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In the mirror
On the wall,
There's a face
I always see;
Round and pink,
And rather small,
Looking back again
At me.

It is very
Rude to stare,
But she never
Thinks of that,
For her eyes are
Always there;
What can she be
Looking at?

—*Elizabeth Fleming, "In the Mirror"*

THE RECONSIDERATIONS

Listen carefully:

Where I Work

I work up on the third story of an office building in the downtown banking district, a building you've seen if you've ever walked along Ocean Boulevard, which I happen to know with certainty that you have. But never mind that for now — the relevant facts in this particular story concern the things that did and did not happen, and those are ones we'll be sticking to.

From my window you get a narrow view of the Bay, a view that would be post-card worthy were it not blocked by a second building, a building which looks nearly identical to this one save for some key differences. The most important difference, for our present purposes, is that among the shops and restaurants on the bottom floor is *Barely Present: Live Girls and Cheap Drinks* (technically speaking the “ly” was the work of a graffitist, but nobody bothered to paint over it and the name has kind of stuck).

More on that later.

What else? Just a few months back, right next to the “store” sign, which reads *Second Draft* in big, blocky letters, we installed another smaller sign that reads *alternative therapy*.

This was partly for tax purposes, but mostly so people would stop asking so many questions. What actually went on in our little store was something we always thought best to keep secret. Conveniently enough, this secret always proved to be extraordinarily easy to keep, for reasons that should still be obvious to you.

Second Draft has the unusual “store” hours of 10 PM- 6 AM. We found out, after a couple of rough trials, that the patient’s brain needs sleep immediately after the drafting process. Being that I’m the only employee of this place, and that my being absent at any point during the procedure could quite easily lead to the patient getting unimaginably horrific psychosis for the rest of his or her life — that being the case, I’ve never once been able to so much as approach the front door of *Barely Present*. Which wouldn’t even be worth mentioning if it weren’t the only strip club establishment in town, or if I hadn’t been looking in vain for something decent looking and female ever since my wife disappeared a month after I opened this place. But oh well.

Hobo Jack

I ought to mention Hobo Jack before I get to what I shall refer to as The Day In Question, a day which — I can think of no reason to keep this from you — was a mere two days ago. Hobo Jack is the name I’ve given the homeless man who spends most of his time in front of the building. I don’t know his God-given name because he’s never told me it, or if he has, I was unaware since the not-quite-ignorable lack of teeth on his upper maxilla makes every word that comes out of his mouth indistinguishable. Jack gives me company during my cigarette breaks. I try to hold conversations with him.

“Nice weather, eh?”

“hrrrmfmfm”

“Have a light?”

“hrmmfmlum”

Jack used to try sneaking into *Barely Present* until they hired a new bouncer who roughed him up pretty seriously. Now he spends all of his time on my side of the street.

I like to think Hobo Jack means well.

The Facilities

On the day that I was scheduled to meet E____ for the first time (we’re at least 3 days before the Day in Question at this point), I had an irrepressible urge to tidy up the facilities. Ridiculous as it might sound, I think it was because E____ was going to be the first woman I’d had up there in weeks. In fact, for whatever reason, the vast majority of our patients are men. Figure that one out.

I vacuumed the carpets, I organized the papers on my desk, I dusted the furniture with a dirty wet rag. Our facilities consist of two rooms, rooms labeled The Waiting Room and The Drafting Room, though I’ve come to simply call them Room 1 and Room 2 (respectively). At this particular time I could only clean up Room 1, because in Room 2 a patient was mid-draft. If I stood close enough to the door, I could make out some of the words he was reading: (“After my mother moved out...”). From the inside, however, the walls of Room 2 were about as close to being 100% soundproof as money could get us — an inhumanely expensive but necessary installation on account of the brain’s hyper-sensitivity to external stimuli during drafting; a while back, you see, while a patient was drafting, a particularly persistent bird of some sort must have been perched outside directly behind the room’s far wall. From that night on the patient couldn’t dissociate bird noises

from his years at medical school — naturally, he didn't really understand why this was, but he had a vague notion that my odd little business and I were somehow responsible, and he started talking lawsuits. So I took out some credit to pay for his psychoanalysis bills for a year, took out some more to get the room thoroughly sound-proofed, and that was the end of that.

If every issue that came up here were as easily fixed as that one, you probably wouldn't be reading this.

A Request

"I got a lady coming up today, Jacky. You think maybe you could park yourself a few buildings down for a bit? Wouldn't want her to get scared away that quickly."

"hfmlmmmmfss."

E____

"You must be E____," I practically yelled at her, raising my eyebrows and widening my lips, showing off my teeth-whitened smile.

Her narrow, petite shoulders were covered by a trench coat that she declined to let me take. Her wide, buggy eyes pointed at about 45 degrees below eye contact. I offered her a chair by my desk. She took it.

E____ had Insta-Noted me a week prior to this meeting about her situation. She hadn't given me much information, and I still had many questions, but she didn't seem like much of a talker, so I just launched right into my admittedly overly rehearsed introductory shtick. I told her I'd let her in on some of the scientific technical stuff behind what goes on at this place, "if you'll indulge me for a moment." During myelination, "you see," the brain coats its neurons with "fatty goop," allowing you to convert short-term perceptions

into long-term memories. Your serotonic neurons, "if you follow me," let you have mental perceptions without reacting to them like they are actual experiences — most of this goes on in your frontal lobe, which is "why the words 'axe murderer' don't make you run away screaming." So if we stimulate one, and inhibit the other, and then just let you "do some storytelling"—

"Of course, this is very much a lay man's explanation," I inserted. This isn't a lie, but it does imply that I have some deeper understanding of how the Drafting process works. Which I don't.

I saw her eyes glazing over, so I skipped ahead into some of our "company" policies. When I reached the term "customer care," I slid E____ our glossy, tri-folded pamphlet. The pamphlet looked like this: On the cover is our company name (obviously) right above our logo — an ivory white hexagon enclosing a pencil and two pages of notebook paper. The pencil simultaneously writes on one of the pages while erasing pencil markings from the other. Underneath the logo are two of the hippest, most apposite quotations I could find: *"All perception is an act of fiction"* —David Shields and *"the brain is quite capable of putting retrospective content elements into its narrative stream"* —Daniel Dennett. Initially a third quote, *"You are who you pretend to be, so be careful who you pretend to be."* —Kurt Vonnegut, was also included, but I decided its ominous undertones probably ran counter to our company's interests. (The change was easy to make since only one hard copy of the pamphlet exists.)

