’s a collection of notebooks filled with these strange little stories of hers I’ve never seen before. Really, it’s amazing. I had never dreamed I would find something like this! I miss when she would come to visit me, and this just feels like such a perfect and special gift.”

My fine motor skills had developed rapidly, impressing even my therapist. I spooled pasta slowly around a fork and chewed delicately while my daughter spoke. She told me how much work it had been to sort through all her grandmother’s work, how pleased and grateful she was I hadn’t thrown even a scrap of it out, and then how she’d run into the problem of my locked childhood bedroom door. It turned out the key had been hidden away in an envelope deep inside a box of correspondences, whether it had slid in there accidentally or whether my mother had purposefully hidden the key in this subtle and crafty way I couldn’t be certain.

That night, after Molly told me what she thought she knew of *Thistle Land*, and I didn’t tell her what I did know, I navigated the moonlit hallway until I reached the bedroom where she slept. The key to the periwinkle door was there on her bedside table, likely forgotten now the room was unlocked, its Earthly secrets spilled. I whispered to her sleeping face, a face thoughtful even in dreams, that I loved her and then I left her. I turned the key in the lock of the periwinkle blue door the opposite direction, and carefully, delicately, my arm trembling, my hand fragile as a branching, flash-frozen, leafless collection of twigs, opened the door.

***

What Cordelia saw when she returned to Thistle Land was nothing she recognized. Awaiting her was a city of metal and moving parts, caterpillar like vehicles speeding along tracks mounted to the sides of buildings, depositing passengers onto moving sidewalks, and above, stranger vehicles still, undulating through the lavender sky.

"Are you a…historian or something?" a woman wearing a hat that gave her head the shape of a praying mantis asked this lost, old woman.

"I'm…I don't…" Cordelia said, glancing down at the hands emerging from the red, sorceress robes she found herself wearing. The hands were delicate and old, not the powerful hands of the middle aged sorceress she'd been when Thistle Land had long ago cast her out. When she reunited with Geth, she worried what he would think of her. Would he even recognize her under this new layer of years? "Where are we?"

"Barthance—are you unwell? Do you need help?"

"What is going on?" Cordelia asked. Though she didn't think she'd raised her voice, the woman gripped her white, pillow-shaped bag tightly, turned, and walked off at speed, glancing back a few times, unnerved by this unwell woman. Cordelia looked out to the city again, searching for some evidence that what the woman had said was true, something she might recognize that could identify this city as Barthance, but there was nothing. Even the horizon, where mountains might've served as evidence, was obfuscated by towering structures, glittering and tall as any skyscraper.

Cordelia's pulse beat in her throat, ears, and behind her eyes. She could feel her breathing going ragged. To calm herself, she took a spool from one of her voluminous sleeve pockets and tied a wayfinding knot, the first spell Geth had taught her so very long ago, a spell

she hoped would now lead her back to him. The magic poured out of her and into the knot as though from a rusty spigot, but it felt good, blissful even, an injured and bound limb finally stretched free.

Following the directions of the spell, she boarded a caterpillar train and sat beside a fellow commuter wearing the same sort of hat as the woman before. Like that woman, this man stared at Cordelia with a bemused, amused look on his face. Cordelia recognized her dress was out of fashion, but she'd not let fashion bother her for a good many years. When the spell nudged her once again, she departed the train and found herself standing before a multi-colored metal ziggurat that looked like a vast piece of bismuth.

Guards in shining armor stood to either side of the oversized entryway. On closer inspection, she noticed the armor didn't have anyone inside, and when one raised an arm to direct her to the multicolored doors, she realized these soldiers were in fact robots, the sort of technology she once would've thought to be entirely antithetical to the magic of Thistle Land. Inside, a smaller robot descended from above and tipped forward into a hovering bow.

"The library welcomes you, Cordelia. You have a file waiting," the robot said in a tinny voice that seemed to echo from inside its metallic body.

"A file?" Cordelia asked, the word ringing out so strangely in this once magical world.

"A recording of an ancient form of narrative called a 'knot story,'" the robot confirmed, dipping forward into another hovering bow.

"From Geth," Cordelia guessed, smiling even as her eyes stung with tears.

The Unreeling of Uriel Thomas

by Edward Daschle

Later, as the awards ceremony reached its dramatic conclusion, Uriel Thomas could only think about the mysterious men in the hologram display and wonder why he hadn't known who they were. He felt certain he should have. These doubts would plague him until his death.

