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Pork Vs. Pig

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PORK VS. PIG

A Thesis Presented

by

DAVIS WANG

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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PORK VS. PIG

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ABSTRACT

PORK VS. PIG

FEBRUARY 2018

DAVIS WANG, M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Directed by: Jeff Parker

This this the story of pork vs. pig.

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1

My father told me he killed a man on the same day I had decided to kill myself. He could probably smell my inability to endure from upstairs. I was down in the basement, the room of my childhood, the one with damp walls that smelled like dirt, when the side of his fist hit my door. I stared at two palmfuls of pills. Other deaths were too physical for me. Blood was too disturbing, and so was the struggle for breath. I liked the idea of flipping a switch. Nothing complicated or dramatic—a simple change of status from “not dead” to “dead.” I wanted to exist as a single word on a sheet of paperwork. I calculated milligrams of chemicals, then multiplied by ten.

I knew something was seriously wrong with me when I couldn't eat the bacon. During breakfast I had moved fork to mouth too slowly and got stuck halfway through. The bacon had become a concept in midair. It was a wavy rectangle cut from a pig's belly, not something I could eat. It dripped fat and quivered, impaled by fork tines. I put it back on my plate while I sat for a while and felt my neurons twitch.

Bacon had always been my favorite smoked meat, so I knew it was time for me to kill myself. Bacon is a simple and beautiful symbol of death, and it instantly appeals to one's sensory experience. A complex web of failed relationships, intergenerational trauma, substance abuse, and stunted emotional development take much longer to describe, and you need to pull all kinds of tricks to get people to understand what you're talking about, and even if you do, they probably still won't fully get it. I am understood better through bacon.

Suicide is a serious thing, I know. Since I'm talking about bacon, maybe you

suspect I don't think it's a serious thing. Bacon is not the most serious food, I know. And a food symbol isn't the most serious kind of symbol to use, I know that too. People kill themselves and they're gone forever, leaving behind a residue of untapped potential and unnatural loss for the people that loved them to deal with. It's sad and it has nothing to do with bacon, I know.

My father banged on my door. "Davis," he said. "You're too quiet in there, you're like a rat nibbling secret cheese. What are you doing?"

"I'm not wearing any pants," I said, despite the pants I was clearly wearing.

"Who cares about pants?" he said, and started to turn the doorknob. I panicked.

By the time he opened the door I had already dumped the pills into the dirt of the potted plant on my window sill. I thrust my hands into my pockets and radiated guilt. It looked like the plant had sprouted from a mountain of multicolored tablets and capsules. I hoped the chemicals wouldn't leech into the soil because it would be very unfair to the plant, which had always been good to me.

Luckily, my father didn't notice things like that. He walked right past the plant and came over to me. He seemed nervous, and his hands were in his pockets too. He had a massive supraorbital ridge, which is the part of your skull where your eyebrows are. Except he didn't really have eyebrows. There wasn't actually much hair there, I mean. The prominent supraorbital ridge just gave the illusion of prominent eyebrows. I always thought he looked like a prehistoric man tromping around on a search for meat or fire.

I sat on the edge of my bed, and he sat on my desk chair.

"I killed someone," my father said.

"Just now?" I searched him for blood or remorse.

“No, thirty years ago,” he said.

“Oh, good,” I said.

“I want to tell you the story,” he said. “Because I think it’s important that you know where you come from.”

“I was kind of in the middle of something,” I said.

He looked disappointed.

“It’s ok,” I said. “It can wait until later. Tell me the story.”

So he told me.

* * * *

“I never would have killed anyone if it wasn’t for the bamboo spear,” my father said in his storytelling voice, which was exactly like his normal voice except that at regular intervals he would slow it down to a whisper and make his eyes big to show how eerie and mysterious and significant everything was. “That bamboo spear did something messed up to my brain,” he continued. “It turned me into a dead fish when I was only ten years old. I was a ghost inside a pipe.”

My father sometimes said things in the wrong order and with big gaps where essential information needed to be. You had to give him extra time to find the proper pacing and scale for a story. I took out my notepad and jotted down a couple of the words he said so it would look like I was interested. I hoped he would hurry and figure out what he was talking about so I could proceed with my suicide.

“We were fishing, but it was a different kind of fishing,” he said as he whispered

and made his eyes big in another attempt at spookiness. “In this kind of fishing you don’t use a fishing pole or bait—you use a human, and I was the human. I floated through the pipe that went under the road. This was at the fish farm, where there were thousands of fat fish hanging out being lazy. All you had to do was stab the fish with the bamboo spear.

“This was in Taiwan, right?” I said. I glanced at the potted plant behind my father. It looked like its leaves were wilting, but it was probably just because I hadn't watered it in a few days and not because it was absorbing anti-depressants.

“Obviously it was in Taiwan,” he said. “Do you think my dad could have stabbed me with a bamboo spear in America? Child Services would have been called right away. I would never have killed anyone if this wasn’t in Taiwan.”

I wrote down, “Taiwan—fish zone—no child services—duh!” in my notebook and underlined it twice. “I didn’t know your dad stabbed you,” I said.

“Right, he stabbed me. But that was later. At this point in the story we’re fishing, using the bamboo spears. We’re in Taiwan because that’s where I lived, and it was a good and totally different place than here. My brothers stabbed the fish and looked insane, with wild eyes, like they didn’t care what they stabbed as long as it died when they stabbed it.”

I was enjoying the story, but the thought occurred to me that maybe I could still kill myself while my dad was telling it. Some pills had stuck to my hands when I tried to drop them into the pot of the plant, and then they got transferred into my pockets when I shoved my hands in. The thing about me is I have sweaty hands. They're so sweaty that enough pills had stuck to them that maybe I could still kill myself. Usually the

sweatiness was terrible, since people thought I was nervous or untrustworthy or unhygienic. It was really just my hands. I know you don't believe me. It's one of those things that no one believes, no matter how much evidence I present to them. They pretend to accept my sweaty hands but I can tell they really don't trust them and wished they didn't exist.

Anyway the idea came to me that maybe I could stick a pill to my sweaty palm and then pretend to cough. When my hand came up to politely cover my mouth, I could lick the pill off my palm and swallow it with no water. I would have to lick them one or two at a time, because if there were too many pills the motion would be very un-slick and I might drop them. I would have to move like a magician. A magician that was sick and coughed a lot. I believed in myself enough to give it a try.

"It was the first time I saw an animal die," my father said. "That fish with a hole through the middle. I empathized with that fish. I felt like I had a hole through my belly too." After he whispered those words we were left in silence for a few moments.

"I thought you said you killed someone," I said. I was feeling impatient. "Not that you went fishing."

"Davis, it's a thematic link," he said. He rocked back and forth in my desk chair and cracked his knuckles. "You have to think thematically. I stabbed the guy and this is the first time I saw an animal being stabbed. They're linked. A life echoes over and over—you can't reduce it to one thing, ok? Killing the guy doesn't make any sense unless you get the whole picture."

"I feel like this is one of those sales tactics where you say something really wild at the beginning to grab my attention and then rope me into buying a set of

encyclopedias.”

“You only ever want the good stuff,” he said. “Will you shut up and let me tell the story?”

I coughed. My hand covered my mouth and I licked the pill off. Spit mixed with sweat on my palm and I shoved my hand back into my pocket. I swallowed. “Sorry,” I said.

“Me too,” my father said, then readjusted himself in the desk chair and started telling his story again.

“The fish farmer saw us and we narrowly escaped, and it was terrifying. That guy was known to take a pitchfork and stab kids who stole from him. See? More stabbing. Stabbing has been with me from an early age.”

“How long is this story?” I asked.

“This is important, Davis. This is my life. And my life is your life. I still get a rotten fish smell in my nose just talking about this stuff. It’s traumatic and it’s real and you need to hear it.”

“So are we talking a couple of hours?” I asked.

My father sighed. “Yes, a couple of hours,” he said. “Can I continue?”

I nodded.

“You probably don’t get it, since all you know is that he gardens all day and force-feeds you Häagen Dazs chocolate-covered ice cream bars and lets you sip on his glasses of Rémy Martin, but when I was young your grandpa was a real mean motherfucker. We were scared shitless of him, so I was the one who had to go inside to cook the fish, since I was the youngest. Your uncles said they would keep watch outside

and make a bird sound if they heard him coming, but no bird sound ever came. Or maybe it did, but I just thought it was a bird. It was a terrible plan. Now I can't even hear a bird sound without feeling like a bamboo spear is about to come down from the sky and impale me."

I felt my hand-sweat dissolving the pill stuck to my palm as I waited for the right time to make a move.

"I cooked the fish in oil on the wok," my father continued, getting back on track. "I was barely even tall enough to see over the edge of it to stir the fish around. Then I felt everything get dark and cold and I knew my father was home and that my brothers had abandoned me. I turned the gas burner off and ran toward the bathroom, which had a window that I could still fit through. I almost made it. I had my elbows and one knee up on the window sill when my father whipped me with the bamboo stick. He kept whipping me over and over, and it was so painful that I fell down and had to hide behind the toilet."

"I thought you said he stabbed you," I said.

My father looked annoyed.

"I'm just saying it doesn't really go with your stabbing theme if he whipped you instead of stabbed you."

"He did stab me," he said. "After he whipped me. See?"

My father pulled up his shirt to show me a penny-sized scar to the side of his abs. He was the kind of father who had abs.

"My ribs blocked it, so it didn't pierce my lungs," he said.

"Nice," I said. "I always thought it was a birthmark."

I wrote, halfheartedly, “Grandpa—R.M.M.—Real Mean Motherfucker (not only Hagen Das)” in my notebook. I coughed again, but my hand was so sweaty that I couldn’t lick the pill off of it, and I had to retreat it back to my pocket. The pill was glued on there pretty good. It wasn’t a good shot with my tongue, either. I had glanced off the edge of it.

“Wait, why was he mad at you?” I asked to cover up my failed cough. “Or was he just going around like that stabbing everybody?”

“He was mad because we stole the fish. And also because it was in Taiwan and it was a long time ago when everything was different. Not like now when people think life is so sacred and precious.”

“Amen to that,” I said. “Can we pause this story for a sec? I have to go pee.”

I left my father in the windowless basement room with damp walls that smelled like dirt. He said he would wait for me down there. I went upstairs to the bathroom, and the first thing I did was lock the door and wipe my sweaty hands off on the hand towel. They were instantly sweaty again, but not excessively so like before. I emptied the contents of my pockets on the sink ledge and lined the pills up by type. There weren’t as many as I had imagined, and the proportions were all off. Not at all the right mixture for killing oneself. I would probably get quite high and wonky if I took all of them, maybe even pass out or acquire some minor brain damage. But that was not the goal toward which every fiber of my being stretched.

You tell someone you want to die and they start getting all freaked out. They think they have to position themselves between you and the death, rather than just let you talk it out. The only person who let me talk it out was my therapist. I was surprised, since

she was supposed to report me to the police or the suicide experts or something, or at least give me some unasked-for advice, but she didn't. I couldn't tell if she was the best therapist ever, or the worst.

Things in our last session were tense because she kept trying to get me to talk about my father and about my girlfriend, who was now my ex-girlfriend, and I kept trying to talk about other stuff, like killing myself. I was getting sick of making ominous insinuations about death, so I said it straight.

"I've decided I want to kill myself," I said.

"Who doesn't?" she said. She slumped back in her comfy chair and seemed relieved.

"Probably almost everybody," I said.

"True," she said. "How are you planning to do it?"

"With pills."

"When?" she asked.

I hesitated.

"It's ok," she said. "There's no one watching. Our conversations aren't being recorded. When you die no one will know I knew about it, and if you tell anyone before you do it that I know, they won't believe you."

"You're kind of unprofessional," I said. "Even more unprofessional than my last therapist. No offense."

"That's ok," she said. "I care about you very much, Davis. I hope that comes through."