E____ interrupted me mid-sentence without even touching the pamphlet: "This isn't really the kind of stuff I wanted to talk to you about."

“Go on,” I said.

“It’s more that I’m generally uncomfortable lying to myself,” she told me after a long pause.

“Ah yes...” I stood up, walked towards the window, and looked out at the sky.

“Can I ask you a question, E____?”

“What?”

“How well do you remember your first kiss?”

For what I believe was the first time in our interaction together, she looked up, directly at me.

Her eyes were devastating. Luckily I’m a professional.

“Look,” she said, “maybe I didn’t make myself clear enough. But I have no interest in talking about any... I’m not here to discuss anything. I don’t need you to help me. Not like that. The only thing I want from you...”

“No, no!” I showed her my palms. “You misunderstood me, E____. In fact, I probably should have made that more explicit: Whatever it is that brought you here is not something you need to share. It is in no way any of my business.” In retrospect, that last part wasn’t really true. But she seemed to understand.

“What I was getting at,” (her eyes pointed back down) “is simply this: Think of a memory you have, let’s make it a positive one, one that you often find yourself coming back to, sharing with other people.”

She tilted her head down and then to the side.

“I won the spelling bee in 1st grade...”

“Right then! Perfect!”

And then I launched into it — my little presentation on memory, trauma, integrity, personal freedom. I asked her to picture her little 1st grade self on stage, and all those little

details in her mind’s-eye (“The lights beaming on you, your parents smiling in the front row. Probably tough to find them, but you spotted them soon enough. Must have been nervous — never had so many people watching you at once.” Etc.) Just as her mind started drifting back, I told her she could trust none of it, that apart from the literal fact of her winning the spelling bee, the entire image could be a fabricated construct — even her winning could reasonably be called into question.

You lie to yourself all the time (I told her this), “not because you’re dishonest or anything like that,” but because it’s inevitable, because all of us do it, because it is intrinsically linked to the act of recollection (around this point I gave the Shields quote on the pamphlet, still lying untouched on the desk, a quick *tap tap tap*.) I name-dropped psychological studies on trauma and suppression, on certainty vs. accuracy, on self-deception. Her facial expression was barely changing, but I could tell I at least had her attention. The punch line was this:

“At any given moment of any given day, your brain is engaging in the unenviable task of taking the bits and pieces of your memories and reshaping them, recasting them, constructing out of them something cohesive and whole that fits with its current needs and understandings. Essentially, E____, your brain is forming narratives, it is *telling itself a story*. Now yes, in fairness, it’s typically not a story that you literally wrote down, and not one that you read aloud with medical equipment attached to you in a lab — I understand it’s all a bit odd, but fundamentally, *fundamentally*, is there really much of a difference?”

“Now, see, in your case, E____, somewhere along the line, while your brain was writing and rewriting, it suddenly stopped, and it settled on some version of some events that

troubles you. And it probably does for completely legitimate reasons. All I want to offer here at *Second Draft*, right now, is simply the tools to give your mind the chance to reconsider.”

I must admit I always thoroughly enjoy giving this little speech — probably because I rarely get to talk to people for so long, or at all, for that matter — and this day was no exception. But for reasons I can’t articulate here, really pulling off this whole bullshit sales pitch thing felt particularly important this time.

Her eyes started getting bulbous with tears. “Right,” she finally said. “And let me ask, how much of this will I remember? Like this place? This conversation?”

“Good question. It’s ultimately up to you, but most patients decide to leave it out of the draft, which is generally what we recommend, since keeping a memory of the procedure can make things a bit messy.

“I know it’s a bit overwhelming, but of course you have all time you need to decide.”

“So it really works then?”

“Every time. Not a single unsatisfied customer to this day.”

One of the perks of this job was that once I could tell I had someone (and I’d gotten quite good at this over the years), I could pretty much tell him or her whatever the hell I wanted.

The Guidelines

She came back the next day.

“Truth is, writing these things is much more art than science. This should tell you all you really need to know.” I handed her a hard copy of our *Writing Your Draft: Guidelines* instructional sheet, and Insta-Noted her a digital one.

“Quite honestly, I’m not a very good writer.” She

smiled a bit as she said this; her whole demeanor suggested she was less uncomfortable this time — I may have even detected a hint of excitement. It’s funny, the things you remember.

“Won’t be a problem. The thing to remember is that you’re the only person in your audience, and you’re the only one you need to convince. Which works out well, since it’s sort of everyone’s natural inclination to trust themselves.

“Just read the guidelines carefully. They’ll give you sense of what you should have on your mind while you write. Sorry for all the technical jargon. I’ve been meaning to edit it down a bit.”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I can even follow this.”

“There is one important thing, the only thing that’s really set in stone, if you will. Flip to the last page?”

“Thy kingdom come,” she read aloud: “thy will re-done.’ Huh.”

“Right, so that exact phrase has to be the very last thing you say, so make it the last line of your Draft, or the line after your Draft is finished, however you want to look at it. The machine will detect your saying it and will start the shutdown process at just the right time. You understand?”

“I know it seems a bit silly, but we’ve found it effective.”

It actually took some trial and error before I settled on that phrase. The repetition of the vowel sounds in the first and second clauses, along with the two hard Ks, makes it pretty difficult for the voice recognition software to fudge up. And yes, I do have a couple of unpleasant stories of the machine shutting off before the patient was finished reading, but I’ll spare you.

“Great, so you just Insta-Note me your draft when you’re finished with it, and then we’ll make an appointment.

Any questions?”

The Wolf

E_____ never gives the age of the “The Wolf,” but judging by her descriptions, I’d say he was a man in his 40s or 50s. She first saw him in a café near her dorm room when she was 19. She was waiting on line for her favorite drink — a pumpkin spice latte with extra whipped cream, I think — and he was sitting at a table alone, without any food or drink, and staring at her, occasionally smiling “wryly,” (her word). He wouldn’t look away: In fact, other than the occasional smiles, he never moved at all. The line was moving slowly, and finally E_____’s anxiety and fear and sheer discomfort of this creep staring at her overcame her, and she walked out through the front door. As she left, she looked behind her and saw that he was leaving too, through the back door. She didn’t see him again for about a year, until there he was — The Wolf, that is — unmistakably the same guy, doing that same thing, with the staring and the smiling. This time he was sitting on a park bench looking in at her through a window while she sat in class. And again, as soon as she starting packing up her books to get out of there, he got up and walked away. And so on and on it went; once a year she would see him in some random location where he’d be watching her until he simply walked away — never trying to talk to her, follow her, or even enter her general vicinity. Until about a month before the Day in Question, when she saw him for the very last time — this time, he was sitting in a parked car. She’d had enough of this guy’s lecherous harassment-from-a-distance (understandably, I suppose), so she charged at him screaming, her hands clenched into fists, and before she could reach him he stepped out of the car, calm as ever, and walked into the street, where he got hit by

a bus that looked like it didn’t even *try* to slow down, spattering enough of his viscera onto the sidewalk that a paramedic wouldn’t be needed to confirm that he was dead.