***

Orbiting Mars, Nautilus Theater was the oldest and largest venue of its kind. The stage at its heart was a splayed clam shell above which booths of the glitzed and glorious floated like ejaculated pearls, free from the forces of gravity. So rarely did such wealth gather in one place, but the Genuine Arts Galactic Awards (GAGAs) was a tradition, would be a tradition until the Nautilus Theater had become so much space dust. And this cycle, Uriel Thomas' unreeling, the story of his life arranged from his memories by the GAGA's unreelers, professionals in the art of mental spelunking, was at the center of it all.

"So here we are, celebrating my impending death," Uriel said as a vast hologram bloomed into being above the stage, filling all the space between the hovering booths and kicking off the end of the whole event. The old actor sat with his date for the evening, Myron Duke, a young star on the rise more than sixty years Uriel's junior. Uriel brushed his palm over Myron's pink buzz cut, wishing he'd had someone more significant in his life to take with him to the awards, a husband or long-standing boyfriend. But romance had never been his way, it seemed, and so he was left with only youth and beauty.

"So dramatic," Myron chided coyly. "But let's watch, I don't want to miss a moment of your unreeling."

FADE TO:

INTERIOR, ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STAGE

A CARDBOARD WALL painted to look like gray brickwork sits in the middle of the stage, dark red curtains pulled back on either side with more dark red curtains serving as the backdrop. Other than the wall, the stage is empty. The wall turns slowly and reveals a face, the face of a CHILD URIEL THOMAS.

CHILD URIEL THOMAS as TOM SNOUT as WALL

In this same interlude it doth befall
That I, one Snout by name, present a wall;

"From this humble beginning the beloved favorite of screen and stage, Uriel Thomas set about to bring dignity and gravitas back to our ancient profession," the award show host and pop star sensation, Primera Pink, announced to the audience, her head projected moon-like in its vastness, momentarily replacing Uriel's unreeling.

"A decade ago, his award-winning portrayal of Mr. Mother in *Lips Canyon* altered how we understand acting, but it was in the admittedly cheesy *Siebold* film franchise—come on Uriel even you have to admit to the cheese—where we first fell in love with the young Uriel Thomas as he took down deathless necromancers across a fantastical hellscape. But we know him too, and I've always believed more deeply, for his portrayal of classic figures, figures which have long defined how we think of and understand storytelling. For example, his deeply felt and decades-spanning stint as the superhero The Rearrangeable Man.

“His is a career of triumph in the art of visual storytelling, proof once again of the truly ancient adage—nearly as old as Mr. Thomas himself, if you’ll let me have that one—that there have never been any small parts, only small actors. And Uriel Thomas is truly one of the giants.”

So saying, Primera Pink’s giant, holographic eye winked and then her whole head vanished, replaced once again with the projection of Uriel’s unreeling, the story of his life.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR PRIVATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CLASSROOM

Young Uriel Thomas sits with his back straight at the front while his classmates scroll idly and surreptitiously through their phones (devices which look much like our holopages but made of hardware). His mother is the teacher, and he is her best student.

VALENTINA THOMAS

(in a teacher voice)

Why did Prometheus steal the fire from the gods if he didn’t do it for himself? Can we learn anything from his example?

CHILD URIEL THOMAS

I think we can learn that even if it’s hard, or not good for us, we can still do good things for other people.

Uriel watched the exchange; it was eminently clear what the unreeling director was going for, childhood discussions on mythology and religion some of the best unreeling bait. Uriel, however, was a bit disappointed with his younger self; he wished he’d been a more insightful child, one of those little geniuses like Bella Varley who’d been unreeled a few cycles ago. All

through the childhood portion of her unreeling she'd spewed micro doses of philosophy in her high-pitched little girl voice.

The memory gleaning process had turned out to be an exceptionally invasive procedure, one Uriel had undergone just about a cycle ago. He hadn't expected this, had assumed he wouldn't mind the unreelers tinkering about in his brain; his life had been a highly scrutinized one, all those decades in the spotlight. But it was different when light spilled into all the mundane corners, the little things everyone did, chewing at his nails, wiping his ass, flicking the last drops of piss from his penis, stepping over cracks in the sidewalk not because he believed in the superstition, but simply because he loved his mother and thought of her whenever he did so. These dull memories wouldn't end up in the unreeling of course. Nobody beyond the unreelers would care to watch them. No, the memories for the unreeling were carefully curated, arranged carefully to form a cohesive narrative. Artisanal storytelling for the wealthy and beautiful who so rarely gathered in person, more often traveling the solar system, engaging with fans, and attending meetings only as holograms while in truth they were lounging in some Ionian spa.

