

BAKER'S DOZEN



BRADLEY PEARCE

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Dedicated To:
SERENA & MURPHY BROWN

*"Life is a Tragedy in Close Up,
But a Comedy in Long Shot."*

Charlie Chaplin



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BRADLEY

“Intelligent men become Drunk,
If only to spend time with their Fools.”

Fort Street was bustling with bums. Night crawlers and drunks. I had had a shit of a week. I was going fit right in. I contemplate which way to head for the night.

Do I take the red pill? Or the blue pill?

Next door, downtown Mumbai congregated outside a Kebab shop. Bollywood music wailed through speakers. To my right a Sports Bar of beer guzzling barflies punting their pays away. It had its attractions. It had Alice. If know what I mean.

The place enticed me. I play the scene out in my head, and I quickly find myself being shunted to the back like a leper. I decided to jilt the place and head to a bar where barman knew your name. Where you were never drunk. You were just having one more for the road. And there were a lot of roads. A place where I could become invisible. To reflect the tragedy of life. My life.

And like a pincushion looking for pricks, I swallowed the red pill and headed to Vulcan Lane. The Blacksmith's and Gambling dens of old had long since displaced by fancy bars and Woke Vegan eateries. The brothels by Solicitor's Chambers.

Nothing had really changed.

Cassette pulsed like a Christmas tree. Young people peered down from a balcony, smoking, drinking, laughing. Oversized gorillas in undersized shirts stand guard outside the entry checking IDs of young scantily clad women seemly impervious to the chill of the evening.

Another bar stands opposite. A more mature bar. One that had history. And Tomo.

I make out the familiar profiles of the faithful that had gathered about a table for Evening Mass. Benjamin was talking to William. Lisa puffed on a vaper sending large plumes of smoke into the air like Indian sending up smoke signals. Emmitt hunched over his cellphone. Craig quietly beneath the heater sipping on a beer, smoking a cigarette.

I give him a nod. He nods back.

Benjamin catches my arrival. A grey tweed cheese-cutter covered a head of salt and pepper hair. I sensed an awkwardness, as though they had been talking about me. William wearing his Guinness jacket, a reward for having drunken five thousand pints of the black muck. A small fortune, but that was ten thousand pints ago. I approached the table cautiously. Then recall an ace I had up my sleeve.

'Two can play at this game.' I thought.

“William... I found some porn for you.” Reaching for my cellphone.

“Eh... What?... Ah. Ah.” He stuttered only to draw Benjamin's curious attention.

“I found some porn you might like.” I repeated making sure everyone heard, thumbing through pictures on my cellphone.

“I really don't want to see it.” He responded caught off guard.

“Oh William, this is amazing, you'll love it... You should see the phallus on this thing, its huge.” Finding the picture I show him, “...I saw this on YouTube, and thought of you.”

“I ah... ah... It's a Panzer tank.” He quipped excitedly.

“Nineteen-Sixty-Seven.” I regurgitated a date hoping it was right.

“Egyptian I believe.” He qualified.

“My job here is done... I’m getting a drink. I’ll right back.”

I headed inside.

The place was busy, Tomo looked up with his good eye to see me standing back. I give him a head’s up, and I make my way through the rowdy mob. Newbies. Outsiders. One-pint wonders. Amateurs.

“Bradley... What you after?” Asked Tomo.

“Serve the young ones first Tomo... I’ll be fine.” Eyeing the back-lit frosted cabinets glistening with bottles looking Amsterdam hookers in a window front. Red heads, hazy blondes, and dirty brunettes. I turn a blind eye to the alluring temptresses. I knew what I had come in for. A tip-jar labelled ‘*Cocaine and Hookers*’ had enough money in it to buy a line of Ajax and prickly kiss from Brian.

“Red?” Tomo asked reading my mind.

“Book me two and a packet of crisps be lovely thanks mate.”

“How you been?” He asked.

“Cold around the edges... Busy at work... You?” I wanted to rant on, but this was not the time or place.

“Same shite different day... What crisps you want?”

“Surprise me.” Making one less decision to make.

“There you go mate.” Placing a tall wine glass of blood red Merlot before me.

Tossing me a packet of crisps I catch it awkwardly.

‘*Buzz-Buzz!*’ Waving my cellphone over the eftpos machine like a magic wand.

“Thanks Tomo.”

A television was playing a game. A Warriors match had broken out but more surprisingly they were ahead. Not wanting to jinx them and pretended I never saw the score and made my way back outside. William still standing where I had left him as though his feet had been glued to the pavement.

The spirit level of his glass suggested it was half-empty.

I sip on the heavy bodied wine. The first hit was like heroin.

I took another.

“Have you seen Dale lately?” I asked William.

“Not since the other day.”

“Are you coming with us next week?”

“Is it next week?”

“Yeah, the tenth. You coming?” I wanted to make sure he heard the question.

“I won’t know ‘til closer the time.” He said vacantly.

“There’s always room in the back seat with Dale’s belongings.”

“I’ll let you know.” He replied with an uncommitted tone in his voice.

‘*I doubt that.*’ I thought.

“I’m easy either way.” I replied indifferent to whether he came or not.

Benjamin appeared at the table. An empty glass filled with ice cubes. Whatever else had been there was long gone. It appeared it may not have been his first drink for the evening. Joanne

his better half appeared beside him. A Welsh Aphrodite for deprived eyes like mine. Think Audrey Hepburn, but only more beautiful. If you know what I mean.

Feeling suffocated I move to the far end of the table.

I notice a dark shadowy figure sitting quietly in the corner, a ghostly face lit by a flickering lighter. After a few puffs, the man stabs the cigarette on a ledge beside him and tosses the corpse to the ground where countless others that had suffered the same premature death. Barflies gravitate about the beer-soaked Shaman and waited for him to speak. Slurring what could have been words the man withdraws behind his pint glass and stared vacantly into space.

His lights another cigarette, takes several puffs and its stabbed to death moments later.

Exiting the bar next door, I notice Tweedledum and Tweedledee Dumber. Inebriated. Intoxicated. Pissed. There was no nice way of putting it.

“Ah... So that’s where he’s been hiding.” I said to William.

‘This would be interesting.’ I wave the pair to the table.

Dale staggers over, bracing himself upright against the table to fight the gentle slope of the lane and forces of gravity.

I knew what Dale was going to ask before he even asked.

“We still on for next week?” He recited verbatim.

“Of course, you know that. I’ll be there.” I reminded him for the umpteenth time.

“Donna has the basement bed for you. The tenant moved out.”

‘Or... I could put my slippers under her bed.’ I thought to myself.

“So we’re good for next week?” He parroted.

“Next week... I call you when outside.”

Dale held out his hand to shake on the commitment. A formality that I knew would be repeated before the night was over.

“Next week eleven o’clock.” He reminded for the umpteenth time again.

“Next week. William might come.”

“Where you going to stay?” Asked Dale warily.

“I’ll find a motel or something.” Said William.

Phil appeared as sober as a judge, on the surface. But beneath the surface I knew he was pickled as a cucumber. Eyes dart about as though he had snorted a line or popped a pill or sorts. I did not want to know. Life was had enough on beer.

“That story you’re writing about me...” Phil asked, “... Make sure it has lots of sex.”

“It’s called, *Phil the Rooter.*”

“I want sex in every known position.”

“*Charm-Sutra Phil.*” Suggesting a new title hoping that would be the end of that awkward conversation.

Then without so much as a farewell, Phil wondered off. As though I had suddenly become invisible. Dale too had disappeared, only to return moments later with a wine glass topped to the brim. Anchoring himself on stool beside the table.

‘Who the hell served you?’ I thought questioning his already pickled state.

“We’re good for next week?” He asked again extending his hand as though he had just arrived.

“Next week... I’ll call you when outside.” I firmly shake, knowing it would mean nothing a minute later.

“Donna has a bed for you.” Informed Dale with the attention span of a windscreen wiper.

"I quite like the couch... How's the ticker?" I ask, hoping to change the subject.

"It been bad." He replied.

"Really? ..." I questioned looking at the large glass of wine in his hand, "... You're almost finished work, you should be winding down."

"I won't be happy until I'm out of here."

"Yeah... Know what you mean."

"So, we good for next week?" The windscreen wipers returned for another swipe.

'Christ here we go again.' I thought.

"Yeah, yeah... We're good mate. Don't you worry, I'll be there..." Holding up my empty glass, I find a chance to escape, "... I'll be right back." I lied.

Inside, the crowd had thinned a little. The one hit wonders had wandered off. I notice a few vacant tables. This could be my chance to stay inside. I look up at the game. Somehow after eighty minutes the game had become tied.

"What had happened? ..." I asked myself rhetorically.

Obviously, the Referee happened. And now it came down to a golden point. I dared not look just as the other side attempt a drop goal.

And missed, "... Thank God for that."

"Hello darling... What would you like?" Asked Cameron catching my attention before the altar.

"Got one in the tab with Tomo." I tell him.

"Red?"

"Yeah."

"Say please."

'Please_.' I play along.

Faces stare at the television willing the Warriors to win. I try not to look. I already knew the outcome. It was the same result as the previous week, and the one before that.

And the one before that.

"There you go darling." Placing the wine glass on the bar.

"Thanks sweetie... Cheers."

I see a vacant table but resist the urge to sit.

'One more tour outside, then I'll head home.' I tell myself. It would be painful, but I did not come here to sleep.

Dale had attached to the table as though it were a walking frame.

'Hick! ... Hick! ...' He hickuped, *'... Hick! ... Hick! ... (lengthy pause) ... Hick!'*

I watch sadly on.

"Sip and swallow some air." I inform him hoping that would alleviate his torment.

'Hick! ... Hick!'

The advice goes unheeded, and he takes a gulp of wine as though I had never spoken.

'Hick!' And swallowed the last of the wine.

He gets to his feet and sways as though he may have been drunk.

"You going to be okay getting home?" I ask encouragingly.

The question goes unanswered. It was like talking to a wooden puppet.

"We're good for next week?" Asked Pinocchio.

"Yeah, we're good for next week..." I assured him, holding out my hand to shake on it.

I nudge him in the direction he stood be heading. And like a homing pigeon he heads down the lane. I dared not look lest he fall over, and I feel responsible.

Denial is a wonderful anesthetic.

Craig takes the seat next to me on the bench. And lights a cigarette. The fumes whiff under my nose and passively inhale the drifting smoke. I did not smoke myself having quit when I was ten. Still, there was something soothing about it.

The look on Craig's face telegraphed the outcome of the game.

Nonetheless, I asked.

"Did we win?"

"Yeah-nah... We lost." He summates.

"How do we lose being up by so much."

"The referee."

But I already knew that.

"Two forward passes."

"The TMO didn't see them?"

"They see nothing the Muppets! ... Dale gone?"

"Yeah, just left. Pickled as a fart. Hope he gets home okay." Now feeling some guilt.

I look down the street for him, but only notice the growing queue of near naked young women lined up for the night club.

"I thought H'ch might be down tonight." I asked.

"He was down earlier. You must have missed him."

"Oh... What ever happened to crazy Jane?" I pondered.

"She got banned."

"What for?"

"Having sex in the toilets... It was her third warning."

"Yeah, that would do it... Hm... *Third warning?* What were the first two for?"

"You don't want to know." Cringes Craig.

"Oh... I liked her, despite being a red head..." I had to admit. I could forgo the craziness. There was something nasty about her I could not resist, "...She made *me* appear normal."

"Yeah..." Craig agrees, "... She made everyone seem normal."

"I hear Brian is having a birthday bash tonight... A hundred and fifty people."

"Many of those are in New York... I doubt they'll show."

"Yeah, long way to come I suppose..." I skull the dregs of the glass, "... One for the road... I'll be back."

And I head back inside.

Alice and a girlfriend had taken stools in front of the bar. Pawing and whispering to each other. Their suggestive body language spoke volumes. Or perhaps it was just me. They disappear together into the restroom together, if only to confirm my lurid suspicions. My imagination runs wild as to what could be happening in there.

'Nah... They wouldn't... Would they?'

The fantasy is cut short as Brian swaggered in as though he owned the place.

Looking sharp. But something was amiss.

He was naked.

He was minus his Yankees baseball cap. That thing was like a security blanket. Thirty-nine and not looking a day over forty-five. He walked pass as though he had not seen me.

I blanked him back.

“Ahh_ What’s up.” He snarled with a Brooklyn drawl.

A group of people trail in behind him. Beautiful people. Carrying pizza boxes. These were not regulars. These were Ousters.

I look to Tomo as though to say, *‘what are they doing here?’*

He just shook his head. It was going to be a busy night.

I was beginning to feel like a wet orange guppy flapping on the floor waiting for someone to step on me. I see Garry at the bar with two ladies by his side. Both tall, blonde, and slender. I catch his attention and offer up my table to him and his harem. Not so much as a noble act of chivalry, but moreover from my fear beautiful women. And I quietly slip to the end of the bar and watch as Garry undresses them with his silk tongue and Fabio looks.

I supped quietly on my drink, blending with the surroundings like a chameleon. To watch and observe. Some would say to *profile*. Would I do that? One never really hears what the people were saying. Their body language gives it away. I simply fill in the blanks.

That’s the danger with writers.

The bar had become a battlefield. Empty glass shells litter the bar top. I catch sight of Thomas swaying beside the bar. His wings folded. Feet nailed the floor boards to prevent him from falling over. Next to him Tim, busily swooshing and swiping Tinder screens up and down, left and right. Little beknown to him, the love of his life stood next to him.

If he only he had the courage to say, *‘Hi, I’m Tim.’*

‘You can rely on your old man’s money...’ Sang over the speakers to the amusement of Brian’s friends, poking fun at him.

I knew I should be going, but it was still early.

“One for the road Tomo...” Inform Tomo.

“This one’s on me.” Placing a mis-pour in front of me.

“I’ll take it. Thanks mate.” Holding up the glass, I examine the soft pastel color, a Shiraz perhaps. A red was a red to my unsophisticated palate. Artists lived and breathed wine. Many an outlandish tale had been scribed while under the influence. Even this story. Everything was simply a product of my imagination.

Then everyone froze. No one moved.

No one but Tomo.

“What’s wrong Bradley?”

“Writer’s block... I don’t know what comes next.” I stammered.

“Get that into you... You’re bugging up the space-time continuum mate.”

“Sorry... I’ll think of something, just give me a moment.” Wondering how I was going to write myself out of the corner.

I take a hefty swallow of the red wine and feel its warm creative juices dumbing my senses. Like smelling salts it jolted a hallucination. Then another. And another. People animated back to life. I notice the young ladies with Garry were down to their panties and bras.

“Steady on now Bradley...” Warned Tomo watching on, “... It’s not that kind of story.”

“Oh yeah... Sorry mate, I forgot.”

“You better get back outside before any else happens.”

I head back outside and sit beneath the heater its warmth embraces me as though to comfort my troubled soul. Alone. The barflies had flown away. But they would return. They always do. As would I.

Across the lane, a queue of naked women stood freezing their tits off.

“Oh Christ Bradley... I leave you alone for five minutes!” Said Tomo appearing at the entrance.

“It wasn’t me they were already like that... *Honest!*” I lied.

“I think it’s time you went home... I’m cutting you off before you completely go off-script.”

“Ah_ The story is almost finished anyway.”

“Last call if you want one for the road.”

“I’m done...” Sculling the remains of my glass now tasting like battery acid, “...Crikey, where did the time go?”

The party carried on inside. No doubt I would hear all about it tomorrow.

And I wondered if Dale would be on for next week.

Probably not...



GOLF DAY

“Golf is a game in which you yell Fore,
Shoot six and write down Five.”

‘Squawk! Squawk! ... Squawk! Squawk!’ A periscope arm reaches out to kill a crowing alarm.

Fingers fumble for a button. But it was at was all too confusing and Charlie presses them all in the hope one would stifle the electric roster.

The morning sun pierces a gap in the curtains and pokes him in the eye. His head throbs, a reminder of the night before.

‘Ah... What was I thinking?’ Shielding his eyes.

“Mmm!” His wife groaned urging him to get moving, wanting the bed to herself. Fingers prod like nine-inch nails into his back.

“Ah! ... I’m up! I’m up!” He sits upright dazed and confused. Wondering why he was getting up so early.

‘Golf day.’ Having an epiphany followed by a flowing feeling of content.

Today was his day. The day he would break eighty.

Sleepishly he took himself from the bed to the bathroom.

Returning to the bedroom, he finds his wife spread starfish across the bed embracing a pillow as though it were her surrogate lover. Charlie shelved the feathery affair. He had one of his own to attend. His mistress would be unforgiving if he were late.

“I’ll be back later.” Kissing his wife in the cheek.

“Mm-mm.” She murmured sleepishly.

Supping black coffee Charlie thumbed through a dog-eared golf magazine as if it were Playboy. Seductive advertisements promising bigger sweet spots, greater distance, eliminating slices and hooks and other sins. The temptation was there. All it would take would be one bite of the apple. His credit card. But nothing would escape scrutinizing eye of God.

His wife.

A heavy roller door slowly grinds opens and floods the garage with morning light and fresh air. Charlie inhaling deeply. Filling his lungs to its extremities. Rousing a sense of excitement and anxiety. Victory and fear. He wondered if the Golfing Gods would look kindly upon him today.

Finding the golf bag where he had left it from last weekend. Grubby soiled heads peer out from the top like meerkats. He had been in a longer relationship with them than his wife. They would never leave him if he played around with another set. Scuffed golf shoes hung like condemned prisoners about a shaft of the driver standing watching above the others.

‘Cling-clang-clatter-clatter.’ Sound the metal club heads as he lugged the heavy golf bag awkwardly to the open boot of the Prius and tossed the bag in as though it were a body.

‘Thud.’

It was the perfect day for golf. The sky was blue. The air was still.

What could possibly go wrong?

Then his cellphone rang.

'Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz!' A cellphone vibrated in a trouser pocket.

"Who would be calling at this hour?" He asked himself, hoping the other players in his group had not cancelled the game. He stared at the screen.

It was his boss.

"Christ... Not now..." He cursed then answered, "... John..." As though nothing was amiss.

"Blah-blah-blah... babble-babble-babble... blah-blah-blah... babble-babble-babble... blah-blah-blah... babble-babble-babble... blah-blah-blah... babble-babble-babble... blah-blah-blah... babble-babble-babble..." A voice babbled on relentlessly about nothing.

Charlie felt his life slipping away.

"Someone get me a gun..." Whispered Charlie to himself, "... Nothing John, just saying what a lovely day it was... You have a great day. Call me if you need me. My phone is always on for you." He lied hanging up and contemplated turning it off.

Slipping onto the quiet suburban street Charlie watched as the roller door closed in the rear vision mirror before heading for the motorway.

A finger sedately presses a button on the car radio. Abruptly, a loud demonic voice screams speakers as if the car had become possessed.

"What the...?" A finger stabbed at the radio trying to kill the beast assailing him.

Speakers fall silent.

"Damn kids..." Ejecting the CD out the window.

Up ahead in the distance, he spies the offramp.

The Club House was within sight.

"Arf-arf-arf!" A familiar voice barked out like a seal.

'That could only be one person. Darryl.' Thought Charlie.

"Arf-arf-arf! ..." Charlie barked back, "... You all paid up?"

"Yeap... Pushed us out to eight-fifteen... Another group wanted to get away before us."

"All good... Where are the others?" Asked Charlie.

"Oscar is on the putting green, and I haven't seen Big-A yet."

"I'll get fixed up inside."

The pro-shop was like a candy store Charles fantasized. Flirting with one set, then the next. Teasing him. Luring him. Fondling big headed drivers. Caressing slender graphite shafts. The devil whispered in one ear, tempting him as the accountant in him tallied sums in his head. Maybe if he could pay them off... The kid's university fund.

The fantasy dies abruptly when he visualizes his wife standing before him.

"A trundler and the group at eight-fifteen." Charlie informed the man behind the counter.

"Name?"

"Darryl Group."

"That will be twenty-five-fifty thank you." The man advised ringing the register.

Lugging the bag around the side of the club house Charlie takes a pick from the countless black marred trundlers parked like shopping trolleys.

Examining one for sturdiness, attached his bag to it.

“Charlie!” A voice calls out behind him.

“Arthur ... You made it.”

“Yeah, the twins.”

“No rush mate, eight-fifteen now...Darryl pushed us out a group. I’ll see you on the first tee... Oscar and Darryl are somewhere about. I’m going to get some putting practice. Any advice?”

“Yeah... Keep the ball low.”

“Funny.”

It was Arthur had introduced Charlie to the game. Lending him a set of antiquated clubs. After that, Charlie was hooked. Addicted. He wanted more.

Charlie watches on as Oscar peppered a dozen balls about a hole before one finally dropped.

“Got one!” He exclaimed pleased with himself.

“Big-A just got here... We have about ten minutes before we hit off. I’ll catch you on the tee.” Charlie informed him.

“I’ll be over here... I don’t need holes.”

“That explains a lot about your putting.” Quipped Oscar.

“Next group on the tee we have the Darryl four... Next group... The Darryl four.” A loud voice announces through overhead speakers.

“That’s us.” Said Charlie looking up.

“*Arf-arf-arf!* ...” Barks Darryl catching Charlie’s attention, “...Time gentlemen!” Called out Darryl to the pair on the green.

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Charlie barked back.

Scooping up balls Charlie trudged to the First Tee box to do battle.

FIRST TEE

The group ahead of them walk down the first fairway to their balls, leaving the first tee vacant. Charlie’s group line their bags up like horses outside an old western saloon. Charlie inspects the bags for new clubs. *New toys*. Anything to would suggest they had an advantage over the other. Or committed the most cardinal of sins, practiced.

Darryl’s clubs sparked unusually bright. Not going unnoticed by Charlie.

“Okay guys... Let’s hear your handicaps...” Charlie called out as if it were a roll call, “...Oscar?”

“Thirty... That’s what I had last time.”

“Fair enough...” Charlie scribbles his initials and handicap above a column on the score card, “... Big-A?”

Arthur looked up from his bag and thinks hard, “Eighteen.”

And continues to rummage through his clubs as though nothing was a miss.

“*Hang on...* You took a sixteen last week and shot a fourteen... I’m putting down at fourteen. You burglar.”

“You sure?” Questioned Arthur.

“I have it on a spreadsheet in office. I have copy in my car if you want to see it.”

“Okay, okay... Fourteen.” Conceded Arthur reluctantly, he could work with that.

“Darryl? ... What with the new clubs?”

“Just cleaned them.”

“Why? What are you up to? You been practicing?”

“Maybe.” Admitted Darryl.

“How many Tigger?”

“Ohh...” Staring into space, “... Thirty? Like Oscar.”

“Thirty my ass... You whipped him by five shots last week... Twenty-five and be grateful I’m not taking more off you.”

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Barked Darryl laughing it off.

“How many for Snake-Meister?” Asked Arthur.

“Eighteen... I should take twenty-two, but I’ll take a shot a hole... Who’s up first?” Seeing the group ahead now on the green some three hundred yards ahead.

Arthur flips a tee towards Oscar like a penny toss. Landing like compass needle it pointed more towards him than away. He repeats the flip with Darryl only have it go the other way.

“I’ll go last.” Informed Charlie pulling on stale smelling synthetic leather glove.

Oscar goes through his pre-shot routine. Swinging his driver wildly back and forth as though he was shooing away a pestering mosquito. Whatever was about to happen was not going to be pretty. Satisfied he had frightened the mosquito away presses a long tee into the turf. Balancing a ball on top with a quivering hand.

Only to have to tumble off.

Adjusting the tee to a more upright position he attempted the balancing act again. The others watch on in amusement. Finally the ball stuck to the top of the tee. Standing back he takes aim at the hole some three hundred yards away. Stepping up to the ball places a large, oversized club-head behind the ball.

Then stands as though he were paralyzed. Seconds seemed like minutes. Then without warning, arms lurch violently backwards only to lunge violently forward at the ball. Resembling nothing like his practice swing.

‘*Crack!*’ A reverberating sound of steel on urethane.

The shot launches like a missile cruising a meter or so above the ground down the fairway. After defying gravity as long as it possibly could the ball returned to earth. Skipping and hopping before coming to a halt center fairway. What it had lacked in height it had made up for in distance.

“Wasn’t pretty, but I’ll take it.” Remarked Charlie enviously.

Big-A stepped onto the Tee. He was call *big* for a reason. Two-hundred and fifty pounds of Polynesian loving. Arthur presses in a tee and balances a ball confidently on top. Taking a couple of lazy swings while eyeing the hole ahead, quietly stepped up and smoothly slams the head of the driver into the back of the ball.

‘*Swo_ooosh-Crush!*’

The ball takes flight, lofting high sailed center fairway before curving left to finish in a fairway bunker next to the green. Players on the green look up to see where it had come from.

“That’s a big hit Big-A.”

“Nah... Too much draw.” He said disappointedly bending down to collect his tee.

“Okay Tigger, you’re next...” Charlie instructed, “... Keep your head down.”

“Arf-arf-arf!” He barked.

Nimbler than any of the group, Darryl stepped onto the tee box.

“Hey! Hey! ... What’s that?” Questioned Charlie noticing something different.

“Got a new driver.”

“I can see that.” Remarked Charlie.

Darryl takes a few practice swings. Standing over the ball, he begins to fidget worse than Nadal. His body twists like pretzel, arms lurch skywards before sweeping downward as quickly as it had risen.

Taking everybody, and the ball by surprise.

‘*Swo_oosh-Whack!*’ Sending the ball skyward and to the left, before bending back to the right.

Coming to a halt behind the trunk of a very large tree.

“I see it... Its behind that tree.” Remarked Charlie.

“Okay Snake, you’re up.” Informed Arthur.

‘*Relax... Exhale... Rotate the body... Let the club do the work.*’ Charlie repeated in his head.

Charlie stood over the ball and exhaled. Just as he was about to pull the club head back, an unsolicited noise vibrated from his bag. All eyes now on Charlie’s bag.

‘*Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz!*’ The cellphone buzzed like an annoying blowfly.

He swung, nonetheless.

‘*Swo_oosh-Crack!*’ The clubhead contacts solidly with the ball.

Feeling it come off the toe of the club face, a twisting sensation telegraphs up the shaft. He loses sight of the ball in the morning sun as it slices deep into the trees.

“You might a shot to the green.” Remarked Darryl.

“I should be so lucky.”

“Whose phone is that?” Asked Arthur.

“Mine... Informed Charlie frustratedly, “... I better get it.”

Unzipping a side pocket to retrieve the now silent cellphone and a missed call from his boss.

The announcer called the next group to the first tee as the four head off in search of their balls. Oscar center fairway. Arthur in a sand trap, no worries for him. Darryl behind a tree.

And Charlie deep within the hundred-acre woods.

It was like looking for a needle in a haystack. Leaves littered the ground. His ball could be anywhere. Darryl had found his and took a hasty swipe at it. Narrowly missing the trunk of the tree, but not the branch extending out over the fairway.

‘*Chunk.*’ His ball falls like a dead duck to the ground.

“You found yours?” He asked looking over to Charlie rummaging among the leaves and shrouded undergrowth for his ball.

“Not yet...” Then spied a ball further ahead than expected.

It was not his.

“Found it!” Claiming it anyway.

A narrow corridor of tree trunks and low hanging branches provided a window of opportunity to get to the green in two. Or he could play sideways safely onto the fairway forsaking a distance.

“I can do this.” Pulling a three iron from his back.

Cleaning away leaves from about the ball takes a few practice swings. He stands behind the ball to take aim.

“Fire in the hole!” Charlie called out.

‘Swoosh! Clunk!’ Watching the ball tumble a mere twenty yards forward.

Karma had caught up with him.

Wishing now he had played it back onto the fairway. Numbers tally in his head. Par was out of the question. At best he could score was a bogey. Bogey was okay. He could live with a bogey. Lifting the ball places it on a clear patch of turf hoping no one had seen him. Arthur was already on the green a yard from the pin while Oscar had skulled his shot behind the green.

“Are you ever coming out of there?” Darryl taunted him.

“Fire in the hole!” Called out Charlie pulling the trigger on a five-iron looking for loft.

And he found it. Striking an upper branch ricocheting the ball to the first cut of the fairway beside the green.

He was out.

“How many is that?” Asked Darryl, wondering what had taken Charlie so long.

“One... Two... Three...” Charlie counts aloud, pointing a finger to each position.

“You?” Charlie asked.

“This is my third.” Said Darryl.

Charlie eyes his ball sitting up nicely on the grass. No overhanging branches. But there was a green side sand trap.

‘No worries... I can clear that...’ Dismissing the bunker pulling a wedge from the bag.

Darryl swipes at his ball, lifting to the heavens. Eyes track it like an ICB missile as it falls to the earth.

‘Splash.’ Into the sandy bunker.

“Bugger.” Curses Darryl.

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Charlie barked as though it were funny.

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Darryl barked back.

Charlie takes a short sharp swing at his ball sending it high towards the bunker.

“No... No... No.” Feared Charlie watching his ball come down.

‘Thud.’ The ball lands precariously close to the edge of the bunker before trickling onto the green, gaining speed on the down slope towards the hole.

Before falling in.

“*Arf-arf-arf! ... Par!*” Barked Charlie.

“You uncanny bastard!” Protests Darryl finding his ball half-poached in the sand.

“That looks nasty.” Remarked Charlie.

“I’m the best bunker player there is.” Quipped Darryl.

“You should be, you’re in enough of them.”

Darryl stepped into the bunker with sand-wedge in hand. Silence falls over the group. You could have heard a pin drop.

Or in Charlie’s case, a cellphone vibrating.

‘Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ...’

Distracting Darryl enough to duff his shot.

'Thud!' Sand flies out of the bunker.

But the ball remained.

"Turn that damn tell off Charlie!" Complains Darryl looking up in disgust.

"Sorry my bad!" Rushing over to his bag.

Frantically pulling the cellphone out just as it fell silent.

"It's off. Sorry Darryl... Take your ball back and play it again." Offered Charlie.

Darryl lifts his ball and replaces it on a smooth patch of sand and attempted the shot again. Showering the green with sand. The ball lands, jumps and skips before rolling a yard left of the hole.

"Great shot." Remarked Arthur.

Eyes turn to Oscar patiently waiting to chip on from behind of the green.

'Click!'

The ball rolled past the hole again for a second time leaving himself a twenty-footer. Uphill. Oscar lined up the putt. Giving it a good nudge he leaves it a foot and half short.

"That's a gimme." Said Arthur stepping up to his ball.

Quickly Oscar picked the ball up before anyone could change their mind.

"I'd give you that, but there are rules." Charlie informed Arthur.

Stroking the ball effortlessly, the ball rolled to the hole.

'Rattle.' The ball falls in the hole.

"How many?" Asked Charlie reaching for the score card.

"Three." Responds Arthur as though it was nothing.

"*Three? Birdie?*" Questioned Charlie despondently, circling the digit twice.

"Read 'em and weep." Remarked Arthur striding back to his bag parked next to the second tee.

"How many Oscar?" Called out Charlie.

"One, two to the back of the green, three to there, four to here... Five in the hole." A finger danced back and forth before pointing to his feet, "... Five. Bogey."

"Darryl?"

"Five." He responds quickly.

Too quickly for Charlie's liking.

"You sure?" He questioned suspiciously.

"One off the tee... Two from the tree... Three..." A finger points to locations, before skipping to another, even he was beginning to doubt himself, "... One from the bunker... One in the hole... Five."

"Bogey... Well done." Now satisfied with Darryl's alibi.

"How many for you Charlie?"

Charlie looks back with contemplation and recounts his shots. The tee. Into the trees. Onto the first cut. Up and down in the hole. No one needed to know about the lost ball or playing the wrong ball, or the other half dozen rule violations.

The rules golf were more like *guidelines*.

"Four. Easy par." Informed Charlie proudly circling the digit on the card.

THE WATERHOLE

Meanwhile fifteen holes and four miles later, four wary journeymen, dehydrated and tired, trudged heavily to the next tee. They had arrived at their nemesis. A lengthy par five over a small lake in front of the tee.

A place where the laws of physics did not apply. Oscar's testicles retract at the sight of the lake. Tall reeds sprout like interfering fingers. God knows how many of his balls lay in its mirky depths. Or that he had bought back at the pro-shop.

"I hate this hole." Moaned Oscar collapsing on the wooden bench in the shade of trees at the back of the tee.

"What water?" Teased Arthur.

He would have no trouble crushing a three hundred yard plus drive center fairway.

"You're up first Arthur."

"I can wait... Oscar... Why don't you lead the way. You can do it. Just imagine there is no water... Okay?"

"But there is... I can see it. Its right there."

Pushing the tee into the ground he looked over the fifty-yard lake ahead of him. Taking a couple of lazy practice swings he had pretty much surrendered to the hole.

'Swo_oosh-Boom!'

He never felt ball come off the face.

Disbelieving eyes watch as it flies long and straight.

"Where did that come from?" Oscar asked surprising himself.

"Whoa! ... We might have to reassess you handicap... Great shot!"

"Charlie, you're up." Instructed Arthur.

With big-headed Bertha in hand Charlie stepped onto the tee. And goes about his pre-shot routine. If he could just hold it together for the last few holes, he had a chance at breaking eighty.

'Seventy-nine, that would be nice. Just once.' Praying the golfing Gods were not paying attention to him or had gone to lunch.

Birds tweeted. A zephyr breeze whistled through rusting leaves. It was the perfect day for golf. Calming Charlie's anxiety. He swings the club effortlessly.

'Ping.' The metal clubhead strikes the stationary white ball.

Eyes follow the ball over the water and raising, left of the fairway only to fade back into the center. And calmly walked back to the others as if it were nothing.

"No pressure Darryl." Jests Charlie.

"I think we should be checking *your* handicap." Warned Darryl striding to the tee.

Teeing the ball low, too low for Charlie's liking. He wanted to say something, but it was already too late. Darryl had begun his back swing. Lifting is head at the very last moment.

'Swo_oosh-Thud-clunk! ... Splash!' The ball flies twenty yards skips on the water before splashing to a watery grave.

"Take a *mulligan*..." Charlie called out, "... Tee it higher this time." Tossing a ball he had found towards him.

"Thanks."

This time Darryl launches the ball high. He had gotten under it and Charlie feared it would fall into the lake. Eventually the ball comes back to earth after violating several angels, landing fifty yards ahead of the lake.

"I'll take that." Said Charlie happy to see Darryl over the water.

“Arf-arf-arf!” Barked Darryl.

Arthur stepped up to the tee box. A breeze blew from behind him. Tall pine trees with sinister limbs that reached out into the fairway like arms ready to catch any wayward shot. Rotating his huge torso, arms cement to its side.

There was no moving parts other than the hinging of wrists.

‘Swo_ooosh-Crush!’

You had to feel sorry for the ball.

NASA would have been proud of the launch.

“That thing ever coming down.” Charlie asked.

“Don’t think so.” Said Darryl.

The ball apexed and returned to earth. Bouncing once before slowing to a walk.

“That’s got to be over three-hundred-and fifty yards?” Commented Charlie checking the yard on the card.

“Let’s go. There’s a group coming up behind us.” Said Arthur.

Charlie wondered if the Golfing Gods had seen his drive. Pulling the brim of his cap down dare he look up and catch their attention.

Like a fragmented funeral possession, players go in search of their balls, pulling trundlers like stubborn mules. Darryl had taken to Army Golf, marching left then right then left again. Taking himself from one side of the fairway only to end up back on the other side.

Charlie hears rustling coming from the bushes as if a wild boar was rummaging for truffles. Then spied Oscar.

“Oscar... What are you doing in there? Get out of there you mongrel!”

“I’m looking for my ball... Found it!” He cried out.

“Throw it out here... That’s G.U.R. take a free drop.” Instructed Charlie

“You sure?” Asked Oscar suspiciously looking back at the shrubbery.

“Yeah, yeah... They need to repair that.” Assured Charlie.

Without questioning the legitimacy, Oscar tossing the ball onto the fairway.

“Any advice?” Asked Oscar hoping to avoid a repeat of the last shot.

“Yeah... Keep your head down, left arm straight, rotate your body, rotate your wrists and swing through the ball.”

“Anything else?” He asked overwhelmed.

“Yeah... Don’t overthink the shot.”