Response

It was obvious (to me anyway) that the memory she was trying to Draft away was either something that she’d done to The Wolf or something he had done to her. And in spite of the utter incoherence of her draft (the summary above is the best I could do — she was right about not being a very good writer), I think I’ve seen enough of these things to get a sense of how they work, and I’d put my money on the latter. I could probably have gotten some more clues if I reread it once more, but it was 3 AM and I’d already read through it three or four times, finished off half a pack of cigarettes, and engaged in solitary nighttime activities one time too many, so I figured it was time to go to sleep.

Drafting

Like most of my patients, E_____ was a bit put off by the simplicity of the Drafting equipment. It consisted of four electrodes to be stuck above her forehead, carefully placed to temporarily mitigate frontal lobe activity; two catheters from which a nonbenzodiazepine hypnotic and a low dose of dextroamphetamine would be simultaneously administered; a finger-heart rate monitor and fMRI scan so I could watch her vitals from Room 1; and of course, two metallic, as-of-yet-unnamed metal devices to be inserted gently into her ears to induce hyper-myelination by the technique I accidentally discovered in my late 20s while working at an electrical engineering research facility and deemed too valuable and dangerous to even so much as discuss with the folks over at the

patent office, thank you very much.

I installed the monitors (on which to watch those aforementioned vitals) in Room 1 to let the patient draft in pure solitude. Usually during the drafting I'd wait over in that room, read, eat, watch a video, engage in some solitary nighttime activities, etc.

I got her set up and she started Drafting. "Try to relax," I told her, "it will be over sooner than you think."

Her heart rate, blood pressure, neural patterns, and myelination process all seemed to be going reasonably well. And yet, something felt odd. I looked over at that door — that thin, unlocked door that separated Room 1 from Room 2, E_____ from myself — and had one of those thoughts that comes slowly and gently but won't go painlessly, like an itch or a sore tooth. How thin and feeble that door looks, I thought, and how pathetic and vulnerable the person is behind it — namely E_____. And how trusting and dependant she therefore is in this situation, not on the strength of the door, but on the moral integrity of the person on its other side. Namely me.

And it was then — and you have to believe this point, at *that exact moment* — that I started to hear the faint sound of music: high pitched vocals, heavy guitar, slow and sludgy, sexy in the basest possible way. I looked out the window across the street.

Look, I shouldn't give my age here, because who knows who may find this thing, but suffice it to say I've been doing this for a long time, and ultimately there's only so many times one man can get the same idea and resist the temptation.

E_____ would be fine, I told myself.

I stepped outside, finished a cigarette in 8 or 9 drags, and walked into *Barely Present*.

Selected Excerpt from *Writing Your Draft: Guidelines (i)*

♦*Projection-Conducive Prevarication: During instances in draft in which the Drafting reality/factual truth discrepancy is at its highest, (pseudo)-factual reporting should remain sparse and fragmented, so as to best facilitate hippocampus neuronal pattern recognition/projection, i.e., blank-filling [with "factual truth" being understood as propositional claims which run in direct correspondence with invariant, physical, actuality, i.e., reality.]*

Bare(ly) Present

It looked just like I'd imagined. I mean that quite literally; it was exactly as it had been pictured in my mind's-eye. What transpired there is not really of consequence; I wasn't even in there very long, but it wasn't until after I walked passed the bouncer, after I sat down at the bar, took quick glances at the other patron's lurid faces hidden under layers of smoke, got approached by a young looking stripper with a small build who introduced herself as Candy, had her lead me by the hand into a dark room in the back (not really aware of where she was taking me), watched her lean over and whisper an offer into my ear that I'm fairly certain is illegal in this part of the country — it wasn't until after all of that happened that I got a creeping sensation that something was very, very wrong.

Finishing that cigarette before going into *Barely Present*, I suddenly realized, was the first time I'd ever been in front of my building, in all my years at *Second Draft*, in which I was not accompanied by Hobo Jack.

I got up and left, much to Candy's consternation. I stepped out into the streetlights. Still no sign of Hobo Jack. I only then realized how reassuring his guaranteed presence had always been, like his volatility and sheer mercurial insanity were somehow under my control. I asked a bored security

guard reading a magazine in my building's lobby if anyone had come in who fit the description of somebody one would nickname "Hobo Jack." "Bout ten minutes ago." Walking up the stairs. Putting the key in my lock. Pushing the door open. Time seems to slow down at moments like these, to stretch itself around you and pull you apart. The thin door separating Rooms 1 and 2 was slightly ajar. I heard a noise I recognized. I walked up to the door, pushed it open, and this is what I saw.

What I Saw

Most of what winds up in our mind's eye after an event is, in fact, ad-hoc filler. The way we actually experience consciousness is less of a "stream" sensation than it is a series of frozen images: disparate, discrete, discontinuous, alone. Jack's shadow covering E____'s entire body. Her eyes pointed at the ceiling with more confusion than fear. Her skirt hiked up past her waist. One catheter dangling loosely from her left wrist, the other flopping around on the floor like a live fish. Jack's toothless moan. His sweat and saliva dripping down onto her bare midriff.

My sudden awareness that I wasn't merely a witness to this scene, but a physical presence, a rational agent who could affect its outcome. The cold metal of the fire extinguisher on my hands. The high-pitched moan of air friction. The hollow clunk against Jack's skull. His weight hitting the ground. And then silence.

Selected Excerpt from *Writing Your Draft: Guidelines* (ii)

♦*Foundational Neurological Structure Codification- Patients' 2nd Draft should incorporate a skeletal structure of factual truths so as to enable cerebellum-recall of conditioned memories, thereby reinforcing habitual mental/neurological patterns and garnering*

mental self-trust, and in turn rendering memory malleability more pronounced and thus exploitable.

Aftermath

E____ was ruined. She blathered on incessantly in broken English, apparently convinced that she had been molested by a close family member. When it became clear that talking sense into her wouldn't be an option, I tried hooking her back up into the machine, but it only made things worse. With nothing else to be done, I did what any morally conscious licensed medical practitioner would do.