From Uriel's lap, Myron's attention was rapt, the young man motionless, his holopage hovering listlessly and blank off in the middle of the booth. Uriel stroked the pink bristles of Myron's head and returned his attention to himself, to the unreeling where a vast crowd of large, dark figures rushed through what he thought might be King Street Interplanetary Station in Seattle. In the unreeling, through the eyes of his younger self, it was a strange and marvelous place, not the dully familiar one he knew as an adult.

INTERIOR, BULLET TRAIN LEAVING SEATTLE – LATE AFTERNOON

TEEN URIEL THOMAS is pressed up against the window of the train by the bodies around him. Between these bodies we can see the city and then the countryside

rushing by. He is not leaving Earth, only traveling down the coast to California. Teen Uriel Thomas taps the holodisplay flickering across his forearm (a holodisplay looks much like our holopages but requires a surface on which to project). A message comes in, a zoom in on the word "Mom" making it clear to the viewers that this message is from his mother.

VALENTINA THOMAS (voiceover)

Hope your audition goes well! Don't worry about me right now, today is about you. Keep your eyes on the prize, your head in the game, and your feet on the ground. Don't let this opportunity pass you by because you're distracted by things you can't change.

Uriel couldn't believe his mother had ever sent a text so saccharine as that, but then she must've because this unreeling had been taken entirely from his memories. He gestured across his holopage and the booth began to drift up, circling the unreeling as it continued.

EXTERIOR, UNION INTERPLANETARY STATION IN L.A. – NIGHT

Teen Uriel Thomas exits Union Interplanetary Station into a dark night, his face illuminated by the light of his holodisplay. A car pulls up to him and he leans over to talk with the driver—his words unheard by the audience under the sounds of the night—and then he opens the door and gets in, no baggage but for his backpack.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR, CASTING ROOM – NO WINDOWS

The room is nondescript and gray, but filled with young men who all look just like Teen Uriel Thomas. He is at his audition for the first *SIEBOLD* movie.

The audience knows this will be a successful audition, but he is not certain, fidgeting in his metal, folding chair.

A WOMAN'S VOICE

(calling out from off screen)

Uriel Thomas?

Teen Uriel Thomas stands, clenching his script tightly in his fist, exhales and enters this other room.

STAR CUT TO:

EXTERIOR, HELLSCAPE

Across most of the field of vision all we can see are pointed, stony clouds, flickering with purple and silver lightning. A slow, sideways pan reveals a crystalline tower, but then Teen Uriel Thomas' face comes into the shot until all we can see are his eyes. His eyes dart left and right. A slow pan out reveals he's wearing tight, black leather, holding a sword that's much too large to be reasonable.

TEEN URIEL THOMAS as SIEBOLD

You think you have me cornered, don't you? I might be young, but you haven't seen anything yet!

Teen Uriel Thomas as Siebold swings his sword and we follow the tip as it slides through a zombie. We stay on Teen Uriel Thomas as he smiles winningly and swings his weapon.

CUT TO:

EXTERIOR, ON THE RED CARPET – LATE AFTERNOON

This is Teen Uriel Thomas's first awards show. He is wearing an indigo tux, buttoned, but with no shirt underneath. A young woman and an old woman walk

beside him, his costars from *Siebold*, and behind him is his mother wearing a simple, silver column dress and a silver, lace shawl over her shoulders. He waves at fans. One face in particular is clear: a handsome MYSTERY MAN.

When he saw this face in the unreeling, Uriel felt as though some great predator had appeared behind him, looming, fangs dripping saliva and blood. He shivered. No one else watching would recognize this face, Uriel was certain. This man never appeared in film, and thinking about it, he couldn't quite remember who this man might be. Who was he? He thought he should know.

INTERIOR, TEEN URIEL THOMAS' FIRST AWARDS CEREMONY

Movie people in astounding outfits fill the theater, the stage is golden and dark blue, the set pattern abstract and swirling. A gentle rumble fills the air with chatter and something else. Anticipation? Excitement? Fear? Jealousy? Ambition? All of the above and something more, something exclusive to this art form and the awarding of it. A slow pan finds Teen Uriel Thomas and his mother as they navigate their way to their seats.