“Thanks. You’re a great help.”

Oscar lunges at the ball unaware of Darryl marching across the fairway for the umpteenth time.

‘Swo_ooosh-Crack!’ Sending a worm burner from hell towards Darryl.

“Fore_!” Hollered Oscar.

“Fore!” Called out Charlie meekly, and belatedly.

Darryl looked up to see Oscar now waving his arms and a ball coming at him at a rate of knots. Buttocks flinch as to which way to move.

But it was too late.

‘Bang!’ The ball strikes his golf bag and falls center fairway.

“Great shot! ...” Commended Charlie, dismissing Darryl’s near-death experience.

“Arf-arf-arf!” Darryl barked back at the mongrels.

Charlie had played the hole methodically and was now only a hundred-and-thirty yards from pin after two shots. Arthur had crushed fairway wood and was at the front of the green for two. Ten yards from the hole.

Oscar had made it on the green in five.

“Anyone seen Darryl?” Asked Arthur thinking he had gone home.

“I think I saw him over there...” Informed Oscar pointing to right, “... No wait, there he is.” Pointing to a tree on the left of the fairway.

A ball scurries past the trio watching and stops just short of the green.

“Fore!” Called out Darryl, albeit too late.

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Charlie barked back at him.

The flag fluttered over the edge of the incline. Charlie gauged his next shot. The elevation. The breeze behind him. The clean lie. And reaches for a seven iron, one more than the distance allowed.

He was not going to be short.

“How many?” Asked Darryl.

“Third.” He replied calmly.

Practice swings graze the turf. Leaving subtle scuff marks. He just had to let the club do the work. A gallery of three watched on. All he had to do was put it close and have a chance at par. Or birdie. The Golfing Gods watched from above, unsure what to make of the upstart below.

Charlie swung.

‘Swo_oosh-click-thud!’ He barely felt it come off the face of the club.

A small divot goes flying ahead of him. The ball on its way towards the pin. But did it have the legs. And the ball disappears over the crest and from sight.

“Great shot...” Rewarded Arthur.

“Might have cooked it.”

“Nah... You’ll be okay. Come on.”

Lugging trundlers up the slope to discover two balls on the green. Arthur’s but yards from the hole and Charlie’s some ten yards further back.

“Lag that and you get your par.” Informed Arthur.

Oscar and Darryl chipped on and putted out while Charlie assessed his line. But the more he looked at it the more confused he became.

“Darryl...” Called out Charlie getting his attention, “... You’ve got good eyes. See any breaks? ... I look at this too long, up becomes down and down becomes up.”

“Stand back you dyslexic bastard.”

Darryl crouches down behind the ball. There as a lump here and bump there, but on the whole the region was flat. It would only a matter of distance.

“Any advice?” Asked Charlie.

“Yeah... Keep it low... It’s as flat as your tires will be if you beat me today.”

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Barked Charlie.

“*Arf-arf-arf!*” Darryl barked back.

Charlie rocked the putter back and forth like a pendulum. Imaging the ball rolling to the hole. Satisfied he had the weight sorted, stepped up to the ball. His eyes over the ball. Taking one last look and pulled the trigger. Letting the putter head stroke through the ball.

'Clunk.' The soft covered ball tumbled towards the hole.

It needed legs. A lot of legs, like a centipede. Rolling and bobbling over the tightly cropped green closer to the hole.

"Looking good Snake-Meister." Encouraged Arthur.

"Lag the hole... Lag the hole!" Charlie instructs the ball willing it closer.

The ball runs past the hole to stop a yard long.

"You had the legs." Informed Arthur stepping up to his ball.

Arthur taps out a six-footer as though it were two. Making it look easy.

"Okay Snake-Meister no pressure."

It was a straight poke. He imagined a tee behind the hole. He had made this putt a hundred times on the practice green.

He had also missed it a hundred times.

"Good luck mate." Said Darryl.

Charlie lined the putt up. Knowing the longer he stayed over it the more paralyzed he would become.

'Relax Charlie.' He tells himself under his breath.

Exhaling, his body go limp. Pressing hands gently forward. Too much he thinks at the last moment, but it was too late. The ball rushes to the hole. Striking the back of the hole, jumps in the air six inches and falls into the hole.

'Rattle-rattle-rattle.'

Charlie swallowed his heart and stares at the hole in disbelief. The first time he had ever parred the waterhole. The monkey was off his back. The golfing Gods had been kind to him. He raises his cap to them.

"You lucky bastard!" Said Darryl on seeing the ball go in.

"*Phew...* You can say that again. But I'll take it. Reaching for the score card and circling a five in the column under his initials.

"How many Darryl?"

"Big fat lady. I'll take a circle seven..." He said despondently, "... And that was without the water ball."

"Oscar?"

"Seven." He said cheerfully. It could have been worst. It could have been a snowman.

"Arthur?"

"Birdie."

"*Christ* mate... Unbelievable, you burglar."

"Next tee Gentlemen.... You too Charlie." Directed Arthur.

'Rattle-Rattle-Rattle-Rattle-Rattle.' A final ball rattles in the final hole.

The torment was finally over. As tradition held, gentlemen shook hands and commended each other on a good round.

"Are you staying for a beer?" Carlie asked Arthur.

"Nah, better get back. Her-in-doors and the twins." Arthur excused himself.

"All good, totally understand... Darryl you up for one?"

"You beat. Oscar?"

"One wouldn't hurt." Looking to the heavens.

Pulling the score card out from a back pocket, Charlie tallied the final hole.

"How many Darryl?"

Darryl looks down the fairway, recalling the final hole as though it were a past life regression.

“Seven... I think.”

“Close enough.” Accepted Charlie. No one was without sin.

“Oscar?”

“Six.”

“Nice.”

“Big-A?”

“Par... Seventy-five.”

“Get out of here. Seventy-five? You should be on the Tour you burglar.” Noting the score on the card.

“Catch you next weekend gentlemen.” Said Arthur heading to the car park.

“You too, keep safe... Five for me. Bugger. I really needed that hole.” Said Charlie disappointedly.

But they still had one last hole to play.

The nineteenth.

THE NINETENTH HOLE

Air conditioning welcomed the parched vagabonds. Sitting about a table, Charlie tallied the scores while Oscar picked at a bowl of heavily salted fries dowsed in ketchup.

A near empty pitcher of beer at the center of the table.

“That can’t be right.” Charlie looked to Oscar.

“What’s can’t be?” He questioned.

“I have you at ninety-nine. Did we get all your shots?” Questioned Charlie.

“I broke hundred...” Said Oscar surprised, “...I never broke a hundred.”

“Darryl ninety-five. Well done... And as for me...” Charlie checked his addition, “... Bugger... Eighty-five... I’ll take that. It could have been a lot worse I suppose.” Overlooking the mulligans, the lost balls, the out of bounds and countless rule infringements.

“What’s that on handicap? Who won?” Asked Darryl anxiously supping his beer.

“Read them and weep *gentlemen*, and I use that term loosely... In last place, for a change... by one stroke is... drum roll please...”

“Darryl with net seventy-one.”

“Eh... That can’t be right...” Protested Darryl.

Oscar grinned from ear to ear.

“Oscar, you had a net sixty-nine.”

“Cheers.” Raising his handle.

“Burglar!” Darryl called foul.

“Yours truly with a sixty-seven... Maybe I should have taken that twenty-two handicap?”

“Too late now.” Challenged Darryl.

“And the winner and still champion is Arthur with a net sixty-one.”

“Good game ... Drink up gentlemen... May we be in the driveway before our wives notice us missing.” Toasted Darryl.

“Or our bosses.” Added Oscar.

“Oh shit! The boss!” Charlie dashes outside as though the club house was on fire.

Rummaging through the bag for a cellphone he turned it on and anxiously waited for it to come to life.

“Please don’t let there be any messages.” Charlie prayed to the Golfing Gods.

But the Golfing Gods had deserted him. The office was out-of-bounds to them.

‘Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... ‘Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... ‘Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ... Buzz-buzz! ... Buzz-Buzz! ...’ The cellphone sang a chorus of missed calls and message alerts.

“Oh well, not much I can do about it.” Conceded Charlie shoving the cellphone into his pocket.

Charlie catches Darryl and Oscar leaving the Clubhouse.

“You guys off?”

“Yeah, better get going, chores to do around home.” Informed Darryl.

“Same time next week gentlemen?” Asked Oscar.

“Wouldn’t miss it, I’ll rework the handicaps.” Said Charlie.

“*Arf-Arf-Arf!*” Barked Darryl.

Charlie drives inside the garage and the interior dims as the door close behind him.

“Eighty-five. Can’t complain.” He commended himself.

It had been a good day.

Golf was more than chasing a small white ball from one hole to another. There was the comradery of like-minded individuals pitting themselves against the course. Where for but a few hours one could become Jack Nicholas, or Lydia Ko. It could lift you on high with a single stroke. And crush you with the next. And much like a woman, it would never be truly understood.

Charlie found himself alone in the garage.

Voices filter from a doorway and into the garage.

“Honey, I’m home!” He called out...



MURPHY BROWN

“Slugs and Snails and Puppy Dog Tails,
That’s what Little Boys are Made Of.”

Serena awoke to find a face pressed against hers. A small child’s face. A face with beautiful eyes.

“What are you doing here?” She asked rhetorically.

The question goes unanswered, running fingers through the child’s long fair hair. His father’s. A gigolo of sorts. No doubt impregnating some bitch for money. He had served his purpose and now she had Murphy to show for it. And he was worth every penny.

Dragging herself from the bed and got ready for work. Returning to the bedroom to find Murphy where she had left him. Sound asleep. His nose twitching as though he were dreaming.

“Wakey, wakey Murphy... Breakfast time.”

Eye lids sleepishly open and stare at his mother as though it were the middle of the night. The child snuggles his head into the pillow pretending he had not heard her.

“Cereal?” She tries to tempt him.

“*I hate cereal.*” He mumbled.

“Suit yourself... I’ll be in the kitchen if you get hungry.” She tells him.

“*I want that.*” Seeing his mother dishing bacon and eggs onto a plate.

“This is not for little boys. Eat your cereal if you want to be big and strong.” Pushing the plate under his nose.

“*Yuck!*” Sniffing the dish. Picking at it. Chewing on the flakes.

“Drink your milk. Good for your bones.”

“*Slurp-slurp-gulp-gulp!*”

“Look at you. Milk all over the place. Come here!” Attempting to wipe it away, but not before a tongue had gotten to it first.

“Have you done widdles yet? Number ones? Number twos? ...” She asked, “... Hurry up, you’re a big boy now... Off you go... Widdle-widdle, piddle-piddle!”

Murphy dashes away only to return moments later looking no different than when he had left.

“Hmmm... What am I going to do with you Murphy Brown? ... You have big boy school tomorrow. But until then you can come to the office.”

“*The office?*” Thought Murphy.

The word spelt danger. That was where the Giant Ogre lived. His mother’s boss. A mean fierce growling beast. That ate little boys for breakfast.

“You have to behave yourself, no yelling and running about. Okay?” She instructed him sternly.

“*O_kay_.*” Murphy lied.

“You finished? You haven’t eaten much...” Taking away the uneaten bowl, “... We better get you dressed. Can’t have you looking all scruffy... Where’s your brush?”

“That’s much better....” His mother straightens his collar, “... Okay in the car. Where are your toys?”

Murphy runs off and returns with a toy. A green cactus rag doll looking worse for wear. Fluff extruding from its belly.

‘Squeak-squeak.’ Murphy squeezes the toy.

“What happened here?” She looked at him inquisitively.

“Wasn’t me.” He lied.

Dark ominous rain clouds gathered overhead and threatened to break open at any moment. Spits began falling through the cracks.

“Are you coming?” She beckoned him to get into the car.

“Wait for me.” He cried out afraid he would be left behind.

Clambering onto the back seat the door closes behind him. He peered out the window to the deteriorating day. Murphy loved the rain. And rain meant puddles he could splash about in.

“Did you bring your gumboots? ...” His mother asked,

“Gumboots?” He asked looking at his mother. Little boys did not need gumboots.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“We haven’t got time to go back... Promise you’ll stay out of the puddles, okay.”

“I promise.” He lied.

“Harry might be there today... You’d like that wouldn’t you?”

“Harry?” Murphy’s ears prick up at the name.

“And Charlie... You want to see Charlie don’t you.”

“Charlie.” Murphy parroted the name.

Charlie would protect him from the Giant Ogre. Excited he pulls himself into the front passenger. Pressing his nose against the fogging glass. Long black wipers sweep heavy rain drops back and forth. The rain outside bucketing down. The long black sticks washed back and forth. And back again. He was going to the office. There was a yard to explore. Mounds of dirt and ditches and creeks. And puddles. Lots of muddy puddles. It was heaven. Maybe today he would find a frog.

“Are we there yet?” He asked.

Pulling into the parking lot. They had arrived. Anxiously Murphy sits upright and looks about for Charlie’s car, nowhere to be seen.

“He’ll be here soon. Now hurry inside and don’t dilly-dally in the rain.”

Outside the rain teemed down.

“Inside! Hurry up!”

Murphy makes a dash for the door way just as a bolt of lightning flashed.

‘Boo-oo-oo-oom!!!’ Quaking thunder sounded.

Rattling the building and frightening him. Looking about for the Giant Ogre, Murphy hurried up the stairs.

“Murphy!” Namsoon welcomed him.

Murphy dismissed her and hurried to Charlie’s desk. Disappointedly, he finds it vacant. Looking back up to Namsoon.

“Where is he?” He asked.

“He won’t be much longer.”

Serena appears at the top of the stairs to find Murphy beside Namsoon eating her breakfast.

“Don’t give him any. He wouldn’t eat his breakfast this morning.” Informed Serena.

Cereal always tasted better from someone else’s bowl. Murphy’s eyes fixated on Namsoon hoping a spoonful would come his way.

“It’s hosing down outside. The traffic was bad.”

“Charlie has to walk in that.” Said Namsoon looking out the window down the narrow rural road.

“He loves it. Reminds me of someone... He has an umbrella, he’ll be fine.”

‘Thud-thud-thud-thud-thud-thud-thud-thud.’ Heavy footsteps sound from the stairwell.

Charlie appears standing in the doorway soaked to the bone. Holding an inadequate folding umbrella in his hand, now blown inside out.

“Charlie... You look like you came down in the last shower of rain.” Remarked Serena.

“Hmm...” Grumbled Charlie shaking the water from the umbrella and tossing it in a rubbish bin, “... Another five minutes I would have been fine... *Murphy!* What are you doing here!”

“*Charlie! Charlie!*” Murphy rushes over to him and jumps up at him.

Picking him up Charlie tickled him. Murphy fidgeted to be put down and runs off to bring back a toy.

“What happened to the Cactus Doll?” He asked.

“*Wasn’t me.*” Murphy lied.

Charlie attempts to take it but at the last moment Murphy pulls on it and a tug-of-war ensues.

“You give that here Murphy Brown! ... You give that!”

“*Arr-arr-arr!*” Murphy strains to keep hold.

Charlie relents and Murphy runs off with the toy.

“You’re too strong Murphy.”

Charlie collapses on the chair.

“John coming in today?” He asked knowingly.

‘Please say no. Please say no.’ Charlie begs.

“Should be in around noon.”

“There’s my day gone...” Lamented Charlie, “... Coffee. Come on Murphy.”

Murphy followed like a shadow.

“Okay, no toast until lunch time... Let’s see what have here...” Opening the refrigerator door, “... A light comes on and shelves and shelves of exotic foods line the shelves. Out of reach for a small boy, but not out of reach for Charlie, “... Yogurt. You want some yogurt? Hmm.”

“*Plea_se_.*” Murphy whimpered.

Beady brown eyes light up as Charlie scoops some into a bowl pushes it in front Murphy.

“Don’t tell your mother okay.”

“*Okay.*” Gulping it down and licking his chops with a long pink tongue.

“That was quick. You should learn to chew your food.”

The advice goes unregistered and Murphy looks up to Charlie for more.

“Not for little boys... Come on, I have work to do.”

Murphy trails him back to his desk. Outside the clouds had broken open and sunlight streamed through. In the distance, the dark clouds had snagged on the Sky Tower and was pelting rain on those below.

Charlie hears the sound of a car door outside and his heart sinks in his chest.

'Oh shit... John.' Cursed Charlie.

But to his relief he hears a woman's voice and the sound of little feet skipping up the stairwell. Murphy's ears prick up at the sound of Harry's mother. Poking his head around the corner of Charlie's desk to catch sight of a little boy appearing at the doorway.

"Harry!" Cried out Murphy excited to see him.

"Harry... Look at you, you've had a haircut! ..."

Noticing his brown curly locks had been cropped, "...Maybe Murphy should get a haircut."

"Good timing Harry, lunchtime... We're about to go for a walk about the yard... You want to come?"

"Okay."

The two little boys follow Charlie down the stairs like Tom Sawyer & Huckleberry Finn.

"Keep him out of the puddles!" Warned Serena.

"Me or Murphy?" Jested Charlie.

"Both of you. John doesn't want muddy foot marks on the carpet."

Murphy leaped down the stairs, while Harry took his time.

"Hey wait up Murphy! ..."

Charlie called, "...You come back here!"

Only to have Murphy galloped back up the stairs.

Puddles peppered the yard like foxholes, and Murphy dashes off ahead in search of a deep one. Jumping into one, trying to make the biggest splash he could. Harry stands back and watches on. Content to stay close to Charlie.

"Come back here. Stay close. There might be monsters out there." Charlie warned.

Murphy rushes back behind Charlie's legs. Charlie pulls a muesli-bar from his pocket. The crinkling sound catches Murphy's attention.

"Food."

"You want some?" Asked Charlie.

"Plea_se_." Looking up at Charlie.

Charlie breaks off a corner and gives it to him. Murphy chews and swallows wanting more.

"You too Harry." Breaking a piece away for him, "... No more for you Murphy... You know what your mother would say."

A large dog kennel guarded the upper lot.

"Shhh! ... There might be a dog inside." Warned Charlie.

Murphy approaches the hut cautiously, stopping short of the opening, he peered inside.

"Empty." Murphy barked disappointedly.

Seeing a large mound he scampers up it and slides down on the long wet green grass as though it were a slide. Harry climbed up and saw Murphy at the bottom calling out to him slide down. But Harry would have nothing to do with it.

"Why can't all little boys be like you Harry... You're the best... As for Murphy Brown... Get back up here you mongrel! ... By Crikey if your mother finds out!" Warned Charlie.

The instruction fell on deaf ears as Murphy ran off through the long grass to a creek that ran along the boundary.

"Harry... Frogs!" Called out Murphy getting Harry's attention.

Temptation finally got the better of Harry and he races off to join Murphy.

“Harry! ... Not you... Get out of there!”

But to no avail. Catching Murphy just as he was stepping into the shallow flowing creek.

“Don’t you even think about it Murphy Brown.” Warned Charlie.

But it was too late. Murphy sat down as though it were a paddling pool.

“Oh, for the love of God?” Charlie shook his head.

Harry stood on the bank and giggled.

“I give up Murphy Brown. Come on... Let’s get you two back.” Just as spits of rain begin to fall.

In fear of getting wet Harry runs off ahead to find shelter.

“Are you coming?” Asked Charlie walking away.

“*Wait for me!*” Called out Murphy not wanting to be left behind.

“What is your mother going to say when she sees you? Hmm?”

“*You’re in so_ much trouble.*” Said Harry laughing at him, “... *Catch me if you can.*” He challenges.

“Come back here you two!” Ordered Charlie.

The Giant Ogre had arrived. Whatever Charlie had planned for the afternoon was redundant. Along with it, his *will-to-live*. Looking up the stairwell, knowing the troubles were only about to begin.

“Up-up-up!” Charlie ordered the two wet urchins.

Tiny legs scampered up the stairs as though they were made of springs. Charlie followed as his were made of lead. Each step as though they were a stake through his heart. Until finally there were no more steps. No more stakes.

“Damn it.” He cursed. He was still alive.

“Who’s are these muddy foot prints over the floor!” The Ogre growled.

Murphy cowers beneath Charlie’s desk. Harry behind his mother.

The complaint falls on deaf ears.

“Charlie, I need to see you.” John called out.

“For the love of God!” Charlie dismissed the request knowing it was a waste of time, “...I’m not here... Leave a message.”

“Charlie, I need to see you.” The Ogre asked again.

“I’m still not here.” Repeated Charlie, hoping the Ogre had gotten the hint.

“I think he wants to see you.” Suggested Serena encouraging Charlie to go.

“You think?”

Knowing that once he stepped into the cave the Ogre would go on and on and on. If only for the sake of hearing the sound of his own voice.

“What’s up.” Asked Charlie standing the cave opening.

“Babble, babble, babble... Blah, blah, blah... Babble, babble, babble. Blah, blah, blah... Blah, blah, blah... Babble, blah, babble, babble...” The Ogre babbled on, and on, and on, “... Oh and one more thing... Babble, babble, babble, blah, blah, blah...”

“I’ll get onto it right away.” Stroked Charlie, returning to his desk hoping that would be the last he would hear from the Ogre for the rest of the day.

Like a visit to the dentist, the pain was over.

A loud clap of thunder rumbled outside. Charlie fashioned a cave beneath his desk for the boys where they could find shelter from the storm and sanctuary from the Giant Ogre.

Harry stuck his head around the corner.

"Can you see him?" Murphy asked.

"Must be asleep... Go and have a look." Harry replied.

"No... You have a look."

"Scaredy-cat." Challenged Harry.

Murphy crawled on hands and legs. Weaved his way around a large pot plant and stuck his nose into the opening of the Ogre's den.

The Giant Ogre catches Murphy from the corner of his eye.

"What do you want! ..." Snapped the Ogre, drooling saliva from the corner of his mouth like a rabid dog, *"... Grr-rrr-rrr_!"*

"Gasp! Ekh!" Yelped Murphy hurrying back to Harry peering through the partitioning.

"It's awake! It's awake! The Ogre is awake! ... Don't go in there. He eats little boys!"

Quaked Murphy cowering beside Harry.

"What are you two up too down there?" Asked Charlie.

"Who wants some toast?" Charlie asked.

Harry and Murphy follow him into the kitchen. Just then Serena noticed Murphy.

"What happened to him?"

"He kind-a got away on me." Charlie offered a meager defense.

"Oh_you're trouble Murphy." Giggled Harry.

"Murphy Brown..." Examining the half-drenched boy, not knowing where to begin, *"...Right, off to the shower..."* Leading him to a bathroom.

"Just you and me then Harry..." Charlie inserts two thick bread slices into the toaster, *"... What you want on yours? ... Butter?"*

"Butter... I like butter."

The sound of the shower filters down the hall way soon followed by escaping footprints. And the sight of a small naked boy making a run for freedom. Hiding behind Charlie's legs.

"Come here you!" Serena commands him, drying him down with a towel.

"Here, put on your clothes." Serena struggles to restrain him fidgeting.

"I don't like clothes!" Murphy protested.

"Look at Harry and his red bandana, doesn't he look smart?" Said Serena.

"Yeah_... We need to talk about that." Remarked Charlie.

"He looks adorable." Aimee weighed in.

"It ain't right..." Said Charlie, *"... He looks like some metro-male."*

The toaster popped up. Catching the boy's attention.

"Okay, a piece for you and piece for you and a piece for me. Try to chew this time okay."

"Gulp-gulp-gulp-gulp-swallow." Murphy looked up for another piece.

Harry on the other hand chewed and chewed and chewed and chewed before finally swallowing his piece. Charlie cut two more soldiers and handed a strip to each boy. It would have been insanity to have expected a different outcome.

"Gulp-gulp-swallow." Murphy looking up for another piece.

"I give up Murphy Brown." Charlie returned to his desk.

Two disciples follow in his wake.

“You two play under there, I have work to do... Apparently.” Staring at a to-do list.

Exhausted from their adventures and buttered toast in their bellies, two little boys had taken a nap beneath Charlie’s desk.

The Giant Ogre asleep in his den opposite.

Charlie kept watch.

“*Buzz-buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz-buzz... Buzz-buzz-buzz.*” An alarm sounded on Charlie’s cellphone, reminding he needed to catch his bus.

Alerting the Giant Ogre to Charlie’s imminent departure.

“I need to see you before you go.” The Ogre barked from the den if only for his own wanton pleasure.

“I’m not here.” Said Charlie pulling on his jacket.

“I need to see you before you go.” The Ogre summoned again.

“Still not here... Leave a message.” Parroted Charlie from the doorway, “... See you tomorrow, Murphy Brown. You behave yourself okay.” Ruffling his hair.

Charlie made his escape. Sneaking quietly down the stairs.

The day outside was grey and bleak. It would be a long, wet walk to the bus station. Strides lengthened and the pace quickened the further he got from the office.

The Ogre would have to wait until tomorrow.

“Come on you.” Serena called out to Murphy.

“I’m off, I’ll catch you tomorrow.” Sticking her head into the cave to find the Ogre asleep in the massage chair oblivious to her presence.

She headed down the stairs.

“In the car you.” She ordered Murphy, closing the door behind him.

The day ended much as it had started. Dark grey clouds spitting rain. A windscreen speckled with tear drops. Long black sticks wiped back and forth. And back again. Murphy crawled onto the front seat beside his mother.

“Are those whiskers on your nose? ...” Looking at your furry ears, “...I would swear you were a puppy dog.”

“*Woof-woof! ...*” Barked Murphy, “... *I am a puppy dog!*”

Pressing his wet snout against the fogging window. Murphy looked about for the Giant Ogre. Suddenly, lightning flashes, followed moments later the rumble of growling thunder.

Murphy looked to his mother.

“*Woof-woof...*” Barked Murphy, “... *It’s the mean Giant Ogre! He eats little boys!*”

“It’s only thunder you silly-nilly...” Stroking his small furry head.

Murphy catches sight of Harry on a led trotting to the car before leaping onto the back seat.

“Good boy Harry... *You’re the best.*” His mother encouraged him.

“*Woof-woof!! ... See you tomorrow, Harry!*” Barked Murphy Brown to his Huckleberry friend...



BANG! BANG! BANG!

“Now, is the only Reality.
Everything else is your Imagination.”

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ A banging noise sounds.

Awakening Larry from a strange dream. Now slipping from his grasp. A naked woman lay beside him. Infomercials play on a television. Sleeping bodies litter a beer-stained lounge like rag dolls. Limp and impotent. A pungent odor hung in the air. A slice of pizza droops over an armrest like a Dali painting.

Larry tries to piece together the party that must have occurred.

‘Phil...’ He thought, *‘...Yeah... Phil was here... Or was he?’*

“Ahh! ...” Sunlight poked him in the eye.

Pulling a sheet up over his head only to suffocate in his own foul breath. The confinement becomes too much.

‘Gasp!’ He gasped like a breaching whale.

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ The banging sounds again, like gun shots.

An eerie feeling of déjà vu came over him. As though a ghost had walked through him. Goosebumps erupt over his skin. He feels a pain in his chest and wonders if he is having a heart attack. Grasping his chest he breathed heavily and the sensation fades.

“Never again.” He vowed.

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ Shaking the door on its hinges.

Startling him he sits upright on the side of the bed. Elbows on knees, hands cup his head as though it had been severed.

“Coffee... Need coffee.”

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ The knocking persisted.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” Larry called out looking about for spectacles.

Hinging them on his nose. The room comes into focus. Flaccid bodies lay about the floor. Some entangled with others. Four feet protrude from the side of a couch beneath a blanket.

“Jesus.” Scratching his head.

‘Bang! Bang! Bang!’ A fist pounded again.

“I’m coming! I’m coming! ... Hold your horses!” He calls back, he shuffled to the door.

Stepping over bottles and bodies he peers through a peep hole to see the last person in the world he wanted to see.

“Fuck! Kowalski!”

His landlord.

“I can hear you Larry... Open up!” The Kowalski ordered from the other side.

Latches sound and Larry wedges his face in the opening.

“Mister Kowalski...” Larry began.

“Your two weeks overdue Larry... I’m not running a charity here.”

“I understand Mister Kowalski... It’s just that I’m *between jobs*.”

“Don’t try to fancy-talking me, You’re unemployed Larry.”

“I have an interview this afternoon.” Larry lied.

“You better have, or you’ll be out on the street. You hear me, Larry?”

“Yes, Mister Kowalski, I hear you. I promise.”

“You have one week to get your shit together, and another thing...”

“Oh what’s that Mister Kowalski?”

“I had complaints from the neighbors about the noise last night.” Trying to peer into the room. A scent whiffs beneath his nose. Nostril’s flare as they took in the sweet pungent odor.

“(Sniff-sniff) ... Is that drugs I smell Larry? You know I don’t tolerate drugs on the premises. You hear me?”

“No, no, not me, Mister Kowalski.”

“Keep it that way Larry... You have one week. (Sniff-sniff).” Kowalski’s nostril’s twitch.

“One week... I’ll have it all for you. I promise, Mister.” Quickly closing the door.

‘Phew.’ Larry sighed, leaning against the door if only to keep himself upright.

And he wondered how he was going to come up with the money. He had been fired from the last job for not showing up. Thanks to Phil and one of his late-night parties.

Just then his cellphone rang. It was Phil.

“Hey Phil... Not much... You... A job? ... Man, your timing couldn’t be more perfect... Stop by your apartment? ... Yeah sure, when? ... Now? I’ll start walking... See you soon... (Click).” The cellphone goes dead.

Larry charted a course to the bathroom. Only to find someone sleeping in the bathtub. Then sees himself in the mirror. A five-day growth on his chin. Sunken dark eyes. Unkempt hair.

“Jesus, you look like shit.” He informed his reflection.

“You can talk.” His reflection replied.

Larry clambers down several flights of stairs, steps quietly past Kowalski’s door and finds himself on the pavement where children are playing hopscotch and skip rope. Four brothers from the hood cruise slowly by in a pink Cadillac eye him up and down as though to intimidate him. Anxiously, he watches them drive on. Throwing a rucksack over his shoulder he strolled down the street without looking back.

Phil had suddenly become the answer to his prayers. It would be a long walk to his apartment, but it would be worth the pain. Larry lit a cigarette and filled his lungs.

He felt alive.

Two blocks away.

He picked up the pace. Strides lengthened. About him, people went about their lives oblivious to the poverty-stricken wretch in their midst. It was temporary. Everything is eventual some wise ass once said. Buddha perhaps.

Wait long enough and a roast duck will fly in your mouth, they said.

Larry was still waiting. Today could be his lucky day.

One block away.

Larry waits at the intersection for the little green man appeared on the other side. From nowhere, a blue and white squad car stopped in front of him. A patrolman eyed him up and down suspiciously. Warily. As if he was carrying.

‘Hurry up man.’ Larry takes a hefty drag on the cigarette.

‘Woop! Woop!’ Sirens come to life, lights flash, startling him.

And the squad car races across the congested intersection.

‘Blip-Blip-Blip-Blip-Blip-Blip...’ The little green man stuttered, alerting the blind to cross.

Ahead on a five-story apartment building. Phil's place.

Larry looked up at the brick building, Concrete steps lead up to the front door.

'*Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!*' Pressing a buzzer he waited for the resident to respond.

A speaker voice echoed back at him.

"Who is it?"

"Phil, it's me... Larry."

"Come on up man!" Instructed a chirpy voice.

'*Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!*' A buzzer sounded unlocking the front door.

Larry stepped inside.

Residents eye Larry warily as though he were a drug dealer wondering how he had gotten in. Larry ignored them and entered a lift and presses a button. The lift climbed upward and comes to a halt. Stepping out he enters a hallway a far cry from the scuffed wooden floorboards and torn wallpaper of his building.

Drug dealing paid well.

But it came at a cost. Prison time. On the upside it had its merits. Free board, and medical. And three-square meals a day.

Larry knocked on a door.

'*Bang! Bang! Bang!*' Rousing a rash of goosebumps over his body.

Suddenly, the door springs open, and Phil stands before him wearing boxers. Rubbing a hand under his nose as though something was irritating it.

A woman giggles from a bed room.

"Larry! You cock... (*Sniff!*) ... Come on in! Come on in! ...(*Sniff!*) ..." Phil ushered Larry inside, "... Man, what a party last night... (*Sniff!*)"

"You remember it?"

"You don't?"

"Not really... I must have blacked out..." Admitted Larry, "... What time did you leave?"

"About three or four... Yeah, you'd passed out alright. I left you sleeping with Alexia."

"*Alexia?* Who's Alexia?"

"Whoa man... You seriously don't remember?"

"Nah man... Not a thing... Hey, I'm not interrupting you, am I?"

"Nah-nah-nah, we're good... It's only Sarah... Sarah! Come say hello to Larry."

"That's okay man."

"Sarah! ... Get your ass out here, Larry is here!" Phil hollers to a bed room.

Sarah appears at the door. Naked from head to toe. Leaving nothing to Larry's imagination. Other than a lucid fantasy.

"Hi Larry." Sarah purrs seductively.

"Hi Sarah." Replied Larry timidly.

"Drink?" Interrupts Phil.

"I'm hanging out for a coffee. Some prick drank mine."

"Knock yourself out... I'll just finish this line."

"Christ man... It's eleven in the morning."

"You my mother now?"

"Knock yourself out man."

Larry heads to the kitchen.

“Let me help you.” Insists Sarah following him.

“I’m good.”

“Don’t be silly. Sit.” She commands him.

He takes a stool at the bench and watches as a beautiful naked Goddess made him coffee.

“How do it take it?” She asked.

“Black. And sweet.”

“Just the way I like my men.” She giggled.

Larry tried to look away, but he could not. It would be rude.

Sarah places a mug of steaming black coffee in front of him and pressed her warm body against him suggestively. Her hand touches his leg. Her hand strokes his leg. She kisses him, his hand fondles a breast.

She kneeled and looked up at him.

“Oh my God! ...” He whimpered hoping Phil was not about to walk in on them, “... What about Phil?”

“Don’t worry about him, he’ll be out for a while.” Taking him by the hand to the bedroom.

“One moment...” Reaching for the coffee and taking an overdue swallow, “... (*Sigh*) ... God that’s nice.”

“Better than this?” Sarah asked, turning about presenting herself to him.

“Oh Lord... Give me strength.”

Phil lay comatose on the couch. Staring up at the ceiling. His arms splayed like Christ. Was he dead? Sarah pulled Larry by the hand and leads him to the bedroom. Closing the door behind them. Then lays on the bed and coaxes Larry to join her.

Poking his head into the lounge only to discover Phil had disappeared. Noises sounded from the kitchen. Larry shuffled awkwardly into the kitchen to find Phil drinking his coffee and swiping his cellphone.

“Hey.” Said Larry feeling guilty.

“Took one for the team, eh? ... Thanks mate.” Remarked Phil indifferent to the liaison.

“You don’t mind?” Remarked Larry becoming confused.

“She’s a bloody nympho mate... You did well to stayed on for eight seconds.” As though she was a wild rodeo ride.

“Don’t know how you do it. Most guys dream of having that... Now I’m not so sure man.”

“Get that into you.” Pushing a breadboard with a thin line of white powder in front of him.

Larry looked at the clock on the wall. 11:47AM.

“Close enough.” Reaching for the tightly rolled Benjamin. A week’s rent.

Reminding him of the reason for his visit.

“*Sni_ff_!*” Larry took a hit, “... Whoa! (*Sniff!*)”

“Good, eh? I haven’t cut that lot yet.”

Larry had no response. He could not feel his face. Eyes stare vacantly into space. Warm arms embrace his body. Sarah wrapped her arms about him. Pressing her naked body against his back.

‘*Oh shit! She was back.*’ Thought Larry.

“Steady down girl, give the lad a break...” Instructed Phil, “... Go get dressed, we have visitors coming soon.” Checking his watch.

“Visitors?” Asked Larry.

'Bzzzzzzzzz _!'

"It's open." Larry instructed.

The two gentlemen disappear from view. Larry opened the door and poked his head into the hallway. Vacant. Leaving the door slightly ajar returned to find Phil pouring four stiff vodkas over ice into craved crystal glasses.

And pushes a glass towards Larry.

"Get that down you."

"Cheers man."

"Remember... No speaking, unless spoken to."

"Got it... How much does it pay? ... This job? Driving."

"Get it right, there's ten-G in it for you."