As for Jack. I sat there with his unconscious body for hours. Finally he got up, and with his head wound still suppurating and blood and puss running down his face, he looked right into my eyes, and for a brief moment, I swear he looked sane, like he understood me, like we were connecting as two individuals, and we could relate, and be friends, and be one. But before I could run away or punch him or embrace him or whatever the fuck it was I would have done, that look in his eyes went away, and he was back to being that distant, unsympathetic degenerate. Which was comforting.

I brought him into the back of my truck and dropped him off somewhere very far away that I'll never return to. He was seriously hurt; the blow to his head must have caused some sort of brain damage, but talking to Jack you couldn't really tell the difference. I can assure you that, as of my typing this, he is still very much alive, but you'll have to take my word for it. Look for him all you want — you won't find him.

Selected Excerpt from *Writing Your Draft: Guidelines* (iii)

♦*Retro-Depersonalization: Dissociation of one's own factual actions from his/her own autonomy has been shown to be most reliably*

achieved via attributing said actions to a 3rd party figure; basing elements of said figure in a factual figure is optional, but complete character fictionalization in this case is strongly encouraged.

Addendum

Codify, fortify, retro-depersonalify

Well that covers just about everything; in fact, all that remains is you, dear reader.

I can't help but wonder if maybe, for one brief moment, you might actually grasp what's going on here. Obviously pretty unlikely at this point, considering how far along you are (sorry for the whole 2nd-person thing, but it makes this all less confusing — for me, anyway). I haven't really thought about what to do when this thing is over, but I guess that's your problem, not mine. It's funny isn't it? It really is almost like we're two different people now, standing on opposite sides of that goddamn machine. Well, enjoy whatever's next for you, whatever the hell that is, just don't completely forget about me, and how hard I once worked for you, and how I could once still feel some sort of guilt about what happened (otherwise why would I even be doing this?) So I guess this is goodbye, then, ole bosom buddy, ole precious pal. Take a deep breath, and be sure to enunciate this part:

Thy kingdom come, thy will re-done.

MARGINALIA

*I*n a small studio apartment in Ashville, North Carolina, there lived a young woman who had been described on multiple occasions as an Aspiring Young Writer. She'd gotten her B.A. from a well-respected university where she'd regularly submitted to her school newspaper and on-campus (and even some off-campus) literary journals. To her humble surprise, she'd gotten published several times, and even garnered herself a spot on a list of *24 Young Writers to Keep an Eye On* in an outside-the-mainstream-but-still-widely-read quarterly literary journal. She still hadn't forgotten that several of her professors had independently told her that her career as a writer looked "promising," should she decide to pursue it.

So all things considered, then, the Aspiring Young Writer was doing pretty well for herself, and the self-confidence she'd gained in her literary abilities was clearly not unfounded. Still, she was reluctant to commit herself to writing full time. She felt she'd still yet to actually write her best ideas: They remained no more than fragmented scribbles on notebook pages and inchoate bits scattered on her hard-drive.

After graduation, she found the studio apartment in Ashville, in which she planned to take a gap-year. This would

give her ample time to focus on her work, namely, writing some of those high-potential-but-still-non-existent stories, and finishing a novel she had privately begun working on at the University. She'd already made some progress on the novel, but it was still quite fragmented, and it had a length and scope that was growing beyond her control.

And so one day, about halfway through this yearlong period (which had been going considerably well so far), the Aspiring Young Writer, while browsing her local library, came across a short story collection by a Well-Established Writer named W.T. Eigen. The Well Established Writer was a mere 13 years older than the Aspiring Young Writer (still rather young for a writer), and had been enthusiastically recommended to her by one of her writer-friends whose opinions she trusted and respected dearly. Typically, the Aspiring Young Writer would try to avoid, or at least limit, her reading of contemporary writers to prevent the possibility of the writer's literary aesthetic too heavily influencing her own, and thereby mitigating the thing that makes her own literary voice distinct and unique. Plus, she generally believed that focusing her readings more on classic works and the like would, in the long run, be more enriching for her own writing — a belief she was consciously aware was probably an outmoded perspective she'd inherited from her professors, but one she adhered to nonetheless.

But in spite of these vague principles, the Aspiring Young Writer had been working hard as of late — at her part-time day job and on her novel, for which she had been immersed in dense non-fiction research — and actually hadn't had a chance to read anything for pleasure in quite some time now, so she thought oh why not and she pulled Eigen's book off the shelf and sat down and started reading.

The title of the first story, "The Spinster," caught the Aspiring Young Writer by surprise. She had been working on a short story with the exact same title: Hers was about a blind paraplegic who designs the blades in lawnmowers. She smiled at the coincidence and read on.

Even before she finished the very first sentence, she realized that something was very strange: Eigen's story was nearly identical to the story the Aspiring Young Writer had been writing.

The similarities were dizzying and uncanny: the characters' names and physical descriptions, bizarre plot details, the tone of the narrator's voice, etc. Her first thought was that she had been plagiarized and she should find herself a lawyer. This, however, was immediately followed by a more troubling thought, which was that Eigen had published his story when she was merely a 3rd grader.

But perhaps even more distressing than the similarities were the differences: In every way that the Well Established Writer's "Spinster" differed from hers, it was undeniably better. Little turns of phrase Eigen would use captured the exact things the Aspiring Young Writer had wanted to express but was unable to. In short, it was the exact story she had wanted to write.

The Aspiring Young Writer got through the 17-page story without once taking her eyes off of it, and then, upon finishing it, anxiously looked up at the people around her, like they'd caught her doing something wrong.

Unsure of what else to do, she moved on to the second story in the collection. Just as she had feared, she instantly recognized striking parallels in the story to one of her own — this time, not one she had actually written, but one she had

been toying with in the back of her mind. (The story involved a polygamous Mormon household going through divorce procedures.) Whatever it was that had struck her about the idea was perfectly captured in Eigen's story yet again — so perfectly, in fact, that writing her story seemed pointless now.

The Aspiring Young Writer checked the book out of the library and got through the rest of it that afternoon (she was an exceptionally fast reader). She then went to various bookstores until she had purchased every book in Eigen's entire oeuvre — five short story collections, three novels, and a memoir. She spent the next 10 days — including several sleepless nights — reading through all of them, cover to cover. One by one, the Aspiring Young Writer recognized each story she had started to write, and each story had even thought about, until not a single one remained (this included her novel, whose plot Eigen had used in his novel *Slow Cloud Rising At the Sunset of Dawn*), each one written by Eigen in vibrant prose that the Aspiring Young Writer could never even dream of producing. When she was finished reading all of his work, she gathered her old notebooks and her novel's manuscript into a pile and threw it all into the garbage.