The shadowy predator slipped away, disappearing with the man's face, and Uriel relaxed into the bliss of the memory playing out above. As booths drifted about through the air, spiraling in a lazy helix, Uriel thought about how far he'd come. Myron leaned his head back, turning his attention away from the teen Uriel in the unreeling to the old man this teen had become. If Uriel's teenage self ever had a head as beautiful as Myron's in his lap, he would've been rock hard, but in an unfortunate twist, he wouldn't have known what to do with his hardness. But now, Uriel rested languidly inside himself, his feelings on the matter of arousal uncertain.

"I was hot, wasn't I? Do you wish I still looked like that?"

"That boy's too young for me," Myron said. "I prefer men. Always have."

"What a relief," Uriel said without conviction. "I don't think I could compete with him. He had something I think I must've lost…"

"No way, you've never been better than you are now. That boy never could've played King Lear. But you'd make a hot Siebold. Seriously, I'm looking up a projection of that costume right now."

Myron scrolled through his holopage, and then a projection of the classic Siebold costume overlaid itself across Uriel's body, turning him into an overaged version of the famous teen assassin.

"I was right, hot as hell," Myron said.

INTERIOR, THE TEMPLE OF SYCORAX

Teen Uriel Thomas, now slightly older, runs through the Temple of Sycorax in the sequel to the first *Siebold* movie. The Temple is built from black stone inscribed with strange, glowing patterns about the height of Teen Uriel Thomas's shoulders. Around him, the Temple is rumbling, but it is not collapsing, instead, small, insectoid shadows are detaching from the walls, evidence of the necromancer's magic. He runs and runs attempting to reach the light at the end of the tunnel—

CUT TO:

EXTERIOR, WIDE OPEN FIELD IN MIDDLE AMERICA - DAY

20-SOMETHING URIEL THOMAS is running hard, pumping his arms. He is dressed in period garb: blue jeans, converse sneakers, and a striped shirt. This is his lesser well-known period romance movie, *Wailing Grace*. He runs, breathing hard, the sound of his breath the only sound. He runs until he trips—

EXTERIOR, MUDDY BATTLEFIELD IN MEDIEVAL GERMANY – DAY

20-Something Uriel Thomas in full armor falls into the mud, his eyes wide in shock. He rolls as something plunges toward him—

INTERIOR, POST-CONTEMPORARY CHIQUE COFFEE SHOP – MORNING

A stream of black coffee pours down and fills a cup. A handsome man smiles at 20-Something Uriel Thomas from across the counter at the front of the shop. He is handsome in an ordinary way and yet he is exceedingly entrancing. 20-Something Uriel Thomas is wearing dark glasses and a hoodie, high quality holoprojections still a few years from being released to the public. MYSTERY MAN #2 says something to which 20-Something Uriel Thomas responds.

20-SOMETHING URIEL THOMAS

Are you flirting with me? Do you know who I am?

Mystery Man #2 smiles and says something else, muted under the rising sound of the coffee shop as it overtakes the conversation.

"What was that?" Myron said, sitting up in the booth to glance about. And he wasn't alone either. A subtle commotion wafted through the floating booths. But Uriel didn't notice any of this. He was frowning, fixated on the mysterious man's face, a face he was certain he should have known, after all, the unreelers had dredged this face up from his memories.

"Who is that?" Uriel asked. "I swear I know him, but I can't remember…what's happening?"

EXTERIOR, WARSAW – NIGHT

20-Something Uriel Thomas is dressed in period garb, playing a refugee from Mid-Century War I (MCW I). He is waiting outside a train station, sitting with his elbows resting on his knees, heavy-headed, but dry eyed when he looks up.

ANTONI

(speaking in a Polish accent)

Where is your mother, SZYMON? Did you not say you were taking her with you?

20-SOMETHING URIEL THOMAS as SZYMON

(speaking in a Polish accent, voice flat)

She was vaporized.

ANTONI

That is no good, but you, you come with me. We can still be free.

20-SOMETHING URIEL THOMAS as SZYMON

I can’t come with you. I—

THE DIRECTOR’S VOICE

(from off screen)

CUT!