"You do?"

“Yes,” she said.

“I’m still going to kill myself,” I said.

“Go for it.”

“Once I do, I won’t need therapy anymore.”

“There are plenty of other people who still want to give it a shot. I get about five voicemails and ten emails a day from people looking for a therapist.”

“Thanks for choosing me,” I said.

“No problem,” she said. “It was completely random.”

“Are you ok?” I asked. “I care about you too, and I hope that comes through too.”

“I’m probably not,” she said. “To be honest.”

We sat there in silence slumped back in our comfy chairs for a while. She crossed her legs and stared at me, and I patted myself on the stomach like I was trying to digest something I shouldn’t have eaten.

“It looks like we’re out of time for this week,” she said, even though we were only fifteen minutes in.

“See you next week?” I asked.

“I guess that depends,” she said.

My therapist didn’t look that sexy, because her face was too long and her nose was pinched and her body was made of rigid cylinders instead of organic curves. But she was sexy anyway. I thought about asking her out on a date even though she was at least fifteen years older than me and she knew how emotionally unfit I was and what medications I was taking and that I wanted to kill myself. I also didn’t know what part of the attraction was me and what part was the medication. I had been feeling aroused at all

sorts of unexpected times after I started taking certain pills. And unaroused at all sorts of unexpected times also. It was a mess. I couldn't tell what was causing what. There was no scientific process in my life to generate insights. Surges of chemicals kept sloshing through my blood-brain barrier and washing away everything I tried to build up.

My father banged on the bathroom door. He was always banging on doors. It was because everyone was trying to get away from him, but to him it must have just seemed like there were a lot of doors in his way.

I dropped the pills into the toilet and they hit the water in many small plops. There were too few of them to kill myself, and I was sick of my sexual dysfunction and my general confusion due to altered neurotransmitter activity. So I flushed.

"Are you pooping or what?" my father said. "I have to poop too, let me in."

I opened the door and my father rushed past me and started to unbuckle his belt. I closed the door to let him do his thing. My first thought was to rush back down to the basement and swallow all those pills in the pot of my potted plant. But once I thought about how it would play out, I could tell it wasn't the right move. My father would be looking for me, and he would find me in the basement getting wonkier and wonkier and he'd interfere and take me to the hospital or maybe pump my stomach himself. My father lacked many skills you would expect a person to have, but these were balanced out with weird skills you wouldn't expect a person to have, and I assumed pumping stomachs was one of these, though I hadn't actually seen him do it. If I was going to take advantage of my alone time I needed to act quickly. My father was a fast pooper, always a minute or two faster than I expected.

"You didn't have a very smelly one," my father called through the door. "Hey, are

you still there?" I had missed my chance already. I didn't say anything.

"I just realized I can still tell you my story while I'm pooping," he said. "I have to tell you about when my mother died. It was very traumatic to me, and it will help you understand where I was coming from when I killed the guy. My mind was a messed up place! You should have seen me. It's lucky I didn't kill two or three guys."

"Does Mama know about this?" I said.

I heard him unravel an extra-long preparatory piece of toilet paper. "Mama already hates me, ok? She doesn't want to hear about me killing someone."

"We all hate you," I said.

"What about Jaki?" he said. "Jaki likes me." Jaki was my sister.

"I'm pretty sure she hasn't for a few years. But I might just be projecting my feelings onto her."

"Hating someone doesn't have to do with anything," he said. "Just listen to my story, ok?"

"Fine," I said. I sat down on the floor outside the bathroom.

I could hear him shifting around on the toilet seat, getting himself into story-mode.

"You're pooping extra slowly today," I said.

"What do you expect?" he said like I'd insulted him. "I'm multitasking."

"You're still the fastest pooper around," I said. I wanted him to know that I respected him.

"Thanks, Davis. So, my mother died. This was a few years after my dad stabbed me. I was in high school and I was gambling at recess. You know what I always say

about gambling, right?”

“Bet big win big,” I said.

“That’s right. But I only drilled that into your head when you were young so I could win more of your money. In reality it’s one of those things that’s no more true than its opposite. On the day my mother died, I had bet big and lost big on the playground. I lost the money my brothers had lent me and I knew they would pile on top of me and punch me when I got home. I was pretty strong at this point—I had hit a growth spurt and my ankles were sticking out of my pant legs and my eyebrows were thick and black and my hands were strong like a man’s—but three older brothers against me? They could still rip me apart.”

“Your eyebrows were thick and black?” I asked. “Not all nubby and bald?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.”

“Were you ugly?” I asked because a story about an ugly guy is different the a story about a not-ugly guy.

“About as ugly as you were at that age. Maybe a little more. Anyway I had lost all this money and was going to get beat up and to make things worse, my teacher caught me gambling and he beat me too. This teacher was not a normal guy. He was a retired army general, an old guy, like seventy, but still ridiculously strong. He bent steel rebar on the first day of school to make us scared of him. And he kept a meter stick on his desk that never measured anything, he just used it to whip kids. So he whipped me really good, so much that I passed out and everyone just left me there when class ended.”

“Did he stab you?” I asked, perhaps sounding a little too hopeful. I wondered how many stabbing stories my father had inside him.

“No, this time I just got whipped.”

“That doesn’t really go with your theme,” I said. “Maybe you could change the story so he had a bamboo stick to stab you with instead of a ruler.”

“Yeah but then I feel like it’s too many bamboo sticks.” I heard the toilet flush, but my father kept sitting. He told me once that his deepest thoughts came when he was sitting on the toilet, and I wondered if he was having one of those thoughts now.

“Like it wouldn’t be believable?” I asked.

“Too heavy-handed,” he said. “This story has many aspects to it, not just bamboo sticks, and I don’t want you to get too hung up on the bamboo.”

“But I can’t think about whipping without thinking about stabbing anyway. You might as well just make it stabbing.”

“Then I would have to reveal another scar to prove it, and I only have that one.”

“Good point,” I said. I lay down on the floor and imagined that it would nice to be the kind of person with many scars on their body, each one with a good story behind it. You would be able to navigate across your skin and weave together a narrative of your life whenever you wanted. My father unrolled some more toilet paper and blew his nose. He was an extra loud nose-blower. It was pretty extreme. Probably on the upper limit of what was acoustically possible.

“But I still don’t see how it connects to your main idea about killing the guy,” I said. “Were you abused so much that violence became a part of you or something and it festered inside you until finally you lashed out and killed someone?”

“Pretty much,” he said. “But stop being so impatient. There’s more to it than that, and if you just listen you’ll figure it out.”

I heard my father stand up, flush again, and pull up his pants. He opened the door and I was still lying on the floor outside. I scooted backward to make room for him.

“I have to go to work,” my father said. “Come with me and I’ll tell you the story while I break apart boxes.”

“Like I said before, I’m kind of busy. I was planning to do something today.” I wanted him to respect my time.

“Bullshit,” my father said. “Let’s go.”

* * * *

I flipped through my notebook as my father drove the truck. The stuff I wrote was always straddling the line of legibility and illegibility. Like my sweaty hands, I knew my handwriting was something that made people uncomfortable. If I asked them what they thought about it they would always say something like, “Wow, I wonder how a graphologist would analyze that!” or “You have a truly unique sense of spatiality!” or “I wish I had the courage to write that freely!” What they meant was, “Your mutilation of the English language is terrifying to me. Please get away from me now, you psycho-killer freak. This writing is surely a reflection of your soul, and it sickens me just to look at it and know that it comes from you. If this is the way you write, I do not want to imagine the horrible thoughts that must comprise your mental experience.”

It was just one of those things I had to accept. My mind wasn’t that bad. It wasn’t completely virtuous, to be sure, but it definitely wasn’t totally filthy or psychotic either. But try telling that to someone who had seen my handwriting. There was no recovery

from it. Luckily, by this point in my life I was able to keep it mostly private. Everyone had a computer by now. I didn't have to go to class and take notes anymore, and I used a debit card instead of writing checks. But I still had a notebook, which was dangerous. I had tried tons of times to get rid of it, but it managed somehow to endure in one form or another. I ripped out and burned pages, I wasted entire pens meticulously blacking-out pages word by word. Once I even stuffed my notebook deep down inside a dumpster filled with the juices of rotting things. Then a few days later I went out to the store and bought a new one.

I was feeling adventurous, so I brought my notebook out with me. My father had already seen my handwriting many times, so he didn't freak out when I opened it. We sat silent in the truck, which smelled like soggy cardboard, and I flipped through the pages, which were the crinkly kind that made a lot noise when you flipped.

I read the words with the kind of fascination one gets when sniffing a very strange-smelling mushroom. Repulsed, possibly inhaling toxic spores, but for some reason you keep sniffing. So I continued reading, enchanted by what a strange mushroom I was. But suddenly, all at once, just like with a mushroom, I had had enough. Any more and I would have puked out the window. Reflecting on myself reflecting on myself was too much. My writing was nostalgic and clichéd and poetic at all the wrong times and many other things I didn't want to be. I flipped to a blank page and clicked my pen.

My father lit a joint and rolled down both windows. I didn't know where the joint had materialized from. There was a little gold-plastic buddha incense holder that my father had superglued to the dashboard, and there was a long stick of incense stuck in it, glowing orange at the end. The air from outside was cold enough to make my nose run,

even with the heat shooting out at us with all its force. It got swept away before it reached my face. I wiped my nose with the back of my glove.

“I didn’t know you smoked pot,” I said.

“It’s legal now,” he said.

“So what?”

“Smoke ‘em if you got ‘em,” he said.

“What kind of Chinese immigrant knows that expression?” I said.

“The best Chinese immigrant,” he said.

He passed me the joint and I suspiciously took a couple small hits. “Is there tobacco in here?” I asked.

“When you finally see how phallic everything is,” he said, “it’s like there are suddenly a million more penises around than you anticipated.” He was looking at the joint instead of the road.

“This is why I said Jaki doesn’t like you.”

“Jaki likes me.”

“Pay more attention next time and you’ll see what I mean.”

“I pay attention, Davis. I pay too much. I paid so much attention that I’m broke.”

“Was that a joke?”

“Yes. But also it was the truth. Was the joke part funny?”

“No. Not even a little bit,” I said. He shrugged and took another hit.

“Why doesn’t Jaki like me?” my father asked. He looked concerned by the news, which I hadn’t thought was news.

“She’s embarrassed by you because whenever you’re in the car you get so weird

because you're nervous and you start saying inappropriate things and making terrible jokes even when her friends are there. This is just one reason among many why she doesn't like you."

"Teenagers," he said.

"I don't think high-you is much of an improvement," I said.

"I'm not even high," my father said. "I'm high all the time. Even when I don't smoke pot I'm high."

"We're here," I said. We were parked in the back of the grocery store where my father worked, but he didn't seem to have noticed.

"Good," he said. "I'll tell you about Fat Head while I break apart boxes."

The page of my notebook I had intended to write on was still blank. As I got out of the truck I closed the notebook, put a rubber-band around it, and tucked it under my arm. We went around to the loading dock, where there was a mountain of cardboard boxes tall enough to avalanche down on you. My father was the box man. He ruled the area between the loading dock and the dumpsters. He was suspicious of anyone he didn't know entering his box-zone. One time when I was helping him break apart the boxes he stopped and peed on the wall, and when I asked him what the hell he was doing, he said, as if I were a little slow in the head for asking, "I'm marking my territory, Davis. A man smells before he sees."

As I mentioned before, there were many things my father couldn't do well, like empathize or respect personal space or drive a car at a reasonable speed or eat without cheating and using his fingers. But he was damn good at a lot of other random things, like pooping very fast, or blowing his nose very loud, or, as it turned out, box-breaking.