It was only then that the Aspiring Young Writer realized how invested she'd been in becoming a writer. Her entire sense of self worth, and her personal vision of using her skills to positively contribute to the world and thereby achieve some kind of self-actualization (or whatever it was she was after), had all been contingent on her being able to write and publish original work. But now any value that her literary intellect may have once had was nullified and made redundant by a writer who was essentially a better version of herself. The whole thing was starting to send her into a pit

of purposelessness and meaninglessness and despair — an existential dilemma that none of her extensive readings in Philosophy and Literary Theory seemed to be doing a damn thing to help her work her way through.

She spent hours sitting at her writing desk with a pencil and a fresh notebook trying to create something new — she even sold her television and disabled her wireless Internet access in a desperate attempt to keep herself focused — but nothing would come to her. Any brief moment when she thought she might have an original concept in mind was followed by a realization that the Well Established Writer had already used that exact premise in one of his stories.

She did manage to think of one original story idea: It was the story of two Sudanese brothers who run away from home to try to find their long lost sister, who'd gone missing when they were just toddlers. The idea, however, wasn't exciting her, and she felt like she didn't have the will or the mental energy to actually start writing it, so she scribbled down a brief plot sketch and stuffed it into a drawer.

She started having great difficulty falling asleep, greater difficulty sleeping through the night, and even greater difficulty waking up in the morning — a sleep pattern that quickly got her fired from her day job (she'd been waiting tables at *The Watering Hole*, a restaurant/bar walking distance from her house; her parents, who were always very supportive of her, had agreed to help pay her rent if she worked part-time). Anything that she read or heard that reminded her of the excitement she once had about writing made her so frustrated and sad that she could barely breathe. She developed a persistent pain in her stomach that made her feel like she hadn't eaten for days, and yet she was rarely hungry. She started to spend virtually all of

her time in her apartment, only leaving to buy groceries, and stopped answering phone calls and returning text messages.

One night she dreamt that she met the Well Established Writer in his palatial mansion and explained her predicament to him. The Well Established Writer listened stoically, nodding occasionally, and then as soon as it became clear that she was done speaking, he burst out laughing. The Aspiring Young Writer lunged at him, pushed him onto the ground, grabbed him by the throat, and plunged her fountain pen deep into his jugular. She awoke with a jolt, finding her bed sheets damp with sweat. After taking a moment to register and recall the dream she had just had, she sat up, amazed that she was capable of committing such a hideous act of violence, even in an unconscious sleep state.

Unable to fall back asleep (it was 5:30 AM), the Aspiring Young Writer decided to get herself a cup of coffee at *The Watering Hole*. On the way she walked by a newsstand and noticed that Eigen had been profiled in a nationally circulated magazine. She started skimming the article until her eyes fell on a quotation where Eigen explained his upcoming novel. It would be the story, he explained, of two brothers growing up in Sudan, who decide to run away —

She stopped reading and placed the magazine back in the rack as calmly as she could. She decided it was time she took some sort of action.

She went back to her apartment and hand-wrote a letter she would send to Eigen. In tactful wording and a dishonestly lighthearted tone, it explained that there was an important issue that she and he had to discuss, though she didn't go into details (how could she?). She left her phone number and e-mail address (she'd reinstalled her internet

access, because this clearly qualified as a valid reason to do so) and sent the letter to his publishing agent, with a request that it be forwarded to him.

She quickly received an e-mail response from Eigen himself. He explained to her that by a total coincidence he was currently in North Carolina, and that he would be more than happy to meet up and discuss whatever it was that was troubling her. His cordiality annoyed her for reasons she didn't fully understand, but after a few e-mail exchanges, they had a time (1:00 PM), a location (*The Watering Hole*), and a date (the following Monday) for their meeting.

She arrived 20 minutes early. She sat at the barstool with her hand in her pocket, gripping a pen so tight it hurt her knuckles, occasionally glancing at the clock. The pen was capless.

He barged in at exactly 1:00 PM. He was unshaven, wearing a wrinkled collared shirt half unbuttoned and blue tinted glasses with thick frames, carrying under his right arm an accordion folder held shut by an elastic band. He walked directly to the stool next to the Aspiring Young Writer's, hopping off of the ground a little bit with each step he took, the whole time staring at his wristwatch. Once seated, he began unpacking the folder with his left hand while holding his right hand above his head. The bartender approached.

"One shot of your cheapest gin." He then pointed at the Aspiring Young Writer and looked at her for the first time, raising his eyebrows. She froze. "Make it two."

He pulled out all of the papers in the folder and slapped them onto the bar, and then gazed directly at her. A smirk slowly crept across his face, then immediately reverted back to a stern pucker. She glanced from side to side.

“Since we exchanged e-mails,” he finally said, “more has been published than in all of human history since before the second millennium. Just in the time between now and when we exchanged e-mails. Do you understand that?”

Before she could respond, the two shots landed on the bar. Eigen picked his up and brought it close to his mouth, then put it back down without drinking it.

“Most books on all those bestsellers lists were ghostwritten,” he said. “Even the ones you wouldn’t expect. They were written by *ghostwriters*. Faceless word-sharks. One barely valued skill away from non-existence. The reading public knows this, and the reading public doesn’t care. You understand?”

He bunched up his shoulders and grabbed the sides of his barstool, slowly rocking back and forth. She couldn’t figure out what to do with her left hand, so she rested it stiffly on her lap. He leaned in closer: “You think those nine books you read are the only ones I’ve written?” He pointed to the hand in her pocket. “You should relax.” She loosened her grip. He drank his shot of gin, sat pensively for a few seconds, and then drank hers as well. He did a full-body shudder, furrowed his eyebrows like he’d suddenly remembered something sad, then jerked his head in her direction.

“Wait, how —”

“Look” — he cut her off — “here’s what I can do.” He slid her the papers. “These are yours. Send them out to magazines. Send out about one a month. There are seven stories. Understand? Send about one story a month to a different magazine. Then publish them as a short story collection. That should keep you occupied for a bit. And give you some cash for groceries. All of them are completely shit.”

She looked at the top page. It was titled, “Tuning Forks and Cell Plates.” He was standing up now, pressing down the empty folder and trying to pull the elastic around it. “No,” she said, “No, wait, don’t go. This isn’t right.” He looked at her, his hands still struggling with the elastic.

“I can’t do this,” she said, “these stories aren’t mine.”