“We are sorry to interrupt this program, but unfortunately there is a situation developing. Please remain calm, redirect your booths to their ports, and follow the emergency exit directions sent to your holopages,” a nasally, official voice said, overlaying the unreeling.

CUT TO:

INTERIOR, HOSPITAL ROOM – NIGHT

Valentina Thomas is attached to multiple, antiquated medical machines, but they are all silent and she is still, unresponsive in her hospital bed. She has died of the chronic illness which defined their life, subtly indicated up until this point in the unreeling every time she coughed and stumbled, and in her texts and her lingering looks. She was the perfect mother and now she has passed. Beside her, 20-Something Uriel Thomas sits staring at the machines, and we don't understand the expression on his face. Mystery Man #2 walks into the shot and sets a hand on 20-Something Uriel Thomas' shoulder.

Myron cursed quietly as he rapidly waved his hand through the holopage controls to return the booth to its dock.

While in the unreeling his mother died, the vast hologram of her mouthing words nobody would ever hear, Uriel pulled up the emergency notifications on his holopage. An unexpected asteroid shower, a gravity-borne bullet storm of innumerable small rocks, was headed toward the Nautilus. But Uriel was hard pressed to make himself care. With his life playing out above, the sound coming in and out now that the announcer had finished speaking, he felt detached, divided in two even as wealthy commotion roiled all around him. That was him, wasn't it? The young man in the hologram? Who was this man here, this man with veiny, spotted hands and a date a quarter his age?

INTERIOR, PEAK URIEL THOMAS' APARTMENT IN L.A. – NIGHT

A hand comes down to hold PEAK URIEL THOMAS' hand in place. Peak Uriel Thomas has gone through the worst portions of his life, suffered, allowed for some questionably stable AI clones to be made of his brain (all of which since hunted down and eliminated as per requisite legal standards). He's older now,

but handsome and hopeful, ready to move into his upswing, the second half of his career. But what about the hand, the one holding his hand? It's a big hand, hair on the knuckles, beautiful and strong. Peak Uriel Thomas smiles at the owner of this hand. A man's face descends into the shot to kiss him. But this man like the men before is a mystery, an unknown in the industry despite his good looks and kind eyes. The two have sex.

PEAK URIEL THOMAS

Would you believe me if I said I loved you?

MYSTERY MAN #3

After the good dick I just gave you? I might.

Mystery Man #3 leans down to kiss Peak Uriel Thomas again and the two embrace. The camera pans up away from them to the window where rain has begun to fall, blurring the image of a shining airvertisement just rising into the night sky beside the moon.

Uriel's apathy drained from him in an instant, he was no longer divided in two, because he didn't recognize the events playing out above. His memory was fine, felt fine. He could remember what he had for breakfast—refreshed skyr with berries and nut essence—and he'd not forgotten a single name in his parade down the wine carpet a few hours before. But these men? These mystery men? Especially this latest one? A hookup he might forget, he knew he'd forgotten many hookups throughout his life, but he'd never told a man he loved him before. Not even in jest. Even the characters he'd played hadn't said those words, too young, too stoic, or two old for such sentiments.

“There’s something wrong with this unreeling,” Uriel said uncertainly, watching as this latest mystery man helped him as he practiced auditioning again after a few years away from the industry, cooked dinner with him, did laundry, and then even walked a dog. “Something is seriously wrong. I mean, that’s me, but I don’t remember, at least I don’t think…”

Myron set a firm hand on his lower back. “Not right now, we have to go!”

The booth had met with its dock, hissing into place, the sound a cosmetic indicator of the connection, nearly as vestigial as the clicking of certain holopage commands. The pearlescent walls of the Nautilus shimmered with scenes from Uriel’s life as meanwhile the halls teemed with opulent people in glittering disarray, flitting holopages exacerbating their panic with notifications. Myron guided Uriel through the crowds to the mezzanine where the vast holotech window displayed Uriel’s unreeling and through it outer space and the coming asteroids.

“Down to the garage, come on!” Myron shouted over the commotion.

“Holy mother of hell—!”

It was not only small space debris in this storm. A vast rock nearly the size of the theater itself collided with the holotech window.

STAR CUT TO:

EXT: HIGHEST TOWER OF CHÂTEAU DE LA ROCHE-GUYON – EARLY MORNING

Fog obscures the river below, neon pink holopages flitting about Peak Uriel Thomas’ head. This is his triumphant return to film, *Lips Canyon*, the classic novel adapted for the first time successfully to the screen.