From his first day on the job began to revolutionize the box-breaking game. No one had ever seen anything like him. The company even brought box-breakers from their other locations to learn from my father, but he refused to work while they were around. He didn't want to reveal his secrets. It pissed his bosses off, but he was too good to fire. They thought he might be some kind of idiot-savant polymath of the grocery world, and for a while they tried him out in other positions. His performance was mostly terrible, and it was occasionally disastrous. Before he could cause any more property damage or alienate other large groups of customers, they moved him back to the boxes and mostly left him alone.

We approached the box mountain confidently, like warriors about to engage in our craft. I tucked my notebook in the back of my pants because it wouldn't fit in my pocket and I didn't want to put it down. It was pretty awkward. I didn't have my full range of movement, and the notebook kept shimmying up and trying to escape. I broke a couple boxes half-heartedly. My father didn't need my help, but I always liked to break a few to show that I cared and so I would have something to do while he talked.

"It was my fault that Fat Head died," my father said, effortlessly transforming box into flattened cardboard. "But it was accidental. I don't count it as a murder. The guy I killed was premeditated, first-degree."

"How many people die in this story?" I asked.

"Just a couple more. Be patient. Don't offend the dead people."

"What do they care?" I said. "And why have you never told me about Fat Head before?"

"When you ask so many questions, it makes me feel like you don't care about my

story, or that you don't believe what I'm saying. Do you believe what I'm saying?"

"About fifty-percent," I said.

"Which parts?"

"I mean that I only half-believe everything you say, not that I full-believe half of it."

"Alright, you don't have to full-believe, just listen, ok? I promise that it will all add up at the end. Like I said, Fat Head was my best friend. He was so poor he had to dig up bamboo shoots to eat when he was hungry. He made knives. He apprenticed with a blacksmith and he made knives with extra scraps of metal. Crazy shanks, all different sizes. He was a talented guy. I still have one of the knives that he made. I'll show it to you when we get home."

"Did he get stabbed?"

"Kind of."

"How do you kind of get stabbed?"

"He was a glue-sniffer, which means he sniffed glue all the time to get high. Not when we were young, but when we got a little older. When we were young everyone made fun of him because his head was so fat, and when they made fun of him his head got so red and full of blood from embarrassment that it looked like it was a balloon about to pop. I feel bad about that. I could have done more to protect him so he wouldn't have become such a glue-sniffer. It rotted his brain out and if he didn't die he would have been retarded eventually anyway."

"So he stabbed himself?"

"Yes, but not on purpose. One time when we were all up on the roof sniffing glue,

this bad guy was coming with his gang to beat us up because we were on his territory. We were all high from the glue, so we were basically screwed. That roof was connected to all the other roofs, but there were gaps in between where the alleys are. So we ran to escape from this guy and I jumped over no problem, but when Fat Head went to jump his head was so full of glue fumes that his legs turned to jelly underneath him and he didn't make it all the way across. He fell down two stories. I went and got him and we still managed to escape. He lay in my room for a couple days to convalesce. He had fallen in a glass pile and shards were stuck in every part of his head and it was swollen to double its normal size. Pretty freaky stuff, having such a huge head lying on your pillow.”

I could tell my father was slowing down his box-breaking so that he could tell his story longer. He was only moving at the speed of a normal person. I had seen him when he really got going, and it was something beyond human, something more like the Tasmanian devil cartoon. When he really got into it, he created a vortex of boxes around him. He got lost inside the mountain. You couldn't even see what he was doing in there, you just saw the mountain trembling violently and slowly shrinking as he tore it apart from the inside out. It was truly a fearsome sight, but he saved it for special occasions. It drained him, I think.

He saw his boss coming before I did.

“Boss coming,” he said in a low voice. “Don't tell him I killed someone.”

My father's boss was a dorky white guy. He wore pleated pants like a dork and had terrible social skills and took everything without humor, like there was a black hole inside him that sucked up everything funny around him. The question wasn't if he fell on the autistic spectrum, it was where. No one knew for sure. Sometimes he seemed like a

regular guy, just a little awkward. Other times he said something that suggested that underneath his skin there was a metal skeleton and a computer with poorly-programmed artificial intelligence.

“Heya Boss Man,” my father said. “Welcome to the zone of the Box Man.”

“Salutations,” the boss man said. “And what do we have here?” he asked, turning toward me.

"I'm a cybernetic organism," I said. "Living tissue over a metal endoskeleton."

"Excuse me?"

“Just kidding. I'm one hundred percent human, male gendered, age twenty-three,”

I said. “Progeny of the box-breaker.”

“Hm. Your name please?” he said.

“Forename Davis, surname Wang.”

He stuck out his hand and I shook it vigorously.

“Your hands are wet,” he said.

“Sorry,” I said, wiping them off on my pants. “That’s just the way they are sometimes. I've been cursed by the gods.”

“Is it sweat or some other liquid?” he asked.

“It’s sweat,” I said. “But not the kind you get from working out. The *other* kind.”

“There are two kinds of sweat? I haven’t heard about this.”

“Oh yeah, at least two,” I said with added seriousness. “Scientists are discovering new ones all the time. Each has a different purpose, obviously. Some even say that our sweat is an extension of our minds, and that different thoughts produce different pheromone profiles. Last I heard, NASA was developing sweat technology for

communication across vast distances of space. But I haven't heard anything in a while. They don't have as much funding now, as you're probably aware, so maybe they dropped it. Or maybe they found something big, and the research has been taken over by the military to weaponize it."

"I'll have to do some fact-verification at trustworthy websites before I can continue this discussion," he said. "I'm skeptical but I don't want to offend you, since I know others are often irrationally emotional when their beliefs are challenged. Moving on, as you can see, we have a big pile of boxes today. It would great if you could break them down as soon as possible."

"Got it," my father said. "Break the boxes. Break them fast. I think I should be able to do that for you. My son is here with me, as you can see, and he's a promising box-breaker too. I'm passing on the tradition on to the next generation. I want to see that the empire I've built continues to grow when I'm gone."

"Excellent," the boss man said. "I understand you want to keep your secrets in the family. Family man. I respect that. It's taken me a while, but I've come to terms with you."

I didn't like the sense of camaraderie this guy was trying to establish. In that moment it felt like we were all on the same page, and I didn't want to be on the same page with him. So I took out my notebook.

"Take a look at this," I said, opening it up. "It's my notebook."

"I see," the boss man said. "Notebooky."

"Do you notice anything about the handwriting?" I thrust the book into his porky porkchop hands.

“No. Not in particular.”

“How would you characterize it?”

“It just looks like handwriting. Words on a page. A lot about your girlfriend Elizabeth, it looks like. Or your ex-girlfriend, I guess I should say.”

I flipped to the next page for him. “What about this page? The handwriting doesn’t look strange to you at all?”

“No.”

“And you can read all the words?”

“Yes.”

“And you aren’t put off by the messiness of it and how each word is a different size and slanted different directions and the lines aren’t straight and the letters sometimes overlap?”

“It appears you have some vested interest in getting me to criticize your penmanship. Perhaps it is an inside joke at my expense or some other such cruelty. But I assure you with utmost confidence in my own intrinsic and unconditional worth that I can see nothing strange about it. Now since I have answered your questions and informed you of your duties I will leave. I am the boss, which means I can’t talk to you for too long.”

I couldn’t help but feel like the dork had bested me in combat. His attitude toward my writing combined with his terrible personality did not make me feel good. I watched his pleated pants waddle away and disappear behind the door. I sat down on a cardboard box and it half-crumpled beneath my weight.

“What’s all this about sweat technology?” my father asked as he began to attack

the boxes again.

“I just made it up,” I said. “But maybe it’s what I secretly believe.”

“Sweat is a powerful thing Son, to be sure.”

I watched my father break apart boxes for a while as I squatted a few inches off the ground. The air was so cold that it hurt to breathe, and my breath obscured everything I tried to look at.

“So what happened to Fat Head in the end?” I asked a while later. “It sounds like he got a pretty raw deal.”

“His head was like a giant red balloon that wouldn’t pop,” my father said. “Even these days I can’t look at a red balloon without my mind projecting Fat Head’s facial features onto it. A couple years after that we were drunk and high on glue and I was driving my motorcycle and he was waving his knife around like a madman when suddenly there was a fork in the road and I decided not to take either paths but went straight through the middle and crashed into a ditch. Fat Head went flying. So did I, but he went a lot higher and farther than I did. I caught glimpses of him before I hit the ground, and he was really flying, totally weightless, drifting out over open air. The knife ended up between him and the ground with the pointy end toward his stomach, and when he hit, the thing went straight through him. When I found him he was pretty much dead. I dumped him in the river. They found his body and assumed he had killed himself.”

The mountain of boxes had crumbled before my father’s powers. I loaded some of the flat ones onto a pushcart and wheeled them over to the dumpsters. There was a special dumpster just for cardboard, and I threw the boxes up over the metal wall. They seemed to hang weightless in the air for a moment longer than I expected.

“It’s pretty much like you killed him,” I said when I got back. I had built up a fairly graphic image of the scene in my head.

My father didn’t say anything. He looked around for another box to break, but there wasn’t one. He put his hands in his coat pocket and puffed out his cheeks. I loaded up more flattened boxes and rolled them over to the dumpster.

“Do you want me to keep telling you the story?” he said when I got back.

“Do you?” I asked.

“It feels bad and good at the same time. So I guess I do. But I’m pretty pooped from all the boxes. Can I tell you the rest tomorrow? I think I went too heavy on the violence. Tomorrow I’ll tell you some funny and beautiful parts of the story.”

I thought about it.

“Come on,” he said. “Otherwise you’re just going to be down in the basement jerking off all day.”

“I know, but.”

“What?”

“This story has implications and stuff,” I said. “I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Don’t think too much about it,” my father said. “Everyday your brain is working too hard and giving off smoke. You’re stinking up the house.”

When we finished putting the rest of the boxes into the dumpster we drove home, and we didn’t say anything to each other in the truck not because we were pissed off, but because we had just worked hard and had been talking all evening. The silence was like a warm bath. We got home and I shook off my shoes and was halfway down the stairs to the basement when my father said, “Hey Davis, you want a crazy sandwich? I’m going

to make one.”

My father hadn't made a crazy sandwich in years. That was a good thing, since they were disgusting. “Nah,” I said. “Thanks though.”

I went downstairs and got into my rocket-ship pajama onesie. My potted plant still looked somewhat alive. It had managed to somehow survive for years in a room without any windows, so I figured it must be pretty tough and could absorb whatever chemicals had leached into the soil like a champ. I was taking the pills out of my potted plant and putting them back in their bottles when my father banged on the door.

“I brought you a crazy sandwich,” he said.

I put the pills down, opened the door, and took the sandwich. I thanked him and he nodded and went back upstairs. He was less intrusive at night. I put the crazy sandwich on my desk and looked at it. It was made of eight slices of white bread stacked on top of each other, and there was a different mixture of stuff in between each piece. There were all different kinds of things that weren't supposed go together. Kimchi and Hershey's Syrup, cream cheese and crushed peanuts, ham and anchovies, mayonnaise and sliced banana. Everyone in my family thought my father's crazy sandwiches were gross, which they were, but looking at this sandwich I glimpsed a kind of beauty that I hadn't expected. It was made with care. Maybe you could even call it craftsmanship.

I waited a few minutes and then snuck out the basement door into the woods behind my house. The light in my parents' room was still on, and it shone through the leafless trees. I dug a hole in the frozen dirt with a mini-shovel and tossed the crazy sandwich in. But before I did, I smushed the white bread down to a size where I could get my mouth around it. Various condiments oozed out the sides and splattered in the

hole. I took a bite, and it was ten times better than I expected, which meant it was still only barely edible. I filled the hole in, snuck back into the basement, and went to sleep with the taste of crazy sandwich still in my mouth.

2

I had weird dreams, which I should have expected. I woke up and watered my potted plant, then went upstairs and was surprised to see that it was still early in the morning and my mother was in the kitchen cooking eggs and toast. She had neglected the toast and it was smoking in the toaster oven. I took it out and crumbled the burnt parts into the trash.