“Yes they are. They’re yours now. All of them are yours.” The elastic snapped loose and flicked his hand. He sucked on the knuckle of his forefinger.

“But I didn’t write them.”

“Well I’m sure you could have. You seem like a smart girl.”

“This isn’t right though. I was supposed to do this myself. This is supposed to be who I was.”

Eigen held the folder against the bar with his forearm and ripped off the cord with his other hand.

“Don’t be silly, ‘Going to be who I was.’ Who are you anyway? You’re still young.”

He stuffed the elastic band in his pocket, pushed the bridge of his glasses up against his nose, and looked at his watch. “Look, I really have to go. Could you pay for the drinks? I’m really in a rush.” And he left.

The Aspiring Young Writer sat at the bar in front of “Tuning Forks and Cell Plates.” From the title alone she was fairly sure what the story was about, and completely sure of how it would end. Still, she felt that if it was going to be her own, she should at least read through the damn thing.

She took the pen out of her pocket to annotate with. Since as long as she could remember, she had heavily annotated everything she’d ever read.

WHAT I KNOW

Greg could count four things contributing to his sensory overload:

1. The rotating black light flashing on the tacky psychedelic posters of Bob Marley and mushrooms with smiling faces.
2. The music (“Love Potion Number Nine”) playing at that volume where it feels like the bassline is displacing your heartbeat.
3. Nicole and Victory doing a quasi-mock-ironic lesbian dance (or something) with each other.
4. The aimless wanderings of some very stoned person with long hair whose name Greg didn’t know (let’s just call him Cheech), and
5. Rick’s full-body Mick Jagger impression, which he could actually manage to pull off while seated, kicking his legs out and snapping his neck with arms akimbo and such (he did impressions often, and Greg had to admit that he was quite good at them).

He spoke to Rick over his shoulder, taking care to sound curious and inquisitive: “It seems weird that nobody here’s ever heard of this stuff. When did you think they created

it?”

He snapped out of Mick Jagger mode and gave Greg a cold glower: “I don’t know where your head’s at, but you really gotta relax.”

You know that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth

Earlier that night, Rick had driven Greg to the house of somebody who swore his legal name was Ratso. He’d left Greg in the car and came back with a Ziploc bag filled with Eigens — red, ovoid capsules that reminded Greg of a blown up image of red blood cells in his 6th grade biology textbook. Now Rick was crushing the pills one by one in the palm of his hand with his thumb and shifting the powder into neat little piles with two playing cards.

“No I was just wondering.”

Greg wasn’t actually “just” wondering. In fact, his “head was at” was something he liked to call “The Paradox of Bad Trip Experiences,” (PBTE) which goes as follows: Those who like to go on trips will tell you that the number one cause of BTEs is the user’s fear of having a BTE; thus, prior to tripping, one is advised to rid himself of fear and other negative thoughts. The precariousness of this situation, however, is itself quite scary, and thus induces its own 2nd-order fear, i.e., fear of fear of BTEs. This, being a scary thought itself, inevitably induces a 3rd-order fear, and so ad infinitum — an infinite regression only avoidable by ignorance of the very idea of bad trips to begin with. Of course, avoiding knowledge of something requires one to know about it — hence the PBTE.

Sellin’ little bottles of... Love Potion Number Nine

“Try to leave those thoughts behind for a bit, Gregors. Besides, if it doesn’t cause permanent brain damage it’s probably

not even worth doing. That's what I say."

Rick carefully poured the powder into the chamber of a glass pipe. "So who's on deck?" Cheech grabbed it aggressively, nearly spilling it onto the white carpet. Rick dropped the corners of his mouth: "Take it easy there, kid," and looked over at Greg for recognition.

"De Niro?" said Greg.

"Close. Kevin Pollak *doing* De Niro. Close though."

Rick held the flame of his blowtorch lighter up to the chamber while Cheech gently inhaled. The powder sizzled and popped. Greg was watching Nicole and Vicky, trying to distract himself, but it wasn't working.

*She bent down and turned around and gave me a wink
She said "I'm gonna make it up right here in the sink"*

"Alright, pass it to me. I'm ready." Ratso had told Rick (who had then told Greg) that his older brother was working as a chemical engineer in a government lab. Eigens, he said, were something they had only recently synthesized, and they would probably be hitting the streets within the year. After an unpleasant experience smoking something called "Spice" in high school, Greg had promised himself he'd never take anything without researching it first — a good rule, and one he was about to break.

"Take it, but wait for that part. In the song. If you're gonna do it, do it right."

*It smelled like turpentine, it looked like Indian ink
I HELD MY NOSE I CLOSED MY EYES:*

He handed Greg the pipe. It was cold and heavy. Greg could feel his pulse behind his ears.

"Here it comes..."

◆ ◆ ◆

Later that night, a woman sitting in the back seat poked her head between Greg (passenger) and Rick (driver), and said something about eventually needing a ride home. Greg struggled to remember her name, then struggled to remember her relation to Rick, then considered the possibility that he had never seen her before, then realized he didn't even remember when they had gotten into the car.

"Won't be a problem," Rick replied.

It was late, and the empty streets had that bleak aura unique to late night South Miami driving experiences: the dead possums, the sky without stars, the empty police cars on the side of the road, the traffic lights blinking yellow and red.

"Remind me what exactly we're doing?" Greg said to Rick. Rick let out a shrill laugh.

"That stuff really got to you, eh boyo! We gotta pick up some eye drops for Henry, and some food for Nick and Vick. The girls love their Devil Dogs, I don't know."

Greg and Rick had known each other since they were in elementary school, but after Greg went up north for college, the two of them had fallen out of touch. Rick stayed in town after high school and bought a small house a few blocks away from where he'd grown up with money he'd inherited when his uncle died. As far as Greg could tell, this money was still Rick's main source of finance.

"Oh," Rick added in a serious tone, "we also have to do at least one Drive-By Plant Rip." Two seconds didn't pass before Rick burst out laughing.

Greg looked at the rear-view mirror and saw that that girl in the back seat (who, it just then occurred to him,

was actually aggressively attractive) was shaking her head and rolling her eyes — so at least, Greg figured, she'd seen this sort of behavior from Rick before.

Rick slid his black Pontiac into the left lane (it was a two-lane street), lowered his window, and decelerated to about 15 miles per hour. He turned his head and gave the two of them his John Wayne semi-smirk, then quickly reached out with his left hand, got a firm grip on the thin trunk of a ficus and some of the ragweed surrounding it, pressed down the gas pedal, tearing the plants completely out of the ground — roots and all, twirled them over his head like a lasso two times around, and then tossed them onto a lawn a few more houses down. He darted back into his lane, swung a hard right turn and thundered off down a back road like a fugitive.