Myron caught Uriel as the old actor fell when the collision rocked the theater. A Californian earthquake transferred neatly to the edge of the asteroid belt. Celebrities screamed.

The unreeling warped and fizzed pink. Metal emergency doors closed like a sphincter. Myron pulled Uriel to his feet and guided him at half a run to the emergency exit down to the garage where their cruiser would take them to safety.

“This place is a piece shit,” Uriel said. “It was only a matter of time before it fell apart. Oh—!”

Another shock rocked the theater, and sent it spinning. The lights in the emergency stairwell flickered, but still the unreeling played on. Anyone late to the ceremony wouldn’t miss a thing.

INTERIOR, MIDDLE-AGED URIEL THOMAS’ APARTMENT IN L.A. – NIGHT

MIDDLE-AGED URIEL THOMAS wakes in bed and turns to Mystery Man #3, smiling as the dawn sun simmers the air, shimmering through holopage notifications Uriel Thomas brushes away with a distracted flick of his hand, focused instead on his lover.

Uriel touched his forehead, and his finger came away moist. In the red of the emergency lights, he couldn’t tell if this was blood or sweat.

“The whole place is coming down,” Myron said, but though he tugged at Uriel’s arm, the old actor wouldn’t stand. He was watching his unreeling. Caught in Mystery Man #3’s eyes. Maybe he’d just suffered a concussion, but he felt he needed to know who this man was before he did anything else. He was just out of reach, and yet so close.

“Get up, you old—get up!”

“No, I—” Uriel said.

Myron lifted Uriel from under his arms. But another quake nearly knocked the two of them over again.

SWIPE TO:

EXTERIOR, A MISTY OCEAN SHORE - TWILIGHT

A holographic ocean laps the shore. Pirates stalk out from the water, grinning, promising violence—

A ceiling light swung and blinked redly, a bloodshot cyclops, casting Myron's face into obtuse shadows. Uriel felt as though he were looking through a filter of blood.

"I don't know you…" Uriel said. Because what he realized then was that he didn't know how he and Myron had met. He didn't know why he would've brought Myron with him to this, the most important event of his career.

"You know me, you love me," Myron said, gripping Uriel's arms, keeping him from falling as the floor wobbled drunkenly.

FALSE EXTERIOR, SILVER BULL RESORT, THE MOON IO – FALSE NOON

Mystery Man #3 cannon balls into the water of the resort beach, splashing a laughing Middle-Aged Uriel Thomas. Above, palm trees droop as though to join the men. And above the palms, a holotech dome protects the resort from the vacuum of space.

"Please, let's just get out of here and then we can talk," Myron wheedled.

"I'm old, my career is over, you think I care if I die now? In fact, what better time to die than in the collapse of the Nautilus? Tell me, what's going on here, I know you know!"

“I love you,” Myron said. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“You don’t know me at all!” Uriel shouted, his voice leaving him more feebly than he’d intended. An old man’s voice. The unreeling fizzed, and blinked ahead to late in Uriel’s life, to not so long ago.

FADE TO:

INTERIOR, AN ANCIENT ENGLISH CASTLE – NIGHT

The structure has the shape of an Ancient English castle, but it is made of empty, neon lines, a hologhost of a structure that could be but wasn’t. Actors in medieval dress pace in the background, visible through the nonexistent walls and floors, floating in the imitation of walking.

GRAY-HAIRED URIEL THOMAS as KING LEAR

I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squinny at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid, I’ll not love. Read thou this challenge. Mark but the penning of it.

“Of course I know you!” Myron shouted back, pleading and slithering his body up against Uriel’s, pressing the old actor into the shaking wall. A woman in a hologram getup that blinked in an out, leaving her dressed and undressed, stumbled past them, down the hall. She didn’t even seem to notice anyone else was there. “You’re Uriel Thomas! Everyone knows you.”

Uriel reached for his holopage, but Myron caught his hand, caught it as though holding Myron’s hand was just what Uriel had intended.

The unreeling fizzed again. Back now into the past.

EXTERIOR, A CASCADIAN BEACH - AFTERNOON

Above, the sky is gray, below the sky, the pine trees are dark green, fading into misty clouds which have descended low over the mountains to sit on the beach as fog. Young Uriel Thomas and Valentina Thomas stroll down a beach together. Young Uriel Thomas pulls away from his mother, running through a flock of white seagulls, which whirl screaming into the sky. Young Uriel Thomas stops and watches the white spiral above him.