"Fuck me? Ten thousand dollars?"

"I'll leave that to Sarah... Speaking of which."

Sarah appears wearing a short red silk dress. Stretching arms to the air, the dress lifts to reveal she was not wearing any panties.

"Oh Jesus Sarah... We have visitors. Go put some underwear on."

The words fell on deaf ears, as she snorted the remaining line.

"Sni_ff_! Sniff! ... Sniff!"

Larry takes another swallow and felt it to burn to his stomach. Ten grand. That was year's rent and then some. This was his lucky day. He could not wait to see the look on Kowalski's when he paid him.

A knock sounds at the door.

'Bang! Bang! Bang!'

Followed by foreign voices.

"In here boys! ..." Phil called out, "... Now remember, say nothing. Let me do the talking. No questions okay... Ten Grand can be yours if you play your cards right."

"Got it." Larry falls silent.

Sarah reaches for a mug from an upper cupboard. The dress lifts with her exposing her perfect ass. Larry stared captivated by the perky flesh-colored melons. Behind him, he feels the chill of two dark shadows towering over him. Their attention also drawn to Sarah's ass.

"Gentlemen... This is Larry... He's your driver. The best in the game." Over selling him.

Turning about Larry discovers two thick-set gentlemen eyeing him over.

"Larry, that's Igor on the left, Viktor on the right."

"Hi."

"Ah-mm." Coughed Phil reminding Larry to stay quiet.

"He doesn't look like much... You sure he's up to it?" Igor asked, leaning over as though to sniff him.

Squeezing his arm for muscle.

"Best there is... You all set for the *drug* run this afternoon?" Phil slyly winked at Victor to suggest Larry knew nothing.

"Yeah. Yeah... All set for the *drug* run." Nodded Victor grinning.

"Good. Good. Drink up... Cheers!" Salutes Phil grinning pleased with himself.

The Russians scull the vodka as though it were water and turn to leave.

Larry watches them walk away only to see them stop and turn-about.

"Are you coming?" Igor asked staring at Larry.

“Now?”

“Yeah now...” Informed Phil, “... Follow their instructions to the letter. As if your life depends on it. I’ll have ten grand waiting for you when you get back tonight... We good?”

“We’re good. Let’s do it!” Larry sculls the last of his shout.

“Come on you!” Ordered Viktor.

Larry felt like Woody Allen sandwiched between two King Kongs as the lift descended. Stopping at floors, only to have residents take one look at the men holding Larry hostage. And decide to catch another lift.

Larry scratches his crotch to relieve the irritation.

“What’s wrong with you?” Igor noticed.

“Sarah.”

“Hmm!” Grinned the two men, stepping back from him.

Lift doors open and the trio make their way to a waiting black sedan.

“You’re driving.” Igor throws Larry the keys catching them in one hand.

“Whoa... Nice car.”

Igor and Viktor scan the street for suspicious people. Just then the pink Cadillac from earlier that day cruises pass. Catching sight of Larry. And the two Russians. Staring defiantly back at them. Bulges beneath their jackets suggested they were not intimidated.

The car speeds away bellowing a plume of exhaust in its wake.

“Friends of yours?” Asked Igor wondering.

“Not really.”

“You can drive? Yes?”

“Of course.”

“Get in. Drive.” Ordered Viktor.

Igor sat up front. Viktor in the back. A large dark canvas bag sat on the seat beside him. Larry adjusts the rear mirror. Secures his seat belt. Turned the key to feels the power vibrate through the steering wheel. Throwing the stick into drive, he indicates.

Catching Igor’s attention who turns back at Viktor.

“Ty uveren v etom parne? (*You sure about this guy?*)” Speaking in Russian.

“Yesli Fil govorit, chto on khorosh. On khoroshiy. pust' vodit. (*If Phil says he good. He good. Let him drive.*)”

“Bez lishnikh kontsov. (*No loose ends.*)” Instructed Igor.

“Ya sam pozabochus' ob etom. (*I’ll take care of it myself.*)” Responded Viktor.

The words were gibberish to Larry.

“Which way.” Larry asked.

“Forward. No questions...” Rebuked Igor, “... The less you know the better.”

“Okay.” Larry focuses on the road ahead.

“Drive... Faster.”

“I’m already doing the limit.” Protested Larry, “... Don’t want to be pulled over by a cop before we start, do we?”

“Don’t worry about the cops. We’ll deal with them. You just drive... Ogranicheniye skorosti? Verite etomu parnyu? (*Speed limit? You believe this guy?*)” Chuckled Igor.

Larry sees Viktor in the rear mirror shaking his head chuckling.

“Your money. I’m just the driver.” Said Larry.

“Vodit' mashinu... Just Drive.”

“On ponyatiya ne imeyet? (*He has no idea?*)”

“Ponyatiya ne imeyu. (*Not a clue.*)”

Block after block, mile after mile. Bridge after bridge. Larry was lost. But continued to point the sedan in the direction he was told. A left here, a right there.

They could be in Texas for all he knew.

“Stop! ... Pull in beside that bank.” Igor instructs, pointing to a vacant parking space.

“Bank?” Questioned Larry suspiciously.

“Yeah... We need to make a withdrawal to pay for the drugs.” Said Igor.

“You don't think we carry fifty grand in cash on us, do you?” Said Viktor.

“I suppose not.”

“Keep the engine running... Don't want anyone jump us, okay?”

“Gotcha.”

“Keep an eye out for cops... Three toots if you see one okay.”

“Sure... But why?”

“Too many questions Larry... Cops are on the take. They get a sniff of this, and they'll want their cut... Your cut. You wouldn't want that... Would you Larry?”

“No. Of course not.”

“Take this.” Handing him a Glock.

“Hey, I don't know how to use these?”

“You watch TV show... You know how to use...” Viktor taps Larry on the head with the barrel, “...Petsi (*Patsy.*)”

“Stay here until we come... We know where you live.” Igor lied.

“I'll be here.” Said Larry.

Viktor pulled his cumbersome frame from the sedan together with the large empty canvas bag. Igor chambered a bullet and holstered the gun beneath his arm. Getting out of the car, he looked up and down the street. It was quiet. A few cars cruised up and down. They had timed it perfectly. Not a guard to be seen. Security cameras point their becks in all direction, but them. Igor gives Viktor a nod to get moving. The men enter the bank foyer, pulling their menacing revolvers from beneath their jackets and Igor fires a thunderous shot into the ceiling.

Causing plaster to crumble and rain over cowering customers.

“Everybody down... This is robbery! ...You! ...” Viktor points to a Bank Manager in a dark suit, “... Fill bag! ... Now! You have two minutes... Any funny business I'll blow your fucken head off! ... Understood!”

“Everyone... Hands out front where I see them... Understood?”

“No guard?” Questioned Viktor.

“Probably taking piss. I'll check.” Informed Igor and casually wanders to the restroom.

Moments later a loud gunshot sounded.

“Boom!”. Igor casually returned pleased with himself.

“My bad, he was taking crap. He won't be an issue.”

“Hurry up... You have two minutes!” Bellowed Viktor to the Bank Manager clearing the registers.

“Have him open vault. If he refuses... Shoot him.” Igor instructed coldly, allowing the Manager to hear him.

“My pleasure.”

“You heard him! ... The vault!” Ordered Viktor pointing the pistol at the Managers face.

Larry waits anxiously. Hearing the two muffled shots from inside wondered what was happening. Reaching for his cellphone dialed Phil’s number. Frantically looking to the entrance of the bank.

“Pick up you bastard. Pick up.” His heart racing at thousand beats per second.

‘Click.’

“That was quick!” Answered Phil.

“You bastard! They’re robbing a bank!”

“A bank? I thought they were doing a drug run...” Phil lied, “... You okay? Where are you?”

“I’m still at the bank you prick!”

“You’re still there?”

“Yeah, they’re inside... I heard shots!”

“Probably just warning shots... Don’t move. I’m on my way...” He lied again, “... Where are you?”

“Dunno, I can’t see any street signs.”

“What’s the name of the Bank?”

“Wells-Fargo.”

“Fuck man, that could be anywhere. Stay put. Don’t upset them. Just do as they say... And you may get out of this alive.”

“Alive? What the fuck have you gotten me into... Phil?... *(Click)*... Phil? ... You there? ... Phil? ... *(Dial tone)* ... You bastard! I’ll fucken get you for this!” Larry screamed down the disconnected line.

‘Boom!’ Another shot is heard coming from within the bank.

Bank doors open and the two Russians walk out, appearing to be in no rush. Viktor’s bag now heavier than before. And he casually climbs into the rear of the sedan.

“That went better than I thought.” Remarked Igor brushing the Bank Manager’s brain tissue from his jacket sleeve.

“Drive... Slowly.” Instructed Viktor, looking back through the rear window, “... Three blocks to the underpass.”

“Didn’t think you would stick around kid... You got balls.”

“Couldn’t exactly go anywhere. You know where I live.”

“Ha! ... The fuck we do... I just messing with you...” Igor jokes, “... Just up here... Stop under underpass behind white van... We switch vehicles there.”

“You’ve thought this through.” Said Larry.

“Not the first time we robbed a bank... Did Phil not tell you?”

“Fuck Phil.”

“Steady down petal... You will get what is coming to you.” Igor looks to Viktor grinning.

“Pull in here.” Pointing to a spot behind the white van.

Larry pulled the car to a halt. Relieved it was over.

“Viktor... Why don’t you take the bag to the van... While I fix the kid up... Larry, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Well the thing is Larry... This is where we part ways.”

“Good... Give me my ten grand and you won’t ever see me again.”

“Oh I can assure you have that right.” Pulling his gun on Larry.

“Hey, what the fuck is going on?”

“Phil sold you out Larry... How you say, *dog-eat-dog* world... No? ... Last thing I need is loose ends... If you know what I mean.”

“I promise I won’t tell a soul... You can keep my money... Don’t shoot me.” Larry begged for his life, pulling his gun from beneath his Tee.

Igor did not flinch an inch.

“You going to shoot me Larry? ...” He said calmly, “...I dare you too.”

‘*Click! Click! Click!*’ Larry pulled the trigger, but nothing happened.

“You didn’t think I give you a loaded gun now? ...” Igor chuckled, “... Any last words?”

“Yeah...”

“What’s that?”

“I fucked you daughter Alexia. (*chuckle*).”

Larry never heard Igor’s reply.

‘*Bang! Bang! Bang!*’ Igor fired three shots into Larry’s fragile body...

“*Gasp!*” Larry sits upright, grasping his chest. Fingers fumble for non-existent wounds.

Finding himself back in his apartment. Limp rag dolls litter the floor. A naked woman beside him.

“What the fuck?” He responds disoriented and confused.

‘*Bang! Bang! Bang!*’ Kowalski’s fist pounds at the door...

Shaking it on its hinges...



MAXINE

“I saw that You were Perfect,
And I Loved You.
Then I saw that you were not Perfect,
And I Loved you even More.”

A piano played from the corner of the bar. Rhythmic fingers tiptoe across ivory keys. Maxine tapped her foot in time with the Gershwin tune. Taking her mind back to the swinging-twenties. She had almost forgotten Valarie had abandoned her.

And for a moment, she felt... happy.

Swallowing the last of her drink stared into the cocktail glass. Men came and went, buying her drinks. Making flirtatious small talk. But she knew what they wanted. What all men wanted. The next morning, they would be strangers again. Tonight, she was not in the mood to become strangers.

Across the room she catches a man looking at her. A well to do gentleman. A little older than she. A businessman she pondered.

“Hmm.” She mused.

Corners of his mouth offer a subtle smile. Kind eyes convey a pleasure at seeing her. There is a woman by his side. A closeness that suggested she was his wife. Or girlfriend perhaps.

‘*What are all the good ones taken?*’ She thought sighing, offering faint smile in reply.

Maxine stirs the empty blue cocktail with the straw. And contemplates going home.

The warmth of the bar held her captive a little longer.

“Can I buy you another?” Asked a confident voice behind her.

She looked about to discover the gentleman that had glanced at her. He was better looking than from a far. Maxine fidgeted on the stool. Fingers play with her hair.

“Only if your wife doesn’t mind.”

“Excuse me? ...” He looked back at his group, “... Oh, no... I’m not married...” Holding up his wedding finger, “... That is my sister... *Francisca.*”

“Oh, how embarrassing.” Maxine blushed.

“Don’t be... That’s very respectful. I appreciate that... Now, about that drink.”

“I’m not sure... I don’t know your name.”

“You can call me...” He hesitates as though he were making one up, “... Luca.”

“Luca? Really?”

“Hm... It’s Italian... My parents immigrated here when I was five.” Extending his hand.

She takes it in hers. So warm, so soft. So large. And gently squeezes it. Was she dreaming? Where was Valarie to pinch her or steal him away from her.

Even his name made her melt like chocolate inside.

“Ah-hm... And do *you* have a name?” Luca smiled pulling her from her daydream.

“I think so... It’s ah... Ah...” Becoming tongue tied, “... It’s ah... *Maxine.*” She finally remembered.

“Hm...” Luca looked at her suspiciously, “... Can I get you that drink. What was it...” He inspects the glass, “... May I? ...” Raising the glass to his nose, “... *A Blue Hawaiian?*”

“Very good... You know your cocktails.”

“I tended bars in my misspent youth... Barman, my good man...” Catching the barman’s attention, “... Two Blue Hawaiians if you please.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re most welcome... *Maxine*... You come here often?”

“Most Saturdays with Valarie.”

“Valarie?”

“My girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Not like that... What is it with men? ... Sorry I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Ha... I have to agree with you. It’s a guy thing... Forgive us.”

“I’ll try.”

“Where is this *wingman* of yours... Or is it wing-person these days?” Looking about for her.

“She took off with a guy named *Charlie*... Probably married with half dozen kids by now.”

“She’s a fast worker then.”

“Yeap... That’s Valarie. Next week it will be someone else.

“And she left you all alone.”

“Not the first time... I haven’t seen you in here before.”

“I come in now again... I travel a lot... Business. If you know what I mean.”

“Must be nice to travel about.”

“Not really... Hotel rooms. Living out of a suitcase most of the year... But I like coming back here. It’s a nice bar. Something about the ambiance... The *people*.”

Was the comment directed at her, thought Maxine.

“Yeah... It’s one of mine too.”

A barman places two blue cocktail glasses before them. Sugar frosted about the rim. Short pink straw rest against the sides.

“Cheers.” Luca raises his glass to hers.

‘*Cling.*’ Tapping them gently together as though they were kissing.

He takes a sip of the sweet and sour concoction.

“Hmm_ Just as I remember it... Haven’t had one in years... Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m being rude... But I must get back to the group... It’s been nice talking to you.”

“And you too... Thanks for the drink.” Raising her glass in appreciation.

Luca pulled a plain white card from a vest jacket pocket and handed it to Maxine.

Luca Pacioli

“I don’t usually hand out my card, but I’d really like to see you again... Call me... We should talk more.”

“Talking is good.” Maxine grinned watching Luca walked away.

Luca’s cologne hung in the air like a ghost haunting her. Hoping it would possess her and carry her away with him. Francisca glances over her shoulder and glared at her. A warning perhaps to keep away. Pursing her lips in disapproval before turning her back on her.

“Bitch.” Muttered Maxine under her breath.

Luca looked over to Maxine just as she mouthed the words. She smiled, hoping he had not noticed. Smiling he raised his glass. Perhaps chivalry was not dead she thought. Was she batting out of her league? What could he possibly see in her? Sighing heavily, she savored the name on the card and the bar and people faded into the background.

(Bump.) A man bumping into her brings her back to the room.

“Sorry about that... Let me buy you a drink.” The man offered.

“I’m fine thank you.” Fending off him off.

“I’m Rick. People call me Ricky.”

“I’m... Paige...” Thinking of any name but her own, “...Thank you Ricky. You be careful next time, okay?”

“You sure I can’t but you a drink?”

“I’m good thank you...” Looking at the intoxicated young man.

Sliding off the stool Maxine towered over the man. If it was a man.

“It’s not me... It’s you.” She broke their fleeting relationship.

Noticing Luca and his group of friends had left, Maxine slipped the card inside her bra close to her heart. A place no one find it that evening. It was getting late. And time to head home.

A white Uber pulled to the curbed and she climbed in. The passing streets outside became a blur. Her heart raced. Perhaps it was the cocktails. Perhaps it was because, she was a hopeless romantic.

‘Who are you fooling.’ She told herself.

She had been burnt a hundred times, and then some. Tomorrow he would have forgotten about her. Moved onto the next woman sitting in some bar. Drinking some exotic cocktail.

“Oh well... It was fun while it lasted.” She grinned writing off the brief encounter.

“What that Miss?” The driver asked, eyeing her in the rear mirror.

“Nothing. Sorry... Just talking to myself.

“Very good. Very good.”

The Uber climbed up a long winding road.

“Twenty-three The Crescent please... You need to go around. It’s a one-way street.”

“Yes-yes... Very good.”

Maxine pulled herself from the comfort of the warm interior.

“Thanks driver.”

“Good evening, Miss.”

She watched the car drive away and around a corner from sight. Chased by a cool Wellington southerly breeze. A city of lights shone below. A distant towering apartment building catches her eye. And for a moment she fantasized another life.

A falling star race across the sky. A silly notion passes through her head.

“Oh, how I wish.” She wished closing her eyes.

When she opened them again, the star was gone.

As was the Uber.

Standing beneath a street light, she looked up to the shrouded path to her flat. No lights at the windows. Hoping Valarie had gone back to Charlie’s place. She would have the place to herself.

A key fumbled in the lock. Flicking a light switch, the room fills with light. She sees two wine glasses on the coffee table. Clothing strewn about the place like a teenager's bedroom.

"Oh fuck." She muttered.

Killing the light she headed to her bedroom and kicked off her heels.

"Oh... That's nice."

Slipping out of her dress places Luca's card on the side table beside the bed.

As if it were a memento of what could have been.

"Yeah right... Like that was ever going to happen. *Ha.*" She chuckled falling onto the bed.

With her mind awash with blue cocktails.

Subtle groans filter from the room next door. Soon followed by a bed creaking. Rhythmically banging against a wall. Rousing her own erotic fantasy of a tall dark handsome stranger. She finds herself whimpering in unison with Valarie and Charlie.

"Ah_, ah_, ah_." She shuttered as waves of ecstasy came over her, "... Damn you Luca."

Spooning her pillow as if it him she falls asleep.

Eyes open to a morning lit room. Only to shut close again. Her mind spinning. Feeling as though her world had been turned upside down and she did not know why. Pulling a sheet over her head to defy the day outside. But the more she tried, the day fought back. She fidgeted. Rolling from side of the bed to the other, only to find it cold and empty.

Much like her life, thirty-two and half and single.

She stared at the ceiling. What had happened to the knight in shining armor that would save her and take her away to his castle in the sky. But right now she felt like The Princess and the Pea.

"Ahh!" She protested, dragged herself from the bed.

Pulling on a pink fluffy bath robe, she shuffled bare feet to the bathroom, hoping it was not occupied.

Looking in the mirror at what she thought was her reflection.

"Who's Luca?" The woman in the mirror asked.

"No body." Maxine replied.

"Didn't sound like no body last night in bed." The mirror pointed out.

"You shouldn't be listening... Anyway, it's never going to happen." Said Maxine brushing her teeth.

"Why not?"

"*(Spit!)* ... Because isn't meant to be."

"Says who?"

"Me."

"You're impossible Maxine." Informed the mirror misting over.

Returning the bedroom she picked up the card and inspected it.

"*Luca Pacioli.*"

The name conjured visions of his face. Nostrils flare as if to inhale the remnants of his cologne. She imagined herself his arms. A warm glow came over her only to be doused by a vision of his sister appearing from nowhere.

'*Keep away from him.*' The wicked sister cackled pointing a claw like finger at her.

"You can have him." Maxine informed the wicked sister.

Tossing the card to the bin. She stared at it laying there. A feeling of guilt comes over her. Perhaps it was an angel whispering in her ear. Perhaps it was her conscience. Retrieving the card from the bin she placed it gently on the side table.

“Luca can wait... Two can play at this game.” She dismissed.

Heading to the kitchen Maxine discovers a man sitting at the table munching on toast, slurping coffee.

“Hello... You must be Maxine.” The man announced calmly as though he were a guest.

“You must be Simon.” She played with him.

“I’m Charlie... Who’s Simon?”

“Sorry... I get all of Valarie’s boyfriends mixed up.”

“She has a lot?” Charlie asked concerned.

“I’m just messing with Charlie.”

“Ha! ... Very good.” He chuckled taking another bite of toast.

Pouring herself a cup of tea takes a chair opposite and examines him closely. Charlie feels eyes burning into him.

He looked over to Maxine.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, no... Just wondering what makes men *tick*.”

“Ah_ well... I’ll let you into a little secret Maxine... If you promise not to tell anyone.” Charlie informed her.

“I promise... What is it?” Maxine leaned forward anxiously.

Charlie looked to the right, then to the left, to ensure no-one was listening.

Then to Maxine fixated on him.

“We *don’t*... *Tick*... What you see is what you get.”

“Oh.” She sits back disappointed.

“Now a woman on the other hand... Ha.” Shoving dry toast in his mouth to silence himself before he said too much.

Just then Valarie entered the kitchen.

“Morning Maxine... You’ve met Charlie... You want some toast?” Inserting slices into the toaster.

“I’m good.”

“Is there anyone...” Valarie’s eyes shift to the hall way.

Thinking Maxine had hooked a man and brought him home.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Oh... I thought I heard voices... Must have been the landlord.” Looking to the ceiling.

“No. Just me. There was one guy...” Reluctant to continue with Charlie listening on.

“Don’t mind me... Go on, what happened?” Eager to hear it from the other side.

“Well, like I say... There was this guy... Tall dark and handsome.”

Valarie looks disappointedly at Charlie.

“And...” Charlie asked intrigued.

“He gave me his card.”

“Oh, how could he? ... The *beast*...” Valarie puts her arms around her to give her a hug, “...*Men*.” Glaring at Charlie.

“What did I do?” Questioned Charlie retreating behind the newspaper.

“It’s not like that... He was... was...”

“Married... I knew it.”

“No... He’s not married... I don’t think... I’m sure... He’s not married. But he has a sister.”

It all came out wrong.

Charlie lowered the paper enough to catch sight of Maxine.

“Ooh_ the creep.”

“It’s not that. He was in town on business and his sister was with him. He couldn’t exactly, well... *Hit on me*... Now, could he? ... Bought me a drink and gave me his card.”

“What’s his name then? This tall dark stranger of yours?” Asked Valarie sounding envious.

“Luca... He’s Italian.”

“*Oh* _he sounds delicious.” Remarked Valarie.

“I can hear you.” Informed Charlie from behind the paper.

“You going to call him?”

“Don’t know... He’s out of my league.”

“No one is out of your league Maxine... You’re a beautiful young woman... There are a million men out there who gave their left testicle to be with you.” Charlie lowered the paper.

“That’s a romantic way of putting it Charlie... You’re so sweet.” Said Maxine.

“Give him a call... Put him out of his misery.” Suggested Charlie.

“I’ll do that... Thanks Charlie.”

“Well I better get going before Simon shows up.” Informed Charlie.

“I haven’t seen Simon for months.” Informed Valarie looking to Maxine suspiciously.

“Shit.” Maxine muttered being caught out.

“Thanks for the breakfast... Call me.”

“I don’t have your number... Got a Card?” Said Valarie

“Got a pen?”

“Here.” Handing it to Charlie scribbling a number on a corner of the newspaper and tears it away and passes it to Valarie.

Valarie examines the number. It looked authentic. It also looked familiar. Charlie suffocates her with a hug and kiss.

“Get a room.” Said Maxine looking away.

“Thanks for last night.” Said Charlie.

Valarie watched as he walked past the window from sight. Then dialed the number on her cellphone and waited for it to answer. She listened carefully as it went to voice mail. A frown comes over her face.

Then hung up.

Ripping the piece of paper into strips before tossing them onto the table.

“Hey... What are you doing?”

“*Sal’s Pizzas!* ... Thought I recognized the number...” Valarie chuckled, “... He won’t be showing his face at the Bar for a while if he values his left testicle.”

“Sorry Valarie...” Putting her arm around her, “... It could have been worse.”

“How?”

“It could have been *Taco-Bell*... Oh well, plenty more fish in the sea.”

“So, tell me about this Italian stallion of yours.” Valarie presses her.

“He’s not like that... He’s... different.”

“Oh_ my_ God_... You’re in love with him.” Exclaimed Valarie standing back enviously.

“No I’m not.” Maxine lied.

“Where’s this card? ... I don’t believe you?” Hurrying away to Maxine’s bedroom.

“Valarie!” Maxine pleaded to halt Valarie.

“Luca Paci_oli...” Valarie purred, “... Call him.”

“What? ... Now? ... It’s nine-thirty in the morning.”

“So?”

“I don’t want to sound... *Desperate*.” Exclaimed Maxine.

“It’s for you.” Valarie holds out her cellphone.

“Who is it? ...” Then the penny dropped, “... Please tell me you called him.”

“You can thank me later.”

“You bitch! ...” She mouthed, taking the cellphone from her, “...Maxine speaking.”
Answering as though nothing was a miss.

“I thought you called me?” Responded Luca.

“I did, I did... Just wanted you to know it was me.” Maxine burned her eyes into Valarie taking a seat to listen in, “... Piss off! ...” She warned, flicking her hand as though she were shooing away a fly, “... No, sorry, not you... Valarie.”

“Tell her I say hello and thank her for the call.”

“Luca says you’re a bitch and you should keep out of it.” Covering the mouth piece.

“Hope you made it home okay.”

“Yeah, I did... Thank you for the drink... You disappeared before I had a chance to say goodbye.”

“Francisca came down with a stomach complaint... Had to take her home... I would have loved to have stayed longer.”

‘That manipulative cow.’ Thought Maxine.

“Close, are you?” She asked.

“Not really... You know how some families are.”

“Not really... I’m an only child. I always wanted a baby sister... But...” Catching herself in time.

“Go on.” Luca encouraged her.

Valarie had become bored by the monotonous small talk.

“Here, give me my phone... Give. Give.” Valarie insists.

“I have to go. Valarie wants her phone back.”

“Call me back on yours... I’ll be waiting.”

“Okay... Give me five... Bye.”

“Bye.”

“Bor_ing! ... Drop the guy... No wonder he’s single. Probably lives with his parents in the basement and hand out cards to hook sucker fish at bars... Call your Ken doll... But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind... I’m having a shower.”

“There’s no hot water... Charlie used the last of it... Anyway, a cold shower will do you good.”

“I have a feeling about this one.”

“We all have feelings sweetheart... Scratch it and get over him. That reminds me... Have you seen Bob?”

"If you mean your *Battery-Operated-Boyfriend*... Then no... You checked the charger? I noticed the power bill was higher this month. Been a drought of men lately?" Maxine fired back.

"You're only jealous you don't have one."

"I prefer the real thing."

"Maybe Luca has the real thing."

"Leave Luca out of this."

"Okay, okay. But I'm telling you now. He'll have a girl in every port. You're no more than a booty call Maxine... I'm just saying."

"And you and Charlie... and Simon? And the guy before him, what was his name?"

"He had a name?"

"You're unbelievable Valarie... I'll be in my bedroom."

"You're wasting your time, Maxine."

Waving off Maxine off to go in search of Bob.

Closing the bedroom door behind her Maxine sits on the side of the bed dials Luca's number. Listening to it ring and ring and ring and ring and ring and ring... *'Click.'*

"Hello?"

"Hey." Recognizing his voice.

"Maxine, you called... I was beginning to think you weren't going to call."

"Sorry about that... Valarie has lost *Bob*... Don't ask."

"I don't think I want to... So how are you after the cocktails last night?"

"Surprisingly well... Better now hearing your voice."

'Shit! Why did I say that? You idiot.' Reprimanding herself.

"Oh... Maybe Valarie should have called earlier... Actually why did she call?"

"That's Valarie for you, always looking out for me... Like a big sister. Speaking of which, how is Francisca? Hope she's okay."

"She'll live. She can be a bit of a prima-donna at times... Looking out for her little brother."

"Oh that explains the look."

"Sorry about... Ignore her. Her bark is worse than her bite."

"I'll remember that."

"I was wondering when I could see you again..." Luca hesitated, *"... I'd really like to see you again."*

"Oh... Well... I free anytime really... This afternoon if you want to hang out for coffee somewhere."

"This afternoon? ... Why not... I know the perfect place... I'll pick you up. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, yeah of course."

"It's a little out of the way... But it's worth it."

"I like surprises."

"Then you're in for a treat... You have an address?"

"Oh yeah... It's ah..." Wondering if she should tell him, "... Twenty-three the Crescent..."

"Roseneath..." Luca completed the address, *"... I know it well... Say... One o'clock?"*

"I'll meet you outside."

"Wear your trainers."

“Oh, there’s a dress code?”

“Of course... This is no place for heels... See you at one then?”

“One... Bye.” Maxine hangs up and laid back on the bed staring at the ceiling as though it were a crystal ball. Was it happening too fast? Getting into a car of a man she barely knew.

The bed room door opens and Valarie stands filling the doorway.

“Were you eavesdropping?” Asked Maxine.

“I wouldn’t do that, would I? ...” Valarie lied, “... I just wanted to say I found Bob.” Tossing the black silicone phallic next to her.

“Get that thing away from be.” Fending the sex-toy away.

“Don’t knock ‘til you try it girl.”

“I’ll pass.” Distancing herself from *Bob*.

“So_?”

“So_ what?”

“So_, what did this Luca have to say for himself?”

“Well if you must know, we’re going for coffee this afternoon... Two o’clock.” Hoping to escape without Valarie knowing.

“I thought it was *one*?”

“You were listening! ... Get out of here. And take Bob with you!”

One o’clock and Maxine waits anxiously on the sidewalk dressed in a white Tee and faded blue jeans. Trainers on her feet. A lazy southerly breeze washed over her, cooling the heat of the summer sun that shone brilliantly over the Capital city.

Turquoise blue waters of the harbor glistened below.

Bus after bus, car after car passed, with no sign of Luca. She looked over her shoulder to Valarie watching on, concealed in the shrubbery hoping to catch sight of the Maxine’s man. She begins to wonder what was keeping him. Checking her cellphone for missed calls. She was about to give up and go back inside she heard the sound of an approaching car. From around a corner a small white car appears, with Luca behind the wheel.

Maxine waves out to catch his attention. Luca pulled the car awkwardly to the curb. Winding down a window, called out for Maxine to get in.

Then spied Valarie among the shadows of the path.

“Valarie!” He called out.

Valarie was speechless, stunned by Luca’s handsome looks.

‘*You-bitch.*’ She smiled raising a hand to wave.

“Sorry I’m late... It’s a loan car. My car is in the workshop.”

“No worries. You’re here now. Better get going before Valarie invites herself.”

“She is most welcome...”

“Just drive! We can lose her at the lights if we’re lucky.”

“*Eh?*”

“You’re not an axe murderer, are you?” She looked at him, perhaps it was too late.

“Weekends are my days off.”

“Oh that’s a relief.”

“So where is this place?”

“That would be telling... But if you must know...” Luca pointed across the harbor.

“I’d put some music on, but I really don’t know how to operate the radio.”

“That’s okay, we can talk.”

“I’d like that.” Said Maxine.

Driving the beneath the Khandallah hills, past the Hutt Valley off ramp and slipping along the Petone foreshore. Talking about silly little things. Until finally they pulled into a vacant parking spot outside a quaint seaside café bustling with people.

Luca killed the engine. An awkward silence filled the interior of the car.

“We’re here.”

“It looks busy.” Maxine remarked.

“I know the owner... He’ll squeeze us in somewhere.”

“Luca! Luca!” The owner welcomed him.

“Manuel. How are you?” Giving the grey-haired old gentleman a friendly hug and patting his back.

“Good-a. Good-a... And you-a?”

“Can’t-a complain-a.”

“And who is this *beau_tiful* angel you have-a with you?”

“Manuel, this is Maxine... Maxine, this is Manuel.”

“Hello Manuel... What a lovely place you have.”

“Thank you... Thank you... Please, this way-a... I have-a special table for-a my-a favorite Nephew.”

“Here’s your, Uncle?” Maxine whispered.

“Told you I knew the owner.” Grinned Luca.

They followed Manuel onto an outside patio overlooking the beach. Waves from Cook Straight roll in and crashed upon the stony shore. Seagulls float on the breeze. It was everything Maxine could have imagined. Fearing it was all a dream and she would wake up.

She pinches her arm to felt pain

“Ah.”

“You cold?” Asked Luca seeing her clutching her arm.

“No, I fine... What a lovely day.”

Manuel returned with a menu and a pitcher of iced water.

“I hope you haven’t eaten... Thought we might have a small bite here before our next excursion.”

“I’m famish...” Maxine lied, “... More surprises.”

“I thought you might enjoy a walk along the beach.”

“Ah, that explains the trainers.”

Sipping on the coffee, Maxine sat back and sighed with content. The warmth of the sun on her skin. The bite of a southerly breeze washing over her. From the corner of her eye she sensed Luca looking at her.

‘*Squawk!*’, A seagull cried out from a nearby banister.

Soon to be joined by another, then another. Ever hopeful of a fallen scrap of food.

“I never knew this place existed... It’s so... *Idyllic.*”

Manuel returned with two large white plates laden with food.

“*Divertiti!* (Enjoy!).” Said Manuel.

“*Grazie. Grazie.* (Thank you. Thank you.)”

“You speak Italian? ... What am I saying? Of course you do.”

“That’s okay. I’m a little rusty.”

“Oh, this looks yummy.” Maxine eyes become like saucers.

“I can’t eat another bite. I’m so full.” Groaned Maxine leaning back in the chair.

“In Italy, they say happiness is in the belly.” Said Luca.

“Well then, I’m very, very... happy.” Holding her stomach.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it... How about that walk?”

“I’d like that.” Levering herself from the chair.

Maxine looks out to the city nestled on the far shore. A city of century old villas clinging to the hills like abalone.

“You ready? ...” Taking her by the hand, he leads her down wooden steps to the beach.

“... My mother use to say, you can tell a lot about a person by holding their hand.”

“That’s either the best pickup line, or your mother is a very wise person.” Said Maxine intertwining her fingers with his.

Hoping he would never let go.

Waves crashed along the foreshore. Seagulls squawk circling above them. Manuel watched grinning to himself from the patio.

“So_?” Valarie asked with wine glass in her hand seeing Maxine return.

“It was... *Nice*.” Maxine lied. Still glowing inside.

“*Nice*? You were gone five hours! ... You went to his place, and shagged, didn’t you.”

“Please! ... He was a gentleman... We talked. Nothing more... Oh, I had the most divine dish.”

“Who are you?... What have you done with Maxine?”

“I don’t know anymore... He’s asked me out to dinner next weekend.”

“He *is* gorgeous... Bit of a dish if you ask me. He could put his slippers under my bed any time.”

“Is there room? ... Besides wouldn’t that be cheating on Bob?”

“Hey... Bob and I have an *open* relationship.”

“Oh, is that what you call it.” Responded Maxine sipping from her glass.

The week passed like any other. Valarie continued her pestering interrogation. Maxine focused on her work to distract herself from Luca. Until the day finally arrived. Maxine shuffled like a zombie into the kitchen after another sleepless night.

“Maxine.” Said Charlie biting into a slice of pizza.

“Charlie? ... What are you doing here? ... I don’t want to know.”

Charlie buried his head behind the newspaper.

“I’m going back to bed... I need sleep.” Said Maxine shuffling sleepishly back to her bedroom.

Meanwhile several hours later, Maxine reappeared looking no different.

“There you are.” Said Valarie.

Maxine stretched and yawns.

“You look a mess girl.”

“Thanks... If it’s any consolation, I feel a mess.”

“Here... Have a hair of the dog.” Pushing her glass of wine in front of her,

“I’ll pass. Any coffee?”

“In the jar on the shelf.”

“I saw Charlie earlier... I thought he was in your bad books. What happened? Bob batteries go flat?”

“I have his number... Now_ it’s my turn to dump him.”

Stopping Maxine in her tracks.

“You got back together... To dump him?”

“Yeah... I’ve got principles you know... Anyway, what time is the Brazilian stallion picking you up?”