“Davis,” she said, “Stop crumbling my toast. That’s your father’s breakfast.”

“Sorry,” I said. I had forgot he liked the burnt parts.

“How’s the job search going?” she asked.

“How about I just tell you when I find a job and you stop asking me about it until then?” I said.

“You are a demon child,” she said.

“So dramatic,” I said.

In one of my dreams I was in charge of beheading someone, but my weapon was a giant spoon. It was sharp on one side, but because of its curved shape I couldn’t slice all the way through the neck in one shot. I had to hack away at it for a while in little curved cuts, but I got the head to come off eventually. I’m not sure who the guy was, but I felt like I needed to remember so I could apologize to him on behalf of my dream-self. I sipped on a glass of water and watched my mother do her morning thing.

My mother was so healthy it almost seemed unhealthy. She ruthlessly detoxified, starting with herself and extending outward to her immediate environment. She had

given up trying to convert me and my father, but she could still sometimes trick my sister into engaging in healthy activities. Her own life was a complete victory over unhealthiness. Her skin glowed. Her hair was soft and silver and almost liquid. She ran every morning to the gym to do yoga or kickboxing or rowing or cycling or weightlifting. Even when it was raining or snowing or a relative had passed away. Old men were constantly hitting on her, not because her face was super symmetrical or model-ish or something, but because they wanted to steal some of her vitality. It was gross. She liked it, though.

“I heard your father made you a psycho sandwich last night.”

“I have to ask you a question,” I said, ignoring her.

“I think those sandwiches are a reaction to me,” she said. She pressed down on the french press like she was trying to hurt the coffee.

“Listen to me,” I said.

“I am.”

“We’re not talking about sandwiches.”

“What are we talking about?”

“What if I wanted to take a break from life for a while?” I asked, and my mouth got all trembly. I opened the fridge and was greeted by some bacon covered in congealed fat and plastic wrap. I closed the fridge and felt dizzy.

“You can take all the time you need, Honey.”

“But not here,” I said. “Like if I went to Hawaii or Alaska or something.”

“It’s too cold for Alaska. You’d freeze. Like that poor boy in the movie.” She tied her running shoes and started running in place to get warmed up. She bobbed up and

down and side to side.

“Hawaii then.”

“It's awfully far,” she said as if she was worried not only about my safety, but also about my ability to understand distance.

“Let's just say I figured out some way to get there. Like I won a ticket or something, hypothetically.”

“Davis, what's this about? Is your father pressuring you to work at grocery store? I've already told him your skill-set doesn't align.” She was doing little boxing punches in the air as she ran in place, like her arms were jealous that they were missing out on all the exercise.

“It's not that. Stop trying to read into it. I just want to know how you would feel if I wasn't here.”

“I would feel happy for you, Davis. I want you to strike out on your own again, you know that. Your father doesn't understand that you need time to regain your balance. He doesn't even have his own life figured out—how does he expect you to know how to handle everything already? You're just at the beginning of your journey, Honey. Your codependency with Elizabeth was unhealthy. Think of this as a rebirth.”

I thought about my dreams again, and about how often they followed the same formula: put dream-Davis in the midst of an unpleasant activity. Then put some constraint on him, like making his beheading weapon a spoon instead of an axe. This creates a feeling of panic and impossibility inside him which further sabotages his efforts. Repeat this formula in endless variations. Whoever dictated my dreams was a sicko. It was probably subconscious-me dictating things, so I was probably the sicko.

My mother's watch beeped. "Tell your father his breakfast is ready for me," she said.

"What are you doing today?" I asked.

"Acro-yoga."

"Nice. Enjoy balancing your stomach on the fungus-y feet of creepy old men."

"Davis! My goodness," she said, and bolted out the door like a racehorse. "Don't forget Jaki is coming in tonight," she called out from the street. "You have to go pick her up at the airport."

"I know!" I called back, even though I had completely forgotten. My sister Jaki was coming back after her first semester at college. She was very annoying and I wasn't looking forward to it.

As my mother ran away and I closed the door I realized a faint imprint of my dream had been replaying itself in my mind the whole time, dimly overlaid onto the real world, and upon focusing on the faint outlines of the dream-action, I saw that the person I had been beheading with a spoon was me. As I made the last cut with my spoon and the head fell off, I could see his face falling through the air, and it was my face, making an expression I didn't know I could make.

The feeling I got from this image wasn't so much the urge to kill myself. It felt more like I was already dead, and to not kill myself would be something very unnatural and inappropriate. I stumbled around the kitchen as if I were intoxicated.

Life itself was sick. Life did not do acro-yoga or drink antioxidant smoothies or put jojoba oil on its face. Life followed the exact same pattern as my dreams: create a difficult situation, give the life-participant the wrong tool for the job, watch him fail, and

repeat until death. I thought about everyone out there failing over and over and enduring it, hacking off their own heads with semi-sharp spoons. I thought about the crazy sandwich frozen in its shallow grave. I even thought about Fat Head with glass shards stuck in his swollen cheeks, down at the bottom of the river with cold water rushing over him and wild fish nibbling his toes. I thought too much. I could feel smoke pouring out of my ears.

“Hey, what are you doing up?” my father asked. He had come down the stairs and was peeking his head out from behind the entranceway to the kitchen. “Are you drunk already or something? Or did your mother trick you into drinking one of her smoothies?”

“I’m pretending to be a zombie,” I said. My words were slurred and hard to control.

“Very cool,” my father said.

“I just woke up at a different time for some reason. I wasn’t trying to. Just being a zombie.”

“Maybe you’re transforming into a butterfly and this is your metamorphosis,” my father said. “I just have to take a quick poop and then I’ll come join you for some breakfast. That coffee aroma just barely grazes the tip of my nose and already I feel a poop poking out of my intestines.”

I nodded knowingly and fell into a chair.

“I think you’re overacting,” my father said before he left. “Even zombies are subtle. You’re not opening yourself fully to the zombie psyche.”

My father went back upstairs to the bathroom and I sat in the chair trying to focus my vision. I sipped some water and felt it drip down my throat and hit my stomach. The

only thing I had eaten the day before was a single bite of crazy sandwich. I had also only taken one pill instead of six and I didn't even know which type of pill it was. I had disturbed my routine significantly, so it made sense that I felt some level of disorientation. There was also some psychological stuff going on that I didn't understand, obviously.

Normally I would have gone downstairs and gotten my notebook to try to figure it out, or at least to complain about it in secret, but today I decided to leave my notebook alone. It hadn't done me much good the day before, and the idea of living a day without transposing it into scribbles felt wise and noble.

I looked in the fridge at different food objects and gauged my body's reaction to them. Milk was too white to look at and the shape of the plastic gallon jug seemed grotesque to me. There was some leftover chicken in a glass container that seemed to be partially decomposed, something smushed and bloody that a crow might pick at on the side of the highway.

Following the trend of earnestly intending to kill myself and then not following through, I didn't kill myself. I didn't go down in the basement, pour pills down my throat, and wander off into the woods to die alone. The desire hadn't left me. The fire was still burning. I even thought about digging a little grave for myself next to the crazy sandwich. But I didn't even take any pills. I had the discipline to wait until I felt ready to do it all at once.

For food I settled on some saltine crackers. I put them in my glass of water and mashed them up one by one until I had some easy-to-digest carb-paste. I had only spooned a couple glops into my mouth by the time my father came back downstairs from

the bathroom. As always, he was a little faster than I expected. I hadn't even heard him flush.

My father pulled a knife out from behind his back and pretended to stab me with it using his best zombie-killer moves. I pretended to bleed out from the belly and die a painful death. The knife was long and curiously shaped. It had a skinny wooden handle that was wrapped with string. There was a dark aura to it, which I noticed even before my father told me that it was the knife Fat Head stabbed himself with by accident.

"This is the knife Fat Head stabbed himself with by accident," my father said. "I took it from him before I threw him into the river so that I would have something to remember him by." He handed me the knife. I touched the edge and it was sharp.

"Sharp," I said.

"What's a knife if it's not sharp?" my father asked. "Just a metal stick."

"That seems harsh."

"Knife-world is harsh. Anyway today I'm going to tell you the story of how I met your mother," my father said.

"What about the guy you killed?"

"That's like the grand finale," my father said as he paced around the kitchen. "I realized last night that I was trying to get there too fast. It was all death death death. I need to balance it out a little. It's all related, anyway. In the end we'll get back to the big death but it will be more meaningful because we've meandered around a little and got a spectrum of experiences."

"You keep stringing me on," I said. "This is some One Thousand and One Nights-type shit."

“Except I only killed one guy instead of a thousand virgins like the guy in that story.”

“You would actually be the woman in that analogy,” I said. “Scheherazade. She was the storyteller. I would be the virgin-killer.”

“Whatever,” my father said. “This analogy makes me uncomfortable. Are you eating baby food? I want some too.” He made a grab at my glass of carb-paste.

“It’s just saltines in water,” I said.

“I haven’t had baby food since Jaki was a baby. I miss it.” He chewed on some burnt toast, washed it down with coffee, and looked legitimately nostalgic for his baby food days.

“It’s not that precious or rare of a thing,” I said. “You could totally get some if you wanted.”

“That’s right,” he said, his eyes lighting back up. “We live in America, the land of plenty. There is baby food on every street corner. All you have to do is get off your butt and go out and get it.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Thanks! Let’s go to the grocery store before too many other people get there and start clogging up the aisles.”

“I’m not coming,” I said. “I have to think about something alone in my room.”

“A man needs a mission,” my father said. “Baby food is a good mission for a man. Jerking off in your room all day thinking about your ex-girlfriend is not a mission.”

“Ouch,” I said.

“Let’s take the knife with us,” my father said. “Maybe there will be bad guys out

there.”

“That sounds like a terrible idea,” I said. “But unfortunately I can't stop you.”

I shook the last of my saltine paste into the trash, yawned, and walked out the door with a puffy jacket over my rocket-ship pajama onesie.

* * * *

We did our shopping at a different grocery store than the one my father worked at, even though we would have got a 15% discount. He didn't like to mix business with pleasure. Grocery shopping was one of my father's favorite activities in life, and he didn't want the experience diminished by the presence of his bosses. So we shopped at the rival grocery store, which my father did not see as a betrayal, since he thought of himself more as a mercenary than an employee. In his mind he was a hired killer of boxes who would do a box job for anyone, as long as they met his price.

My mother, on the other hand, worked from home. She had an interior design consulting business, which meant that she spent most of the day in her office talking into her headset and making money. It alienated her from the rest of us, who were decidedly less professional. Sometimes she wore the headset outside of her office and it became hard to tell if she was talking to us or one of her clients. It was confusing and made the house a worse place to be. Over the years her voice had changed from talking on her headset so much. It was too loud and formal and didn't have the verbal tics that made a person pleasantly imperfect. I wished she would start binge drinking or dumpster diving or sword swallowing or drag racing. Though I guess those too would get old after a

while.

My father drove the truck either too fast or too slow. I couldn't look at the road. I felt like everyone was angry at us. I had my eyes closed and was attempting meditative peace when he started talking.

"After Fat Head died, I bummed around for a while and felt sorry for myself," my father said. He had lit another joint of mysterious origin. "Then I was in the military for a few years, where I formally learned to kill. But that stuff only works on you if you're already a killer inside, which I was. After that I moved to the United States when I was around your age. I had had enough of Taiwan. It was too small for me. I wanted more land to explore. So I got in at JFK, made my way to Chinatown, found an old Chinese newspaper on the ground, and called someone in the classifieds about a restaurant job. The guy asked me if I could cook, and I said yes, even though I couldn't. Turns out the restaurant was in State College, Pennsylvania, where Penn State is. I didn't know where that was, but I got on the bus anyway and sat there for six long hours and watched the sun set over rolling green hills. The air in America was crisp and dry and I sensed all the things that were about to happen, though I couldn't see exactly what they would be."