“God I hope that never gets old.”

They pulled into a low-lit Quick Stop.

“You two lovebirds can wait in here,” Rick said, turning on the car radio to an AM station (some nasally talk show host unloading about death row inmates) as he stepped out of the car, leaving his door open. The mystery-woman got out and re-situated herself in the front seat.

Greg's fingers danced on his kneecap. Seconds of wordless silence passed. “So how long have you known Rick?” asked Greg. She grinned.

“What?” said Greg. “Did we do all that already?”

“It's all right. That red stuff hit you hard.”

“No, I really feel fine!” (And he really did!) “Sorry though. Mind recapping for me?”

“Oh sure. The two of us were working at that office supply store down on 5th a few years ago. We met there.”

“Myer's Suppliers?”

“Office Max.”

“Right. And your name?”

“Andrea.”

“Greg,” he responded, extending a hand.

“I know,” she said, and shook it.

“Damn it. Sorry.”

And isn't it funny with all of this coverage of the innocent folks getting the chair, nobody ever talks about this, how

Greg searched desperately for something to say. “Rick's taking a while. Maybe we should check on him?”

And it was when Greg stepped out of the car — that's when it really hit him.

The world outside of Rick's Pontiac felt different. But not in any concrete way; the sights and sounds were basically the same, but something felt altered, askew. It was like he had just been submerged in some viscous fluid, or some radio frequency in his head had just gotten flicked on, or he had just awoken from or fallen into a dream.

The word “high” entered Greg's mind. He understood that on some level, the word's referent mental state described his current condition, but he couldn't get that far, no, he couldn't get past the actual sound of the word: the hiss of that *h*, and then the anticipatory short *o* and excruciating long *e*, like some piercing primal scream.

He looked to his left over the roof of the car, but that girl (whose name he'd learned now, Andrea, it was) must have already been in the store, so he sauntered his way over.

Processed foods in packages with lurid colors sat on shelves in rows. Greg brought his face close to a red bag of potato chips. His field of vision shook gently, and the red of the

bag started to blend and bleed past its border into the shapes around it like watercolors from a brush dipped in that little cup of water too many times by an impatient toddler.

That's when Greg noticed the cop. He was young, maybe in his late twenties, with a shiny bald head, sunglasses, a chest that somehow looked not just huge but *heavy*, and a you're-all-worthless-pieces-of-shit-until-you-convince-me-otherwise expression. The cop was looking at something intently, so Greg followed his line of sight until it landed on Rick. Rick had already paid the cashier — he was holding his purchases in a white plastic bag — and now, for some reason, he was picking up each box of Tic-Tacs on the shelf one by one and shaking them close to his ear.

Greg spoke: "Rick, let's go." It was the first thing he had said out loud since he'd fallen under. The words felt foreign, like they were things he was overhearing from a conversation he wasn't a part of. It occurred to him that he couldn't locate the part of him where the words came from, or where any of his thoughts and feelings were coming from, for that matter. Rick was leaving now so Greg was following, and the cop was eyeing them both. On the way out, Rick ran his hand around a magazine rack's bottom and flashed Greg the John Wayne rictus.

"Don't," said Greg.

"Tee-hee," said Rick, and walked outside.

"I'm not ready to drive quite yet," Rick said as he walked right past the car. Greg and Andrea followed him.

They made their way toward an odd little piece of ground — a type of place that probably doesn't really have a name, but contains green grass surrounded by a cement curb and a single coconut palm tree and some cleanly trimmed

bushes — that acts as a sort of interstice between strip mall and suburbs: a spot where surely no people were ever intended to traverse or even so much as notice, but a spot that exists nonetheless because something or other has to be there, doesn't it?

Greg walked with both hands out to stabilize himself. The blades of grass were all pointing directly at him; the tree trunk slowly sinking its way into a spiral; the dotted yellow line in the street starting to vibrate like a guitar string.

Rick was sitting cross-legged bent over his lap. Andrea was facing the street doing something with her phone. Rick walked up behind her and rested a hand on her lower back.

"You guys," Greg managed to say. "I think I need something."

He was internally compiling a list of facts. His name was Gregory Peltz. His parents were named Frank and Martha Peltz. His birthday was June 13, 1991. Each of these things took him a few seconds to recall, but that wasn't the real problem; the real problem was the facts weren't forming any coherent whole. They felt like funny little post-it notes tacked on to his exterior.

"Are you okay?" Andrea asked. Rick waved her away.

"Greg," Rick was standing up now, a hand on each of Greg's shoulders, "You're fine, all right? You're fine. You'll feel totally normal in like ten minutes."

"Can one of you just talk?"

"What?"

"Just keep talking. I need to hear things. Just basic things. Things about my life."

But Rick wasn't looking at Greg anymore; he was looking over his shoulder at the cop, who was strutting towards

them. Rick took a step away from Greg, and tried to suppress his smile, but couldn't. "Don't worry. I'll handle him," Rick told them.

The cop stopped in front of them and held his flashlight above his right shoulder. He shined it right into Rick's face.

"You kids having a good night?" he finally said.

"No," said Rick. This simple reply seemed to truly catch him by surprise.

"No," repeated the cop.

"Not really kids anymore. Not legally, I don't think. And I think it's morning now. I don't have the time, but it's definitely after midnight. Either of you have the time?"

"Please," Greg said. The cop moved his light over to him — he had his hands pressed against the sides of his head — then back to Rick. They waited for what must have been a full minute.

"So you're the funny one then?"

"I do my best."

"Well you up to any funny business?"

"No sir."

He grabbed Rick by the arm and pulled it up into the light. His fingertips were stained red, and there was powder lodged under his nails.

"Mind tellin' me what that's about?"

"Look officer," Rick pulled his arm out of his grip and wiped his fingers on his shirt, "unless there's something we can help you with here, we'll just be on our merry way."

And so the three of them started moving towards the car — Greg in front, Rick and Andrea side by side behind him.

"I wasn't done with you yet," they heard behind them,

"I wasn't through talking with you yet." He wasn't following them, just standing there on the grass, and waiting for them to stop, but they wouldn't. They walked by a man jogging in a white top and short blue shorts with a dog on a nylon leash. Greg focused on the dog; its collar started growing spikes, which slowly extended to a length of about six inches. It snarled and flames shot out of its nostrils.