“Italian.” She corrected her.

“Italian, Brazilian ... Men are all the same laying down.”

“Luca is not like that.”

“You are.” Remarked Valarie.

“Maybe once...” Reflecting on past week, “...There’s something about him. It’s like I don’t have to sleep with him, to know him... It’s like I’ve known him forever... You know?”

“Not really... What are you going to wear tonight? That short black skirt and long black heels.”

“Nah... Too slutty... It looks better on you.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Maxine takes a gulp of coffee feeling it sink to her stomach.

“Oh_ that’s better... I was thinking that red dress. I’ve been saving it for a special occasion.”

“Think you’ll still fit it? ... You’ve filled out a bit girl.”

“I’m not fat.” Looking down poking her belly with a finger.

“You be fine... I’ve a few you can try on if it doesn’t”

“Thanks.”

“What time is he picking you up?”

“Seven... He’s made reservations at some restaurant somewhere in town.”

“Never guess where Charlie took me for dinner last night... I say dinner, it was more like late-night munchies.”

‘Pick me! Pick me!’ A Sal’s Pizza box telegraphed out from the table.

“You’re kidding?” Said Maxine grinning.

Maxine looking a million dollars. And then some. The red dress caressing her sensual body.

“OMG girl! ... You look beautiful... I’m jealous.” Exclaimed Valarie.

“You think he’ll like it.”

“He better, or he’ll be hearing from me!”

“Thanks.”

“What’s the fragrance?”

“Dior... Poison... Too much?”

“Perfect... Where have you been hiding that?”

“Away... From you.”

“Okay Cinderella... You ready?” Valarie checked the time like a nervous mother.

“As I’ll ever be.”

‘Tap-tap-tap.’ Came a knock at the door.

“Who could that be? Can’t be Charlie... You stay here. I’ll get it.” Informed Valarie.

On opening the door she discovers Luca standing there in a smart suit. A small bouquet of yellow roses in his hands.

“For me?” Asked Valarie cheekily.

“Actually, they are... You must be Valarie. I am Luca...” Handing the fragrant bouquet to her, “... Is Maxine about?”

“Luca? ... You’re early.” Said Maxine appearing behind Valarie.

“After my tardy arrival last time, I thought I’d be early this time. I wouldn’t want a reputation.”

“No wouldn’t want a *reputation*, now would we Valarie?” Asked Maxine.

“Why are you looking at me for?”

“Those for me?” Maxine spies the yellow roses.

“For me actually...” Grinned Valarie stepping back from the door, “... I’ll leave you love birds to it... I want her back by midnight, or she turns into a pumpkin.”

“It’s true... *Puff!*... Just like that... It’s a girl thing.” Informed Maxine gesturing with her hands.

“Ha... I’ll try to remember.”

“Have fun kids.” Said Valarie retreating to the lounge.

Luca stood captivated.

“You shouldn’t stare.” Remarked Maxine.

“You shouldn’t look so beautiful.” Countered Luca.

“You scrub up okay yourself.”

“Thank you, I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Taking her by the hand he leads her down the narrow path to his car.

Maxine looked up and down the street for a white car only to have Luca walk her to the passenger side a black Mercedes and opened the door for her to get it.

“Your car?”

“I hope so...” He grins, “... The other car was just a loan while I have this serviced.”

“Oh, I see...” Taking the comfy leather seat.

“Have I told you, you look beautiful.”

“No.” She lied, just to hear him say it.

“You look beautiful... Music?” Pressing a stereo and soothing orchestral music filled the lavish interior as they drove unhurriedly away.

Heads turn to see a tall dark handsome man and a beautiful woman in red by his side walk into a candle lit restaurant. Gentlemen subtly nod to acknowledge him.

Luca quietly nods back.

“*You know these people?*” Whispered Maxine.

“Friends, business associates.”

A waiter waits at their table.

“Welcome back Mister Pacioli.” Sliding out a chair for Maxine, placing napkin on her lap. And does likewise for Luca.

“Thank you, Andrew, it’s good to be back.”

Andrew handed Maxine a menu. The menu had no prices.

“Wine Mister Pacioli.” Inquired Andrew.

“Amarone Della Valpolicella if you have it...” Informed Luca, looking to Maxine, “... Wine?”

“Perfect. Thank you.” She remarked.

“I’ll check Mister Pacioli ... I’ll leave you to look over the menu... Chef’s special tonight is the duck... Confit de Canard served with green salad or potatoes. For sauces, you have redcurrant, orange, or cherry.” Andrew pronounced in a quaint French accent, “... I’ll leave you to decide.”

“Thank you, Andrew.”

“Sounds delicious.” Remarked Maxine with her mouth-watering.

“Hungry?”

“Haven’t eaten all day... Thankfully so, or I would not have been able to get into this dress.”

“Have I told you, you look beautiful.”

“No.” She lied.

“You look beautiful.” Luca informed her.

Maxine blushes.

“I thought we might go back to my place for a night cap, or coffee if you wish... I assure you my intentions are honorable.”

“*Honorable?* ... Well... If you insist.”

“I do... And what were Valarie’s plans tonight if I may ask?”

“Knowing her, she’d be curled up in the couch with Bob.”

“Been in the relationship long?”

“He’s been on and off for a number of years... If you know what I mean.”

“Oh... Well here’s to Valarie, for bringing us together.” Luca raises his wine glass to Maxine’s.

‘Cling_.’

Maxine found herself being driven deep into the bowels of a tall apartment building. Incapable of escaping. Not that she wanted to if she could. Parking the sleek Mercedes between two exotic cars. The couple enter a plush lift and ascend higher and higher. Forever higher, to his castle in the sky. She waits nervously for the lift to stop. But secretly harbored it would go on forever. Doors opened to a softly lit penthouse. Walls adorn with gilded art. Windows cast a panoramic view of a city below. The harbor looking dark and foreboding. Hills sparkling with lights.

And somewhere among them in the distance opposite, her humble flat. A falling star races above the sky, but she had nothing to wish for.

Framed photographs of majestic white horses line a mantelpiece.

“We breed them back home.” Said Luca handing her a drink.

“It’s beautiful... You bring all the women back here and dazzle them.”

“You’re the first... And only.” Said Luca standing behind her, embracing her gently in his arms, “... Have I told you, you look beautiful?”

“A thousand times.” She whispered.

“That will never be enough.” He whispered to her ear.

“You had me with the duck.” She confessed, turning about looking to face him.

Eyes meet... Hearts raced... Breaths quickened... Eyes closed... Lips touched...



THE PRINCESS & THE DRAGON

“It's Never Too Late
To Live Happily Ever After”

Once upon a Time...

... In a land, far, far away. There lived a beautiful peasant woman and her elderly parents in a small wooden hut. She toiled from dawn to dusk, tilling a rice field for the winter rice with a long bamboo shade. All the while singing an enchanting melody that her grandmother had taught her. A conical coolie shaded from the unrelenting sun.

She did not complain. Stopping only for a cup of water. A bowl of rationed rice.

One hot day in the distance far off, she hears the sound of approaching horses. Looking up she sees a cloud of dust raising into the air. Spears wavering skyward. The King's flag fluttering. The sound of horses' hooves thunders closer and closer until the ground began to tremble. She waits until the last moment before crouching subserviently to the ground until they passed.

But they did not pass. Stopping before her humble plot.

Horses neigh and snort heavily exhausted by hard riding. Hooves stump the earth in protest. Riders have trouble controlling their steeds.

“You, there! ... Peasant woman!” A rough voice roared.

The woman raised her head ever slightly, her eyes fixed to the ground.

“Yes, you wench!” The man pulled hard in the reins to hold his horse steady.

“My Lord.” She whimpered dare she make eye contact with the man.

Men about him laugh at the title. The man glares at them. He would deal them later.

“Has the Warlord Zhang passed through here?”

“No... My Lord.”

“*Hm!* He grumbled.” Half believing her. Knowing she would have been slaughtered or taken as a salve if they had. Looking about the improvised farm. Nothing for the picking.

No sign of tracks.

“This way men! ... I know they here somewhere... I can smell them! *Git! Git!*” Digging spurred heels into the horse's flanks.

The horse to neigh loudly snorting with pain. And galloped away wildly with the man clinging on. Leaving the others behind in a cloud of dust. And they race off after him with amour clattering. Hooves pound the baked earth road. And she waits for the noise and trembles to fade before looking up.

Relieved for the timely rest. She stood and brushed the dust from her apron. Watching the spear tops disappear into the distance together with a cloud of dust.

“Ping... Who was that?” Her mother asked bringing her a bowl of water.

“Just the King's men looking for Zhang... He's on the warpath again.”

“Oh dear... Best you come inside and keep safe.”

“The walls of our home will not stop Zhang and his men...” Looking to the sun in the mid-afternoon sky, “... I have work to do mother. These fields won't till themselves before the rains arrive... Go. Look after father. I'll be okay. I promise.” Bowing humbly to her mother.

“Keep an eye out and hide in the forest if you do.”

“I cannot leave you and father.”

“They have no concern for an old man and woman my daughter... But you...” She could not speak the words.

“I understand Mother... I will hide as you say.” Bowing again.

Smoke rises from a mud baked chimney. Ping wiped sweat from her forehead and began to sing and she worked. Her voice carrying upon the breeze over the fields and into the dark forest.

Suddenly, a startled flock of birds took flight, a frightened deer looked up from feeding, Ping’s ears prick up.

She hears an anguished howl. As though someone, or something was hurt. A bear perhaps. Caught in a trap. Without fear to her own life, she rushes off, taking the bamboo shovel to protect herself. Stopping at the forest edge, she waited and listened. Dark shadows cloud her vision.

It was quiet. Too quiet.

The birds did not dare to sing. Even the insects had fallen silent.

Ping stepped forward. Twigs snap beneath her feet. Keen eyes search the darkened abys. But the beast had sensed her presence the moment she had stepped into the forest. Nostril’s flare. Exhausted and weak.

Making her way to a ridge Ping peered out from behind the tree to discover a strange, winged creature collapsed on the ground. Horns protrude from its forehead. It could go no further. Thick arrows protrude like porcupine quills from its scaled sides.

‘Zhang’s men.’ Thought Ping.

The Tailong groaned with pain and let out a pitiful howl.

“*Oh!*” She gasped unsure what to do.

She watched and waited. The creature was hurt. She could not leave it to die. She had to do something. And she began to sing as though to sooth the savage beast. Her eyes fixed on the creatures tearing eyes. Laying the shovel down and holding her hand she stepped closer to show she meant it no harm.

Nostrils flare with each struggling breath.

“There, there... Lay still... I not here to hurt you.” Stroking the creature.

Examining the arrows. They were too shallow to have cause the Tailong to have fallen.

“What have you eaten? ...” She asked, stroking the dragon’s head as she thought, “... Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Running away to return to the hut.

Rushing through the door Ping startles her mother.

“What is it, Ping? ... Is it Zhang’s men? Are they coming?” Seeing her daughter out of breath.

“No time to explain mother...” Ping rummages about a box containing herbs. Finding what she wanted, filled a wooden pale with water and crushes the herbs to make a soup, “... Stay with father. I’ll be back before night fall.”

“Ping! Ping!” Her mother called out, watching her run off unable to stop her.

Retracing her steps she sings aloud to telegraph her presence. Hoping she was not too late. Arriving at the ridge to discover the dragon laying still. Eyes closed.

The creature gives a mournful groan.

“Wakey, wakey... I have something for you.” Holding out the bucket.

Nostrils twitch as the aroma of herbs. Was this another human trick. The hand stroking its forehead and soft voice singing, told the creature otherwise.

“Drink... It will make you better...” She told the creature. Taking a handful herself and drinking it, “...Hmm... Yummy.”

A forked tongue slivered from between fangs into the bucket before slipping back to swallow. Again, the tongue darts out and back in.

Until the bucket was empty.

“Good boy...” She coaxed him stroking its stout, “... Now, sleep.”

And Ping waited for the dragon to fall to sleep.

She looked at the arrows protruding from its scales. And one-by-one she went about and gently giggling and pulling them out.

The dragon slept on unperturbed.

“Good boy... There we go.” Pulling out the last arrow.

Gathering them she places them in the bucket. There was no more she could do but return the next day to see if it survived. The forest had become dark. The day outside had turned to night. But somehow, she did not feel afraid. With a bucket of arrows in one hand and her shovel in the other she looked back at the sleeping dragon.

And she began to sing. Cicadas come to life and sing along with her.

The evening sky alit with stars she returned to the hut and an anxious mother.

“Ping! Ping! ... Where have you been? Your father and I were worried for you? (*Gasp!*) ...” Seeing the bucket of arrows, “... Arrows? Are you injured?”

“I’m fine mother. Come inside mother... It was only a Tailong.”

“A Tailong!? ... You could have been killed.”

“It was sick mother... I had to help it.”

“Oh Ping... ... Where is it now?”

“Sleeping.”

“What would your father and I do if anything happened to you? ... You must not go back. Understood?” Her mother instructed.

“I promise.” She lied.

Dawn broke and cast long shadows across the land. The wooden door creaked as Ping crept out of the hut. Taking in the new day she inhaled the crisp morning air before it became warm and arid. When everything was quiet. Everything was at peace.

She looked to the forest.

Shrouded with shadows and Tailong within. Without hesitation she entered the forest softly singing to foretell her presence, lest she scare the Tailong. Following the path from the day before she came to the ridge and discovered the Tailong was gone.

Days passed and Ping continued to toil and sing as she worked. Her angelic voice carried over vast green pastures, along valleys, as if it were being guided by a mysterious hand. Over castle walls and through a window. Where a Prince lay sleeping. The ancient melody lingered like the spell. Stirring the Prince from his slumber, and a bizarre dream of a battle, a dragon and beautiful woman with long black hair and enchanting eyes.

The prince awakens and disappointedly sees a guard standing watch.

“What news of Zhang?” Asked the Prince rubbing his eyes, stretching his limbs.

“He is heading North. My Prince.” The man replied.

“That will not bode well for Fang... Have our men ready. Sharpen their swords. Archers their aim... I want to be prepared.”

“Yes, my Prince.” The guard bowed.

“I will speak with the King... His men had not returned.” Looking beyond the castle walls worried as to their fate.

The Middle Kingdom lay sandwiched between two snow-capped mountain ranges. And two feuding Warlords. Fang to the North. Zhang to the South.

It would only be a matter of time before one came knocking at the other gates.

“Morning father. How goes you?” Asked the Prince.

“I fair well for an old man... What news of Zhang?” He asked.

“He travels North. Our men are on his heels to ensure he keeps to the path.”

“He’ll be back my son... We must be prepared... He grows more powerful by the day. He will not be content with Fang’s Kingdom.”

“Why has he not attacked us already?”

“He is saving us for last.”

“Fang is a more valuable prize.”

“Can Fang hold him out?”

“He grows old and weary like me. No son to inherit his crown. His Generals bicker like old ladies over a market foul.” The King contemplates inevitable.

“How long do we have?” Reading his father’s grave thoughts.

“A week... Maybe two. Have the men ready, archers double their practice. We must make every arrow count.”

“We have the high ground of the castle.”

“These walls will not hold back those who lust to be Emperor... We must protect the villagers... Send word to have them ready to come within the walls at moment notice.”

“I will see to that myself father. It has been a while since I have left these walls.” Informed the Prince.

“It will be good for the people to see you too my son. Assure them they have nothing to fear.”

“Yes father.” The prince bowed.

“Take more men my son.” The King advised.

“Too many and the people will worry. I have enough to stand our ground should enforcements be called for.”

“Be careful, nonetheless. Zhang is ruthless... He will stop at nothing to have you a prize.”

“Nor he mine...” Informed the Prince climbing aboard a large white steed, “... I will be back before sunset.” Bowing his head to his father.

“God speed my son.” The King bids farewell watching his son lead two hundred horsemen through the castle gates.

Making their way along narrow winding roads wary that ambush could occur at any moment. Or an arrow meant for the prince. Informing villagers Zhang was on the war path and that they should go to the castle at first signs of trouble.

Tired and thirsty after a day’s riding the prince looked to the sky and the harsh sun.

“We should be heading back.” A General advises the prince.

“Not yet... We still have one last village to warn.” Informed the prince taking water from a goat skin.

And they rode on.

The ground trembled with hooves. Ping looked up to see the wavering of swears in the distance. The King's flag flutters atop a tall shaft. She waited for the horses to get closer and lowered herself subserviently to the ground.

Almost becoming one with the soil. The prince raises a hand for the men to stop. Horses stutter to a halt. Neighing with relief.

“My Prince, why do we stop for this peasant?” Asked a General beside him.

The question goes unanswered. He did not know why.

Only that he had a feeling.

“Stay here.” He instructed his men, dismounting.

Ping senses standing before her. Eyes catch polished boots. Whoever it was not a soldier. But someone more important. She cowered lower. Pressing her face onto the earth.

“Stand.” A strong voice commanded.

Unable to refuse, she stood. Her head bowed. Her face concealed by the hat.

“May I?” The prince asked gently removing her hat.

Long black hair tumbled from beneath.

“Look at me...” Asked the Prince, “... Please.”

‘Please?’ Thought Ping bewildered.

She raises her head to see a troupe of men and horses behind the man. Then to man, who appeared familiar. As though from a dream.

“It’s you.” He whispered to her.

Just then the sound of hooves thunder sound in the distance. The prince turned to see the King’s men galloping in haste towards him.

Fearful of what was chasing them.

The horseman pulled hard on the reins of the frothing horse.

“My Prince! My Prince! ... Zhang heads this way. Beyond those hills.”

“Ride to the castle and inform the king to send reinforcements.” The prince instructs.

“You can’t fight them my Prince...” Looking about the two hundred men, “... There are thousands of them.”

“Then we will hold them until the King arrives.”

“Yes, my Prince.”

“Take my horse... The King will know what to do.”

The man rides off raising a trail of dust in his wake.

“Men! ... Take your positions. We hold this ground until the King’s men arrive. Understood?!” The prince commands loudly, then looked to Ping standing in awe of him, “... As for you, we need to keep you safe. Stay in the hut until it is over, okay.”

“I fight with you, my Lord.” Picking up the bamboo shade.

“You sound just like my mother...” And there would be no arguing with her either, “... Then stay behind me... Promise me that.”

“I promise.” She lied.

Soldiers form a wall of shields across the road. Spears protrude forward. Archers with crossbows at ready behind them. A calvary of horsemen waiting anxiously at the rear. Horses jitter nervously sensing a battle. In the distance, battle cries are heard. Swords bang on shields like drums. Zhang's men sending an ominous warning that they were close.

The sun hung low on the horizon.

Three horsemen appear on the crest of the hill. Zhang at the center. Generals either side. Cantering their horses forward they halt out of the range of arrows.

"A delegation..." Said the Prince noticing the Zhang, "...Get me a horse."

Flanked by solders either side, the prince rides leisurely as though he were in no hurry. Zhang fidgets in the saddle and waits impatiently for the prince to eventually arrive.

"Zhang." Acknowledged the prince.

"Prince... What kept you? ..." He humored, "... Not enough men? (*chuckle*)."

"More than enough."

"Surrender now and save your men the bloodshed... I hope you are not as foolish as Fang."

"What of Fang?"

"He hangs from his castle walls, or should I say... *My_ castle walls. (Chuckle).*"

"You have your kingdoms... What do you want with this one?"

"Don't you see young prince... *I want it all_...* I will be Emperor. And you and your father will not stop me from what is rightfully mine."

"You have to get past me first." Warned the prince.

"Fighting words prince... I like your spirit."

"After you... I will come for your father... *Ha! ...*" Pulling hard on the reins to turn his horse about, "... Don't say I never gave you a chance."

"We'll be waiting for you!" Informed the prince getting the last word.

"What do we do?" Asked the man beside him.

"We stand our ground... Until the last man."

"That woman my prince?"

"Protect her with your life... Understood?" Ordered the prince looking the man in the eye.

"Yes, my prince... With my life."

"And that goes for every man... Tell the others."

"Yes, my Prince."

Riding back, shield's part and they ride through. Closing behind them. The prince addresses the men from horseback.

"Men... We must hold our ground until the King arrives... This is what you have trained for. Make the King proud... Zhang's men must not cross our line... His men are weary. Tired. Hungry... They are weak... You are strong. We hold the upper hand... Knowing Zhang, he will try to play with us... Sending only a few men at a time... This will be his mistake... Make every arrow count... Make every thrust of your spear true. Go... Take your positions!"

Men bang swords against shields. Battle cries call out as men salute the prince's orders. He turned about to find Ping standing behind him.

"Ah... There you are."

"You did say, stand behind you." Replied Ping.

"I really wish you would find sanctuary in the hut."

“My mother told me once that no wooden hut would stop Zhang’s men.”

“You have a wise mother.” He grinned seeing an old woman at the door, “... Keep close.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Bowing her head.

The prince looks to the distant ridge behind him for his father’s flag. In hope that he was on his way. But sees nothing. Ahead of them, several hundred of Zhang’s men had gathered on the crest of the hill about to make a charge at them. To soften them before the main charge. Beating their shields to intimidate and rile the prince’s men. Sluggishly they step closer.

The prince was right. Zhang had sent the weak men in first.

“Don’t break the line! ...” The prince reminds them, “... Kill anyone who enters!”

Zhang’s men fired first. Falling short of their target.

“Save your arrows men. Make every arrow count.”

“Yes prince.” An archer responds taking aim at a limping individual.

Jeering insults fly out of the mouths of Zhang’s men.

“A little closer...” An archer encouraged the man.

Waiting for the very last moment before releasing the arrow that flew swiftly and true, striking the man in the chest falling to the ground in a buckled heap.

“Well done.” Called out the prince.

A sea of arrows flies out from the barricade, striking shields like porcupines. More men fall to the ground. Picked off one by one by the prince’s archers. Fearing retreat they would rather die on the battlefield than face Zhang’s wrath.

“Charge!” The leader of the pack called out.

Men crash into shields with swords. Thrusting and slashing wildly. Only to find themselves outnumbered and cut down by a superior foe. Zhang watched as the remains of Fang’s men are reduced to sacrificial lambs.

“Be ready men for the next wave! See to your wounded.” The prince ordered.

Ping goes in aid of a wounded soldier struck in the shoulder by an arrow. Groaning with pain.

“Don’t pull it out.” She warned him, “... Help him to the hut. My mother will tend to him... Quickly.”

Zhang had had enough games. It would soon be dark. The sooner this battle was over the sooner he could eat. Raising his sword thrusts it forward and the roar of men trumpet towards the prince.

“Hold your line... Wait... Wait.” Drawing his own sword, his eyes set on Zhang.

The ground trembled with thundering hooves. Men on both sides scream battle cries. Galloping at pace horses come upon the barricade of shields locked together. At the last moment spears are raised and point at the horsemen. Leaping over the barricades only to be impaled and fall to the ground and finished off by swordsmen.

Ping lashes out with her shade. Striking a man. A man comes at her from behind about to make a fatal thrust but is struck down by a watchful archer. Swords clash metal on metal. Bodies fall. One by one the prince’s men fell. Slowly being reduced. And no sign of the King’s men in sight.

Ping knew it would only be a matter of time before they would be defeated. Then to the bewilderment of those about her, she began to sing.

“What are you doing?” The prince asked fending off two men.

“But my Lord... This is the perfect time.” She informed him.

A darkness comes over the battlefield.

Men look up and see the silhouette of a menacing Tailong blocking out the setting sun. Flapping its wings forcefully. It could smell Zhang's men. The men who had poisoned it. Seeking revenge, it lets out an ear-piercing screech. Swooping swiftly down, legs extended, claws spread wide. Clutching Zhang's men effortlessly and ascending on high to release them mercilessly back to the earth.

"What is this trickery, Prince?" Zhang called out.

"Tis' beyond me." Said the prince confused as Zhang was.

Enraged, it swooped back around over the cowering solders. Snorting as it spewed a belly of fire upon them. Turning Zhang's men to human torches. Zhang tries to flee only to have the Tailong catch him and carried him away. Screaming.

Zhang's men drop their weapons and kneel before the prince to surrender. Hoping he would show them mercy.

"Friend of yours?" The prince asked.

"My Lord." Ping bowed her head.

Only to feel a gentle hand beneath her chin softly lift it again.

"What is your name?"

"Ping... My Lord."

"From now on, you bow to no one." The prince told her.

Eyes whelm with tears and run down her cheek. And the prince wipes them away with a finger. Ping smiled laid her head upon his chest and felt his arms about her. Behind them, the sound of thundering hooves of his father's army arriving.

A little too late, but a welcome sight. The King pulls hard on the reins of his steed.

"Whoa boy! ... Whoa!" He commands the horse coming to a halt before the prince, "... It seems I have arrived too late..." Informed the King.

Then sees Ping standing beside his son. Their fingers intertwined.

"And who might this be?" The King asked.

"Ping... *Princess* Ping..." He added, "... I am hoping she would be my wife."

"Your wife? ..." The King asked, baffled by the sudden courtship.

"That's if she will have me." Kneeling before her.

All about her, solders lowered themselves.

Leaving Ping standing alone among a sea of prostrate men. Joyful tears rolled down Ping's cheeks in disbelief.

"I'll take that as a yes." Said the Prince...

...And They Lived Happily Ever After.



BLINK

“The Past is the only Dead Thing
That Smells Sweet.”

‘Clickily-clack... Clickily-clack ... Clickily-clack...’ Steel wheels clatter on rails.

Noah sat cradled in his seat like a baby about to sleep. Disconnected from the world flashing by outside. About him, lifeless eyes staring at lifeless cellphone screens. Curiously, he surveyed the sea of familiar strangers. Wondering who they were. Coming and going five days a week, and back again. Masquerading as functioning human beings while they concealed their pain beneath the make-up and fancy suits. Clocking in. Clocking out. Day after day. Week after week. Year after year. Their lives falling like sand through an hour glass. Until it was too late.

And the last grain of sand fell. Lights out. There was no going back and putting right the wrongs. The bad decisions. The bad choices.

Michael chuckled to himself.

The scruffy guy by the door could well be a millionaire. The man with the polished black briefcase could be bankrupt. The primly dressed woman could be on her way to meet her lover. The man in the pin striped suit was definitely a lawyer.

Or a banker.

Noah on the other hand, well, you could read Noah like a book. He dressed like a duck, he walked like a duck, and he talked like a duck. There was very good chance Noah was a Civil Servant. Living a mediocre life, in a mediocre suburb. With a mediocre wife and three adorable children. He told himself he was doing it for them. And that all *this*, was temporary. Another grain of sand through the hour glass.

Checking the time... 6:15PM... He was almost home.

Unseen, sitting opposite, sat a man dressed in black. Black roles. Black shoes. Black hat. Contrasted only by the white of his starched collar and paleness of his skin. A clergyman of sorts. Sitting quietly. Reading Noah’s troubling thoughts.

Michael grinned.

Noah’s head wobbled like a bobble doll recollecting old memories that seem to have sprouted from nowhere. As though in search of the answer to where his life had taken a wrong turn as it were.

But there are no wrong turns in life.

Visions project like eight-millimeter film in his mind. Snippets of yesterday. Of places and faces and fun times. But that’s all they were. Snippets. Noah blinked. And for a fleeting moment thought he saw someone in black sitting in the seat opposite. But the seat vacant. He blinked again as if it would conjure the man back. But nothing appeared. Hoping no one had noticed he rubbed his eyes.

Then as if from nowhere, a reminiscent childhood memory flashed in his mind. A vision of a school yard. Of a time long, long ago. The sound of the train begins to fade as he is held captive by the vision. Feeling the warmth of a summer sun beat down on his face and arms and legs as if it were yesterday. Playful voices cry about him. It seemed so vivid. It seemed so real.

A peculiar feeling comes over him as though all the blood in his body had rushed to his head. Disoriented, he opens his eyes only to discover the world turned upside down.

“Ah! ...” He gasped, “... What the fuck!” Finding himself suspended by his knees from a bar.

Children gather about him, shocked at what he had just said. Noah releases himself and falls to the earthen ground with a thud. Bumping his head in the process.

Child laugh and giggle as he lay in a buckled heap.

“I’m telling on you Noah for swearing.” Said a child.

Noah sits upright rubbing a head.

“How you know my name? ... Where am I?” Noah asked thinking he recognized the child, “... Ross? Is that you?”

The grubby barefoot kid stared at Noah unsure what to make of his best friend.

“Are you playing, or not Noah?” Asked Ross, indifferent to Noah’s mishap.

“It can’t be happening.” Looking about the school yard.

“What can’t be happening?” Asked Ross thinking it was a new game.

Noah found himself surrounded by children looking like the cast of Lord of the Flies. Dirt-stained knees and unkempt hair. Il-fitting clothes. He pulled himself upright and feels his head for blood and wondered if he were hallucinating.

“What’s today?” Noah asked.

“Monday.” Informed Ross.

“No... The Date... What is today’s date?”

“I don’t know... Misses Forrest might know... Are you playing or not?”

“I don’t think so.” Noah replied dazed and confused.

“You sure you okay Noah? ...” Ross asked, “... You should go to the Sick Bay?”

“I’m good thanks. Just bumped my head.” Stepping back from the group of boys.

“Come on... Noah’s not playing...” Ross called out to a string of boys linked together, chanting, “... *Who wants to play Cowboys and Indians!*”

“That is so_ wrong.” Said Noah watching the boys wander off aimlessly.

His mind racing with a thousand questions and zero answers. None of this made sense. One minute he was on the train. The next he was here.

“It can’t be real.” He told himself.

Hoping he would wake up at any moment.

“What *is* real Noah?” Questioned a quiet voice behind him.

He turned about to discover the man from the train standing over him.

“You? ... Who are you? How did I get here?” Noah asked.

“*Who* I am is not important Noah...” Said Michael looking about, “... Time flies doesn’t it... Here we are... *Again.*”

“*Again?* ... I don’t understand. How do I get back? ... I *need* to get back.”

“Do you *really*... *need* to get back?” Questioned Michael.

“I... I... I...” Noah stuttered.

The group of girls giggled seeing Noah talk to himself

“Don’t forget to breath. You know what happened last time... That’s your home over there Noah.” Michael pointed to a house in the distance, momentarily distracting him.

Noah turned about to see the large white bungalow on the other side of the playground.

“Home...” Noah murmured, reflecting on what awaited him, “... Kate.” He reflects wishfully.

“Yes... *Kate*.” Michael whispered from behind.

Turning about, Noah discovered the man in black had vanish.

As though into thin air.

“Hey... Where’d you go? Come back here! ... Don’t leave me here!” Noah protested.

Girls giggled hysterically wondering who he was talking to.

Just then the school bell rang out. And a tidal wave of children rushed inside classrooms. Leaving Noah alone in the playground. Staring transfixed on the house across the road. He turned and looked across to the carpet factory across the other road. His father would be there. How tempting to pay him a visit. To see his face. Again. What would he say?

What could be said?

“Hey dad, it’s me. Noah... I’m from the future.”

That would go down like a lead balloon. Only to receive a stern look and ordered back to school.

“Noah Finch!” A voice called out to get his attention.

“Misses Forrest!” He called back seeing her standing at a doorway.

“Get yourself inside! ... *Immediately!*” She ordered him pointing inside.

Like a gazelle he rushed towards the classroom. Skidding to a halt at a doorway. He stuck his head inside as though he should ask permission to enter.

“Don’t just stand there...” Forrest instructed him, “... Someone told me you bump your head. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine thank you.” Noah crept to an empty desk.

“Not that one, that’s Samantha’s... You sure you’re feeling okay Noah?” Forrest asked.

“I think so.” Noah took another seat hoping it was his.

Slouching down, he looked about the class room. Walls plastered with a kaleidoscope of drawings, and large alphabetical characters. The scent flax carpet. It was just as he remembered it. Right down to Misses Forrest.

“Sit up straight Noah! ... What has gotten into you today?” Forrest catches him slouching.

“I really don’t know... Misses Forrest.” He replied finding it difficult to get comfortable on the hard wooden chair.

“Now listen up everyone. Today we are going be talking about the Moon... Now... Does anyone here know anything about the moon?”

The question rouses Ross to throw his hand in the air.

“Ross... What do you know?”

“It’s made of cheese!” He called out followed by a giggle only to make the other children laugh.

“Don’t be silly! Its’ not made of cheese... Now quieten down everyone! ... Anyone else?”

‘*How hard could this be?*’ Noah thought to himself raising his hand. Having followed the Apollo missions as a kid.

“Noah... What do you know about the moon?” Forrest asked.

“Neil Armstrong...” He began, only to be cut off.

“And who is *Neil Armstrong* may I ask?” Red eyes brows pinch together forming a scary hairy elongated caterpillar.

“The first man on the Moon.” Replied Noah.

The class burst out with laughter again.

“Perhaps in your imagination Noah.” Forrest suggested.

“What year is this?” Noah asked curiously.

“What do you mean what *year* is this?”

“What year is this?” Rubbing his head.

“Nineteen-sixty-seven... What year do you think it is?”

“I’d rather not say.” Said Noah.

“Humor us, Noah.” Forrest dared him, if only to gauge the extent of his injury.

“Well... Since you asked...” Noah hesitated, “... Twenty-twenty-two.”

The classroom sat in stunned silence. The year beyond their comprehension. For some off them, they would never see the end of the twentieth century. Then Forrest noticed something peculiar about Noah.

Something not right with him.

“What happened to your stutter Noah? It’s ... *gone*?”

“Yeah... I lost it... Years ago...” Then realized he may have said too much, “... I think I’ll be heading home now...” He stands to leave, “... I don’t feel so well.”

“That’s a good idea Noah. Tell your mother I’ll give her a call.” Informed Forrest.

“I’ll do that.” Said Noah stopping at the door.

Turning around as though he had forgotten something, “...Oh yeah... Those jungle gyms... *Health and Safety* written all over it... You should look into that before someone gets hurt. As for you Stephen. Wear your seat belt.” Noah gives the lad a wink.

Just then goosebumps erupt over him, and he wondered if he was about to be teleported back to the train. But the sensation passes.

“That’s weird.” Shaking himself.

Children giggle as they watch him in the doorway.

“That will be enough of your nonsense Noah, now get yourself off home.”

“Good seeing you again Misses Forrest... We should do coffee sometime... Call me...” Gesturing a hand to his ear.

In the distance he could see his old home. A house that would still be standing another sixty years. It was the center of his universe. A refuge for when he fell between the cracks.

Perhaps this was one of those cracks.

‘Nineteen-Sixty-Seven? Wow... That would make me eight years old.’ He thinks to himself.

He ran as fast as his legs would carry him his arms spread like wings. The bungalow grew closer and closer. Noah stopped before the white wooden gate. It seemed taller than he had remembered it. Running his fingers run over the mail box. He opened it. Discovering several envelopes address to his father. Occasionally he would receive a letter from some hair brain competition he had entered. Or a large orange envelope from NASA.

Yeah, he knew about the moon.

Small things come flooding back to him. The latch on the gate. The crack in the pavement. The green patches of prickle-grass. A silver-dollar seedling. Casting a scanty shadow of its future self. The large front yard. A decapitated oak stump. Sprouting new limbs. The handy work of *One-Cut-Charlie*. His father.

Everything as he remembered it. Everything, larger than life. A curving concrete path led to the front door. Forking midway to the driveway out back. Feeling like an intruder, he stepped reverently, as though stepping through a cemetery. Looking about for the man in black nowhere to be seen. Wondering when the man would show his face again.

Perhaps he was stuck here.

Michael sat on the oak stump watching on.

Like huge black eyes large sash windows reveal a dark interior, watching Noah pass. A grey fifty-seven Humber Super-Snipe proudly parked in the back yard.

'Man would I love to drive that thing.' Thought Noah.

A large vegetable patch runs fills half the back yard.

His mother appears from the house lugging a heavy basket of laundry to the clothes line.

"What are you doing home?" His mother asked.

"Let me help you with that." Offered Noah stepping forward.

"Get away! ..." She shooed him like a pestering fly, "... I asked you, what are you doing home? *Hm!*"

"Ah-ah-ah..." He stuttered, "... Ah... Misses Forrest sent me home... Bumped my head."

"How'd you do that?"

"Fell off the jungle-gym thingy."