"I already know this part of the story," I said.

"I'm riffing poetically," my father said. "And setting up the scene. Restraint, young grasshopper."

"Sorry," I said. I was being annoying. "Can I have some of that joint?"

He passed it to me and lit the incense on the dashboard. Even though the car smelled like cardboard box mixed with buddhist monastery it was a nice place to be, a small private world to inhabit. There was a crystal hanging from the rearview mirror that

occasionally sent little bits of colored light flashing around the car.

“Do you really want me to be a box-breaker?” I asked as I blew out smoke and scratched my nose. It had become very itchy, which is a thing that sometimes happens to me when I smoke things. “You said yesterday to your boss that you wanted to continue your empire.”

“Life finds a way,” my father said, in his whisper-voice.

“Are you quoting the movie Jurassic Park?”

“Yes.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing. Everything.”

“It all makes sense now. Thank you,” I said.

“It’s in the fingers,” my father said. “The secret to breaking boxes. If you’re serious about learning I’ll show you all the different finger and knuckle shots I’ve developed over the years. The competition would kill for that kind of information, so our lessons would be highly secretive. Every box has a pressure point, a weak spot that when pressed explodes the box open with hardly any effort at all. The hard part is finding the pressure point. All boxes are different. They’re constantly coming up with new shapes and taping methods, different kinds of cardboard, different kinds of tape. It’s like they’re trying to outsmart the box man. But the box man has many tricks. All you have to do is find the weak spot, and there is always a weak spot, even when it seems like there isn’t one. Just like with humans.”

My father reached over to the passenger’s seat and pressed his thumb into a spot on my neck to demonstrate. It felt like I was having a stroke. My brain started to get dim

from lack of blood and my vision doubled.

“Jesus,” I said. “I didn’t realize it was like a martial art.”

“Suit yourself,” my father said. “Being a box man is a long and arduous journey. For the first couple years I wouldn’t even let you touch a box. I’d just have you training your general physical abilities, jabbing your fingers against concrete walls to strengthen your smallest bones, and learning to read different kinds of boxes for weak spots.”

“Brutal,” I said. “So how did you make it in America without no English and no house and no inner peace and no actual cooking abilities?”

“It’s just like Dr. Ian Malcolm says. Life finds a way.”

“That is deep,” I said, and scratched my nose some more.

* * * *

When we got to the grocery store, I still hadn’t heard the story of how my parents met. I had heard about the training process for a up-and-coming box-breaker, which turned out to be a very complex and regimented multi-year affair. I had also heard a conspiracy theory my father believed about Nazis who were still hiding out in submarines in the icy waters of Antarctica, hunting seals and living out their last days in private. Then we began reciting scenes from Jurassic Park and forgot about the story of how my father met my mother.

When my father pulled Fat Head’s knife out from the car door pocket, it reminded me of the story again. He carried the knife through the parking lot. It didn’t have a sheath or anything, and the thin metal looked menacing. I tried to stand in

between my father and other people so they wouldn't be able to see it, but they did anyway. No one seemed to take offense, but maybe they were just afraid of getting their heads chopped off and thought it better to avoid confrontation.

Once we got into the grocery store and my father put the knife into the shopping cart, things were less tense for me. Here's a thing that's absurd but true: if you're in a grocery store and you put something in a cart that is vaguely the shape and size of a food item, suddenly no one notices that it has the potential to kill them.

My father liked to walk the grocery store like a labyrinth, hitting every aisle at least once even though we only wanted baby food. He enjoyed commenting on the overpriced items and telling me how much they cost the grocery store to buy at wholesale, how many came in a case, and what the box was like that they came in. But most of all I think he just took pleasure in the vast variety of goods that were available to him.

“At Penn State, I partied really hard,” my father said as we walked down the first aisle. “Everyday I would walk through campus and see all these beautiful girls lying outside half-naked on big blankets with sunglasses on. They made life look effortless. I wanted to be like that, and I wanted to lie on one of those big blankets with them. I tried a couple times to sit with them, but my English was so bad that I got embarrassed or they got weirded-out and I left. I stole a bicycle off a rack at night and spray-painted it black so no one could identify it. I spray-painted it in my room because I was scared someone would catch me. I laid newspaper down, but some still got on the floor and there were fumes in my room for days. I blew half of my first paycheck on sunglasses the guy at the store told me were cool but were actually terrible. So I had a rough start. But, to reiterate

my point from before, life finds a way.”

"Jeff Goldblum didn't mean people tend to get through difficult situations, he was saying that the earth naturally tends to produce life. You're diluting his message. He would be ashamed," I said, which was perhaps a bit harsh.

“It’s the same damn thing,” my father said as he examined some canned asparagus skeptically. “He would understand. Anyway the point is I wasn’t wooing the Americans immediately. Your mother is American, as I'm sure you're aware, and I wooed her eventually, but I had to build up to that. Alcohol and marijuana served as bridges for me to walk over. I might not have known how to speak English, but I trained myself to smoke and drink better than anyone around. I wandered into house parties at night and convinced strangers to hold my legs up for keg-stands. The kids I made friends with assumed I was some weird exchange student or something. They called me Little Brother, because they couldn’t say my Chinese name, and I didn’t have an English name yet, and because I was always acting a fool like somebody’s little brother.”

I took off my jacket and put it on top of the knife in the cart. My father pushed the jacket to the side, so the knife was again visible. “I need easy access,” he said.

“Who are you planning to use that thing on?” I asked.

“No one,” he said. “I’m not planning anything.”

I wasn’t convinced.

“I would go hunting for stuff in the dumpster everyday,” my father continued as he wove the cart around customers. I followed behind him, ready to apologize when he bumped into someone. But he handled that cart with a lot of skill. “I found an old TV, a radio, even an almost-new pair of jeans. It’s not like I was even that poor. I made alright

money at the restaurant. It was just that people were constantly throwing away all this good stuff in the dumpster out back. It took me a while to be able to let that stuff go.”

We passed an old man whose eyes followed us as we walked by him. I saw my father put his hand on the handle of the knife. Their eyes met, and whatever the old man had seen in my father must have freaked him out. He went back to studying the ingredients on the cereal box with unnatural intensity.

“Who was that?” I asked when we got to the end at the aisle.

“It’s nothing,” my father said. “Getting in knife fights with old men isn’t part of my plan.”

“What plan?”

“Nothing. No plan.”

My father was acting strangely, but since I couldn’t figure out the source of the strangeness, there was nothing to accuse him of. We approached the meat section and my father sped up. He was pushing those little grocery cart wheels harder than they were used to, and the entire metal frame began to vibrate. When we got to the double swinging doors that separated the grocery store and the butcher-zone, my father did not slow down at all and instead pushed right through the doors.

“Don’t follow me,” my father said before he passed through into the butcher-zone. “This battle I have to fight alone.”

The doors swung shut and he disappeared. I stood there with a sudden feeling of unbearable emptiness, as if half my torso had been ripped out and the grocery store air was chilling my organs. I waited and listened for disturbances, but after a minute passed nothing had happened and I felt naked without a cart to hide behind.

This was a thing my father sometimes did. You thought you were having a normal experience with him, doing something mundane like grocery shopping, then all the sudden he revealed his true plans. At best it was an unsettling but ultimately fun experience. I remember once he took me out to get pumpkins for halloween, but when we got there it turned out he had his metal detector in the trunk wrapped in blankets and we spent the afternoon looking for old coins in the field and forgot to get pumpkins entirely. There was also the time he built me a treehouse in the woods but ended up claiming it as his secret mahjong den where he and three other Chinese people from the town next to ours would meet up and gamble when none of their wives wanted them in the house. He didn't mind when I snuck out of my room to watch them play, and they even let me join in sometimes and happily took my money when I inevitably lost. Stuff like that. Confusing but somehow enlivening.

But sometimes what he did was messed up, and he didn't seem to be able to tell the difference. Like the time we drove all the way down to New York for his tooth surgery and on the way back he double-parked on a street in Queens and flew out of the door with a swollen mouth to watch cricket-fighting and told me to drive the car around the block if the police came. I was only thirteen and I didn't really know how to drive yet, so I spent an hour sitting in the driver's seat with my heart exploding in my chest every time a car went by. I told myself it was the laughing gas that made him do it, but really I knew it was just the way my father was. I was mad that I had agreed to accompany him to his tooth surgery, and wasn't sure why I had. I felt tricked. My father came back with pockets full of crumpled cash, and we went to Flushing to buy pastries and styrofoam lunch boxes full of deliciousness, but I was pretty despondent the whole

time. Some might say my father was being selfish and irresponsible, and others might say he was delightfully impulsive and fun. I mostly just felt he was unpredictable and not worth the risk so I stopped accepting my father's invitations to do stuff.

But I had fallen back in the habit of hanging out with him, and now that he had disappeared into the butcher-zone I wondered if I would regret it. I walked down a random aisle to give myself something to do. There were no screams and no bloody headless people emerging out of the walk-in freezers where they kept the meat, so I kept walking, found the baby food, and put a variety of jars I thought my father would like into the cart. Mostly puréed vegetables but a couple meat-themed ones too.

As I moved away from the baby food, I saw someone I knew from high school, someone I didn't want to see. I wished I had dressed in the same gray color as the tile floor so I could slip away unnoticed. I knew her visual system was stimulated by movement, and I tried to stay completely still, hoping she would continue on in the opposite direction. But my nose was extremely itchy and I thought that if I moved slowly enough to scratch it, she might not notice. My hand was near my chin when she looked up and her visual cortex exploded with recognition. I aborted my nose-scratch and turned it into a weak wave.

The person I knew walked over to me and put her basket down on the floor. She stuck out her arms and I didn't know what she was doing. I felt myself being sucked into her and when we made contact my arms wrapped around her reflexively. It was a hug. We were hugging. That was a normal thing to do, so we were doing it. I took a deep but secret inhalation of her scent. I felt my belly expand at the same time hers did, and it was pleasant.

“Did you have a baby, Davis?” she asked as she un-hugged me but kept her hands on my shoulders. Her mouth was open in surprise. “Oh my god. Are you a daddy? Are you Daddy-Davis now?”

We both looked at the baby food in the cart. “No,” I said. “It’s for my father.”

The giddy magic between us left then, and I stood there and wished that I had pretended to be Daddy-Davis. She was my ex-girlfriend. Not the most recent one that had left me after we had lived together for a year. This was the first one, from when I was a sophomore in high-school.

“Oh, right,” she said, remembering my father. “It’s so weird, I had a dream about you the other night. I was worried about you. I didn’t even know you were back in town.”

“I’m not, really,” I said. “I mean I am right now, in the grocery store, but I won’t be for long. I’m going to go live in Hawaii.” I’m not a great liar, and the word Hawaii came out of my mouth unnaturally, like I wasn’t a native English speaker, or like I was a stoned surfer from California who had a bubble trapped in their throat, or like I was someone in an anti-smoking public service announcement who had had their larynx removed.

“Oh, Hawaii! That’s great. Send me a postcard, ok? With interesting stamps, if possible.” She was a postcard collector. “Do you still remember my address?”

“Yeah,” I said, and was surprised that I actually did.

“I still have the ones you sent in high school,” she said. “They’re great.”

“You should burn them,” I said. It was not a good thing to say. Sometimes I chose incorrectly from the list of options my brain provided for me.

“I would never do that,” she said.

“Sorry,” I said. “I know that’s not something a self-respecting postcard collector would ever do. I guess I’m just embarrassed by my past self.”

Love is a strange thing, and going through a few love cycles hadn't make it any less strange. My first ex-girlfriend didn't want to tell me there was nothing to be embarrassed about, because she didn't want to sound like she still loved me, even though she did. I didn't want to tell her I wasn't really going to Hawaii and that I sometimes I still thought about her too, because I didn't want to sound like I still loved her, even though I did. It's a strange thing that no one ever talks about, how we all secretly still love each other. Even when we've drifted apart, or have come to resent each other, or are pretending the person we still love does not exist.