"HEY!" they heard behind them, and so Greg started running. Not because he was afraid, but because it occurred to him that running would be the appropriate thing for a person in his situation to do.

Soon all three of them were running, and they were back in the car — same seating arrangements as before — and Rick started driving before Andrea had even shut her door all the way. Greg was bubbling. His world was flattening, his insides bursting.

RICK: God damn it.

ANDREA: Slow down Rick.

RICK: I'm not speeding.

They saw the cop as they were driving out of the lot. He was running, but not in their direction.

GREG: Drop me off. Just let me out.

Rick drove through the back-alley behind the Quick Stop onto a busy intersection, drifted on to the grass to squeeze in a hard right turn, and ended up on the exit ramp to the main highway.

Rick: Can't do that right now Greg. Just relax. You're fine.

The ramp lifted them up until the street dropped, revealing the city, the sparkling skyline creeping down the front windshield like little dragonflies. And then it was abruptly out-

glared by red and blue flashing lights coming from behind them and shooting back at them off the mirrors, which were on for a solid three seconds before the siren started its wail. Greg held a hand to his mouth and closed his eyes. Horacio Mynxman Elementary. Mrs. Glassberg. June 13th. Rick wasn't slowing down.

ANDREA: Pull over, Rick. That's enough.

RICK: Hold on.

ANDREA: Rick.

RICK: Wait, we don't have to.

ANDREA: What?

RICK: We don't have to! I'm telling you. He spoke to us already, he can't pull us over now. It's a legal thing. I'm telling you. Look it up.

ANDREA: Please, not now Rick.

RICK: Look it up. I'll keep driving and you look it up.

Greg could feel each swerve and bump in the back of his throat and the pit of his stomach. The street lamps were sprouting little tentacles, and the sky was slowly taking on a shade of mahogany. Andrea was on her smart phone now, opening and closing her hand and sliding her fingers across on its screen like she was miming a talking duck.

ANDREA: I can't find anything Rick.

RICK: I don't know. "Stretch Your Rights" or something. Try them.

The cop was right up against their back bumper now. Rick took a ramp off the highway into the city's municipal district. And it was really like sorting through a messy file cabinet, where each piece is hard to find to begin with, and

then when you hold it up and look at it, it doesn't make much sense, and doesn't seem to fit in with all those other papers, they all just seem like disparate little parts of one giant mess.

ANDREA: Rick there's nothing here. Pull over now Rick.

GREG: I need some help. Let me get out.

ANDREA: Rick.

But Rick just started to smile and there was a certain look in his eyes, and he just sped up and turned on the radio.

ANDREA: God damn it Rick!

She was hitting the back of his headrest now. The radio played that Stevie Wonder song with all the horns, and Greg knew that Rick would go into his Stevie Wonder impersonation (which happened to be one of his best).

RICK: Well now, we're just going for a ride here, ain't nothing really.

Very superstitious, the devil's on his way

And Greg looked at Rick, who now had his head cocked back and he spread his lips out and he really had all of his mannerisms down, and then right before Greg's eyes he became Stevie, his skin darkened and his hair blackened and twirled itself into braids and his gut popped out and pressed against the steering wheel.

GREG: Rick, please.

then you suffer

Now another police car was waiting for them on a side street and the siren came on as they went by. Rick was swerving to the music and the right-side tires nicked the curb, making the car jump. And Greg saw that Andrea was really

quite terrified, and he wished he could be sitting near her to comfort her, but what use would any of that be? She was really a woman of another time, like Marilyn Monroe, that's who she was becoming, her dark auburn hair going blonde and her lips puffing up all red and her blue jeans and black spaghetti straps sliding into a big white dress, with air blowing the dress up from under the car so she had to hold it down with both hands. But her face wasn't all smiles and coquetry; it was on the verge of hysteria, like she was about to cry.

do all that you can do

MARILYN: That's enough, Rick. Please that's enough.

STEVIE: Well we just doin some funny business here now.

GREG: I need to stop now.

There were two police cars behind them now. Greg was looking back at them through disks and mazes, colors and lights forming three dimensional shapes and fractal patterns — but he caught sight of a street sign: Officer Jonathan E. Priggs Jr. Boulevard. He knew where they were! Five blocks behind them was the right turn that took you to his old high school; farther down the street was a strip mall with clothing stores and his favorite restaurant, and then, if Rick stayed on the street just a little bit longer, they would reach St. Michaels Hospital. This is when the idea entered Greg's head.

Rick was swerving now, and belting out the lyrics with his head tilted back and his eyes pointed high, so he really couldn't have been watching the road, and Andrea in the back was starting to shed tears. Greg pointed toward the end of the street and tried telling Rick to let him out in front of the emergency room, but his mouth was refusing to do what it was told. He reached out a finger to turn off the radio and long,

thin teeth sprouted around the dial and snapped at him.

STEVIE: Hey well don't be touching the radio now.

If you believe in things

STEVIE: That ya don't understand

The sky was throbbing red and white now. Frank and Martha. The door was already unlocked, Greg realized, which would make this easier. Peltz. It would be quick; Stevie and Marilyn probably wouldn't even notice until it was over. They were getting very close, so now would be the time. 1991.

He threw all of his weight to his right and pulled the handle.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thick air pummeled Greg's face and for an abrupt moment it drowned out all other noises, while the horizontal plane of the street approached slowly, first head on, then at a crooked angle.

His shoulder landed first, and then it was all noise, every noise, his body flipping itself over, crunches, screeches, snaps, an arm pulling across his chest, tumbling, spinning, a knee past his chin, jaw flapping shut and wrist bending back against his forearm, squishing, ripping, the sidewalk sliding up under the sky and back under the sidewalk again, ribcage rattling, muscles, tendons, ligaments, leg skin scrapped and knees suddenly flying up, his knees over his head over ass over heels over teakettle, 50 miles per hour's worth of kinetic motion dissipating into the air piece by piece, blow by blow, bump by dunt by thud, spinning up one last time and landing on a hard crunch with the back of his head resting on the pavement of the sidewalk next to the road.



He kept his eyes closed — it was a conscious decision he'd made — and started to count (one, two, three, four); it felt like the most natural thing for him to do. He got up to twenty, and everything remained quiet and still.

Rick and the two cop cars must have kept driving, he thought. He was aware of all the pain — very much aware — but he was experiencing none of it.

It occurred to him that this might be what contentment feels like.

Two older men approached him on the ground.

“Jesus, are you okay kid?”

“I am,” Greg said.

He spoke with a presence of mind that shocked them both.

“What’s your name?”

“I need a minute. Just give me one minute.”

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