Noah rubbed his head, and felt a definite lump, and wondered if he should have it see a doctor.

"Why'd you do that for? ..." His mother asked, "... Come here... Let me have a look."

Grabbing Noah's by the arm lest he escape, finding the small lump she poked it with her finger.

"Ow! Careful now... It might be a hematoma." Warned Noah.

"A what? ... Don't be ridiculous... It's just a bump... Does it hurt?" Giving it another poke.

"Ow! ... Only when you poke it!" Yelped Noah.

"You'll live." She informed spitting on it, rubbing the dirt away.

"That's easy for you to say, you have seven other children... What's one less?"

"Seven? ... You really did bump your head ... Better have Doctor Malthus look it."

"I'm fine honestly... Misses Forrest said she would ring you later."

"*Hm...* Go wash up. Get into bed." She told him.

"Bed?"

"Don't you question me or that lump won't be the only thing feeling sore." His mother warned.

"Jesus, I'm going already."

"Don't you give me lip... Wait 'til you father gets home."

The warning made whatever testicles Noah had retract. He had not heard that in a while. Though his father would not hurt a fly. His glare alone was enough fear into any child. Noah made his way up the steps, turning about to see his mother hanging out the washing humming a fairy tune to herself.

'Nothing's changed.' Thought Noah.

Michael stood filling the doorway as Noah stepped through him into the kitchen. A weird tingle came over him again.

"That's weird." Shaking the sensation off.

Noah nostril's twitch. The sweet smell of peaches filled the air. A large pot boils on a stove. Sending up a cloud of steam. Countless glass preserving jars line the bench waiting to be filled with whatever was in the bubbling pot. With seven hungry mouths to feed his parents made ends meet.

Noah struggled feeding three bottomless pits.

“My children... Shit.” It suddenly dawned on him that whatever he did here would impact on the future.

He could lose everything else, but not his children.

“You still want to change the past Noah?” Asked Michael reappearing.

“I have one thing I need to do...” What wondered how much Michael knew.

“Kate...” Said Michael, “... I know.” Vanishing before Noah’s eyes.

“Hey come back! Come back!” Called out Noah.

“Who *are* you talking to? ... I thought I told you to wash up and go to bed!” His mother startled him from behind.

Soon followed by a hand across the lump on the top of his head.

“*Ow!* ... We really need to talk about this mother.”

“Talk? The only talking will be with my slipper... Now get yourself to bed.” Her words accompanied by another swift slap to the bottom.

“*Ow!*” Noah runs off to a bed room down a large hallway and closes a door behind him.

Finding himself in his old bedroom. Walls covered with caricatures of the old west. Horse drawn wagons and cowboys. Bunk beds on either wall. A cool breeze drifts through an open window. Lace curtains flutter like butterfly wings.

“Where are you?” Asked Noah hoping to summon the man.

But no response.

Instinctively he jumped on the lower bunk bed. Feeling the firmness of the kapok mattress.

“Oh that feels good.” Sinking his head onto the pillow, inhaling the familiar fragrance that was home.

And stared blankly at the upper bunk.

Michael laid on the bunk bed above him, listening to Noah thoughts. As if they were his own.

‘Kate won’t be home for another two hours... How does an eight-year-old boy tell a twelve-year-old girl about what would happen to her...’ Fingers tally the years, *‘... Twenty-five years from now? ...’* Doubting thoughts begin to surface, *‘... We never really talked as kids... Why would she listen now? ... Let alone understand... She’s too young. I’m too young... What was I thinking... This is silly... What am I doing? It’s all in the past... I can’t change things...’* The conundrum mushroomed, *‘... If only I was older... She’d understand.’*

“I don’t know where you are...” Said Noah aloud to Michael, “... But I know you’re there.”

Noah blinked.

And found himself back on the train to an empty carriage.

“Hey where did everybody go?”

“They’re still here...” Informed Michael, blinking once, people appear, “... That better? ... I really can’t tell the difference.”

“It helps.” Said Noah watching the bobbling heads.

Checking his watch, Noah saw that it was still 6:15PM.

“That can’t be right.” Tapping the face of watch with a finger, he had been gone for at least half an hour.

“You wanted to talk?” Michael asked drawing his attention from the watch.

“What am I doing back here? ... What about the *me* on the bed?”

“He’s sleeping... He bumped his head, remember? He won’t recall any of this when he wakes... You didn’t do too much damage... Other than Stephen... A friend of yours?”

“Stephen? He’s alive?”

“Hm... Alive and kicking as you would say.”

“So there’s hope for Kate... I have to get back to save her... Tell her...”

“You said yourself you were too young.”

“You were listening? ... Who are you?”

“I know all Noah... My *Father* calls me Michael.”

“Michael? ... Well, *Michael*, I need to talk to Kate.”

“I cannot interfere with Freewill.” Informed Michael.

“Was it Freewill that Kate died?”

“Yes...” Michael said indifferently, “... We all make our choices Noah... Kate made hers.”

Noah sat quiet.

“You know everything?” Noah asked.

“Everything.” Informed Michael.

There could be no arguing with someone that knew *everything*.

“Be careful how you thread Noah... All this... Could cease to be.” Michael warned.

Noah knew exactly what he meant. The very existence of his children depended on it. One wrong word, and his world as he knew it would collapse like a deck of cards. A vision comes to mind. Noah shifts his eyes to Michael as though he had something to do with it. Eyes lids fight to stay open.

Noah blinked.

Hearing the noise of children playing, screaming, yelling, running about. Cigarette smoke irritates his nostrils. Noah opened his eyes to find himself in a lounge. A box color television broadcast a cricket match in the background.

“Noah? You listening Noah? ... Noah?” A female voice asked.

“Ah? ... Sorry, I must have nodded off...”

“You want a beer? George, get Noah a beer.”

“Kate... It’s you?” Asked Noah surprise to see her.

“You okay Noah?”

“Not really... I’ll explain later... We need to talk.”

“Talk... About what?”

“Ah... Ah...” Noah searches for a plausible excuse, “...Ah... It’s a family thing... You know us, Finch’s.”

“George... Hurry up with the beer!” Kate called out taking a heavy drag on a cigarette, “... These things will be the death of me.” She joked, waving a hand to disperse the smoke.

“Hey little Charlie, fancy seeing you.”

“You can take him home with you if you like.” Suggested Kate.

“We’re good for kids aren’t we Jeanie?”

“What kids? We’re not even married.” Replied Jeanie looking confused.

“My bad... One day, eh?” Said Noah.

“George! Hurry up with that beer!”

George appears at the doorway, a smoldering cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. Beer cans in his hands. A trail of smoke whiffing into the air, irritating a half-closed eye. Two small girls rush into the room. One chasing the other.

“Nicole. Jessie... Wow, you’re so small.”

“Get that down ya mate...” Said George handing him a beer, “... That will sort you out... It’s a hot day out there.”

“Cheers George.” Noah tears the tab away, making a hissing sound.

Kate lights up another cigarette, exhaling a plume into the air. Waving it away with a hand. George lights up another as well.

‘Hm... Two birds with one stone.’ Thought Noah.

“You hungry? ... I threw a salad together.” Said Kate.

“Yeah, that would be lovely eh Jeanie... We can have that chat afterwards, no rush, eh?”

“*Lovely...* Let me give you a hand.” Janie offered.

“I’m good... Why don’t you two take the terrors outside and I’ll call out when lunch is ready... George!”

“Come on you two.” Noah tickled the girl’s ribs, causing them to scream and run outside.

“Wow... Look at this place... It’s bigger than I remember it.”

“Noah... This is the first time we’ve been here?” Jeanie reminded him.

Jeanie takes a seat on the swing.

Noah stands behind her and pushes her forward. Only to have her return back to him. He pushes again, a little harder this time. Suddenly he catches her in his arms, allowing the swing to fall gently. Two small children run about like blowflies about the yard.

“Can you keep a secret?” He asked.

“What is this about Noah?” Asked Jeanie.

“Promise me you will never tell a single soul... Not even me?”

“Not even you? I’m confused Noah.”

“Just promise me... After I’m return... I won’t remember any of this.”

“Return? Return where?”

“Just promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Pinky promise.” Noah doubles down holding out a pinky finger.

Jeanie interlocks her pinkie with his.

“I swear... Pinky-swear.”

Noah leans forward and whispered into her ear.

“*(Gasp)* ... Why are you telling me this... You know he doesn’t like you.”

“I know... We’ll just have to agree to disagree... Now *shh*... Before I say too much.”

“You could make a lot of money from what you know about the future.”

“I could... But it’s not about money.”

“What about us?” She asked curiously.

“Ah... There’s the mystery.” Said Noah kissing the top of her head, pushing her high into air.”

“*Ekh_!!!*” Screamed Jeanie being pushed higher into the air.

“Lunch is ready!” Called out Kate.

Noah leaned back in the chair. Rubbing his belly. He had not eaten all day having rushed out the door that morning to catch the train.

“Wow... That was lovely... I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Liar... You had a pie before we got here.” Jeanie reminded him.

“Did I? Oh... I forgot about that.”

Kate lights a cigarette, soon followed by George, as though it were desert. Kate begins to clear the table.

“Why don’t I do that...” Suggested Jeanie “...You can have your family chat with Kate.”

“That’s a good idea.” Said Noah.

“George... Give Jeanie a hand. Don’t just sit there like a beached whale.” Shoving him with a hand to get moving.

“Let’s go for a walk down the road... It won’t take long.” Suggested Noah.

“This is all very mysterious Noah. Unlike you.”

“I could not agree more.” Said Noah leading the way.

Michael stood at the far corner. Dressed in black.

“This way.” Said Noah turning about, only to find Michael standing on the other corner.

Looking across the street to see him standing there.

“I can’t win with this guy.”

“What guy? Who are you talking about? ... What’s going on Noah?”

Finding shade beneath a bus shelter. A cool breeze washes over the siblings.

“Here will be fine.” Suggested Noah.

“Noah... What going on?” Asked Kate suspiciously thinking they were being followed.

“The truth?”

“Would be nice.” Said Kate.

“You won’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.”

“Right at this moment... I’m sitting on a train... Heading home to my three beautiful children... To Jeanie... In London.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying?” Said Kate becoming confused.

“I don’t know why this is happening... To me... To you.”

“To *me*? What about me?”

“You’re going to die.”

“You’re *scaring* me, Noah.”

“Good... It’s supposed to.”

“How? How do I die?”

“You got a cigarette?”

“You don’t smoke... Do you?” Kate pulls a packet from a pocket and hands it to Noah.

Noah examined the colorful box, void of the graphic images of cancer and disease. Opening the top, places the packet beneath his nose as if smelling a bouquet of flowers and inhaled its sweet tempting fragrance. Then taking the packet crushed it in his hand and torn it in two, scattering the tobacco like ashes.

Much to Kate dismay and confusion.

“Cancer.” Noah put a name to the thief.

“How do you know this?”

“Because I visit your grave every year... If I had my phone, I’d show you a picture.”

“A phone? With pictures? Don’t be silly... How do I know you’re not making this all up to make me quit smoking?”

“You don’t...” Noah still had one more card to play, “... George.”

“What about George? Does he die too? ... Cancer?”

“No... Do you love him?”

“With all my heart...” Tears whelm in Kate’s eyes and roll down her cheeks.

Noel put his arm around Kate and whispered in her ear. Hoping Michael was not listening. Michael stood unseen before them.

“(Gasp) ... No... No... It can’t be.”

“It’s your choice.”

“I don’t know why this is happening... But you have to promise me one thing.”

“What that?”

“You must never tell me what happened here. Ever... I won’t remember any of this once I’m gone back. I can’t risk jeopardizing anything in my future... I have children... And I want you to meet them one day... Promise me that okay?”

“I promise...” Crushing the smoldering cigarette beneath her foot, “... We better get back. George won’t like giving up.”

“Somehow, I think you’ll persuade him.” Said Noah.

He looked about and found Kate was gone. As had, everything else about him. He found himself standing within a large field of vibrant green wavering grass. A brilliant orb of pure white light shone in a brilliant blue sky. Then he feels the sensation as if someone tapping his shoulder. He looked about and upon closing and reopening his eyes he found himself back on the train.

“Mister, mister... Wake up. We’re here.” Said a man gently rocking Noah’s shoulder.

“Sorry I must have nodded off.” Responded Noah feeling dazed as though he had slept through the entire journey home.

The seat opposite now occupied by an old man leaning on a walking stick about to stand.

“Excuse me sir...” Noah catches the old man’s attention, “... Have you been there the whole time?”

“Of course... And you’ve been asleep... Must have been a hell of a dream... Good night.” The old man bids Noah.

“Good night.” Noah watches the man shuffle down the carriage.

Outside the day had dimmed. Summer had turned to winter. The boundless energy of his youth sapped from him. He felt tired. He felt old.

“Hm.” He chuckled, was it all just a dream.

“Have you been smoking?” Jeanie asked sniffing his overcoat suspiciously.

“You know I don’t smoke... Sometimes I wish I did... What a day.”

“My father is coming over for dinner... I hope you don’t mind... I know how you two get on like a house on fire.”

“You’re father? Really? ... That’s nice.” Noah grinned, “... Where are the kids?” He asked anxiously.

“They should be in bed if they know what’s good for them... You hungry?”

“Staving.”

“There’s a letter from Kate... Your sister in New Zealand... She wants to know when we’re coming over.”

“She’s alive?”

“What’s wrong with you tonight... You bump your head?” Asked Jeanie curiously.

“Something like that.” Said Noah...



DEAR JOHN

"Dedicated to my brother Grimm."

22 January 1986

Dear John

I haven't seen you at the sessions for months now. They ask after you. But no one knows nothing or aren't saying nothing. I was worried about you. I pulled some strings with Records. Did some guy a favor. If you know what I mean. He gave me your address.

I hope you don't mind me writing but I have to see you again. That moment in the rest room. I sensed the connection between us. As though I had known you for a thousand years. That we are meant to be together.

Maybe you need some time for yourself. The group sessions are doing my fucking head in too. Addicts, bleeding their guts as though they'd been cut open. As if to find redemption for their pathetic lives. I just want to put them out of their misery. Prescribe a pill that would put them to sleep.

Sorry, I don't want to open old wounds. It's just that I've been going crazy without you. You're the only man that has ever truly satisfied me. I felt your pain. Your anger. My body aches just thinking of you. My loins burn. I want to feel you inside me. I can't live without you.

My address is on the envelope. No names. No one needs to know. Only us. You can trust me, John. You know that don't you? Your secrets are safe with me. Don't leave me this way.

I beg you to write.

Yours forever
John

17 May '86

Dear John

It feels strange calling a woman John. It seems almost, homosexual. Dirty. I like it dirty. My whole life has been dirty. I'm not the man you think I am 'John'. You don't want to know me. I have too many skeletons. Buried too deep for anyone to find. The less you know the better. For your sake. And mine. I ain't going back inside again. Which brings me to why I haven't been about these past months. I became careless. I'm never careless. Maybe I was drunk. Drunk thinking of you. I barely knew you five minutes and I ended up in some joint. up State. No place you would have heard of. Did my time. Not my first. But there ain't going to be another. I'm going out with a blaze of glory. Fuck the Man. Got five months for pissing on a damn police car. Another month on top for

calling the Judge a cunt. Which he was. Fuck 'em. I did them a service!
Found your letter among a pile of bills when I got out. Landlord held onto them. As if I would want the bills after six months inside. Uncle Sam can go fuck himself. I kept your letter. It made me hard. I guess that's the only reason why I'm writing back. It's not you. It's me. It's not me, it's you. No matter what way you say it. We're both fucked. I ain't going back to those sessions you hear me. Bunch of misfits and lowlifes. Amateurs. I piss on them too just for being weak. Spineless cunts. You don't say much. You just sit there looking prim and proper. Taking notes. What's a classy looking lady like you doing in a place like that? What's your story? What wets your 'pecker'? I'm getting hard again. Give me a moment... That's feels better. I've had a shit of a day. You just made living another five minutes' worth it. Yeah, we can write. But I ain't going back to those damn sessions. But I'm telling you. No. I'm warning you. You don't want to go there. There are a hundred of cocks out there that would bang your fine-looking ass. Why me lady? I ain't no Fabio. Or maybe you like it rough? That it? I can play rough. But there won't be no safe word. Maybe you're just like all the other two-bit crack whores looking for easy money. You got the wrong fella 'John'. Cockroaches have more than me. What you see is all you get.

John

13 June 1986

Dear John

You're alive. Thank God for that. I was dreading you were dead, or worse. I told them you were taking an indefinite break. Family issues. They bought that for now. Hopefully I can persuade the guy on Records to lose your file through the cracks. Toss him a few tramadol, Xanax, flash him my tits, give him a hand job. You just have to know how to work the system. There's always another John coming through the door ready to fill your shoes. It would be like... you never existed. You'd like that wouldn't you John?

Maybe I am a two-bit crack whore. But I have a medical certificate to show for it hanging on some wall in some oversized office. Prescribing hallucinogens to addicts. Including myself. Just to take the edge off. You know. Nothing serious. I can quit anytime.

I'm naked you know. Laying on my bed here sweating my tits off running an ice cube over my nipples and between my legs thinking of you jerking yourself all over me. Ah, that feels sooooo good. I'm tingling from head to toe. My head is spinning thinking of you right now. Wondering what you're doing. How do you spend your days. Tell me. Tell me everything. You can trust me.

It's late here now. After midnight. I have to paperwork coming out my ass. Nothing that a crushed valium in vodka won't fix. You should

try it. It takes all one's cares away. Like I'm floating on a big fluffy white cloud.

I wish you were here with your arms around me. Your cock inside me. We could float away on a cloud together where they would never find us. I have money you know.

Tell about your day. Your dirty little secrets. And I'll tell you mine.

*Affectionately Yours
John*

11 July '86

Dear John

Yeah, I'm alive. But no thanks to God. I make my own way in this world. If there is a God, he's up there on one of your fluffy white clouds pissing on me. Well I showed him, didn't I? Fuck him. The only thing worse than death... is life. The living hell that it is. People are too afraid to live these days. Too afraid to step outside their front door. To take risks. Glued to their televisions sapping their worthless soul. Waiting to die. To be dispatch like some US Mail parcel to heaven. Where-ever the hell that is. I just help them on their way. Sooner or later we all end up dead. As for drugs, I touch the stuff. Never wanted to start. I get my kicks the natural way. Maybe with a little help from Jack. But nothing stronger. I like to retain my senses. If you know what I mean. You won't find me going down some fucking rabbit hole chasing rainbows. Only to end up more fucked up afterwards. Where's the sense in that. But I know what you mean, everyone needs a little something to take the edge off. I live in a one room apartment. But not at the address you write just in case you think about visiting. I've shifted since then. I check in occasionally for any mail. It's easier that way. You never know when the Man is watching you. You know what I mean. I work graveyard shift in at a shit-hole video store not far from here. That's when all the pervs come out. You know who they are. The ones that come to those sessions. I recognize their sick fucked up faces. Junkies, Alcoholics, Sex addicts. The owner stocks some underground shit. Even I would not watch it. I don't ask questions. I need the job. Not just men either. Women love the stuff. The other day, this woman came in. Blonde hair, big tits hanging out, short black skirt, red heels. She reminded me of you. I swear to God she was coming onto me. The way she was bending over and all. Her skirt riding up her ass. I would have ripped her panties off had she been wearing any. Christ, I could have shoved it in her then. There were others about. Not that, that would have stopped me. She was a cock tease. Left with a couple of anal tapes, a tube of lube and two hairy meat balls. She came back a few days later. She wasn't walking right. If you know what I mean. The stench of the city is smells sweeter than that damn video shop. The owner

doesn't give a fuck. I don't give a fuck. I get paid. Pay my rent on time. Whatever is left buys a bottle of Jack. And I stare out the fucking window at a fucking brick wall. That's my day. Everyday. I've been good lately. Well, since January.

John

03 August 1986

Dear John

I think I know the video store where you work. On East 139th street. Am I right? Don't worry, I won't visit. I'm not that crazy. Well not as crazy as the current lot. You knew Bobby, right? The junkie from Queens. Always shaking a leaf on a tree. Anyways, they find him a week ago. He'd OD'd on some uncut smack. Didn't stand a chance. I thought he was making progress. Just fell off the wagon. Got to feel sorry for him. His chair was barely cold when another junkie sat on it. Shaking like a God damn leaf.

It's a vicious cycle. Maybe it's for the best. Something you don't have to worry about. But something I have to face every day. They don't pay me enough to deal with that shit. It's like losing a family member every time one dies. I greave. Like you I draw the line and don't step over it. There's only so much valium and vodka one can take before one falls down the rabbit holes chasing ghosts.

You're so lucky to be staring at a brick wall. You don't see the ugly truth of this city. Though the big titted woman with the anal tapes fascinates me. I have a few myself. Why don't you come over and I'll rewind them. Would you fuck me in front of another woman? I know someone who would be interested. You remember Sheryl, the sex addict. Apparently, we have something in common. We both like men with big cocks. She's been keeping me company on these cold lonely. If you know what I mean.

Just writing this makes me horny for you. Ah fuck. Why do you do that to me. Now I have a wet patch on my couch. You bastard. Sheryl will think I've been cheating on her. I'd like to give her a birthday surprise. She could blow out your big candle. Just say the word.

I'm not seeing anyone. Are you?

With Devotion

John

11 September '86

Dear John

I see whoever I want. Fuck whoever I want. But to answer your question, no. There hasn't been anyone since you. My mind has been elsewhere, I guess. I work in a porn shop, the last thing I need is to be taking work

home with me. If you know what I mean. Don't get me wrong, if some horny bitch wants to drop on her knees and gobble the snake I ain't stopping her. Sheryl, you say. Short brunette. Small tits. You banging her? Can just imagine you strapping on a dildo and giving her one up the ass. She'd moan like a whore. I'd have you both moaning like whores. My cock is hard as a rock for you bitch. I might take you up on that offer. It's been a while. But they say it's like riding a bicycle. Or in this case, a tricycle. I have something to take care of first. Maybe we could pencil in Christmas. Your place would be better. More discreet. I can't have two fancy ladies coming here. The walls are paper thin. Shame about Bobby. There are enough other ways to die without on drugs. He could have been hit by a New York Cab. Or mugged walking down the street. He made his bed. Shit happens. We do what we have to do to survive. He's probably up on one of them fluffy clouds of yours, playing a harp, or harmonica, or whatever damn thing they play up there. You think the Mets will go all the way this year?

John

27 September 1986

Dear John

The television say they found the body of a woman that had been missing since January. About the time you went away. Up State ways. You ever wonder what it's like to kill someone? Take their life away. I'm just curious that's all.

Dave keeled over today in session. Frothing at the mouth. Crazed eyes. You remember him. Dope-head from Jersey. It was only a matter of time before he OD's. They carted him away on a gurney. Won't be seeing him again for a while. Got a new girl in today. Patricia. Cute Brazilian. Nice tits on her. You'd like her. Wouldn't mind a nibble myself. Sheryl and I could warm her up for you. Maybe make a foursome of it. Not sure what the word for it is in French, but it must sound dirty.

What do you do at nights? I just lay on my bed getting wetter and wetter thinking of you. I fanaticize you have tied my hands and legs to the bed end. I struggle to get free. It's hopeless. You have your hand about my throat. Squeezing it. I gag for breath. I feel something between my legs. You thrust into me. Oh my God, it feels so big. I can't take it all. Deeper and deeper you thrust. Again and again. My breasts rock in time with you. My nipples, stiff and swollen. Aching for your tongue. You suckle one. Then the other. Your body dripping sweat. The heat of your panting breath on my face. The stubble of your chin rasps against my face. You tighten your hold about my throat. Thrusting harder and faster you stiffen and jerk. I feel like I'm going to explode. You collapse exhausted beside me. Gently fondling my breast. Kissing

them apologetically. Your eyes shifting to Sheryl. Gagged. Watching on. Come to me my love. The evenings are getting cold without you.

Not much of a Mets fan, being Houston born and breed. Read somewhere that most of the players are pill-popping cokeheads. I'm surprised they can find their way onto the field let alone win the World Series. But good luck to them. They're going to need it.

*Missing You,
John*

11 October '86

Dear John

You're a dirty bitch aren't you. Surprised I haven't seen you come into the store. Maybe you have. Incognito. Many do you know. Concealing their faces. Not wanting anyone to know their dirty little secrets. We all have secrets we don't know known. Don't we John? Some darker than others. Know nothing about the woman up-State. I was inside when they reported her missing. You can't frame nothing on me. You hear. Maybe it was Ted. A sick fuck if there ever was one. A friend of mine. No one you know. But if it was me. They'd never find the body. Some killers get lazy. They don't think. All cock and balls and no brains. They ejaculate them when they cum. Amateurs. I piss on them. What does it feel like to kill someone? To look into someone's eyes, and sense their last breath leave their body. It's like looking at God. You just want to scream back at Him. So I hear. I wouldn't know. You believe in like after death? You think there's a hell for bad people. Or is God all-forgiving? I read that somewhere. I could find Jesus, or something. Repent all my sins. At the end, of course. Maybe before they inject me. I hate drugs. I told you that didn't I? I want to go out in a blaze of bullets. Bonnie and Clyde style. If you know what I mean. No pussy needle for me with everyone looking on. Judging you. Like you've done something wrong. Maybe I've said too much. I'm trusting you, John. What do I do at night? Not much. The brick window doesn't offer much of a view. I walk sometimes. If the weather permits. The days are getting shorter. The nights longer. I like it when it's dark. No one can see me. Like I'm invisible. Watching people go about their boring lives. I can see them fighting through the windows. I see the dealers and pimps. The low life. I might follow one home, now and again. Just for amusement of course. I fantasize too. Which reminds me. The Mets hit off next week. Reckon they'll take those Boston bastards in four.

John

28 October 1986

Dear John

Don't you love New York in the fall. Central Park a blanket of rustic hues. Leaves falling like snowflakes. That nip in the air that says winter is just around the corner to paint the canvas white. Wouldn't that be nice if we could wipe our slate clean. Paint over the shit in our lives and begin again. Purer and unstained. Like two virgins. But not for long. I am sure you would see to that. Sheryl is keen if you are. Cum for Christmas. I have a something for the top of your tree.

You missed all the excitement the other day. We had a police raid. There was a guy in the group that was wanted in three States. It wasn't his real name. It was the records guy that tipped them off. Don't worry, your records have well and truly been trashed. I lit the fire myself. You don't exist. But they're bringing in these new things called, computers. They look like typewriter with television screens. They say they will be the way of the future. That they will eventually replace everybody. Can you imagine the group staring at a television screen for two hours? Apparently, it can search a hundred records a second. I've seen one. But I say, so long as it's attached to a cock, it's no more than an oversized paperweight. They'll never catch on. Mark my words.

Congratulations are in order I hear. What did the papers call them? 'The Blazin' Mets'. It's been a while between drinks. Maybe we could celebrate at Christmas. You still cumming?

Affectionately Yours,
John

13 November '86

Dear John

The only thing I like about fall is the fragrance of decay in the air. A reminder that everything must pass. Nothing is permanent. The Mets won. About bloody time. It might make winter more bearable. I read about them computers in the papers. IBM or some big company was building them for businesses or something. Some dude named Jacob, or was it Jobs, said there'd be one in every home one day. Why would anyone want one? They cost a fortune. And for what? Not like you can talk to another person on the other side of the world. I'd get one to watch porn and watch you and Sheryl going for it. Nah, they would never allow that. Would they? You can't beat yourself off to a computer. It's not right. Give me a VHS tape any day. Or a Mayfair magazine. Had a dude come into the store the other day, bought a bundle of them. Placed them in plastic bags like they were precious or something. Asked him what he was going to do with them, he said they'd be collectors' items in years to come. Total whack-job if you ask me. Good luck getting the pages apart I told him.

Got a post card from Ted from up-state the other day, said he was coming to town. Had to make himself scarce for a while, told him he could crash at my place until things cooled down. Told him I was having Christmas at your place. I was thinking I'd bring him along. Wouldn't want to leave him alone if you know what I mean. The more cocks the merrier right. It is Christmas.

John

30 November 1986

Dear John

The first snowfall today. Isn't it magical to wake up to everything covered in snow. It's our anniversary next week. Where has the year gone? I'm sitting here drinking brandy, looking over Central Park looking serene. I wish you were here to enjoy it with me. Sheryl has gone out shopping for Christmas supplies. It's early I know, but I don't want the store to run out. I have a special recipe just for you. Some Turkey is giving its life for you.

This, Ted fella. You trust him? I don't want to end up in some body bag at the City Morgue. What about that woman up-state? They never did find the killer. I don't know. But if you trust him, then I guess it's okay. Sheryl can keep him entertained. I want you all to myself. I want to base you in gravy and lick it off you. Gobble, gobble your cock as you eat me out. Maybe I'll tie you to the bed and let Ted watch. Oh God, I'm so horny right now. Christmas cannot cum fast enough. I'm taking a cold shower. Give me a moment. This Brandy has gone to my head.

I'm back. No thanks to you. The records guy said he found your record on the system. Said there was nothing he could do to delete it. It's buried deep in a "data-base" I think that's the word he used. He doesn't have authority to delete it. No matter how much I flash my tits at him. It has all your details. This thing is wild. It knows your social security number. Where you live, your work place. All of your priors. Nothing is safe John. If I were you, I'd keep low. He says nothing has come up about you. So that could be a good thing.

I have to go. Sheryl has just gotten back. You know where I live. I saw you following me that night. Well I was hoping it was you. Arrive when you're ready. I'll buzz you in. Apartment 5D.

See you soon.

*Longingly Yours,
John*

12 December '86

Dear John

I'm sitting here having a warm beer. The refrigerator is broke, and don't have the Benjamin's to have it fixed just yet. Besides it cold as shit outside. A man can live on Sal's Pizzas and warm beers. That guy came back and bought another load of those magazines. Either he is a sick fuck. Or he might be onto something. So I stashed a few for myself. Wouldn't hurt keeping something aside for my retirement. If you know what I mean. You sure you can't jerk off that record guy? A man will do anything for love. I wouldn't want the cops crashing my crib. I don't have a phone, only a pay phone down stairs. Shame those computer things don't come with a telephone. Hell would freeze over before that happens. Ted said to say hi. He's out on one of his walks. I thought I was bad. Sometimes he don't come back until after three or four in the morning. I don't ask. He's cool. Keeps to himself. He's the quiet type. You know what I mean. Said he had to leave over some alimony dispute with his ex. So he skipped town until it blew over. The bitch. You wouldn't want Sheryl missing out on all the fun now would you. I'll buzz you when we're outside.

John

26th December 1986

Dear John

I couldn't wait to write to you again. My body is still quivering with the orgasms. My God, it was just as I imagined it would be. Sheryl took off with Ted this morning somewhere. They really hit it off last night. He's a real charm with the ladies isn't he. I can see by his ex, hates his guts.

Tell him it was a pleasure meeting him. You should bring him over again sometime. Sooner than later. Don't keep him all to yourself. Why not New Year's Eve. We could celebrate the New Year. Assuming you get this in time. Buzz the door, I'll let you in.

I'm going to take a hot bubble bath. Think of me naked thinking of you. Wish you here with your periscope.

Forever Yours

John

3rd January '87

Dear John

Sorry, your letter arrived two days late. Damn Postal Service. I would have been there in a flash if I'd known. Strange thing is Ted never came back that evening. Just like him to take off without a word. Not even a

thank you note. Crazy bastard that he is. Left his bag behind. Like he left in a hurry. Probably his ex was onto him. One of those computer things I'm thinking. He has a habit of jumping about. Forget about him. He's well gone now knowing him. Won't be seeing him for a while. Until he needs me again. He's a drifter. If you know what I mean. Anyways, I missed the bubble bath. Let me know when I can come over again. I have unfinished business with your ass.

John

7th January 1987

Dear John

Sheryl never returned. I thought she may have gone back to your place with Ted. If she's not with you and Ted's not there, then where the hell is she? I've called the police John. I haven't got time to play games with these damn letters anymore and the damn postal service. Every minute counts.

Your friend Ted is all over the television and newspapers. He's wanted for the murder of dozen women in a dozen States. And you brought him here to my place. You cunt. He's a fucking serial killer John. Did you know that?

The Police know nothing about "us". I burnt the last of your letters and I suggest should do likewise with mine. You don't exist. We never existed. It all ends now John.

I never want to see or hear from you again.

Goodbye.

John



UNREQUITED DEATH

“You fear Death Because,
You have only ever known Life.”

‘Beep ... Beep ... Beep ... Beep-Beep-Beep-Beeeeeeep_!’ A heart monitor screamed out awakening a woman beside a hospital bed.

Donna sits upright in the chair as her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. For a moment she thought she saw someone standing beside the bed. Thinking it was a doctor, the ghostly aberration fades. Her father mumbles indiscernible words, an arm reaches into empty space as though to something.

Or someone.

“Doctor! ...” Donna calls out, “... Help! Doctor! Help!” Donna screamed over the piercing sound of the monitor.

Her heart thumping in her chest.

A male nurse rushes into the room, soon followed by another. The nurse silences the relentless alarm and watches as the patient’s vitals fall.

“Code Blue! ... Paddles A.SAP!” He instructs the other nurse.

“Onto it.” The nurse responds pushing a stainless steel trolley next to the bed.

“Two Hundred!”

Donna stood back to make room. A chill comes over her.

“Don’t you dare take him.” She uttered beneath her breath to an unseen God.

Nostrils twitch as though she could smell muffins. She senses a presence beside her but sees no one. Maybe she was imagining things and dismissed the sensation as lack of sleep.

“Clear!” The nurse called out, placing the paddles on her father’s chest.

‘Boom!’ A resounding thud sounds, two hundred Joules rip through an old man’s body like a lightning bolt. Causing him to arch.

The monitor remained silent.

“Two-Fifty!” Instructs the nurse instructs, waiting impatiently for the machine to recharge.

‘Ping’ Sounding it readiness.

“Clear!” The nurse shouted.

‘Boom!’ The machine thunders its charge through the flaccid corpse.

Followed by silence. A thin flat line draws itself slowly across the screen.

“We’re losing him.” The other nurse calls out.

“Three hundred!” The nurse instructs.

“It will kill him!” The other warned.

“He’s already dead for fuck’s sake! ... *Sorry...*” The nurse apologized realizing Donna’s presence.

‘Ping.’

“Clear!”

‘Boom!’ The lifeless body arches violently.

Its soul being pulled between here and the eternal here-after in a spiritual tug of war.

‘Beep ... Beep ... Beep ...’ The heart monitor sings a rhythmic beat, dancing periodic blips across the screen.

“He’s back... Thank God for that... Call Doctor Murray. He’ll want to know. I’ll check his vitals.”

The nurse catches sight of Donna standing against the wall watching on.

“He’s fine... For now... Can I get you anything?”

“No, I’m good. Thank you.”

Donna approached the bed warily. Her father laying perfectly still. Lifeless, a heart monitor tolled his continual earthly tenure.

‘Beep ... Beep ... Beep ...’

Death waited patiently between the beeps. Waiting for an opportunity to pounce. And take what was His. Death looked at the daughter as though she had something to do with it. Donna hears a voice in her head speak. Soft and clear.

As though it was coming from within the room.

‘Why do you hold onto him?’ The voice asked curiously.

Turning about she discovers a mysterious man sitting in the chair beside the bed looking at her. Looking neither old, nor young. His eyes pale blue. Dark hair neatly combed to one side. Dressed in black, polished black shoes.

As though he were going to a funeral.

‘Gasp!’ She gasped, startled by the man’s sudden presence.

“Where did you come from? ... Do I know you?” Asked Donna thinking he looked familiar.

“In some ways... Distantly.” Death replied calmly.

“I didn’t see you arrive.”

“Oh, I’ve been here... a while.”

His words soothing Donna’s anxiety.

Donna looked at her father, sleeping peacefully as morphine numbed his mortal pains.

Death looked upon Donna. Probing her mind. Listening to her thoughts. Feeling her fears. And the love she felt for her father.

Her soul, innocent and without sin.

‘How could this be?’ He questioned.

Could this be what had been preventing him make from taking her father. He had taken her mother when she was a child. An accident. But Death does not do, *accidents*.

But merely attends to destiny.