We stood there together, loving each other but not crossing the love-line. The florescent lights above us flickered then, and the whole grocery store was covered in undulating waves of dimness. I felt as if the life of the grocery store was somehow connected to my life. My heartbeat aligned itself to the pulsing electricity overhead, and I felt vast, as big as a lightning storm or a herd of wild buffalo. I thought that every food item in the store turned to look at us, and that every customer was a shadow frozen in place.

“We have to go,” my father said. He had appeared beside me holding a massive side of raw beef in both hands. It was dripping blood. He put it flat in the cart, covering the baby food, and it dripped out the bottom. It barely fit, and the edges of the meat were curled up against the walls of the cart. I looked at him. “I’ll clean it later,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Bye,” I said to my first ex-girlfriend. “I have to go. I’ll send you a postcard.”

“Looking forward to it,” she said, and it looked like she wanted to say more, but she stopped herself. Me and my father turned and raced down the aisle as the lights waved on and off above us.

The checkout area was a mess. The laser scanners and conveyor belts were malfunctioning and the cashiers were all running around ineffectually. It was like the machines had rebelled against their masters, and everyone was freaking out. It reminded me of the scene in *The Terminator* when Kyle Reese falls asleep at the junkyard and we see a memory of his world, a future world full of fog and dust and explosions, where lasers are zapping around always and where tanks crush human skulls, where he and a small group of counterinsurgents army-crawl under barbed-wire and throw grenades to try to blow up the giant self-aware machines full of anti-human sentiment. We didn’t pay. We bypassed the lines and snuck out the automatic doors, which snapped shut behind us with such force it made the glass rattle. When we got to the truck I saw my father was holding the neck of a handle of cheap vodka in one hand and some aluminum foil in the other. Fat Head’s knife was stuck between his belt and his jeans, and it was covered in blood. My father tore off a huge piece of foil, did a bunch of loops around the beef with it until it was covered, threw everything in the bed of the truck, and then we drove away. We turned off onto a dirt road that no one ever went down because it was so bumpy.

My father drove too fast down the road, and my head hit the ceiling.

“Can you slow down?” I said. “There’s no one chasing us.”

“There’s always someone chasing you,” my father said. “Especially when you take his beef.” My father looked a little bug-eyed.

“Maybe you should smoke the joint,” I said. “To calm yourself down.”

Instead, my father unscrewed the cap of the vodka and took a swig.

“I’m thinking about getting back into partying a little,” he said as I judged him.

“You know, responsibly. Adult-style.”

I took the bottle when he passed it but didn’t drink any. I put it between my feet and hoped he would forget about it. “What’s up with the beef?” I asked. “We could have just paid for it. How come you never tell me when you’re about to do something super insane and dramatic like that?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t have worked,” he said. “Do you know how much they pay for that meat wholesale? They’re the ones stealing from us.”

My father’s truck was squeaking in an annoying way as he swerved to avoid potholes. When we hit a bump I became weightless for a moment until my bones jammed down on each other and I was compressed into the passenger’s seat.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, and for a few moments the car beeped at me, trying to guilt me into putting it back on. Instead, I flipped the lock on the passenger’s side door, pulled the handle, pushed the door open against the air, and dove out. I hit the dirt road and tumbled for a while, trying to go with the flow. It was more intense than I expected. The sensation was an expression of pure unemotional physics, like a wave that, coming close, turns out to be much larger than you expected, and comes crashing down on you with the immense natural power of high-volume water. There was a moment before I jumped out of the truck when my body calculated velocities and weights and surface densities and tried to stop me from jumping by sending shivers through my chest that almost paralyzed me. But I had been able to override them, which pleased me.

I lay there on the road propped up on my forearms. My coat and face and rocket-ship pajama onesie had all been injected with dirt. My rocket-ship pajama onesie hadn't ripped, which I was very grateful for, but my knees had managed to get pretty torn up anyway on the rock-infused dirt road. I rolled my pant legs up to avoid getting blood on my onesie, which I liked very much and was unable to sleep without. The truck stopped and my father jumped out and jogged over to me.

"Davis, what happened?" he asked.

"I jumped out of the truck."

"Why?"

"There is no why."

"Who's being dramatic now?" he asked. His voice had become serious.

I didn't say anything. I felt ashamed of myself. I knew there was some kind of acute emotional buildup which had caused me to override my internal safety mechanisms and flop out of the moving truck, but I couldn't put it into words. There was just a hot shame tingling all over my skin and all underneath my skin too. I had been procrastinating all day, and yesterday too, but the suicidal feeling was still inside me and now it was coming out in weird ways and making chaos, causing me to do things half-assedly and confusing my father. I would do it that night, I promised myself, after I had picked up my sister from the airport and everyone had gone to sleep. Until then, I would be normal.

"Sorry," I said. "I always wanted to jump out of a moving car to see what it felt like. When people do it in movies they never explain the feeling of it. Now I know it's because the feeling is not that great and there's not much to say. It's very painful and not

at all fun like jumping on a trampoline or a bouncy-house or something.”

“That’s ok,” my father said, and didn't say anything else, and in the absence of words I could feel vibrations buzzing through the air, though whether they came from him or from me, I couldn't tell.

We got back in the truck and my father promised to drive slower. It was obvious by now that no one was following us anyway, and the adrenaline from his beef-stealing had worn off, so it was easier for him. I saw his hand rest over the button that locked all the doors, as if he were worried that I might try to make another escape.

“I stole the beef to get back at someone,” my father said after we had been driving for a couple minutes. “As you know, my internal sense of justice is powerful and all-consuming. I don’t know whether or not you want to hear the story though, since we already have a few other ones queued up.”

“No more stories,” I said. I was in a bad mood.

"Ok," my father said. "That light show at the grocery store was pretty cool though, huh?"

"You did that? I should have known." I scowled at him.

"I pulled some wires in the back to throw them off my trail," my father said. "Turned out even better than I expected."

"And what about the old man we passed? I know you have some beef with that guy. Get it? I know you have some *beef* with him. Beef." I pressed my thumb down on the lighter and lit the incense on the dashboard. The incense stick stuck out of the gold plastic buddha's belly button, and the buddha looked overly pleased about it.

"Secret agent," my father said. "He goes undercover and wanders the aisles

looking for shoplifters. He knows I work for the competition and follows me around every time I go in there. He's awful at his job though. So slow. Terrible cart-pushing agility. I always manage to lose him if I want to steal something."

"Good for you," I said. I stared at the incense-impaled buddha and finally closed my eyes. "I'm going to rest for a little bit," I said.

"Sounds like a good idea," father said. "Also, that old guy does acro-yoga at the gym with your mother. I don't like the way they touch each other." He exhaled deeply. "I'd like to open him up like a box, to be completely honest," he murmured, and touched the handle of the knife by his side.

"So that's what this is about," I said. "I thought you had really dumped out your marbles, stealing an enormous beef-piece for no reason."

"That reminds me," my father said. "I have to finish the story about how I met your mother. It's somewhat related, in a roundabout way. Every time two people come into contact with each other, it's like a chemical reaction. Ba-boom! This story will help you understand what kind of reaction created you. Do you mind? Or do you need rest?"

"Whatever," I said, keeping my eyes closed. I hated how easily I got caught up in my father's stories and schemes. I didn't know why I cared. It was all going to be over in a few hours anyway. The knowledge that I would soon be dead consoled me greatly, and gave me patience with myself that I didn't normally have. I listened to my father's words, breathed deeply, and let incense smoke twist around my face.

"Do you believe in Bigfoot?" my father said. "You know, Sasquatch? Mr. Yeti-yeti?"

"No," I said with great equanimity. "You've asked me that before, and I already

know you believe in him. Stay on track. You're talking about how you met Mama."

"Bigfoot is how I met Mama," my father said. "He brought us together. I saw him in the woods of State College, Pennsylvania, and he led me deep into the wilderness. I came to a clearing where your mother lived in a log cabin. Then he disappeared, and I've been hoping to see him again ever since. What most people don't know is that Bigfoot is very intelligent, genius-level. He can navigate using the stars, but he knows how to use Google Maps too. He can burn you with a witty insult, but he can rip your limbs off with his bare hands and destroy you that way too if he feels like it. He's like all the best parts of humans combined with all the best parts of animals. He can smell you entering his forest from miles away, and he won't let you see him unless he wants you to. We're like blind-deaf retards compared to him. But he only uses his powers for good, like a rugged angel of the North American wilderness. If he senses your aim is true, he'll help you along your journey. That's why he led me to your mother."

I could feel the truck speed up when my father got excited about Bigfoot and slow down when he paused before the next part of his story. I wondered how often my father thought about Bigfoot. I opened and closed my eyes slowly, and maybe it was the incense smoke entering my nose, or having my brain shaken by jumping out of a moving truck, but for some reason I could picture Bigfoot extra vividly. There was well-groomed auburn hair covering his entire body, and he was lying in a hammock high up in the trees reading a book through wire-rimmed spectacles when he smelled my father enter his forest.

"So you just knocked on Mama's door?" I asked.

"No, I spied through her window," my father said, as the truck sped back up. "She

was cooking and she had a boyfriend there with her. They had a wood fire and candles going, very romantic, glasses of wine, finely-woven rugs and rustic hand-carved bowls and spoons. To me she was the foxiest, and I instantly started to plot a way to become entangled with her. I lurked around with the cats outside, and I whispered to them and told them to try to exert their influence on your mother."

"Sounds manipulative," I said. I was almost asleep, and my father's words created dreamlike swirls on the backs of my eyelids. We were still on the dirt road, and I felt my internal organs slosh around as the balance of the truck shifted.

"It was," my father said. "But those cats did a good job. They peed in her boyfriend's shoes and scratched up all his things. I ransacked his car and made it look like a bear had done it. I prayed to Bigfoot and I think Bigfoot spooked the guy a few times, even though I never saw it happen. Eventually he had had enough of the woods. He moved out and I swooped in. By that time I had built up enough reconnaissance to know how to handle your mother when the chance came. I used all the restaurant money I had saved up and bought a fancy car to impress her. I brought her free Chinese food all the time. I learned English and you were born a few years later. Ba-da-bingo!"

"That is the stupidest creation story I've ever heard," I said.

"Hey, I forgot about my vodka," my father said. We had turned off the dirt road and were entering more populated territory.

"You know there's a law against drinking and driving, right? It's one of the most famous laws there is."

"You have to read between the lines," my father said. "You'll never get anywhere unless you read between the lines. Your mother had a boyfriend, but I read between the

lines, and that's why you're here. Just a little sip."

"You're acting wacky," I said, passing him the bottle. "Even for you."

My father took more than a little sip. "These stories have made me feel in love with life again, Davis. They make me remember why I'm here and why you're here, and why we live in this place. They made me steal a beef-piece, and now I'm going to go home and cook it up to show your mother that I love her."

"I'm sure that's exactly what she wants," I said.

"If you like a girl, steal her some beef," my father said, getting all fatherly.

"Remember that, Davis. That's how you woo a woman. Doesn't matter whether or not you speak English. Everyone speaks meat. Meat is universal. And if she has a boyfriend trying to intercept your meat-gifts, pray to Bigfoot and get him to help you drive him away. If it's meant to be, Bigfoot will come to your aid."

* * * *

When we got home, my father went into the garage with his beef. He came into the kitchen a few minutes later and took some cooking ingredients from the cabinets. I managed to resist his invitations to help him out and "see how it was done." I didn't want to see how it was done. I imagined him clamping the enormous meat into vices and tearing through it with a circular saw like a piece of wood. I imagined him hanging it from the rafters and carving it with a chainsaw as if it were an ice sculpture. Whatever he did in there, a little later I saw him out in the backyard standing next to the barbecue

grill, which was smoking. He had apparently been able to get the beef into small enough pieces to fit inside the grill. I watched him as he stared blankly into the smoke.