YOUNG URIEL THOMAS (voiceover)

How do we know we can't fly too? Who decided that?

What color is the sky when we can't see it?

What color are my eyes? No looking! Just tell me!

Myron tugged at Uriel's arm, and Uriel, too tired to resist the motion while at the same time he resisted what Myron was telling him, stumbled after, along down the hall. More celebrities began to trickle past them, carrying Myron and Uriel along and then leaving the two behind, desperate to escape the collapsing theater.

"Please," Uriel croaked.

A simpering smile spilled across Myron's lips, spreading them subtly, seductively.

INTERIOR, SILVER BULL RESORT, THE MOON IO – FALSE EVENING

Mystery Man #3 holds Middle-Aged Uriel Thomas' hands over a cloth-draped dining table where a single candle burns low.

“There’s a love story that could be told,” Myron said, bracing Uriel against the quaking and guiding him on and on down what was beginning to feel like an entirely endless hallway, “between you and me. And I’m not looking for it to end here.”

“Did you…did you do something to my mind?” Uriel asked, a sudden realization striking him. Had Myron somehow infiltrated the unreelers? Had he striped every other man Uriel had known from his life and mind? Yes, that must be it. He’d had crazy fans before. Any number of them. If the unreeling director hadn’t been trying to craft a romantic narrative out of his life, one that had reminded Uriel of everything he’d lost, the director could’ve just as easily gone for the thriller-inspirational setup like with Georgina Dane a few cycles ago. All those crazy fans filling up pretty much every shot of the unreeling. She’d complained and said they’d totally misinterpreted her life. Where was her work, her art? Wasn’t that all that mattered?

On wall, images from Uriel’s like spun redly through STAR CUTS, WIPES, FADES, and JUMP CUTS as a middle aged, young, old, young again Uriel leapt across building rooftops and then across moving hovercars and then over a vast canyon during a time travel trip to the past in superhero spandex. Uriel, the real Uriel, not the one in the unreeling, pushed himself away from Myron.

“Just let me go! Leave me alone! You’re crazy!”

The greatest quake yet tore the hallway in two like a child ripping a cardboard tube.

“Uriel!” Myron shouted.

INTERIOR, HOSPITAL ROOM

We open on a closeup shot of Valentina’s vagina. But then, wait, what’s this? The camera is moving up, over the hump of her belly, like the sun rising over a hill. This isn’t the sort of birth we think it is. With a swell of playful

music, we watch the doctor pull a screaming infant Uriel Thomas from his mother's c-section cut.

WIPE TO:

Later, the news reported how the GAGA awards had been interrupted by a freak asteroid shower. Investigations were underway, though ultimately the building was old, its sensors out of date, its holotech faulty at best, too much power diverted to the unreeling display of the beloved actor Uriel Thomas. Remarkably, Uriel Thomas had survived, though he'd suffered rather severe lacerations from fallen rubble, a tragedy for a man his age. The reporters wished him a speedy recovery. Others, however, had not been so lucky. The actress Giselle St. Cloud was the most notable star among the dead, the actor Myron Duke the most notable amongst the missing, presumed dead.

The young actor's face tugged at something in Uriel's mind. He watched the young man's last film, *Thistle Land*, in which he played the charismatic wizard Geth.

EXTERIOR, THE BUSTLING STREETS OF BARTHANCE, THISTLE LAND - DAY

Ostrich-like creatures parade the streets. A girl sits holding a meagre meal of pastry. A young man, GETH, portrayed by Myron Duke, approaches her and offers her an intricately tied knot. A spell in the way spells are made in this fantasy world.

MYRON DUKE as GETH

It's a spell for wayfinding. You look pretty lost.

He was certainly talented, this Myron Duke. But there was something dangerous in his portrayal of the wizard, despite the wizard's outward kindliness, despite the script that should've made Uriel trust him. Still, a pity such talent should be lost.

There was a miniseries in the work detailing the events of the attack and starring many of the actors who had been in attendance. Uriel's agent had asked him if he had any interest, but he'd said he was done with all that. He'd had his unreeling, his career had its bookend. Let the solar system make amends with the tragedy without him, he was retiring. He'd cultivated a life of solitude; it was time for him to finally relax and enjoy it.

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