As it was written before they came to this earthly plane. Donna was too weak to have prevented Him from taking her mother. Now she had blossomed into a beautiful young woman. Her aura filled the room, cocooning her father with pure love.

Death found himself hampered by her presence.

“You knew my father?” She asked.

“I’ve known him a very long time... And your mother.”

The mention of her mother struck a nerve with Donna.

“My *mother?* ... How could you possibly have known my mother? ... I want you to leave before I call security.” Donna warned turning to the door way about to open it.

Standing, Death holds out his hand as though to bid a kind farewell. Instinctively she takes it in hers. His hand felt soft. Benevolent. A tingle ran up her arm. It had been two thousand years since He had touched a such pure soul as hers.

It felt... *strange*. Like he was greeting an old familiar friend.

"I'm sorry. I do not wish to upset you..." He spoke caringly, "... I was but a child myself..." He lied, "... I'll see myself out."

"Sorry. I shouldn't have so rude." She said confused.

"Get some rest. You look tired." Death replied.

Just then, the monitor shrieked a sudden *'beep_'*, as if to distract her. She looked about to see her father sleeping peacefully. The monitor resumed its rhythmic pulse. Turning about, discovers the mysterious man had vanish as though into thin air. She peers into the dimly lit corridor she hoped to catch sight of the man but sees no-one.

"That's strange." Closing the door behind her.

"*Hey.*" Her father meekly speaks as though woken by a presence.

"Hey... What are you doing awake?" She whispered back.

"*I thought I heard voices.*" He inquired, rubbing his chest.

"Yeah, just an old friend come to see how you were. He's gone now." She smiled.

Her father looked at her with sedated eyes and reciprocated the smile. Shifting his eyes momentarily to the door as though someone was standing there.

"This man... What a did he look like?"

"I don't know..." Her mind unable to recall his face, "... young... dark hair, I think... Black... He was dressed in black... Weird if you ask me... You know him?"

The description fitted the man standing beside her looking down at him.

"*What do you want?*" Her father asked staring at the man.

"What was that? Donna asked confused.

"*You keep away from her... You hear me!*" He warned struggling to sit upright.

Vitals on the monitor became excited. Numbers climbed to triple digits. Death saw his chance to pounce.

"Dad! ..." Donna places a hand over his heart, speaking softly, "... It's me, dad, Donna... *Shh_*... Lay back down... *shh.*" She soothed him.

Death stepped back as though he had been cheated. Receding to a corner shadow before disappearing completely from view.

Her father grinned having won the battle.

"Dad? You, okay? ..." She asked stroking his face gently, "... Who were you talking to?" Looking over her shoulder hoping to see someone.

"No one... No one at all... Must be the medication." He lied, "... I'm fine... (*heavy sigh*) ... Get some rest sweetie. I'm not going anywhere to soon."

"Make sure you don't." She joked.

Looking up at here, he grinned. Eye lids struggle to remain open before closing completely. The heart monitor beeped quietly as though it too had fallen asleep.

Donna made herself comfortable in the chair beside the bed. A pillow on her shoulder made a head rest. Nostrils twitch as a familiar scent returned. Of freshly baked blueberry muffins. Reminding her of the strange mysterious man. The more she tried to recall him, the more difficult it became. Confused and overwhelmed she drifted to sleep.

Death sat unseen in a chair opposite. Beguiled by her beauty and innocence.

'Tap-tap-tap.' Gentle knocks sound at the door.

Donna looked up to see the man through the glass panel. Unchanged in appearance holding out two cups of coffee. As if to suggest one was for her. The morning sun shone brightly through venetian blinds. Casting zebra stripes over the floor.

Sitting upright she beckoned the man to come in.

“A peace offering... I’m sorry I startled you the other night... It’s a bit of a habit I’m afraid.”

“It was rather late... I’m surprised they accepted visitors after midnight.”

“So was I,” He lied, handing her the coffee.

“Hmmm... This is delicious...” She looked suspiciously at the coffee cup, “... How’d you know?”

“The coffee shop woman told me.” Death lied again.

“I have become a bit of a regular there.” She grinned taking another sip.

“How is he?” Death asked knowing the answer.

“Strong... He’s a fighter.”

“Indeed... I can’t see him going anywhere too soon.”

“Ha...”

“What’s that?”

“That’s what he said last night... After you left. I never heard you leave.”

“I’m not one for crowds.” Replied Death.

“Doctor Murray said it was a miracle dad survived last night... He should be dead.”

“A *miracle* indeed... We should be grateful he’s still here... Someone is watching over him.”

“You truly believe that? Guardian Angels?” Donna asked Death.

Death looked about the room to the multitude of souls watching over the immortal Spirit cradled in the decaying corpus.

“Yes, I do...” He admitted, before changing the subject, “...I was wondering if you’d like to go for a walk... There’s a park nearby. They say the roses are in bloom... You like roses, don’t you?”

“Well... I suppose... It’ll be nice to be outside for a change.” She looked at her father sleeping peacefully.

Breathing strongly, renewed with life.

“I assure you he’s not going anywhere... I *promise*.” Death raises a subtle grin, offering a hand to help lift her from the chair.

“Oh, you’re strong...” Catching her by surprise, “... Workout, do we?”

“I visit the gym... *Frequently*.” He smiled.

“I didn’t catch your name?”

“Thanatos.”

“*Thanatos*?” She asked curiously.

“It’s Greek.”

“Oh I see... I’m Donna. But you probably already know that?”

“It’s always nice to be formerly introduced... It’s nice to meet you, Donna.” Taking her hand and kissing it.

“You’re *gentleman*... That’s rare these days.”

“It’s rare to come across such a fair maiden.”

“Just how old are you?” Donna blushed timidly.

“A gentleman never reveals his age.” Thanatos subtly bowed.

“What’s with the black suit? You look like an undertaker... No offense.”

“None taken... In a way I am...” Grimacing a grin as though being caught out, “... You ready?”

“As I ever will be... Just popping out dad. Won’t be long?” Said Donna kissing her father’s cheek.

Waking him from his sleep. Eyes flicker open, only to be blinded by sunlight streaming over him. Catching his daughter walking out with the man in black. Death looked over his shoulder back at the old man.

Their eyes meet.

“*Won’t be long.*” He spoke to the old man’s mind.

“*Keep away from her! Take me!*” The old man screamed back at Him, only to have his words muted.

“*See you soon...*” Thanatos smiled, “... *Sleep.*”

The old man closed his eyes and slept.

Thanatos and Donna walked a path beside a row of colorful roses in full bloom. Their fragrance filling the air like perfume. Crushed oyster shells sound beneath their steps. Divine sunlight rained down on them.

Birds sang and danced in the air.

“Isn’t this paradise?” Asked Donna.

Thanatos did not know how to respond. He had seen Paradise. It was nothing like this.

“My Father is a gardener... Once.”

“Really... *Roses?*”

“*Apples* actually... But the garden became overrun by vermin. If you know what I mean.”

“You’re not a gardener then I’m taking?”

“Not really. More on the harvesting side these days... *Coffee?*” Asked Thanatos spying a café.

Customers look up to see the couple taking seats beneath a large calico sun umbrella. Then resumed their stare at their cellphone as though something was drawing their attention.

A chatter stirred among them.

“So, what brings you to town? ... Sorry I shouldn’t pry.” Asked Donna.

“Business. Family business... Death is a steady business. If you know what I mean.”

“I imagine it would be. People have to die... Sometime...” Then remembered her father laying in the hospital bed, “... Perhaps we should get back.”

“Your father is fine Donna... He’s not going anywhere just yet... I’ve seen many dead people in my time. He is far from leaving this earth...” Thanatos lied, “... Why do you human’s cling to life so desperately?”

“*You humans? Aren’t you human?*”

“I meant *metaphorically*... Why do you think people cling to a body riddled with pain?”

“Loss.”

“Loss?”

“Loss of the one’s they love... Have you ever been in love Thanatos? True love?”

The question catches Thanatos off guard. As though he had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar and had become stuck. He felt anxious. Fidgeting in his seat, feet scuffed beneath the table. A mild sweat breaks out across his forehead.

'Was this what human's call love?' He thought to himself. Speechless, he looked to the Heavens as though to seek help.

"Thanatos?" Asked Donna getting his attention.

"Sorry... Of course I've known true love... My Father."

"Then you know how I feel about mine." Donna informed.

"Touché." Thanatos grinned.

"What do you think happens when we die?" Donna asked.

"Don't you know?"

"Not really... Who does? Perhaps this is it. The lights go out. We go to sleep. And we never wake up. As though we never existed."

Thanatos grinned at Donna's innocence.

"Or... Perhaps, it is they who carry on, and it is us who cease to exist." He confessed.

"That's so beautiful... I never looked at it that way."

"It's just a matter of altering the perspective." Informed Thanatos.

A chatter circulated among those sitting about the café.

"I wonder what all the commotion is?" Asked Donna noticing people looking at their cellphones.

"I'm not sure... I do not have one of those things."

"Those things? ..." Donna looked at Thanatos as though he had stepped out of the middle-ages, "... You don't have a mobile?"

"Is that what they are called?"

"Seriously?" Asked Donna reaching hers from her hand bag.

"Never needed one." Thanatos dismissed.

"Where have you been?"

"Everywhere."

Swiping the screen, and tapping an icon, she waited anxiously for it to refresh. Scrolling through the headlines, discovered what had caught everyone's attention.

"That can't be right." A puzzled look comes over her face. Unsure what to make of the breaking news.

"What's that?" Inquired Thanatos knowingly.

"You won't believe this." She began, unable to put into words the bizarre situation.

"Try me."

"For the past couple of days..." A chill ran over her body, "... No one has died."

"Where?" Thanatos asked unphased.

"Everywhere... Not one recorded death."

"Must be a mistake..." Replied Thanatos hiding behind a large coffee cup.

"It's being reported all over the world..." She searches for excuses, "... Imagine if it were true."

"How's that?" Thanatos played along.

"Over population to begin with."

"So you're saying... *death* is necessary?"

"In a way..." Donna confessed, "... Death gives life meaning."

"You are wise beyond your years Donna." Complimented Death, sensing a crack in the veil protecting her father.

Someone in the café turned on a television showing images of riots breaking out around the globe. Protestors demanding to know what was going on. Conspiracy theories of government involvement mushroomed over the internet.

Thanatos chuckled.

“You find this amusing?” Asked Donna.

“If it’s true, then I’m out of a job.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.”

“In my profession, death is a cause for celebration.” Stated Thanatos.

“A celebration?”

“A home coming as it were... Releasing the suffocating soul to the Life-Hereafter... To experience divine transfiguration... Would you rather people suffer eternal pain, or have eternal peace?”

“Eternal peace of course.”

“Then the Reaper’s sickle merely severs the umbilical cord of the spirit from its earthly vessel.”

“You have a way with words.”

“I read a lot...” Thanatos lied.

“Well it seems like Death has taken a *vacation*...” Said Donna, “... I better get back to my father... Thanks for the coffee.”

“My pleasure.” Grinned Thanatos.

“I’ll be seeing you around.”

“I hope so.” Watching her walk away.

Thanatos looked to the heavens.

“*What?* ...” He asked.

“His vitals’ are strong...” The doctor informed her, “... We’ll keep him under observation for a few more days before we can discharge him.”

“Thank you, Doctor... Ah, by the way, is it true what they’re saying on the television that there have been no deaths in the past forty-eight hours?”

“That’s good, isn’t it? ... We must be doing something right.” Replied the doctor.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Why don’t you go home and get some rest. Your father is fine here. We’ll call if his situation changes oaky.” The doctor advised.

“Thank you doctor.”

“You heard the doctor sweetie... Why don’t you get yourself home, I’m sure you have things to do there.” Said her father sitting up in bed.

“I wouldn’t mind a long hot bath.”

“I’m not going anywhere... Seems death has taken a holiday. What do you make of that?”

“Somethings not right dad.”

“Go... I’ll be fine. I feel like a million dollars.” He grinned never feeling better.

“See you later.” Gathering her overnight bag she kissed her father on the cheek.

“Tomorrow morning, okay? Get a good night sleep in your own bed and not that chair... Promise.”

“Yes dad, promise... Tomorrow morning...” Then hesitates in the door way, “... Oh before I forget. That guy that was here, said he knew you. And mom... *Thanatos?*”

“Thanatos? ... Can’t say I recall the name.” Replied her father.

“What did he look like?” The old man asked.
“My age... Dark hair, dark suit.”
“Pale complexion?”
“Yeah, that’s him.” Donna’s face lights up.
“I see...” A worried look came over her father’s face, “... When did he arrive?”
The heart monitor skipped a beat.
“A couple of nights ago... When you had you turn. I’m sure he’ll pay you a visit.”
“I’m sure he will... I’m sure he will... You get yourself home sweetie.”
“Love you dad.”
“Love you too sweetie.” Blowing her a kiss.
The old man laid back in the bed. His eyes scan the room eerily.
“Too scared to show your face, eh?” The old man challenged.
Thanatos sat unseen in the chair beside the bed.
“You leave her alone... you hear me?” The old man warned.
“*I hear you...*” Thanatos responded materializing in a chair opposite the bed.

Vitals climbed and beeped loudly, alerting doctors to the room. Unseen, Thanatos watched on as doctors went about turning dials and throwing switches. Doctor Murray tapped the monitor as if it were a faulty television. The old man laid back untroubled by those about him.

His eyes fixed on Death in the corner.

“I’m fine, I’m fine.” The old man grumbled the doctors in a strong voice.

“Must be glitch in the monitor...” Advised Doctor Murray, “... Get another monitor.”

“Nothing wrong with the monitor Doctor. I just need some rest.”

The old man waited for everyone to leave.

“*Thanatos*, I assume.”

“Johnathan.” Death replied.

“You keep away from my daughter!”

“I haven’t come for your daughter Johnathan.”

“Then what are you waiting for? Hmm?!”

“I don’t know...” Replied Death unable to put into words his feelings for Donna.

“Ha! You don’t *know*? That will be the day? ...” Before the old man realized what was happening, “... You’re in love with her?”

A silence fell between the two.

“You are allowed? ... Love?” The old man asked.

“On occasion... A pure soul comes along such as your daughter... My Father permits it.”

“Your father? God?”

“You know Him as God, but he has many names.”

“That’s one hell of a Father-In-Law. (*Chuckle*).” Chuckled the old man.

“Hmm... (*Chuckle*).” Chuckled Death.

“What’s stopping you?”

“She protects you... Her veil is too strong... Too pure for me to penetrate... She has to left you go.”

“So if I don’t go, no one goes? Is that it?”

“Something like that.”

“Won’t you get behind on your quota?”

“Nothing I can’t make up... Man-made pandemics, nuclear arsenals, natural disasters.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Man has found an insatiable appetite to kill himself without my help.”

“I see... Does she know who you are?”

“No. I dare not tell her. She would only resist stronger if I did. It has to come from her. She has to release you.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

“You stay here... Along with everyone else...” Death grinned.

The monitor beeped loudly, distracting the old man attention. He looked back to the chair opposite to discover Death had vanished.

Then wondered if he had imagined the whole conversation.

The old man slept peacefully through the night. Vitals giggled up and down like a yoyo on a string. Donna appeared at the door, holding a coffee in her hand. Catching her father watching a television broadcasting the growing protests around the world. Of a world in crisis.

Thanatos sat unseen opposite.

“That stuff will kill you.” Her father joked distracted by his daughter.

“You’re one can talk.”

“Sweetie, we need to talk.”

“Sure... Doctor Murray said you could be home by Friday.”

“I’m not coming home sweetie.”

“Don’t be silly dad. Doctor Murray said...”

“Forget what Doctor Murray said.” Her father cut her short.

“What are you saying?”

“This...” Hands gesture his body, “... Is not real... I’m living on borrowed time... Your time.”

“*My time?*”

“You have to let me go... So the world can move on.”

“What are you talking about dad?”

“You have to let me go.”

“I love you dad. I’ll never let you go.”

“You *have to* sweetie... *Please.*”

The old man’s eyes search the room for Thanatos.

“Show your face Thanatos... Show her who you really are...” Called out the old man, “... You *coward!*” Aggravating the monitor to beep loudly. Vitals begin to climb but to no detriment to the old man.

He could not die if he wanted to.

“Who are you talking to dad? What’s Thanatos have to do with is?”

“He loves you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I barely know him.”

“He’s known you forever.”

“I don’t understand.”

Thanatos materializes at the end of the bed. Unmoved by the words spoken.

“Thanatos, I never saw you come in... What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to collect your father.”

“Collect? ... What he’s talking about dad.”

“It’s time.”

“Who are you?” Donna asked Thanatos.

But Thanatos remained silent. His eyes fixed upon her father. Beside him stood a woman.

“She’s here.” Her father exclaimed seeing the apple of his eye.

“Who’s here?” Asked Donna looking to the doorway.

“Your mother... She looks beautiful.”

“Where?”

“Standing at the end of the bed...” Pointing to the end of the bed.

“Thanatos, what’s going on?”

“You have to let him go...” He tells her in a quiet voice, “... Do you trust me?” Holding out his hand to her.

Donna takes it and the room is filled with brilliant divine light and angelic singing as though the heavens had opened up and walls of the room had fallen away.

She sees her mother smiling at her.

“Mom?” Tears roll down her cheeks

Realizing what she had to do. She closed her eyes and prayed. Releasing her father from her earthly chains. When she reopened them, her father was standing beside her mother, the hands entwined.

“I love you Dad... I love you, Mom.”

“Thank you...” Said Donna looking to Thanatos, “... Will I see you again?”

“Not for a very, very, very... long time Donna.” Responded Thanatos fading away as the walls of the room reappear about her.

Leaning over her father she kisses his forehead.

“Bye dad.”

Doctor’s rush into the room as the monitor screamed for attention. Knowing their attempt to resuscitate her father would be fruitless we walked out without looking back. Knowing her father would carry on.

As would she...



THE PRODIGY

“Talent can’t be Taught.
But it can be Awakened.”

“*Meow_!*” A kitten meekly meows.

“*Shh_ Tabatha.*” A little girl whispered trying to silence the kitten in her arms. Hidden within the folds of the long velvet drapes.

Voices fall silent as the auditorium as the auditorium dimmed. The audience waits in anticipation. Suddenly, a shaft of white light punches the darkness. Its beam focused upon a lone Grand Piano center stage. As though it were waiting on someone to come out to play.

But this not *someone*.

This was a gifted individual talented beyond the mere mortals watching on. Bar one. An individual who could only be described as a Prodigy. Voices lower to a murmur. Eyes shift to the wings. A young man dressed in black steps onto a disc of light. As though it were a stepping stone. Insatiable applause followed.

The young man bowed graciously.

From the wing opposite, shrouded in darkness, two small feet appear at the foot of the curtain. The child watched on anxiously. Watching as the young man took his place before the Grand Piano. Lifting a hand delicately in time with his. Mimicking his movements as though they were her own. Her mind capturing every note. Tiny fingers twitch and tap invisible keys as though she knew them by heart.

Unaware of another set of eyes watching her.

“*Sofia! ...*” Her father whispered to get her attention, fearful of disturbing the curtain, “...*Sofia!*”

But the child was caught up in the moment. Her father’s voice muted by the building Crescendo. A hand touches for her shoulder, alerting her to his presence.

“*Sofia... You should not be here. Come quickly before Mister Sanders discovers you... Hurry child.*”

“But Papa...” Sofia tries to protest.

Her father takes her by the hand and gently pulled her away. Curtains waver ever so slightly. Keen eyes in the audience notice the disturbance. A gust of air perhaps. Dismissing it as they are lured back to the mesmerizing virtuoso performance.

Sofia watched on from within the unglamorous wing of a theatre that had been for home for entire life. All ten years of it. Helping her father where she could, cleaning and tidying the large theatre.

Her mother taken by God for a reason only He knew.

“*Meow_!*” Tabatha meowed, leaping out of her arms, and running away.

“*Tabatha! ...*” Sofia frantically called out, “...*Look!*” Holding out a small morsel to tempt the kitten back.

“*Gasp! No!*” Panicked her father noticing the escaping furball heading towards the stage.

Tabatha stopped in her tracks. Nostrils and whiskers twitch sensing the tantalizing treat. The kitten returned to Sofia, rubbing itself up against her.

The crisis averted. Her father sighed with relief.

“Get the kitten away from the stage before Mister Sanders sees it...” Eyes scan the darkened shadows for the Stage Manager.

“Yes Papa... Come Tabatha.” Picking the kitten up, cradling it in her arms.

“Where is the twine, I gave you?” Asked her father.

“In my pocket.”

“Put it on Tabatha before she costs me my job... You don’t want that do you?”

“No Papa... Sorry Papa.” A pout comes over her face.

“That’s okay sweetie... I love you...” Her father pulled her close kissing the top of her head, “... You have homework to do?”

“Already done Papa.”

“All of it?” He asked surprised.

“Hmm...” Sofia nods, “... It was easy.”

“I don’t know what to make of you, child.” Grinning and shaking his head in disbelief.

The grin quickly dissolved upon seeing the Sanders marching towards him. A man whose face was too small for his head. Small circular spectacles pinched a hooked nose, or beak. Beneath which sat a mouth. Small, with thin grey lips. A small tongue darts out as though to taste the air.

He was parched and frustrated.

“Why don’t you run away and play somewhere away from the stage... Off you go child.” Shooing her away before Mister Sanders noticed the kitten, “... Tie up Tabatha!” He warned.

“Yes Papa.”

Sofia disappeared into the darkness to become part with the moving shadows. She knew every nook and cranny of the old theatre. And then some. Placing Tabatha into a satchel she climbed a wooden ladder to the rafters overlooking the stage. Creeping across wooden boards. Finding a nest of old blankets, she made herself comfortable.

Watching like God upon the mortal playing below. Her eyes following his fingers as they danced over the black and white keys. In the wing she could see her father talking to Mister Sanders, poking his finger at her father as though they were arguing.

“*Meow_!*” Whines Tabatha wanting more treats.

“*Here...*” Whispered Sofia pulling out several small biscuits from a pocket, “... Now *shh!*”

“You can’t have that cat here Pierre! I’ve told you a hundred times!” Warned Sanders keeping his voice below the music.

“Yes, Mister Sanders... Sorry Mister Sanders. It won’t happen again. I’ll have a word to Sofia to get rid of the thing.” Pierre Apologized.

“Make sure you do. Can you imagine the outcry if that thing ever got on stage? We’d be the *laughing stock* of the city!!”

“Yes, Mister Sanders... Sorry Mister Sanders.” Pierre humbled himself.

“Where are they?” Sanders looked about for the culpable pair.

“I sent her to do her homework... Best not disturb her.” Pierre lied.

“*Hmm_.*” Grumbled Sanders shaking his head walking away.

Pierre watched him walk into the shadows. Suddenly the theatre is filled with lengthy applause. Instinctively he finds himself clapping. The performance was far from over. He looked up to the rafters and spied two small feet protruding out.

It was going to be a long evening.

The stage and theatre lights brighten. The Prodigy stands and bows stiffly at the hips. A beautiful woman appears and presents him with a boutique of white roses. He bows again. Deeper. Longer. Taking in the gratitude bestowed upon him. Lest they knew the hours, days, weeks, months, years, the lifetime he had sacrificed to perfect each performance. Egging a living from the talent the Lord had cursed him with. Living like a hermit. Alone. Homeless. Busking Concert Halls across the country.

To him, it was *easy*.

Unseen on the rafters above, Sofia bowed to crowd as if the applause was for her. Cradling Tabatha in her arms as if she were a bouquet of roses. The applause continued until the Prodigy had walked from the stage and slipped from view. The ovation whimpered before dying a strangled death. People begin to make their way from the theatre. Their evening over.

Pierre's evening was about to begin.

He waits patiently. Content the evening had gone without incident. Doors close behind the last patron. Leaving Pierre finally alone in the grand old theatre. He stepped onto the stage and looked into the vastness of empty seats. The faint scent of perfume and cologne hung in the air together with a lingering silence.

He hears rafters creak above him. Followed by a meow.

"Sofie... Get down from there. Mister Sanders catches you..." Warned her father without finishing, "... Be careful."

"Yes Papa."

There is a sound of scampering feet and moments later Sofie appeared beside her father.

"Why don't you see to the seats and look for any lost property... Then off to bed okay."

"Yes Papa." Sofie skips away.

Pierre closed the top of the Grand Piano gently and began to sweep the stage. Sofie walks up and down rows of seats tilting them upright. A keen eye on the lookout for anything that had been dropped.

"Papa! Papa!... Tabatha found a wallet! ..." Exclaimed Sofia excited by the find, "... Its full of money!" She called out excitedly.

"Good girl. Put it in your satchel and I'll hand it in to Mister Sanders when I lock up."

"Yes Papa... Come on Tabatha. Find some more."

Pierre watched on as the child frolicked along the rows of seats. Flicking them upright with boundless energy, as he lethargically swept the stage.

"All done!" Sofie stood before her father panting, holding out the thick leather wallet and diamond ring.

"Good girl... You've done well tonight... Now wash up and off to bed. You have school tomorrow... I'll see you soon."

"Yes Papa."

Sofie runs her fingers over the keys of the Piano as she passes. Creating a rippling cascade of notes.

"Don't touch Sofie... It's not a toy." He warned her.

"But Papa..." She tried to explain.

"Off to bed now." Giving her a stern look.

"Yes Papa... Sorry Papa... Come on Tabatha." She replied despondently.

'*Me_ow_!*' Meowed Tabatha.

Without warning, Sanders materializes at the foot of the stage looking up at Pierre. A troublesome look on his face.

“Ah! Mister Sanders... You gave me a fright. I didn’t see you there. I thought you were a ghost.”

“I thought I held the piano, was that you?”

“Yes, I’m sorry Mister Sanders...” Pierre lied, “...I was giving the keys a wipe.”

“Hm! ...” He grumbled, “... Be more careful next time. I’m off. I’ll leave it to you to lock up.”

“Of course Mister Sanders... Oh before you go...” Pierre remembered something, reaching into his pocket, feels the wallet and he wondered if he should give it to him. Fingers fiddle to find the ring, catching it, but at the last moment has second thoughts, “... Sofie found this wallet...” Holding it out to Sanders.

Eyes bulge focused on the wallet. Greedy fingertips reach up, pinching the wallet from Pierre’s hand.

“Leave this to me Pierre. I’ll make sure it is repatriated with the *rightful* owner.” Sanders gleefully lied shoving the treasure chest deep into his pocket, “... Well done Pierre... Make sure you lock up now.” Quickly changing the topic.

“Yes, Mister Sanders. You have a good evening...” The farewell falling on deaf ears.

Pierre knew the owner would never see the wallet and contents ever again. Sanders’ liking for the horses and drink would see to that. Digging into his pocket, Pierre retrieves a fold of large notes and a diamond ring.

“*Two can play at the that game Mister Sanders.*” He whispered to the departing ghost.

“Sophia! Sophia!” A teacher called out, catching her attention over the other children taking their seats.

“Mister Bradshaw.”

“Did your father get the letter I sent?”

“I’m not sure... He hasn’t mentioned anything.” Sophia replied.

“Oh... I hope so, it’s very important I speak to him about you...” A grave look comes over Bradshaw’s face, “... Maybe I’ll have a word with him next time I see him... How was the performance?”

“You should have been there, Mister Bradshaw. It was... *Magical.*”

Children snigger and nigger at the comment.

“Children! ...” Warned Bradshaw, “... Only you would call it *magical* Sophia. Maybe next time.”

Children giggle behind her back. She was not like them. She was... *different...* A *freak* some would call her behind her back.

Some to her face.

“*Children!*” Reprimanded Bradshaw again. Casting chastising eyes over the troublesome children, “... Quiet please!”

Silence reined over the classroom. Children sit upright as Sophia takes her place at the very front of the class. Bradshaw waited for her to be seated as though she was a pianist about to perform.

“Today, I will be playing be one of the greatest composers of all time...”

“Justin Bieber!” A child called out.

Causing the class to erupt with boisterous laughter.

“That will be enough Phil! Detention for you after class.”

“Oh_ Mister Bradshaw.” He protested.

“No, it will not be Justin Bieber... Maybe in two hundred years...” Then qualifies, “...Or not...” Regaining his composure, pulled a large vinyl record cover from a briefcase as though it were a prized possession, “... I will be playing Mozart.”

Dare he say *Wolfgang Amadeus* and cause another uproar of laughter.

“What’s that Mister Bradshaw?” Asked a curious child.

“This is how we played music in my time.”

“*Two hundred years ago!*” Squealed a boy seated next to Phil.

The children giggle and laugh.

“You can join Phil in detention after class Ricky.”

“Oh_ Mister Bradshaw.” The boy complained.

Removing the large black disc from its opaque sleeve, Bradshaw holds it up to the light and examines it for imperfections. Gently blowing away any dust. Children watch in awe as he places it gently on a turntable lined with a series of large knobs. Large speakers stand either side. The record begins to rotate. A hand lifts an elongated arm. Carefully Bradshaw places the needle down onto a furrow.

And waited anxiously for it to play.

Faint crackles sound through the speakers. The needle ploughed on before finding what it was looking for. At first it sounded like chirping birds, then a swarm of bees. Melodies that coaxed and soothed at the same time. Curious ears prick up, their appetites whetted. The dreamy requiem drifted along like a paper boat on a wandering stream. Taking youthful imaging along with it.

The music fades and came to an end.

Bradshaw looked about the faces sensing many had never heard such music before. Numb faces stared back at him. Unsure what as to what they had heard.

“Did anyone see anything? Feel anything for the piece?” He probed.

The loaded question is greeted by blank silence. Unwilling to confess their enchanted fantasies, dare they look foolish.

“So what do *you* see Phil?” Bradshaw asked the disruptive boy.

“I saw *nothing* Mister Bradshaw. *Honest.*” Pleaded the boy.

“Somehow, I believe you Phil... You can be excused detention for your honesty.”

“Ohh_ complained Ricky... I saw nothing too. *Honest.*” Added Ricky.

“I guess you can be excused to.” Bradshaw pardoned the felons.

Making the sign of the cross with his hand as though to absolve them.

Turning to Sophia, sitting quiet, biting her lip.

“Sophia... Would you like to tell the class what you saw?”

Reluctant to speak. Sophia coughed to clear her dry throat.

“A storm.... Rippling streams.... Graceful whirling butterflies.” She surmised as though she were standing in the midst of a raging tempest that was sweeping aside the dark of winter.

Giggles sound from the back of the class. Bradshaw cast his eyes and frowned sternly, and the giggles abated.

“You saw all that?” Bradshaw asked.

“Much more...” She added, “...The colors of the rainbow... It was beautiful.”

“Colors? She’s lying Mister Bradshaw!” Blurted out Phil, followed by Ricky laughing hysterically.

“Right you two. You’re both back in detention!”

“*Oh_ Mister Bradshaw!*” The pair sang in soprano.

“Everybody, take out your books and read chapter five about Mister Mozart, and how he was only your age when he wrote it.”

“True?” Asked Phil.

“True... There is still hope for you yet Phillip.”

Children giggle.

“Here Sophia... I want you to read these.” Handing her several sheets of paper.

Recognizing the pages immediately, she places them inside her satchel.

“Yes, Mister Bradshaw.”

“Ask your father about the letter. Its very import we hear back from him soon. I don’t know how long I can keep the board waiting.”

“Yes, Mister Bradshaw... I’ll try.” Responded Sophia opening her text book to chapter five.

“Papa... Mister Bradshaw asked if you got his letter?” Sophia asked shoving a spoon of broth into her hungry mouth.

“Hmm! ...” Grumbled Pierre, “... I wish they’d leave us alone...” Touching a folded envelope in a jacket pocket, “...What trouble have you been causing?” He wondered.

“Nothing Papa, honest.” An innocent face declared.

Confused as to what had upset her father.

“I hope so... Eat up and off to bed now.” He instructed throwing a small log into the potbelly fire.

“Yes Papa, sorry Papa...” Finishing the soup.

Wiping her mouth on a napkin. Stands and pushes in the chair.

“Goodnight, Papa.”

“Goodnight sweetie... Come give your old father a hug.” Taking her in his arms, “... Love you.” Gently kissing her on the forehead.

“Love you too Papa.” Kissing his cheek.

Tabatha followed skipping on her heels.

Pierre waited for her to depart. Listening to the creaking wooden steps to her room and sound of the door. Pulling the letter from a pocket and opened it. Unfolding a page of jumbled letters and words. Meaningless to Pierre. Grumbling in frustration, crushes the letter in his hands and tosses it into the open mouth of the potbelly.

Hoping that would be the last of the letter.

Sophia climbed into bed, sitting against a pillowed bed-end. A blanket pulled up to her waist.

Tabatha wanted to play.

“Not now Tabatha... I have to read this first...” Pulling sheets of paper from her satchel, “... Mister Bradshaw has given us homework.” She informed the playful kitten curling up beside her.

Fingers dance up and down as she read the score as she were recited musical alphabet in her head. Her feet moving back and forth beneath the cover. Tabatha pounces on the moving humps as though they were prey.

“Tabatha!” Sophia protested, nudging Tabatha to one side. Only to have her pounce again, “... You’re impossible.”

Eyes dance playfully across the page. Her mind a sponge. Absorbing all. Leaving nothing behind. He reaches for another page, then another, before sleep finally overcame her. Pierre enters the room to find her sitting upright, her head slumped.

Tabatha curled up next to her.

“What am I to do with you child.”

Gathering the pages scored with dots that were as meaningless as words he places them on a stack of others beside her bed, “... You’re just like your mother...” Lifting her gently and laying her down pulls a blanket to her chin, “... Sweet dreams sweetie.” Kissing her head softly.

Turning off the light, closes the door quietly behind him.

And sighed heavily.

“The Prodigy is returning for another performance.” Snapped Sanders, his breath reeking of alcohol. Looking tired, his suit ruffled, as though he had slept in it. Removing his glasses he polishes them with a soiled handkerchief.

“You okay Mister Sanders?” Asked Pierre.

“Fine, fine... Don’t worry about me... Anymore lost property I should know about? *Hm?*” Sanders asked bluntly.

The horses had not been kind to him.

“Not since the last concert. I hope you found the owner of the wallet...”

“What? You calling me a *theft!*? *Hm?* Are you?” Jumped Sanders on edge.

“No. No. Of course not... I was just wondering...”

“*Well don’t!* That’s my job! You make sure this place is ready this Saturday evening. *Understood!? Hm!?*”

“Yes, Mister Sanders, sorry Mister Sanders.” Responded Pierre apologetically, watching him storm away.

Sophia watched from behind the curtain. Her shoes gave her away.

“I can see you, Sophia.” Said her father calling her.

Sophia appeared holding Tabatha in her arms.

“Your homework done?”

“All done.”

“Of course it is...” Pierre berates himself, “... You heard Mister Sanders. The Prodigy is returning this Saturday evening for another performance.”

“*Meow!*” Tabatha cried.

“Indeed... We don’t have much time to ready this place. You’ll have to stay here to help.”

“What about school?” Sophia inquired.

“A few days away won’t hurt you... I’ll call your teacher.” Pierre lied.

“If you say so Papa.”

“I do... Now go tidy the seats... I’ll polish the stage and piano.”

“Can I help?”

“No... You heard Mister Sanders. You are not to touch the piano.”

“Yes Papa.” Sofia inhales the fragrance of the piano as she passed it.

The wood, the strings, the brass pedals. The ivory keys. Each their having their own peculiar distinct scent.

“Off you go now. We don’t have much time.” He warned, watching her skip away.

Tabatha followed playfully at her heels.

The evening had arrived. The concert hall looked resplendent. Polished brass railings sparkled. The grand piano took center stage. Patrons dressed in their Sunday best. Women in flowing gowns and priceless jewelry. Men in dark tailored suits. All seated but for one gentleman who appeared to have lost something.

Lights begin to dim.

A hush comes over the audience. Sophia had taken herself to the wings, Tabatha tucked securely in her satchel. Her head poking from the opening.

“*Meow!*” Protested Tabatha being restrained.

“Keep that kitten quiet. Understood? You don’t want to go upsetting Mister Sanders.”

“No Papa.”

“Go back further. You can hear perfectly well from back there.” Instructed her father.