"We've got to do something about it," my mother called out, opening the door of the upstairs bedroom.

"What do you mean?" I called back. "About the beef?"

"It's been two weeks already," she said. "There's no going back now."

"You're being cryptic," I said.

"Ronald, there isn't time! Every minute we waste just makes him bolder."

"My name is Davis," I said, getting up from my seat. "Oy! What are you talking about, you wonky maternal figure?"

I heard her come down the stairs. She peeked into the kitchen and gave me a big-eyed death stare. She had her headset on and was evidently deep in a business discussion.

"And those purple velvet curtains!" she said as she went back upstairs. "She's Marie Antoinette reincarnate. Yes. Absolutely. Profligates, both of them. That's what *I* said." I heard her close the door to the upstairs bathroom and I could no longer make out her words. I could hear pee splashing in the toilet, though and then I heard a flush. I wondered if, wherever he was, whoever he was, Ronald could hear it too.

I reflected for a while on the day I had spent with my father driving around, talking, and stealing from the grocery store. It seemed like a pretty good last day of life. I had heard my own creation story, which I thought must have been embellished somewhat, but was still strange and interesting in its own way. I had touched bellies with my first ex-girlfriend as we felt love for each other, which was very unexpected but somehow satisfying and cyclical, reminding me of the way nature opens and closes

relentlessly, with complete indifference to everything it touches, which is everything. I felt the urge to go get my notebook and record what had happened, and also to make a list of all my father's wacky theories and stories that I could remember. But I resisted. I didn't want to leave on a sentimental note. I realized then that whatever was in my notebook would be interpreted sentimentally no matter what, and I made a mental note to burn it before I killed myself that night.

When it came time to go pick up my sister, I put my coat back over my rocket-ship pajama onesie and started up the truck. My father was still shivering in the back tending to his beef on the grill, and it looked like there was nothing he would rather be doing. I lit the incense that stuck out of the gold plastic buddha's belly button and drove away. The incense thing was growing on me. It wasn't the smell so much as the entire experience, the way the smoke mixed with air, the burning orange glow, the shit-eating grin of the buddha. It created a space where one's thoughts and feelings could not help but be pushed in a relaxed and meditative direction.

It took a little over an hour on the highway to drive to the airport. I felt the urge to throw myself out of the truck again, but the rushing pavement looked very hard and painful. I was tempted also by the thought of turning the steering wheel a couple degrees to the right and forcing myself to hold it there, which would, over a long enough period of time, lead me crashing into the woods. There would be a moment in which the situation would shift from "in control," to "out of control," and imagining myself cross that line excited me. But if I didn't die I would be left in a highly messy situation, no doubt involving neck braces, blood transfusions, glass shards poking out of my face, mangled metal car frames, judgmental trees, grumpy tow truck guys, annoying news

reporters, etc. I couldn't risk that, no matter how much I wanted to kill myself.

Then an alternative idea occurred to me. If I waited for a section of the highway with no median and drove into oncoming traffic, my suicide would be assured. There was no way anyone could survive a collision head on with another car while we were both going full speed, I thought. Imagining the intensity of that kind of impact made my sweaty hands sweat even more as they gripped the steering wheel and struggled to keep it straight.

After I put on my empathy goggles and looked the situation again, however, it became obvious that this was actually the worst plan of all, due to the high likelihood of killing someone else in the process, and I wasn't so reckless that I couldn't realize how irresponsible that would be. My throat tingled with guilt for being so self-centered and forgetting to put on my empathy goggles for so long. I wiped my hands off on my fleece rocket-ships. Ultimately there were just too many variables and too much collateral damage when killing oneself on the highway. The logic of my original decision to use pills still held up. Swallowing pills was predictable, quiet, clean, and undramatic. It wasn't all that sexy or fun, but that was probably for the best.

By the time I got to the airport I had shoved my suicidal thoughts down somewhere deep inside of me. I drove around the arrivals loop a few times. Everyone around me was pissed off about the limited room to wait at the terminal, the offensively high fee to use the parking lot, and the cold and impersonal design of the airport that did not recognize their humanity. I looked at their faces as they cut me off and made gestures of frustration and despair with their hands. They all wished they were somewhere else, at home with their families, or back at work, or at the gym, or back on the highway driving

seventy-five miles an hour in cruise control in the passing lane with no cars blocking them. I just stared at buddha's belly button breathed deeply, and accepted fully that this was the place I was meant to be.

My sister emerged from the automatic doors on my fourth loop around. She pulled two full-size suitcases behind her, which I thought was excessive for a ten-day visit. It was difficult for her to pull those suitcases, as one or more of their little plastic wheels seemed to be broken. I didn't get out of the truck to help. She stood there for a moment by the passenger's door, knowing that she needed to get the suitcases into the bed of the truck, but not knowing how to make them go there. She knocked on the window and I rolled it down.

"I need help to pick these up," my sister said.

"Hi," I said. I dried my sweaty hands off with a Dunkin' Donuts napkin from the glove compartment. I wiped down the steering wheel too.

"Hi," she said, like I was stupid. She thought I was stupid and I thought she was stupid. We were probably both stupid, to be completely honest.

"Ew, why are you wearing that?" she asked, leaning against the door on her forearms.

"My rocket-ship pajama onesie?" I looked down at myself. I thought the rocket-ship pajama onesie looked cool in a semi-serious way, but I had worn it around enough people to know that that onesie nature of it combined with its whimsical rocket ships seemed to offend some.

"Obviously," she said, narrowing her eyes.

"I'm exercising my right to wear a rocket-ship pajama onesie. It's warm and

comfortable and the rocket-ships are beautiful. Get off my back."

"Whatever. I only brought up your baby-suit so you'd remember how much I disapprove of your life choices. Now help me with my luggage. I'm too weak to lift it." Her voice was tremory, but it managed to sound bossy anyway. I always found myself in an argumentative mood when I was around her, no matter how nice I tried to be. It had been this way forever. The seeds of conflict we planted inside ourselves long ago had blossomed into hateful flowers. Even my empathy goggles, which I had developed to work on anyone, malfunctioned whenever I tried to use them on her.

One summer vacation, when I was in middle school and she was in elementary school, we made a fort in the living room with chairs, tables, couches, blankets, sheets, towels, lamps, and cardboard boxes. My parents usually weren't home during this period of our lives, so we were able to build our fort unencumbered by adult considerations. Without any oversight, rampant development ensued, and our fort ended up covering the entire living room, meaning that one could not enter the living room without also entering our fort, and that wherever one went in the living room, they did so within the confines of our creation. The television was enclosed with thin white sheets, and when someone watched it a blue-white glow aura covered everything like a futuristic mist. We had complex cardboard tunnels connecting the various subdivisions of the living room, each of which had a separate purpose, like gambling (our father had recently taught us to play blackjack), imagination (only things that didn't exist could be discussed), wrestling (I always won but my sister still challenged me frequently), and tea (our stuffed animals joined us politely around a small cardboard box table as we sipped).

Our fort was an incredibly enjoyable place to be, and we used to rush off the bus,

kick off our shoes and coats, and dive straight into its complex and shadowy spaces, which I think comforted us, and also made us feel proud that we had created such powerfully mood-altering architecture. But the already-present tension between me and my sister ended up tearing apart our masterpiece and left a void of everlasting lovelessness in its place.

The destruction began when, after a particularly ferocious and exhausting wrestling match, I suggested that we watch *The Karate Kid*. I had been able to pin my sister three consecutive times, but I had been completely drained of energy in the process, and I knew if we had a rematch she would win. She was a vicious third grader. She couldn't overpower me, but instead waited for me to overextend myself and then caught me in all kinds of unusual and creative chokeholds with her bony arms. She locked her chokes in deep, without any remorse, and I had been close to passing out several times in the last week. Her true strength was like a thing she kept swaddled in blankets, nurturing it in secret until it would be strong enough to destroy me. Sometimes when we were having tea at the cardboard table with our stuffed animals, her eyes glazed over and I knew she was replaying our wrestling matches in her head, analyzing me for weaknesses and preparing her strategy for our next battle.

I suggested *The Karate Kid* because I thought the zen of Mr. Miyagi might calm her bloodlust. I put in the VHS and we watched Ralph Macchio wax on and wax off. Unfortunately I think my sister identified more with the of the villains of the movie, members of a karate school called Cobra Kai, whose mantra went, "Strike hard, strike first, no mercy sir!" I almost pressed eject during the halloween scene when the Cobra Kai guys, wearing spandex skeleton suits, beat the crap out of Ralph Macchio. She

slapped my hand away from the VCR. In my peripheral vision I saw my sister bouncing up and down with her fist clenched, mouthing the words "kill...kill...kill," silently to herself. She let out a disappointed sigh when Mr. Miyagi popped out of nowhere and saved him. I think she saw it as yet another instance of unfair adult interference in the world of children.

At the end of the movie, when Ralph Macchio defeated the toughest Cobra Kai guy in a karate tournament, my sister pounded her fists against the rug-covered floor and made whining noises. She clearly had developed a soft spot for the antagonists of the story, who had intentionally injured Ralph Macchio's leg and then tried to repeatedly kick it in order to win the competition. I turned off the TV and rewound the VHS, but I was unable to console my sister, who was bemoaning the falseness of Hollywood action movie narratives. To her, the conclusion of the movie had been so concerned with protecting the well-being of the main character that it had done a disservice to what she saw as the central theme of the movie: the brutal and all-encompassing reality of violence.

I guess I should have known she wouldn't buy into the bonsai tree-trimming, crane-kicking, catch-the-fly-with-chopsticks brand of martial arts that Mr. Miyagi taught Ralph Macchio. It wasn't her style at all. To her, there was no sense in trying to stand on high moral ground in a world she viewed as indifferent, chaotic, and inherently violent. She was of the "strike hard, strike first, no mercy sir" persuasion, and watching the movie had seemed to solidify the ruthlessness she had been carrying around inside her.

I crawled through a dark cardboard tunnel toward the southern annex of our fort, which was the last part we had constructed and consisted of the wrestling room and two

single-person size chambers for pre-wrestling meditation. I had forgotten my socks, which I had taken off for wrestling and now needed for my chilly feet. I was sitting on the assortment of mats, rugs, and pillows we had used as flooring in the wrestling room, and was serenely putting a sock on my left foot when she attacked me. I had felt her observing me and turned to look, received a karate chop to my neck, and then suddenly she was attached to my back, entangling each one of my limbs and determined to suck the life from my body. I was shocked. Our fights had always been highly formal and ceremonious. We always meditated, put on special clothes, bowed deeply to each other, and set a timer for each round. But now she was on me like I was Ralph Macchio, trying to finish what *The Karate Kid* had started but was unable to finish.

Her elbow was clamped under my neck. I tried to buck her off, but she was attached to me like I was a turtle and she was my shell, except the shell was getting smaller and smaller and closing where my head poked out. I tried to protest, to ask what the hell she was doing, to plead with her to spare me, to tell her that I hated Ralph Macchio, that I hoped he was waxing on and off in hell, that I submitted to her, the most fearsome and merciless third-grader who had ever lived. But all that came out was a dry-wretch gurgle that only made her squeeze tighter.

I stood up, unsteady due to my now higher center of gravity, and as I did I pulled the ceiling-sheet of the wrestling room off with me. I stumbled around, crashing into cardboard and rocking chairs, tripping over blankets and pillows but managing to stay on my feet. My eyes were going tingly at the edges. The fort was crumbling under me like I was Godzilla. I didn't care. It was a major faux pas between us to damage the fort while wrestling, but our pretense of civilized etiquette had obviously evaporated. My trachea

was being compounded with what seemed like hydraulic force, and the arteries on either side of my neck were dammed up, my blood flow reduced to a depressing trickle.