“Yes Papa.” Replied Sophia reluctantly.

Sanders walked onto the stage to make an announcement. Appearing agitated. Moreso by the uncomfortable the tuxedo that was either too small for him, or that he was too big for it.

The Prodigy was late.

“Ladies and ah... Gentlemen... May I have your attention... Ah hm...” Clearing his throat, “... My apologies... There appears to be a bit of a delay in this evening’s performance... I am sure it will not be too much longer.” Sanders lied, unsure what was keeping the man.

Sanders bowed and left the stage in search of a telephone. The evening would be a disaster if the Prodigy did not show.

“Sophie!” A familiar voice called out.

Sophie looked about to discover Bradshaw and another man beside him coming towards her.

“Mister Bradshaw, what are you doing here?” Surprised by her teacher’s sudden appearance.

“You haven’t been to school the past few days... I was worried you may have been sick.”

“I’m fine Mister Bradshaw... My father needed me here. Didn’t he call?”

“I don’t believe so... That’s not why I’m here... I really need to talk to your father. This is Mister Fairbanks, head of the Music Academy we talked about.”

“Hello Sophia... How are you?” Fairbanks asked holding out his hand to shake hers gently.

She timidly smiles and stands back. Looking about for her father, seeing him by the curtain watching the people.

“Papa! Papa! ...” She called out quietly. Gesturing he should come to her.

“Mister Larue...” Bradshaw begins, “... I’m Sophia’s music teacher, though I suspect it may be the other way around...” Bradshaw allowed himself a chuckle, then remembered why he was there, “... And this esteemed gentleman is Mister Fairbanks of the New York Music Academy... We just need a few moments of your time to talk about Sophia.”

“You received my letter?” Asked Fairbanks.

“Why don’t you leave us alone...” Pierre protested, “... I told you not to misbehave at school. Now look what you’ve done!” He begins to lecture Sophia.

“Mister Larue, Mister Larue... It’s not like that... Sophia is the perfect student... She has gift...” Bradshaw is cut short by Sander appearing on the stage again.

“Ladies and ah... Gentlemen... I have some grave news...” Distancing himself from calamity that he was about to announced, “... It appears the performance has been cancelled due to unforeseen circumstances... We apologize for the inconvenience... Thank you.”

Sanders bowed as apologetically as he could and shuffles backwards. Taking himself back to his office to drown his sorrows with whiskey.

Murmurs grow louder. Faces turn to each other, half in shock, half in disbelief. Speculating as to what could have occurred. People begin to stand and make their way to the aisles. Fairbanks whispered into Bradshaw's ear. A surprised look comes over his face. Bradshaw looked to Sophia.

Kneeling down beside her and spoke softly to her.

"You think you can do that?"

"Mister Sanders says I must not touch the piano."

"Don't worry about Mister Sanders, it's *my* piano." Informed Fairbanks.

"Can Tabatha come too?" She asked meekly.

"Of course she can."

A smile beamed across Sophie's face.

"*Meow_!*" Squawked Tabatha from the bag.

Sophia walked past her father and onto the stage as if he were invisible.

"Sophia! Sophia! Come back here!" Her father called out about to go after her.

"It's okay..." Fairbanks holds Pierre back by the arm, "... You have to hear this."

Sophie walked timidly onto open stage.

Heads turn to see a child taking the seat before the piano. Some had heard rumors from the Academy of a gifted child.

Some had said, a Prodigy.

Mystified by the turn of events and unsure what was happening patrons began to return to their seats. Watching as the child removed a small kitten from a satchel and placed it on the stool beside her.

"*Meow!*" Tabatha introduced herself.

"*Shh!*" Sophia informed her.

Sofia tapped a key, three times.

'*Ding... Ding... Ding.*'

Drawing the people's attention to her.

Lights dim, and silence fell over the auditorium. You could have heard a pin drop. The spotlight captured Sophia and Tabatha center stage.

And she began to play...



BUSTY SUBSTANCES

“Dedicated to
Peter Cook & Dudley Moore.”

“You still at the book dad?” His son asked, seeing his father hunched over a keyboard like Ebenezer Scrooge over a ledger.

“You just wait and see son.” His father informed him.

“You’ve been saying that for years.” Rummaging a refrigerator for something to eat.

“Oh ye have little faith... It’s going make a million over night.”

“Yeah, yeah... I’ll believe it when I see it.” Dismissing his father’s grand delusions, “... There’s nothing here.” He said discouragingly.

“You’re working, aren’t you? ... What’s the name of that *tabloid* newspaper you work at again?”

“The Daily Mail... And I would hardly call it a *tabloid*.”

“You obviously haven’t seen *page three*... The *busty substances* on display there... Oh dear, makes a married man weep.”

“*Busty substances*? ... You can say *boobies* these days... We have moved on from Sixties you know.” Informed his son.

“And thankfully so... It was *page three* that inspired my story... What was her name?” His mind begins to drift in thought.

“They don’t use their real names dad... Does mom know about your perversion?”

“Women know *everything* son.” Offering fatherly advice.

“What’s it about... Your book?” Peering over his father’s shoulder.

“It’s a dirty story, of a dirty man, and his clinging wife who doesn’t understand.”

“So it’s *autobiographical* then?”

“What are you trying to say?” Asked his father curiously.

“I’m saying there is no food in the refrigerator.”

“That’s probably because you ate it.” Replied his father stooping over the key board again.

‘*Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap...*’ Fingers poke at keys.

“I’m outta here...” Informed his son, “... I’ll get something on the way to work.”

“Um-Hm.” Mumbled his father raising a hand to gesture farewell or reach for an unseen word.

‘*Ah... Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap...*’

Unbeknown to him, his wife of thirty years had entered the room and positioned herself over his shoulder hoping to catch a glance of what he was writing. But the scent of her perfume gave her away and Harold swiftly closes the laptop close like a mouse trap.

‘*Snap!*’

“What *are* you writing Harold?” She shrieked as though he were a naughty child.

“Do you *mind* Margaret? It’s *private!*”

“It’s *dirty* if you ask me.”

“Well I’m not asking... And for your information... It’s not dirty, it’s... *Art.*”

“Art? ... You? ... An artist... Pull the other leg Harold, you’re a banker. But you won’t be much longer if you don’t get your skates on... You’re going to be late. Put that *filth* away and get dressed!”

“Oh dear, look at the time. I’m late, I’m late.” He stuttered like the Mad Hatter.

Clutching the laptop he hurried frantically upstairs. Sounding footsteps before a prolonged period of silence.

His wife looked to the ceiling wondering what was taking him.

“*Har-rolld! ... Har-rolld!*” She called out.

‘*Clunk... Clunk.*’ Noises resonate through the ceiling.

Moments later footsteps sound tumbling down the stairs like a mono-tone xylophone.

‘*Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud-Thud!*’

He stood before his wife dressed in a black pin stripped suit and polished black shoes and a leather briefcase in his hand, like a child about to be inspected before attending school.

“Your tie is crooked... Come here. You’re quite hopeless.” Straightening the tie, tempted to strangle him.

“You say that now. But wait ‘til I’m published.”

“Who would want to read that nonsense?” She scoffed at him.

“Lots of people.”

“Don’t talk nonsense... You’ve been at that silly book for years now... If you ask me, you’ll *never* finish it.”

“Just you wait and see!”

“Don’t forget your Mac! Forecast is for rain.” She called out as he left.

“Bankers never wear a Mac... I’ll take the Umbrella.”

“Off you go now... I’ve got the plumber coming seeing today.” Informed Margaret.

“Wasn’t he here last week, and the week before that?”

“It’s the pipes Harold... They’re in a bad way... Neglected... If you know what I mean.”

“Oh dear, you know best I suppose Margaret.”

“Leave the plumber to me.” Turning Harold about encouraging him to leave,

“Right-o then. I better be off. See you tonight.” Peaking his wife on the cheek with a kiss.

Heavy raindrops began to fall and on Harold’s arrival at the bus shelter finds it congested with people. Harold stood outside beneath a black umbrella, looking like a shunned leper. Suddenly, as though he were dreaming, an attractive young lady hurried towards him. Her long blonde hair wet and tangled. Mascara beginning to run like black tears. The yellow dress clinging to her like cellophane.

“Please... Share my umbrella.” He offered in a moment of chivalry.

“Thank you... You’re most kind.” The damsel replied.

“Get caught out, did we?” Asked Harold.

“Hm.” Came a damp reply.

“The forecast was for rain today.” Harold informed second hand.

“So it seemed.”

The scent of her alluring perfume tantalized Harold’ imaginings. She reminded him of a character in his book. A warmth radiated from her. He made a mental note.

“You must be cold... Here... Take my overcoat. I’m dry. You’re... Wet.”

Only to rouse further flirtatious thoughts.

‘*Stop it! ... She is old enough to be your daughter!*’ He berated himself.

“Thank you... Yes, I am, just a little.” She pretended to shiver squeezing her busty substances, causing them to swell like oversized marshmallows from the top of her undersized yellow dress.

Harold catches sight of her cleavage. And she catches him looking and smiled unashamedly as though it had been on purpose.

“I’m Penny by the way.”

“Harold... Harold.” He nervously stuttered.

“Hello Harold... You’re such a nice man... I hope I can return the favor... *somehow*.”

“Oh that won’t be necessary.”

“I insist.” She purred, pressing herself against him.

“Ohh.” Finding himself caught between a hard place and two soft places.

A double-decker red bus arrived, and people clamber aboard to escape the rain. Harold followed Penny like a love-struck teenager. Taking a seat beside her, Penny places a hand on his knee.

‘This is awkward.’ Thought Harold, placing his overcoat over his lap.

This only encouraged further illicit groping.

“*Oh dear!*” He whimpered, feeling the hand roaming. He looked about, hoping no one was watching.

“*Shh.*” She purred softly to him.

“So ah... *Oh!*” Exclaimed Harold taken by surprise.

“Who’s a naughty boy then?” She whispered, “... You were saying... *Harold*, was it?”

“*Hm!* ... Harold... So... Ah... What... Do you... Ah do... Penny.” He asked as though it were a casual question under normal circumstances.

“I’m a student... And you?” Her hand rubbing beneath the overcoat.

“I’m ah... Ah... A Banker.” He informed her.

“Really... My grandfather wants me to be a banker.”

“Oh really... Ah...” Groaned Harold, “... One can’t go wrong with Banking.”

“That’s what grandfather said.” Said Penny.

The bus slowed as though it were about to come to a stop.

“Ah... My stop.” Informed Harold about to stand.

Only to have Penny lean forward and kiss him on the cheek.

“Don’t forget your umbrella.”

“You keep it. I have more in the office... I wouldn’t want you getting wet again.”

“No, we wouldn’t want that... Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’d like that...” Harold replied, ‘...*What are you saying? You’re a married man.*’

“Come here Harold.” Pulling down on his tie as if it were a leash.

Incapable of resisting, he leant down expecting another kiss, Penny takes a tissue from her hand bag and wiped the lipstick from his cheek.

And loosened his tie.

“There... Can’t have your wife thinking you’re having an affair... Now, can we?”

“*Affair?* ...” The thought of infidelity had never crossed his mind until now, “... No, of course not.”

Frustrated passengers wait impatiently for Harold to move.

“Hurry up mister!” A passenger called out from the back.

“Sorry.” Apologized Harold folding the overcoat over one arm if only to conceal an embarrassing bulge.

“Someone get *lucky* last night?” Asked an identically dressed colleague watching Harold appear with a spring in his step.

“You could say that Roger... But not a word to my wife.” Quipped Harold, never to let the opportunity pass.

“Tell all... Leave nothing out you *devil* you.” Coaxed Roger.

“My lips are sealed... Are the loan documents ready for Mister Lane to sign.”

“On your desk.” Roger replied.

“Very good... Bring him through when he arrives... Eleven was it? Hm?”

“Yes eleven.”

“Very well then, I don’t want to be disturbed until then.”

“Certainly.”

Striding to his office he closed the door behind him, opened the briefcase and pulled out a laptop. And began typing the events from that morning. Nothing would be spared. It was too good to be true.

‘Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap... Tap-tap-tap-tap...’ Typing quickly fearing someone would catch him.

“You wouldn’t read about it.” Leaning back in his chair.

On his desk sits a picture of his wife in a silver frame. Staring at him. A feeling of guilt comes over him.

Taking a hankie he rubs his cheek and examines it for lipstick.

“*Hm...* Won’t be seeing her again.” Harold dismissed the sensual nymph.

‘Knock-knock.’ Sounded a knock at an opening door.

Roger stood filling the cavity.

“Mister Lane is here for his eleven o’clock.”

“Very good Roger, bring him through.”

Moments later an elderly grey-haired gentleman dressed in a tweed jacket appeared at the door. Beside him stood a young woman in a yellow dress holding a black umbrella in one hand and the old man’s arm in the other.

Beaming a smile from ear to ear.

Harold stood flabbergasted. Unable to reconcile her presence. Looking to Roger as though he had something to do with it.

“*Ah-um...*?” Prompted the old man.

“Ah yes... Sir Bernard it’s good to see you again, please come in...” Extending his hand, offering a chair with the other, “... Take a seat... And who might you be?” He asked knowingly.

“Ah, my apologies... This is my granddaughter... Penny.”

“Hello *Penny*... I’m Harold Hamilton... I handle you grandfather’s affairs.”

“*Affairs?* Really. You must be very good at them... My grandfather speaks highly of you... *Harold*, was it?”

“That’s right, Harold... Please have a seat... Drink?” Looking to the old man.

“Yes *please!*” Said Penny as though the question was directed at her.

“It’s a little early, but one won’t hurt.” Said the old man.

“Very good... Whiskey for you Penny?” Asked Harold cocking his head at her.

“Ice if you have it, otherwise neat will be fine... Let me help you.” She insisted about to stand.

“Why don’t you look over these while I pour the drinks.” Handing the old man a folder.

With the old man’s back to them, Penny wasted no time to pester Harold. Hands wandered where they should not.

“Not here.” Whispered Harold warning her to behave.

“He’s deaf... He can’t hear us.” She whispered back, kissing Harold on the lips.

Harold tries to hold her back in fear of being caught.

“But he has eyes.” Warned Harold wiping his mouth with a hand looking for lipstick.

“What was that?” Asked the old man struggling to turn about.

“I was just saying, perhaps you should take them away and look them over and return them in your own time.”

“Wonderful idea Harold... I’ll have Penny bring them back to you. Save me a trip to the city... This wretched weather you know.”

“Yes, I know... One never knows who one will meet.”

“What was that?” The old man asked cupping an ear with a hand.

“I was just saying what particularly nasty weather we’re having lately.”

“Oh... Hm! Indeed... Bottoms up... Here’s to the new venture.”

“Indeed...” Harold holds the tumbler up, ice cubes rattle against the sides, “... And what venture would that be? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I thought I might dabble my hand in Publishing.”

“*Publishing? ... Really?*” Harold’s ears prick up at the word.

“You know something about publishing? I could do with a good man on board.”

“Publishing... No. But I do write... In my spare time. If you know what I mean.”

“Really? I never saw you as a writer. What do you write?”

Penny leaned forward in her chair eager to hear what Harold had to say. Her mystery man had become even more mysterious. Harold wondered if he should divulge his inner most secret. But he had already said too much to go back.

“Drama. Suspense. Romance. Adventure... The lot.”

“Well, well... Still waters do run deep Harold...” Remarked Penny seeing Harold in a different light, “... You’d give all this up, to be a writer?”

“In a heartbeat...” Confessed Harold, “... I’ll be writing more in a week or two.”

“Send it to my office and I’ll have somebody look over it.”

“Thank you, Bernard. I appreciate that...” His eyes fixed on Penny.

Her eyes on him. Slowly undressing him.

“Thank you for coming in Bernard... My apologies for the weather. We’ll try to do better next time... Return the file when you are ready.”

“I’ll do that ... Much appreciated Harold...” Pulling himself from the chair, “... Come my dear. Let’s not keep Harold any longer. I’m sure he has a busy day.”

“Thank you for your time... *Harold.*” Teased Penny pursing her lips as though to kiss him.

“It was *my pleasure*, Miss Lane...” Beamed Harold, “... My card should you require my contact details.”

“Indeed.” Said Penny slipping the card next to her heart.

“*Whoa_...* Did you see the *honey* with the old man?” Said Roger sticking his head to the office.

“Really, I didn’t notice.” Lied Harold.

“Outside *your* league afraid old chap... Best you leave her to me...” His mind filling with sordid imaginings, “... What you are doing for lunch? The boys are thinking of heading to the pub for a couple.”

“Wish I could, but I’ve a pile of work to get through.” He lied.

“Don’t work too hard.”

“I won’t... Enjoy.” Watching him leave, “...Close the door behind you would you be a good chap.”

He waited a few moments to ensure Roger had left before opening the laptop to continue where he had left off. Noticing the picture of his wife still glaring at him, he placed the frame face down. And continued tapping at the keys. Time was of the essence if he was to have the manuscript completed in two weeks.

Just then the phone rang.

‘Bring-bring! ... Bring-bring!... Bring-bring!’ Startling him in an otherwise quiet office.

Lifting the heavy handset he answered the phone.

“Hello... Harold Davies speaking.”

A familiar voice sounds on the other end.

“Penny? ...” Surprised to hear from her so soon, “... That was a nice surprise... Hm... *Old Bernie* is your grandfather, I would never have picked... Indeed... Where are you now?... Your hotel... Alone... Hm... I see... Tonight? I ah, I ah, I don’t know... I really have a lot on at present, and then there’s the small thing called... a *wife*... (*Penny makes erotic suggestions*) ...*Hmm*... You are a naughty aren’t you...” Blood rushed from Harold’s brain to elsewhere making the decision for him, “... The Hotel? ... *The Dorchester*... I can get off at five... *Four?* ... I don’t know, I’ll see what I can do... The manuscript? ... I don’t know. It isn’t finished... It’s on my laptop ... Okay... For your eyes only though... See you soon... *Bye*.” Placing the handset back down and leaning back in the chair feeling quite pleased for himself.

The picture of his wife laid face down. What had she heard? The heavy old band about his finger feeling like a millstone.

‘What have I done?’ A voice in his head questioned.

‘You haven’t done anything...Yet.’ Another voice answered back.

‘You’re a married man. You can’t do it.’

‘Of course you can, Margaret will never know.’

‘You’re having an affair!’

‘It’s not an affair... It’s more of an... entanglement.’

‘My marriage would be over.’

‘What marriage? When was the last time you had sex?’

He thought really hard, but nothing sprang to mind. Was it last year, or the year before. Or the year before that. Then wondered if he had ever had sex at all. There was David.

Even then, that could have been an accident.

‘Divorce... The house. His savings... Everything lost.’

‘She wants you... Her grandfather can publish your book... You’ll be rich!’

‘Don’t you dare pick up the phone.’

‘Do it! Do it!’

A hand reached for the phone.

‘Clunk’ A quivering finger presses a speed dial button.

Harold waits anxiously for the other end to answer.

“Hello... Margaret? ... Of course it is, who else would be there?”

“*The Plumber.*” Responded Margaret.

“Sorry I caught you at a bad time.”

“*What do you want Harold... I’m very busy here right now.*”

“Oh, I just called to say I’ll be working late... What’s that noise?” ...” Hearing grunting and heavy breathing in the background.”

“*The plumber.... He’s ah-ah-ah... Difficulty with an unusually large pipe...I really have to go Harold... Ah-ah-ah... (Click).*”

“Margaret? ... Margaret? ...” He echoed down the dead line, “... How strange.” And for a fleeting moment Harold wondered if his wife *was* having an affair with the plumber, “... Not our Margaret. *Ha.* That would be funny. (*Chuckle.*)”

“Miss Arbuckle.” Harold catches his secretary’s attention.

“Yes, Mister Hamilton.”

“I’ll just be popping out for a while, business of course... I’m dropping some documents off for Mister Lane.” Patting the briefcase.

“*Of course...*” She replied.

‘*It’s not like you’d be having an affair.*’ She thought to herself.

“I may not be back. Take any messages for me.”

“Certainly Mister Hamilton.” Returning to her screen.

Waving down a cab, Harold sat back and watched the grey cobble streets of London rush by outside. Seeing people going about their ordinally lives. Unbeknown to them of the adulterer travelling among their midst. Doubts resurface.

The voices returned.

‘*It’s not too late to turn around.*’

‘*You’re almost there.*’

‘*Think of Margaret.*’

‘*She’ll never know.*’

‘*She’ll find out. They always do. Women talk.*’

‘*You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t... You have nothing to lose. You could be dead tomorrow.*’

‘*You’re dead if Margaret finds out.*’

‘*Margaret and the Plumber... The Plumber... The Plumber...The Plumber.*’

The word rang like a bell in Harold’ head.

‘*Clink!*’ The penny finally dropped.

“The Plumber! The bitch! ...” Accused Harold aloud.

“Excuse me Sir? ...” Asked the driver, “... You say something?”

“Sorry. Just thinking aloud. The Dorchester.”

“Yes Sir. Almost there.”

A grand looking building loomed beside the cab as it drew next to the curb. Harold paid the driver cash and watched as he drove away. He felt eyes watching him. A doorman quietly examined the oddity before him. Looking more like a Banker than a scandalous businessman liaising with the someone’s wife. He had seen it all before. Harold did not fit the stereotype.

Perhaps he was there to see the manager.
“Can I help you sir?” The doorman politely asked.
“Reception?”
“Inside, on the left Sir.”
“Thankyou.” Harold subtly nodded and headed inside.

Entering a grand foyer, with polished marble floors and sparkling chandelier. Its walls adorned with art. He had entered another world.

One of wealth and entitlement.
‘Ding-ding.’ Harold taps a small silver bell on the counter.
Drawing the attention of the Receptionist.
“May I help you?”
“Harold Hamilton... I’m here to see a Miss Penny Lane.”
“*Oh...* I see.” Examining Harold suspiciously, “... Is she expecting you?”
“Of course.”
“One moment please...” Picking up a handset and dials a short number, “... Ah Miss Lane, we have a *gentleman* here to see you... Yes, that’s right, *Harold...* Very good then. I’ll send him up... Thank you Miss Lane.”
“Mister Hamilton, was it?”
“That’s right.”
“Miss Lane has requested you go up... Room 310.”
“Thank you very much.” Making his way to the lift.

Stepping into the elevator lined with mirrors to see multiple reflections of himself. All staring back at him. As though they were watching him about to cheat on his wife. A vision of Margaret and the Plumber flash in his mind. Accompanied by grunting and moaning.

Harold cringes at the thought.
‘How could I have not known?’ He thought.
Doors open at the third floor and Harold stepped out to the hallway.
“Three-Ten.” He eyes the doors.
Finding it, he stood before it. Straighten his tie and jacket.
“This is it.” Taking a deep breath and softly knocked three times as though it were a social call.
‘Tap-tap-tap.’
But this was no social call.
The door opened and Penny Lane stood before him. Wearing nothing but a smile and pink see-through lingerie.
Leaving very little to Harold’s already overactive imagination.
“Come in silly...” Pulling him by the hand, “... Drink?”
“If you’re having one.”
“Of course... Sit, sit... Tell me all about your book... Am I in it?” She asked handing him a crystal tumbler of whiskey.
“Well actually, you are... I hope you don’t mind.”
“Am I naughty in it?” Sitting beside him, pressing her busty substances up against him.
“Of course.”
“Show me... Let me read your manuscript. Where is it?” Looking to his briefcase.

“If you insist...” Harold opened the briefcase, he boots the laptop to life, “... It doesn’t have a title.” She said disappointedly.

“Still working on that.”

Penny’s eyes race across the screen. Pages flick from one to another.

“*I like it! ...*” Said Penny excitedly, “... Its *saucy* yet its *sweet*.”

“That’s what I was after... *Yeah*.”

“Kiss me, Harold.” She insisted, pressing her firm warm busty substances into his face.

“I think my wife is having an affair.” Harold blurted out as though to throw cold water on a raging fire.

“Oh dear... That’s no good, now is it.”

“The Plumber.” Harold added taking a gulp of the warm whiskey to ease the pain.

“It’s always the Plumber, isn’t it? Or the Milkman, Or the Postman.” Qualified Penny.

“The Postman? Now that you mention it, we have been receiving a lot of mail lately.”

“Or the Butcher...” She adds another.

“I get the picture.” Countered Harold.

“Don’t forget the Baker?” Harold played along.

“And the Banker.” She informed him looking into his eyes.

“Roger?”

“No... *You silly*... Bankers can have affairs too you know.” Kissing Harold long and seductively, stirring yearnings and igniting fires within them.

Lifting the flimsy see-through top over her head she loosens his tie and unbuttoned his shirt.

“Oh dear.” Exclaimed Harold.

Before long they were naked. Entangled in sheets and the ecstasy of lovemaking.

“Oh my God you’re beautiful... (*Gasp*).” Exclaimed Harold.

“*Shh*...” She kissed him and mounted him.

And again. And again. And again.

Until the lovers fell asleep exhausted.

The day had slipped into the night. Harold awoke on the oversized bed. Penny Lane beside him. Her naked body silhouetted by the light filtering through the window. It seemed like a dream, and he feared he would wake and find Margaret snoring.

He touches her and she stirred. She was real. She was also half his age. The reality of the situation hit home like the Olympic hitting an ice berg.

‘*What had he done?*’ Thought Harold overcome with remorse.

Fueled by panic, he sat upright, and was about to get dressed, when suddenly his cellphone sounded a message alert.

‘*Buzz-buzz.*’

Causing Penny to stir and roll over. An arm reaches out to prevent him from leaving.

‘*Who could that be at this time of night?*’ Looking at the screen.

“Margaret?”

Anxiously he opened the message...

Harold,

I’m leaving you. I’ve been seeing someone. The Plumber. I won’t be here when you come home tonight. Your dinner is in the refrigerator.

Love Margaret

“What the...?” Exclaimed Harold.

“*Um-mm...*” Mumbled Penny sleepishly, “... *Stay.*” Reaching out to him, pulling him back to bed.

The scent of her perfume luring him like an aphrodisiac. Harold slipped back beneath the sheets and wrapped his arms about her busty substances...



The Boy God

“Let Us make Man in Our Image.”

“Students... Don’t forget that your science projects are due soon.” A Teacher informed the class.

Moans echo in response to the reminder.

“Off you go....” Dismissing the class, but not before catching a one student’s attention, “... Jonny? You can stay.”

“Ohh_” Jonnie groaned hoping to escape with the others now gathering tablets and leaving him behind.

“Jonny... How’s your project coming along? ...” The Teacher questioned curiously, “... Any concerns I need to know about?”

“No sir.” He lied.

“I hope not... We wouldn’t another ‘F’ would we?”

“I think I have it this time.”

“Make sure you do.” Looking sternly down on the boy.

“Yes sir.”

“Off you go now.”

“What did *Creepers* want?” Asked Nibs, his friend.

“Nothing much... Just how the project was going?”

“Don’t know why you persist with that.”

“I can... I know I can.” Responded Jonny stubbornly.

“That’s what you said last time and look what happened... *Boom!*”

“Yeah, yeah... There was a *glitch*.”

“*Glitch?*... Is that what you call it.” Nibs shook his head and chuckled.

“Anyways, how’s your project going?”

“*Boom!*” Throwing hands into the air to mimic an exploding volcano.

“I’ve got to get home.” Informed Jonny.

“Catch you tomorrow?”

“Can’t, I have *field* trip.”

“Does *Creepers* know about that?”

“No... It’s probably best he doesn’t.”

“Can I come?” Asked Nibs eagerly.

“I suppose... But not a word to no-one... Promise... My place first light.”

“I’ll be there... *Na-nu, na-nu*.” Bid Nibs.

“How was school sweetie?” His mother called out to him.

“Ah-um... Boring.” Jonny moaned.

“Go wash up... Your dinner is almost ready... It’s your *favorite*... Guamalo-Lizard.”

“Hm_ yummy!” Jonny races off to sterilize his hands.

Laser beams scan Jonny’s exposed fresh creating a tingling sensation. And he rushes back to the dining room just as his mother places a steaming plate on the table. Jonny’s eyes as big as saucers.

Nostrils flare at the sweet exotic smell.

“What do we say?”

“*Grace.*”

“That’s better.” Patting his crop of blond hair.

Jonny shoves a lizard leg into his mouth and jaws tear meat falling from the bone.

“Eat your greens young man.” His mother tells him.

“Ah_ mom... I hate sprouts!”

“Eat them, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Ohh_” Jonny groaned, shoveling food into his mouth as though he had not eaten for a week, until the plate was clear, “... I have a field trip tomorrow... It’s for my science project.”

“That’s nice.” Said his mother preoccupied watching a projected hologram.

“Nibs is coming with me.”

“That’s nice.” She said again.

“I’m going to my room.”

“That’s nice sweetie.”

Jonny peered into a telescope pointed at the Milky Way Galaxy lit with billion upon billion of stars. Small fingers fiddled with knobs and switches, delicately focusing his gaze on a lonely blue marble of a solar system far, far away. How beautiful it looked. Clouds of white, oceans of blue. Zooming in closer to the surface he could make out coastlines, cities, roads, and houses with yards.

Then found as he was looking for.

A boy, not unlike himself, peering into a telescope looking back at him.

Closer and closer he zoomed in, until he was looking directly down the other boy’s telescope and sees an eye. Large and brown.

The eye blinked.

Startling Jonny he stands back from the telescope as though he had been caught out.

“Not possible.” Dismissed Jonny knowing the primitive creatures were not technically advanced to have developed such a telescope.

Flicking a switch he projects the telescope’s view to a hologram. The eye blinked again. Zooming out, he sees the boy standing back from the crude telescope allowing another boy to peer into the eye piece.

“*Gasp!*” Gaspd Johnny, as though he had seen a ghost.

“What do you see Johnny.” Asked Ned.

“Don’t know... It felt like someone was staring back at me.” Johnny replied.

“I don’t see nothing... Is that Alpha Centauri?... Doesn’t look like much.”

“Four light-years from us... It should look small.”

“Maybe someone is looking at us?” Joked Ned.

“Maybe.” Said Johnny timidly.

A chill came over him at the thought.

“*Ned Flinders!* ...” A motherly voice called, “... Time you were heading home, it’s late, your mother will be looking for you.”

“Okay Mrs. Carroll... See you tomorrow, Johnny.” Grabbing his bike and riding into the darkness.

“Inside Johnny, and wash your hands... Dinner is almost ready, it’s your *favorite*, chicken casserole.”

‘I wonder what is keeping him?’ Thought Jonny, waiting for Nibs to arrive.

The glow of the first sun was beginning to creep over the distant horizon.

‘Buzz_!’ Sounded an alert on a bracelet about his wrist.

Tapping a button on his bracelet and a hologram image of Nibs is projected from it.

“Where are you?”

“Outside.” Said Nibs.

“I’ll open the door... Quiet, my parents are asleep.”

A door slides open, and Nibs tiptoes to Jonny’s compartment.

“Sorry I’m late, slept in... We ready?”

“Almost, you can’t go looking like that.” Looking to Nib’s silver lycra suit.

“How do they wear those?” Asked Nibs seeing Jonny dressed in ragged loose clothing.

“It’s what they wear apparently... Here, put these on. Hurry we don’t have much time.”

“We have all the time in the world.” Remarked Nibs.

“Not if *Creeps* catches us, we don’t.” Tapping a red button on a wrist band.

A point of light appears in the center of the room. Growing into a swirling white disk.

“We have one earth day... That should be long enough... You must not interfere with their technology, as crude as it is to us. Just play dumb.”

“That won’t be hard... These clothes don’t fit.”

“They’re perfect... You ready?”

Taking a deep breath Jonny stepped into the swirling white light and disappeared from the room. Moments later, an arm reaches out from the disk and grabs Nibs by the shirt and pulls him into the portal.

‘Zap!’ The portal collapses behind them.

Jonny had stepped onto another world four and half light years from his own. Looking up he saw a star smudged night sky. A large yellow moon shone brightly. The planet’s single sun would shortly be breaking the horizon if his calculations were correct.

“What’s that smell?” Asked Nibs pinching his nose.

“Pollution.” Remarked Jonny sadly.

Lights appear at windows disturbed by the bright flash of light. Jonny and Nibs crouch behind bushes. A dog barks over the neighbor’s fence.

“What was that?” Cowered Nibs reaching for a taser.

“It’s what Earthing’s call a dog. Quite harmless...” Jonny lied, “... Don’t upset them and they won’t bite.”

“Bite?”

“We wait here for him.” Informed Jonny.

“Him? Who?”

“Someone you know... You’ll see.”

Above them unseen, grey clouds had gathered in the sky and a cold gust of wind blew over them. Nibs begins to shiver. Rain drops begin to fall and the two boys find themselves getting wet.

“This way.” Johnny instructed Nibs to follow heading to an open garage door.

Inside the darkened interior sat a large metal vehicle of sorts.

“What is it?”

“It’s called a motor vehicle.”

“Can it fly?”

“Not yet.”

“It smells in here. (*Sniff*).” Remarked Nibs sniffing the air.

“Fossil fuels.”

Outside they hear the sound of voices and footsteps approaching.

“Ssh... Not a word, just nod, like this, okay?” Jonny nods his head up and down.

Nibs mimics the gesture and becomes dizzy. He holds himself upright against the car.

A side door opened and in stepped a man in a suit and tie.

“*Johnny*? What are you doing here? I thought you were in bed?” Asked the man.

“I ah_... I ah_... Couldn’t sleep.”

“And who’s this?” The man looked to Nib.

Nib nodded back. Unable to understand the strange language Jonny was speaking.

“Oh... Ah... This is Nibs.”

“Nibs... Unusual name... Well I’m off to work... You two have fun at school.”

“Yeah sure... Where is that again.” Asked Jonny seeing directions.

“You’re funny Jonny... Go get ready, your mother has breakfast on the table for you.”

The man got into the car and started the engine. A plume of exhaust filled the garage. The roar of the engine deafened Nibs. The car lurches backwards and Nibs dived out of the way thinking the metal beast was about to attack him.

The strange man waved out to the boys and drove away.

“What was that you were speaking?”

“It’s their language. I learnt it last night.”

“That was lucky.”

“This way.” Instructs Johnny.

Following a path from the garage to the back door of the house. A large rectangular opening of what appeared to be a door blocked their way inside. Nibs attempts to slide the door sideways. To no response.

Hands wave about for sensors to open it.

“Open...” He called out, “... Open!” But to no avail.

Much to Jonny’s amusement.

“What’s *open* in their language?”

“It doesn’t work like that... Watch.” Said Jonny reaching for a door handle.

“How did you get there?” A motherly voice asked, “... Doesn’t matter... I’m late for work... Breakfast is on the table. Help yourself...” The woman notices Nibs, “... Oh, and who might you be? Haven’t seen you before? Hm?”

“Nibs.” Replied Jonny.

“That’s nice... You feeling okay Johnny? You look a little pale... You really should get more sun.”

“Sun? You know how dangerous that thing is? It could go *nova* any moment.”

“You should know, that’s your science project... Isn’t that due today?”

“*Today*?”

“Please tell me you’re ready, you don’t want another ‘*F*’, now do you?”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s ready.” Jonny lied.

“Give your mother a kiss.” The strange woman leaned down and offers her cheek to the Jonny.

Nibs thinks she is about to eat him. Jonny presses his cheek against hers to appease her. The over powering scent of the woman’s perfume almost suffocates Jonny.

He stepped back from the strange woman.

“Bye boys. Don’t forget to lock the doors before you go.”

“Yes *mother?*”

“Mother? ... Hm.” She remarked looking oddly at Jonny, “... Eat your breakfast.”

The pair watch the back door closes behind the woman.

“That was close. We’re in. I have to find *him*. You stay here, keep watch.”

“Watch for *what?*”

“There’s food on the table.” Informed Jonny diverting Nibs’ questioning.

“Ohh...” Seeing a bowl of cereal, a plate of toast, a large glass of orange juice and a hard-boiled egg.

Jonny tiptoed along the narrow passage way that led to other rooms that appeared to be sleeping quarters. Underfoot, a strange flooring, soft, as though made from an animal fur. The walls patterned with repeating hieroglyphics. A small sun suspends from the ceiling. At the end of the passage a closed door with a plastered sign stating...

‘KEEP OUT’

Quietly Jonny opened the door and entered the bedroom. Sunlight streaming through the window. Walls covered with posters of Apollo Missions and Space Shuttles. Shelves lined with plastic models of every description. A foul smell hung the air. Unlaundered clothes lay strewn about the floor. On a bed a mysterious elongated mound moves, then stopped. Then moves again.

A yawn sounded from beneath the blankets.

Suddenly, an alarm rang out loudly, startling Jonny and causing the boy beneath the blankets to sit upright and rub his eyes and stretch his arms. Sensing someone else in the room, he turned and saw a mirror image of himself standing beside the bed staring back at him.

‘*This has to be a dream.*’ Johnny thought.

Johnny blinked and blinked again, hoping the aberration of himself would disappear and he would awaken.

Jonny blinked back.

But the aberration persisted.

“*Mom! Dad!*” The Johnny called out.

“They’re not here... They’ve gone to... *Work?* ... What is *work?*” Jonny questioned.

“Who are you?”

“I am Jonny.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Johnny.”

“*Hmm...* Interesting isn’t it.”

“What do you want? I’m calling the police.” Warned Johnny about to reach for a cellphone on the side table.

Jonny points two fingers at it, tilts his head to one side and the cellphone begins to levitate in the air.

“How’d you do that?”

“It’s easy... I’m not here to hurt you ... Get dressed, I want you to meet someone.” Grinned Jonny.

Heading back to the kitchen to find Nibs with egg-yolk running down the side of his mouth. Fingers covered with sticky jam.

“Hmm... We should take this back with us.” Said Nibs.

Johnny arrived in the kitchen thinking here heard voices.

“We have company...” Said Nibs looking up and seeing an identical likeness to Jonny, “... What have you done?”

“What did he just say?” Asked Johnny hearing the strange language.

“He said it is good to see you...” Informed Jonny.

“Where you from?”

“We’re not from around here... But you could say we are *neighbors*, so to speak.”

“I don’t understand... What do you want with me?”

“How do say on your planet... *You scratch my back I’ll scratch yours*... No?”

“Something like that... Hey, what do you mean... *your planet*?” Johnny takes a step back.

“Last night when you were looking up...”

“That was you?”

“You saw me?”

“Of course not, how could I? ... I... I had a weird feeling someone was looking back at me... You saw me?”

“Of course... Clear as day... And your friend.”

“Ned... Yeah... So what is this all about... Where’s your *spaceship*?”

“Spaceship? ... No, we don’t use those *things* anymore.” Said Jonny as though they were antiquated.

“I really did expect something more futuristic.” Remarked Johnny examining their clothes.

“Couldn’t exactly make an appearance in silver suits now could we.”

“No I guess not.”

Nibs dips a piece of toast into an egg yolk and shoves it into his mouth. Jaws hurriedly chew up and down before gulping down the swallow. Eyes bulge looking for another.

Jonny shook his head at him.

“So what is this all about then?” Asked Johnny.

“Like you... I have a small *science project*.”

“You have a science project? On your planet... Way cool... What’s yours?”

Jonny says nothing and simply looked at Johnny. And waited for the penny to drop. Jonny continues to stare at him. Projecting telepathic thoughts to Johnny’s mind.

‘*Clink.*’ The penny fell. Eyes bulge open in the realization.

“No-no-no-no-no-no...” Johnny stuttered, “... You can’t be serious. This can’t be.”

“A genetic tweak here, a genetic tweak there... And here you are.”

“You’re my father?” Question Jonny.

“In some way... It was either that, or dissecting one of your species in a laboratory... You wouldn’t want that would you?”

“*Species*? ... You make it sound like we’re animals.”

“On a cosmic scale earthlings have the intelligence of earth worms... That’s why no other civilizations have interacted with you.”

“How many *other* civilizations are out there?”

“Civilizations? ... Millions... Species? ... About twenty-five hundred that we know of.”
Stated Jonny categorically.

“How did you? ... You know.” Asked Johnny.

“It was easy... I simply abducted your mother and...” Jonny began.

“You know what... I really don't want to know the details...” Informed Johnny, “... But we look the same age.”

“That because time is slower in my planet.”

“What are you going to do with me? Dissect me?”

“Hmm... Now there’s a thought...” Jonny chuckled, “... No, I thought I might *borrow* you and show you to the class.”

“You’re saying I’m some kind of genetic *Show and Tell*?”

“Something like that... You’ll be back before anyone will know you’re gone.”

“Who’s he?” Noticing Nibs rubbing a hand on his belly.

“Oh yeah, sorry, that’s Nibs... He came along for the ride.”

“*Half-way across the galaxy*? How long did that take? (*Chuckle*).” Remarked Johnny disbelievingly.

“It was instant.” Jonny said plainly, “... Now tell me about your school. Your mother said something about a *nova*?”

“You spoke to my *mother*?”

“It’s okay, she couldn’t tell us apart... I have an idea... I’ll present your science project while you hang out with Nibs here. Wouldn’t want anyone seeing us together.”

“What do you know about nova’s?”

“What doesn’t any kid on my planet doesn’t know about them... We learned about them in what you would call... *Elementary School*... Really quite basic cosmic structure... Though I hold out much hope for the planet in the next twenty years... *Boom!* If you know what I mean.”

“Seriously?”

“I’d get off this rock if I were you while can.”

“Don’t sugar-coat it for me.”

“Sugar-coat? I’m not familiar with that term... Hmm... Now tell me about your school.”

“Johnny... Would come to the front of the calls and present your project to the class.”
Instructed the teacher.

Jonny fidgeted in his seat. Feeling like a fish out of water. Eyes watched the condemned boy walk to the place of execution and stand clutching a blank piece of paper scrawled with hieroglyphics and mathematical equations beyond anyone on the planet.

“I see you’ve come prepared Johnny.” Noticed the teacher.

Children giggle and laugh.

“Quiet please.” The teacher looked sternly over the children.

“May use the write-board Sir.”

“If it helps... Start when you’re ready.”

All eyes were glued upon Jonny as he stood calmly waiting for the room to fall silent.

“Hello... My name is Jonny... I am here today to talk about your Sun and how it is about to nova.”

“Don’t you mean *our* sun Johnny.” Corrected the teacher. Children giggle in the back ground.

“Of course... *Our* sun.” Lied Jonny.

“Proceed.”

And he did. Giving a concise detailed lecture on the birth and imminent death of the gas giant as though it were elementary to him. Filling the whiteboard with inexplicable quantum equations and diagrams.

“... And in conclusion, based on the data I have collected *your* sun will nova in exactly twenty years, four months, twenty-one days, six hours and thirty-three earth minutes... Plasma ejected by the solar flare would reach the earth within twenty hours... There upon everything on this planet would be as you say... *Toast.*”

“Are we all going to die.” A child at the back of the class called out.

“You most certainly will... I however will be watching from another planet.”

The classroom erupts with laughter.

“That will be enough everyone... Quiet please! ... And that’s quite enough nonsense from you Johnny...” Wiping the whiteboard clean, “... Sit down.”

“May I be excused... I don’t feel so well.” Holding a hand to his stomach.

“Visit sickbay... Have them have a look at you.”

“Yes sir.” Jonny hurried from the class.

But Jonny had no intention of going anywhere but home.

“*We all going to die! We’re all going to die!*” Children cry out laughing.

“So how did I do?” Johnny asked curiously.

“You nailed it... Unfortunately the other earthworms may have thought it was funny.”

“Oh man_!” Moaned Johnny, “... I’ll surely get an *F* now.”

“You tried, they didn’t want to listen to the science... *Earthworms*, what can I say... We better get going... You ready?”

“Going where?”

“Home.” Informed Jonny pressing a red button on a bracelet about his wrist.

A pinpoint of light flickers before the three boys, growing larger, spiraling into a large white disk of light.

“It’s a portal... After Nibs.” Instructed Jonny.

Johnny watches Nibs step into the disk of light on one side and not appear on the other.

“Where did he go?” Asked Johnny.

“Home... It won’t hurt.”

Johnny stared at the swirling disk and thinking he could hear Nibs’ voice on the other side. A hand reaches out and grabbed Johnny by the shirt and pulled him into the light.

“*Gasp.*” Gaspd Johnny as though it were his last breath.

Suddenly he finds himself in a large white room. A bed of sort takes center position. Silver clothes strewn about the floor. The air tasted strange. As though it were missing something. Outside a window craft guide pass. Two suns shone in a green-blue sky. Moments later Jonny stepped through the portal and it closes behind him.

A look of panic comes over Johnny's face.

"How do I get back?" He asked.

"Don't worry, I'll get you back after the class... No will notice you gone... Here take this..." Handing him his bracelet, "... You'll be needing it in twenty years."

"How does it work?"

"Just press that little red button and you know the rest."

Johnny slipped the bracelet over his wrist pulling down the sleeve over it conceal it. Jonny changes into a silver Lycra suit. Nibs follows suit but has trouble zipping up over his belly.

"What about me." Asked Johnny feeling left out.

"You're my *Show and Tell* remember. Wouldn't want the class getting us mixed up."

The class room is filled with the chatter of children, accompanied by a menagerie of exotic creatures, some on a leash, some in jars. Johnny sits close to Jonny. Unsure what to expect. Feeling eyes burning into him. As though they were trying to read his thoughts. A strange looking man, perhaps a hybrid creature from another world enters and the class falls silent.

One by one children stand and present their project to the class. No one laughed. Young minds absorb like sponges what others had to say. Finally, as though to save Jonny for the finale, the teacher called upon him to stand and present his project.

"Jonny... What have we here?"

"A perfect clone Sir... From planet Earth, of the Sol System."

Projecting a hologram of DNA markers to prove the exact replication.

"Ah yes, that *primitive* race... Are they still about? I would have thought they had annihilated themselves by now."

"Not yet sir... But they are doing their best."

"Interesting... Can the creature speak?"

"Say something." Jonny nudges John to speak.

"What do you want me to say?"

"What did he say." Asked the teacher.

"He said it is an honor to be here."

"Hmm... Perhaps he may not think as much when we dissect him."

Children's eyes light up with glee. Some already beginning to euthanize their creature with tasers. And begin slicing their bellies with red laser scalpels.

"I think it's time to leave." Suggested Jonny pulling Johnny by the arm.

"Why what's happening?"

"No time to talk, this way..." Warned Jonny hurrying from the class, "... Don't look back."

Scurrying down a long white corridor to an empty side room.

"We don't have much time... You have to get back."

"Thanks... It's been amazing adventure." Johnny leaned forward and gave Jonny a hug.

He had never been hugged before. But felt... nice.

Jonny hugged him back.

"Be seeing you." Said Johnny pushing the button.

A spark of light appeared before him and swirled in to a large white disk of light.

"Quick go... Before they catch you here."

"What about you?"

"I'll be fine... I'll be watching you."

"Come and visit okay."

“You bet. Get going.” Pushing Johnny into the disk.
Closing suddenly behind him. Children rush into the room only to find Jonny alone.
“Where is the hideous creature?” They demand waving laser scalpels.
“Hideous?” Remarked Jonny taken back by the insult.

Johnny found himself back in the kitchen. His mother over a boiling pot. The flash of light catches her attention and she turned about to find Johnny standing there.

“There you are? I’ve been worried sick about you. The school rang and said you had gone home sick.

“Sorry... I wasn’t feeling well after the science project... I failed again.” Bowing his head in shame.

“What do you mean fail? ... You’re all over the internet... You’ve gone viral young man.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Someone in your class posted a video of your presentation... I’ve had to take the phone off the hook. It’s been ringing with universities offering scholarships. Reporters.”

“*Scholarships?*”

“Yeah... Harvard, Yale, Princeton and what’s that place that sends up rockets?”

“NASA?”

“Yeah, that’s them... Come give your mother a hug my little *Idiot-Savant*...” She squeezes him in her arms.

“Oh_ Ma_... There’s someone peering through our window.” Noticing a man with a camera.

“They’d be the reporters. Don’t let them in. I’ve just vacuumed.” Returning to her cooking.

“I’m going to my room.”

“I have your favorite tonight.” She called out.

Johnny closes the door behind him and lay on his bed and stared up at the ceiling as though he could see through it, to a distant galaxy far, far, away.

Clutching the bracelet on his wrist...



DOG BISCUITS & TEA

"Hell, hath no Fury
As a Woman Scorned."

"Is that all you got?" The outlaw bard cried out to turbulent forces assaulting him from all sides from the mountain top lookout of Mount Victoria.

The wandering sage had taken himself on high, not so much to get closer to God, but to seek sanctuary in the bosoms of an old familiar. Te-Whanga-nui-a-Tara. Wellington. The bard conjured jagged doggerels towards the heavens as if casting spells to sooth her troubled heart. Dark glasses hide hungover eyes. His mind intoxicated with spirit. Medusa hair swirled like snakes. A beer-stained scarf flapped wildly in the wind.

The tempest struggled to get hold of the wiry framed bard. Clutching hold of the rail at the last moment. He held fast. With heart felt melancholy he confessed the woeful tale of a journeyman pulled him from his lover's side years before. And how he had wandered to distant lands in search of the quintessential meaning of life. Pining for her on the cold lonely nights as suckled the brewery's teat. But his return was unsolicited.

Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned.

His old familiar was not in a mood to rekindle anything but continue a fight long since harbored. Having plucked her flower and he had left her wanting more. She cursed the day he jilted her.

"Perhaps I should have called first?" He mused, stooping in time to evade a rabid seagull lunging at him.

Turning to look back at the aging grey Vauxhall being batted by the howling squall, then wondered if he had engaged the hand break. It held firm, as did he. Forsaking the temptation of shelter looked down at his faithful league sheltering beside his side. His eyes as bright as the day he got him as a pup. An obedient servant anyone could ever wish for. Howling in unison with his master at an unseen moon. Wondering what had caused his master to lament so feverously?

"Good boy Baxter... Good boy." The bard stroked the dog's head.

Wellington had stirred up a storm. An assault on the city not seen since the Wahine tragedy over half century before. Menacing storm clouds had snagged on the distant Khandallah hills. Blocking the sun and staining the city in subtle sepia hues. A dull red trolley bus rolled like tumble weed along a barren wind-swept street below.

A flash of lightning ignites the grey heavens soon followed by a sonic boom of thunder.

"Got your attention, did I?" The bard barked to the threatening sky.

On high, a red speckled hawk soared majestically. Holding out his arms the bard mimics the bird's flight, reminiscing of a time when another hawk that had captivated him in awe and verse. Leaning into the frenzied squall, hands grip like talons to the cold wet iron railing. The wind howled relentlessly. Pelted by a maelstrom of stinging rain.

Nothing could shake this impresario from the stage.

The bard surveyed the emerald jewel of Aotearoa. An enclave harbor city enclosed by hills. Container wharves and rusting railway yards. An ominous looking cake tin had planted itself

beyond the railway yards. Crushing anything that laid beneath. Colorful villas sprouted from hills etched with narrow roads and impossible inclines and dyslexic turns. At the city's heart an ancient Parliament Building. A remnant of the country's colonial past. Housing closeted civil servants and incorrigible politicians. Sneddon, Father of the Welfare State, stood vanguard at steps. His hand held high to halt any charlatans who dared to meddle with his Socialist reforms.

Winston wandered ancient hallways like a ghost.

Looking South to the dull swat houses. There was no pretense. Dreary working-class houses for the dreary working-class man. It is what it was. Endless suburbs partitioned by endless streets with endless names that ended up at a dead end or into the sea.

The bard inhales a lungful of the salty sea air heaved up from the harbor below.

Casting his eyes East through the haze of mist and rain he makes out Eastbourne. Insulated from the city's daily grime. A rocky outcrop of bungalows and windswept stone beaches. An aircraft makes a death-defying approach to a stunted runway between the pinched bosoms of Evens Bay.

The sudden gust attempts to wrench the bard from the rail.

"You're going to have to do better than that!" He howled back.

Baxter's ear's prick out to his master's torment.

Swallowing the last of the bottle he burped and bowed respectfully. Grateful in that he had been blessed with a sharp mind. A silk tongue, and good friends. Blessed to have seen beauty where others have seen none. Exhausted from a lifetime of searching the bard surrendered himself to the titanic forces about him.

And in that moment of capitulation he found the essence he had been searching for his entire life. But the words could not be spoken.

They could only be felt.

"Of course..."

"I have been to the mountain!" The bard exclaimed Pointing towards the distant Mount Victoria.

Balancing himself precariously on a three-legged stool to those watching on. Suspicious of his appearance and fidgeting movements. The faithful listened on intently to what the bard had to say. Hands and fingers flicked out without warning. Causing children to squeal and giggle hysterically. Children followed the bogeyman's every move. Hoping he would topple at any moment.

But the bard held his turangawaewae.

The bard cried out in prophetic tongue. People cling to his every word lest they miss the message the redeemer was about to deliver. Then, as if in transfiguration the sun illuminated him in an angelic glow.

People gasped at the sight as though he were the second Coming.

"I have been to the mountain!"

"What did you see?" Asked a small boy curiously.

"I saw... I saw..." The bard's eyes stare into space.

But words could not describe the beauty he had seen.

People looked to the heavens for a sign. Only to see a hawk flying on high. Disenchanted they begin to wonder away. Leaving the bard standing on a stool, staring at the sky, staring back at him.

“This is why you shouldn’t do drugs... You hear?” A mother tells her son pulling him away and covering the boy’s eyes from seeing more.

Baxter looked up to his master as though he were God. He had witnessed the rapture his master spoke of. But some things are beyond the wisdom of the unlettered man and small boys.

“Baxter?! ...” The bard calls out soaked through to the skin, “... Where could you have gone, you crafty bugger?” The bard called out looking up and down the Terrace.

Just then a sleek silver car emerges from a subterranean car park. From the passenger window a young boy straddles an arm about the dog’s neck.

“Baxter?!” The bard cried out watching the car drive away.

The Vauxhall coughed and sputtered as a heavy foot flooded the engine. Drowning any hope of any pursuit. His cellphone displayed a missed call. From an unknown number. He listened intently to the message.

The price of the mongrel’s registration was worth every penny.

The rain stopped falling and the heavens broke open. As though his lover had opened her arms and had forgiven him. The bard’s hand touches the cold empty passenger seat. Realizing what he has to do reaches for a map book and searches for a name of a street.

A finger stabbed at the map.

“Gotcha! ...” Turning the key once more and the engine miraculously starts.

“I’ll be back!” The bard called out to the heavens through an open window.

And with those departing words the heavens suddenly darkened and descended upon the Vauxhall as heavy tears began to fall.

Lighting flashed and a thunderous screams objected to his leaving.

“Nooooooooo! I’ll be back... I promise!” Called out the bard.

The bard tugged on a length of baling twine attached to Baxter who resisted every step. He was not going without a fight. Reluctant to leave the warm comforts the human’s home. It was paradise. Plush carpet, soft leather couches and canned food. A far cry from the cold Vauxhall and dog biscuits.

If there was dog heaven, this surely was it.

“Bye Baxter!” Farewelled a little boy waving to the dog.

“Come on Baxter! ...” Pleaded the bard straining on the other end of the rope, “...Don’t give me those bow-wow eyes! ... Come on!”

The little boy disappeared back inside. His scent lingered in the air. Baxter jumped into the Vauxhall and the old familiar smells of car came back to him. Rekindling memories of his benevolent master.

“Good boy Baxter... Good boy.” Stroking the dog’s head.

Driving like a man possessed he had to get back to the city. Accelerating along the narrow winding road. Wheels screeching, stuttering headlights blinked into the darkness. There was no time to lose.

He had to get to the lookout before it was too late.

“The moon Baxter! The moon_!” The bard called out seeing it appear in the rear mirror.

It was already too late.

Baxter watched his master transform in the glowing lunar light. Distraught eyes grew wider. Hair stood up on his arms. Canines glistened and long claw like fingers gripped the steering wheel tightly.

"Oow_ooh_! ..." The bard begins to howl, his mind no longer his own. *"... Oow_oohh_!"*

Baxter whimpered from the passenger seat.

Sounding a horn beseeching other to get out of his way. Oblivious to the siren and red-blue flashing lights behind him.

Parked on Mount Victoria, the bard laid spread eagle on the Vauxhall bonnet staring up at the star lit heavens. Chewing on a dry course dog biscuit as he conjured flirtatious verse to his love's sparking heavenly eyes.

"Oh-oh-oh-oh-oh-oh!" He feels a titillating sensation overcome him.

A cellphone vibrated in his pocket.

"One moment my love..." He excuses himself, *"...Hello_"*

A familiar voice greeted him, and he listened with interest. A journeyman not unlike himself.

Brethren, who had taken the road less taken.

"Garry!" The love sick bard sings out.

"Steady down old cock!"

"Sorry mate, it's been while... What's up?" Taking hefty swig from the bottle to wash down the gritty biscuit.

"There's a gig mate... A big gig... And I kind-a told the organizers you'd do it."

"You did what? Why you do that?" Choking and spluttering on a biscuit.

"I thought you might need the money... Sorry mate if I'd..."

"Money?! ... Ha! Why didn't you say my dear friend? ... Cash flow is a tad low at this month what with fiscal drag, economies of scale and propensities to consume..." Holding the near empty bottle to the moon.

The biscuits would only last another week at best.

"What the heck are you talking about? ... Listen you silly git, are you're in?"

"Of course, what do I have to do? Sing, dance, juggle?"

"Was thinking you could do what you do best mate."

"Drink?" The bard questioned excitedly.

"No you dumb f-f-f-..." Garry bit his tongue, *"...You silly bastard! ... You know... Recite some poems for old time's sake... They love you up there!"*

"Where's the gig?" The bard asked apprehensively.

"Auckland, where else mate? ... You can crash at my place on the couch. It'd be like old times eh... What do you say?"

"Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!" Looking up to the heavens beginning to cloud over.

"What's the matter mate? I thought you be keen_as."

"I am, I am, it's just that ah_..." The bard looks to the threatening heavens hoping his love had not heard, *"... Give me a moment to think about it..."* Weighing the guilt momentarily, *"...Okay! I'll do it!"*

"Bloody bonza mate! I knew I could count on you... Liz will be there."

"Liz? Really?"

"One and only old boy... As in the Royal Wee!"

"Wow_ must be big?" A smile grew on his face.

Visions of Lyon Rouge bottles as far as his eyes could see.

"I'll email you the details."

"Cheers Garry, you're a life saver!"

"Anything for you mate!"

"By the way... Where are you calling from?" Asked the bard curiously.

"Wellington mate... Where are you?"

"Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo_!!!!!" The bard cried out in fear.

That was the last thing Garry ever heard before the phone went dead. That and sound of screeching seagulls.

His love had heard each and every unfaithful word. Jilted for the uncultured northern Trollip. A hideous city of swanky night clubs and decaf Cappuccinos. She spat on him. Though it could have been a seagull. Followed by another.

Then another.

Frantically the bard slides off the bonnet and rushes to the driver's door only to find it locked. And the keys in the ignition. The bard fumbles helplessly for a spare from an empty wallet. Closing the door just as the first a wave of feathered strike-force emptied their bowels upon the car.

Dark menacing clouds materialized as though from thin air. Rain pelted down. The city blew a tempest upon the Vauxhall. Rocking it side to side. A frantic foot floods the engine. His escape now futile. Surrendering, the bard collapses back in the seat as wiper blades smeared seagull shit across the windscreen.

And back again.

"My love... I can explain everything." He lied.

"What is it?" An officer asked another.

"Dunno... I think it's a car?" The other officer speculates.

Wheels could almost be seen.

"A car? ... Is anyone inside?"

"Dunno? ... Fire brigade will be here shortly."

"What's the smell?" Asked the officer pinching his nose.

Japanese tourists happily take photographs. Edging closer to get a better look at the mysterious foul-smelling Godzilla that had crawled itself atop of the mountain lookout.

Cameras clicked incessantly.

"Move back everyone... Nothing to see here." An officer holds out an arm.

The bard and his companion laid sleeping in perpetual darkness. Light could not penetrate the slim layered the Vauxhall's windows. The bard stirs thinking he heard voices and rolled over to resume the never-ending dream of a temptress island.

"Waiheke_Moana_Marie_" He murmured.

He was about to nod off when he heard the sound of a siren growing closer and closer. And louder. It was as though it was right outside. Yet the night remained pitch black. Confused and dozy, he lowered the window. Brilliant sunlight floods the interior of the Vauxhall blinding him. Eyes adjust to intruding light from beneath dark glasses. He finds the car surrounded by people. Boundaries marked off with yellow tape as though it were a murder scene.

And he looked about for a body.

A foul smell rouses his nostrils and he looked suspiciously at Baxter.

“Ah-hm... Is there a problem officer?” The bard asked curiously seeing an officer standing back.

“This your vehicle?” The officer refused to step closer.

“I’d like to think it is... But what is a vehicle but a home on wheels...” The bard began, feeling a poem stir within but is cut off by the officer.

“Yeah, yeah... Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle? ... *Carefully.*” He warned.

“Certainly officer.”

Turning to back the bard discovered the Vauxhall covered end to end with a speckled colored bird pooh. Then it all came back to him. Garry’s call.

The seagulls.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” The bard curses.

“You can say that again.” A bystander remarked laughing at the sight.

Cameras took pictures. Pictures that would soon be posted on the internet. Never had a posting had so many dislikes.

“You bitch!” The bard cried out to the heavens.

“Excuse me?” The female officer asked him.

“Not you... Her!” The bard points the clear blue sky.

The officer looked up hoping to see what the man was talking about.

Only to see a flock of seagulls approaching from the east.

“Incoming!” Yelled the bard diving into the bushes.

“Stand back everyone, this going to get a nasty! ... Okay, hose it down!” An officer directs a fireman tackling a high-pressure hose.

Blasting continued for over hour.

“I think you missed a bit... There.” The bard points out, “... No chance of a wax?”

“Think you’ve had enough wax for today sir... Don’t you? ... I’ve seen you on the telly haven’t I?” Asked the fireman.

“Well_ ... Perhaps once or twice...” The bard modestly straightened his tie and smiled with pride.

The firemen hesitates while he recollects the familiar face, “You’re_, you’re_... You’re that ah_ ... That... Nah_ lost it. Bugger!” And continued hosing the car.

“Your registration and WOF have expired Sir...” The female officer stepping forward tearing a ticket from a pad, “... The only thing registered seems to be your dog.”

“I can explain everything.”

“I very much doubt that... Get it fixed or get it off the road... Watch where you park next time. There as a dangerous storm up here last night. You would not want to have been caught in that.”

“No, of course not...” The bard responded, “...*Bitch!*” The bard cursed the heavens.

“Excuse me?” Responded the officer reaching for her hand cuffs.

The only escape route was up the steep Ngauranga Gorge. He was trapped unless the Vauxhall could make the incline. The engine groaned louder as the speed steadily fell away. Traffic began to bank up behind him. Frustrated drivers sounded their horns and hurled insults in desperation to pass the bard’s lumbering vehicle.

In the rear mirror the bard saw an ominous large gray cloud behind him. Looking closely he realized it was not coming from the Vauxhall. This was something else. Something more sinister. Something evil. Something Unforgiving.

And the Unforgiving was gaining on him.

“She’s found us Baxter! ... I don’t know how! ... But she found us!! ... We’re done for!” Exclaimed the bard pressing the pedal to the floor.

But the harder he pressed the slower the Vauxhall became. Frantically the bard changes down gears to gain more speed. But the mysterious mist was gaining on him. Head lights are consumed by the turbulent dark mass flooding the gorge like a massive tidal wave.

Swallowing anything and everything in its path.

“We’re done for Baxter! ... We had a good run, didn’t we? ... I couldn’t have asked for a finer companion ... See you on the other side my friend!” Stroking the dog’s head.

The mist swallowed the Vauxhall. Cloaking it in darkness.

“*Ekh_!*” The bard screamed seeing large silver teeth behind him.

Closing eyes he awaits the end only to hear a thunderous fog horn. Eyes spring open to discover the silver grill of a thirty-two-wheeler about to strike the unseen Vauxhall.

“Shit! ... Hold on Baxter!” He screamed just as the beast pounced.

‘*Bam!*’ The heavy lorry slammed into the back of the Vauxhall.

Jolting the occupants and causing the glove compartment to suddenly open, ejaculating parking tickets about the interior like a swarm of fluttering paper zombie seagulls.

“*Ekh!*” The bard cried out in fright.

Baxter yelps and cowed to the floor.

The bard raises a finger to the truck driver only to be unceremoniously slammed again by the beast. Noticing the speedometer needle had jumped. The bard conceived a cunning plan. Raising the offensive finger again. This time twirling it about.

And was appropriately rewarded.

‘*Bam!*’ Another shunt and the needle jumped higher. The more he twirled it the faster the Vauxhall was shunted along.

“You, beauty! ... Baxter we’re saved! ... Auckland here we come!!”

The metallic predator snapped at Vauxhall heels. Doubling up. Raises two fingers. And is greeted with another massive shove to the rear bumper. Only to be caught in the predator’s grip.

The massive diesel engine snarled to take the car’s weight.

The bard unloads all barrels and discharges four fingers skyward. The needle climbed higher and higher, faster, and faster. Gradually the Vauxhall slipped from beneath the ectoplasm and broke into the daylight.

The time machine raced along.

Eighty-five... Eighty-six... Eighty-seven... Eighty-Eight... Sparks begin to fly out from under the bonnet.

“Great Scott! ... We’re almost there Baxter!” The bard exalts.

Reaching the crest of the hill the pursuing beast backs away. Growling loudly as it through the gears to slow its winding descent annoyed having allowed its prey escape. The fuel gauge flashes a red light.

The bard swore he had a full tank at the bottom of the gorge. Throwing the stick into Māori overdrive the Vauxhall drifted effortlessly down the hill picking up speed as it did.

“Hungry?” Reaching for a biscuit from the box.

Ahead laid Paramatta, Waikanae, and the Kapiti Coast. Beyond that the distance shores of Foxton Beach.

“*Waiheke_Moana_Marie_!*” He began to sing out of key.

Chewing heavily on the biscuit.

“You sure you don’t want one?”

Turning down the biscuit. Baxter hung his head out the window, his tongue flapping in the breeze. The rushing air nullifying the pain of his master’s singing.

Midnight and how the bard had made it to Auckland was nothing less than a miracle. The Vauxhall coasted down the northern slopes of the Bombay Hills. Watching Aotearoa disappear in the rear-view mirror. He was entering foreign territory.

A thirty-six-wheeler rumbled passed him and sounded its horn.

An isthmus city of two swelling harbors. Hauraki to the east. Waitemata to the west. And the bard squeezed them. Gulf islands frolicked in the moonlight. The bard had his eye on one. A seductive temptress. Waiheke.

Baxter rises his head to the open window. Sniffing odors of spices and caffeine and money.

An Aston Martin races past at a rate of knots. Immediately followed by a McLean and Lamborghini in quick succession. Driven by what looked like blond headed fourteen-year-old. And he wondered if he was still in the same country.

Drifting from an off ramp and through several red lights the Vauxhall comes to a halt outside Garry’s Villa. Bumping the curb, a hub cap falls off and rolls down the street.

The bard toots the horn to sound his arrival.

Garry peered out the window to see who had woken from his slumber. Throwing on a hotel dressing gown scuffled outside in fluffy pink slippers to welcome his brethren.

“What the fuck happened to the back of your car?” Seeing it dented and bruised.

“Ran out of gas.”

“When?” Asked Garry curiously.

“Foxton, I think? ... Could have been Sanson?” He questioned.

“You did well mate... I wasn’t expecting you until the end of the week.”

“Here now! ... Just need to pop up and see the old lady.”

“Oh_ mate. It’s after midnight... Can’t she wait ‘til tomorrow?”

“Love waits for no one Garry... Love is a tender flower that blossoms...” The bard felt a poem coming on.

“Yeah, yeah. Save it for the show... What’s wrong with ya’ finger?” Seeing The bard rubbing his middle finger dubiously.

“Overuse syndrome.”

“I don’t want to know... Keys under the mat... There’s a box of biscuits out the back.”

“Oh ghee_ thanks mate... A cup of tea would be nice?”

“Not for you, you mongrel! For Baxter.” Informed Garry.

“Oh.” Responded the bard despondently.

“I’m going back to bed.” And headed back inside.

The bard made his way to the top of Mount Eden along familiar streets. Not so much to get closer to God. But to rekindle a love affair with an old familiar Tāmaki-makau-rau. Auckland.

But the City had sensed his arrival. A strange wind had picked up. Leaves stirred from their rustic slumber. Tears began to fall like rain.

A domestic fight was brewing.

"Honey! ... I'm home!" The bard announced his unsolicited return.

About him brewed a storm. Unkempt hair swirled wildly to the strengthening gale. The wiry framed bard stood firm. Chanting love-struck incantations to sooth his lover's tempter. Professing his unrequited love. Regurgitating a woeful tale of a journeyman pulled him from her bosom years before.

She had heard it all before.

"She meant nothing to me! ... Honest."

But hell hath no fury as a woman scorned.

And this old familiar was in no mood to rekindle anything but an unfinished fight. He had plucked her flower and left her wanting more. Tamaki spat thunderous foul insults back at him.

"Perhaps he should have called first?" Mused the bard.

Rabid seagulls lunge at him. He stooped in time to evade the aerial assault. A flash of lightning ignites the heavens soon followed by a thunderous roar.

"Got your attention, did I?" He asked.

The bard surveyed the ruby jewel of Aotearoa. Auckland. A harbor city rimmed by luxury homes. A tank farm here. A container wharf there. Goliath machines blink yellow eyes. Lugging metal boxes beneath their bellies. Streets alive with moving colored lights. All roads led to the towering phallic standing like a massive erection at the city's groin. Luring the immigrant haves and the indigenous have nots, like moths to a flame. Rewarded by loyalty points and singing slots machines rattling with gold coins.

Banks and businesses appropriated the prime real-estate. Leaving the natives to retreat to the surrounding suburbs. Sculptured broad roads with easy inclines and lazy turns. It was everything Wellington was not. High rise apartments stood like concrete totems.

Rangitoto lay sleeping, somewhere in darkness beyond.

Inhaling a lungful of the salty sea air heaved up from the harbor below the bard cast his eyes to the south. To Bastian Point. Recalling a party that lasted five hundred and six days only to be spoiled by gate crushers. Beyond the scared lands, he makes out the bright lights of Mission Bay.

To the south Manukau. Onehunga. Mongeré. Dull swat houses. There was no pretense. It is what it was. Dreary working-class dwellings for dreary working class. Working for The Man. Countless State Homes on streets that all lead to the towering erection.

And as though to define the city's southern boundary. The Bombay Hills gutted towards the heavens. Beyond them. The untamed lands of Aotearoa. Where Aucklanders feared to tread.

A gust suddenly attempts to catch the bard off guard.

"You're going to have to do better than that!" The bard called back.

Baxter sits up. Disturbed by his master's annoyance and howls a warning to the unseen to keep their distance.

Swallowing the last of the bottle the bard burped and bowed respectfully to the city. The wind fell away and there is clam. A strong beam of light burst down upon him from the heavens. Soon followed by a divine phantasmagoria of spiraling yellows and reds and blues. More beams of light shine upon him from all directions. As though all of heaven had opened up to glorify his imminent arrival. The air is filled with the angelic sirens.

And the sound of fluttering of wings.

“Stay right where you! ... Keep your hands in the air!” A loud mega-ponic voice spoke over the sound of helicopter blades.

‘Thud-thud-thud-thud ...’

Surrounded by squad cars the outlaw bard had finally been cornered.

“Officer... I can explain everything.” He lied.

Looking down at Baxter the bard realized his only true love had never left his side. The quintessential truth had been under his nose all these years. Tingling from head to toe the bard and Baxter crumbled to dust.

To drift upon the currents of Aotearoa...



About the Author

Born a long, long time ago in the township of Foxton, New Zealand, my first book was a Self-Help book *E is for Effort*. That would lead to the debut novel, *The Ring*. One book would lead to another, and as they say, the rest is history.

I hope you enjoy reading my books as much as I have writing them.

Please visit www.obooko.com to discover my other books:

E is for Effort

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The Mist

Lady in Red

Puppet on a String

Alfie

Three Wishes

Man in the Moon

The Letter

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