But my will to live was stronger back then, and I didn't give up. Even as darkness crept in from the edges of my vision, something approximately the size and shape of a cashew glowed hot and burned in my chest. I didn't know what it was, but it gave me strength to continue on the edge of consciousness. I aimed myself toward the fireplace hearth. I arched and flopped backward with my full weight, channelling my inner-whale. My sister's head struck a brick as I fell on top of her. Her grip loosened, and I pulled in a breath of air into my lungs that was as delicious as anything I have ever consumed.

The Karate Kid VHS stopped rewinding and ejected itself out of the VCR. I rolled over, head throbbing, the sweat of my even-as-a-kid sweaty hands being absorbed by the brick. I checked on my sister cautiously, unsure whether she would spring up again and continue her attack on me. Unconscious but breathing, I determined.

When she opened her eyes a few minutes later she was concussed and confused. It was like she didn't know what had happened. She asked me why the fort was all messed up, and I told her I thought our fort days were over.

"I almost had you," she said to me, gazing out the window with a look that seemed regretful, embarrassed, and deeply melancholy all at the same time.

We didn't wrestle again after that, and I don't think she ever wrestled with anyone else either. I threw *The Karate Kid* VHS into a pond in the woods behind my house and we never talked about our fight, neither to each other nor to our parents, who sensed a rift between us had opened but never found out what happened. Now it was hard to tell that my sister had ever been a bloodthirsty martial arts maniac, almost imperceptible except

for the murderous looks she sometimes gave me and the fact that being in proximity to each other seemed to cause us both a lot of pain, like we were washed-up athletes whose promising careers had been ended prematurely by injuries that refused to heal.

"Why are you too weak to lift your luggage?" I asked her as she continued to lean against the door of the truck and stare at me. A car behind us honked at us. I suddenly felt guilty that I existed and took up space, not only at the airport arrivals terminal, but also in the universe as a whole.

"I'm weak," she said simply. She made a half-hearted attempt to pick up a suitcase, which remained stuck to the ground as if attached by super-gravity. It was true. Her arms, which had once hung at her sides like weapons that emanated ropey tensile strength, now seemed more like two strings blowing in the wind. She was too thin and her skin was dull, and though I know all hair is made of dead cells, hers illustrated this fact without need for scientific proof.

I got out of the truck and threw her suitcases into the back, wondering when this transformation had occurred. I hadn't been paying much attention to her for the past few years. Wasted potential drains life from a person faster than anything, I knew, and it made me wonder whether things might have turned out differently if I had let her choke me out. Maybe we would like each other now, or maybe I would be dead, or maybe she would be able to lift her own luggage.

"What's this thing?" she asked when we were on the highway.

She was holding the knife my father had left in the foot area of the passenger's seat. Both her hands gripped it tight around the string-wrapped handle and she had the tip of blade so close to her eyes that I worried hitting a bump in the road might wound her.

The blood had dried on the blade and created an ugly flakey pattern.

"Baba's knife," I said. Baba is what we called our father.

"Wow," she said, and became interested in the dried blood swirls. "The knife he used to kill the guy?" When I looked surprised, she added, "He told me about it before I left for school."

"It's just the knife he used to cut some beef for dinner," I said.

"Oh." She put the knife down again by her feet and looked disappointed.

In the rearview mirror, I watched the handles of my sister's suitcases flapping in the wind. In my mind, I saw the suitcases lifted out of the truck and into the air, floating for a moment before the zippers burst and they exploded like fireworks made of clothes. I watched myself pull over, jump out, and scramble all over the highway scooping up clothes as cars vroomed and screeched around me. Then I lay down on the blacktop and covered myself in pants and sweaters as I waited for a car to run me over. When I stopped fantasizing and looked at the road again we had traveled miles, but I didn't remember driving at all.

* * * *

The kitchen table was already set when me and my sister got home. My father sat at one end of the table, and my mother sat at the other. They stared across at each other, but they might have just been staring at all the meat. My father had piled the meat in a mountain on a stainless steel steam-table tray, the kind you see at weddings or all-you-can-eat buffets. The meat dripped blood and grease, and heat rose from it. It looked like

the tectonic plates of our dining room table had collided and produced a volcano.

I could never tell if my parents hated each other or were in a weird kind of love. There were candles on the table, which seemed romantic, and their faces hung a little limp and stupid, like they both had minor strokes while I was out picking up my sister. For some reason I associated this kind of look with love. But I knew my parents fundamentally did not like each other. This was a fact established in my mind over many years of observation, though I could not prove it, and nobody could prove it, and nobody even knew for sure one way or the other. Love is an amorphous thing that vanishes under inspection.

Maybe it was like in the movie *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*. I had found out several years before that when I was a toddler I had watched this movie everyday for several months, and that made a lot of sense to me. *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* was a movie I carried inside myself like a past life, and every scene played out in my head with all the familiarity and nostalgia of a home movie. The father, Wayne Salinski, is a scientist who works on a machine that can shrink objects. It's a complex device that keeps in his attic. One of the aspects of the machine is that it has a laser connecting two parts of it, and the laser has something to do with the intensity with which the machine attempts to shrink things. Wayne Salinski, despite being the inventor of this machine, does not understand just how powerful this laser is, and so the machine, instead of shrinking an apple, explodes an apple. Wayne Salinski, despite being very smart, is also a bit stupid. When by chance a baseball flies through the attic window and blocks the laser, the shrinker machine becomes functional, which leads to the kids being shrunken, and an adventure of the shrunken kids ensues.

I was reminded of the laser because the sight line between my parents was intense and full of energy, kind of like a laser, and now that the mound of meat (analogous to the baseball) was partially obscuring their vision, I wondered if they had become a functional love machine. My father had told me that if you liked a girl, you should steal her some beef, so maybe the completion of the love machine had been his plan all along. I daydreamed for a while about a remake of *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids* starring a Chinese family. My father played the father, his name was Wang Salinski, and he manned the shrinking device like a machine gun turret.

My sister and I sat down to eat, completing the rectangle. The volume of the meat mountain accompanied by the fire glow from the candles gave a medieval feel to the affair. My mother said hi to my sister, but continued to stare across the table at my father, who seemed happier than I could ever remember. My sister stabbed one of the topmost slabs off meat off the mountain with my father's knife. She shook it onto her plate and began slicing it up into cubes. Perhaps it was this very meat slab that had completed my parents' love machine, because as soon as it was removed, their faces regained their rigidity and they seemed to realize that we were home and that we were having dinner.

"What do you think?" my father asked. "It's my monument to meat. And to your mother," he added, getting all lovey.

"Monumental," I said. There were also some peas and mashed potatoes on the table, and I scooped some of those onto my plate. The meat-material I saw stacked before us did not appeal to my animal instincts, and actually I think my animal instincts were not in the mood to be appealed to by anything.

"I made us drinks too," he said. "Sangria. Mexican style. Macho man. *Cajones*."

He ladled some red liquid into four glasses and distributed them.

"Sangria isn't Mexican," my sister said. "And I don't have cajones."

"Such a buzzkiller!" my father said. "No wonder you don't have a boyfriend.

Maybe if you had some cajones you could get one. Haha."

"So weird," my sister said.

"This has vodka in it," I said. "It's supposed to be red wine."

"Buzzkiller number two!" my father said, "It's my special recipe. It's part of my nature to innovate."

My mother, who didn't drink alcohol and didn't eat meat, was gnawing on a meat-brick and washing the sinew down with vodka-sangria. We all noticed this at the same time, and she looked up from the bloodbath on her plate to find us all staring at her.

"What?" she said as she continued to chew. My father winked at me.

"What is happening right now?" I asked. "I forgot how strange everything gets when all four of us are together. I feel like Mr. Jones."

"Who?" my father asked.

"His elementary school principal, Russell Jones," my mother said.

"No," I said.

"Are you talking about that stupid guy who sells real estate in town?" my dad asked. "He sucks."

"It's from a song," my sister said.

"Thank you," I said to my sister. My sister stabbed moodily at her meat.

"Why are you making references we don't understand, Davis? Are you trying to alienate us?" my mother asked.

"Are you actually concerned about me or are you just talking?" I asked.

"Just talking," my sister said. My father shrugged, and my mother shook her head and tried to reassure me. After that we all just ate for a while. I think that's why family dinner is a thing—eating gives you something to do when it gets too awkward to keep having a conversation.

As I stared at my plate, alternating between worrying about how little I had eaten lately and how disgusted I was by food, I was reminded of my girlfriend, Elizabeth, who was now my ex-girlfriend. After we graduated from college, we had lived together in a cabin in the woods a couple hours away. The cabin was not a good place. The walls were always wet and it smelled like mold everywhere. It smelled like mold everywhere because there was mold everywhere. If you left something somewhere too long and didn't move it, the next time you picked up it would be coated in a thin layer of grey fuzz. If you forgot about something in a corner of the closet, a pair of fancy dress shoes, for example, the mold would grow so thick and strange that it looked like a creepy fuzz-sculpture when you found it again.

If you perceive that this was not an ideal environment in which to grow love, you are correct. Though perhaps some could have grown it anyway.

If you perceive that this experience in the woods had contributed significantly to my suicidal feeling, even more so than I wanted to admit, and that I was an enormous wailing baby pooping my pants and frantically gulping metaphorical breastmilk every time I thought about it, you are also correct.

If you perceive that I enjoy talking about this experience with you, you are incorrect. Sorry.

On this night my family was highly carnivorous, and the meat mountain was significantly eroded by the time my father noticed my sister had his knife. As I've said before in various ways, his object-recognition skills were subpar. My sister had cut her meat meticulously into centimeter cubes, arranged them in a grid, and then had proceeded to systematically consume them, starting in one corner and working her way to the other. She probably ate more than any of us. Even my mother, who did not normally eat meat, and who usually had her own separate dinner prepared, even at special events like Thanksgiving, was a highly productive contributor to meat consumption. I was the only one who didn't eat any, which I was able to get away with by putting meat slabs on my plate and then returning them to the mountain when no one was looking.

"Hey, that's not for eating with," my father said.

My sister glared at him and put another cube in her mouth. I hadn't realized until then that she wasn't even using a fork. She was just stabbing the meat and putting it into her mouth directly.

"What's it for then?" she asked.

"It's a decorative knife and a knife for unintentional suicide," my father said.

"Hopefully just a decorative knife these days," I added.

"I like eating with it," my sister said. She put another another cube into her mouth seemingly without any fear of cutting herself.

"Ooga booga," my mother said. The love laser had clearly affected her brain.

"What?" I asked.

"It's good to be a cavewoman sometimes," she said.

"Ooga booga," I said.

"Ooga booga," she agreed, and smiled.

"Baba killed someone," I said. I didn't want to be a downer, I just thought I needed to get it out in the open. It's a weird kind of thing to keep quiet about.

"I already told you, *I know*," my sister said. "Why are you saying it like it's a big deal?"

"Well, who did he kill? Maybe it is a big deal. Maybe he should be in jail." I looked around at everyone like I wanted them to help me but didn't know what I wanted them to do.

My sister laughed at me. "Jail?" she said. "You are such a dweeb."

"Isn't that the way the law works?"

"I haven't finished the story yet," my father said, and pounded on the table once with his fist. He was half joking and half serious and the serious part was intense, demonstrating his advanced fist-pounding ability developed by fighting people in his youth and punching boxes in his middle age. Then he stood up and began to clear the dishes. He put them in the sink and began to prepare his dishwashing station. "Nobody spoil the story," he said.

"I thought you didn't know about this," I said to my mom.

"Of course I know," she said. "What kind of relationship could survive a secret like that?"

I shrugged.

"I think I'm going to go for a quick run before bed," she said. This was a thing she did sometimes that somehow helped her sleep better. "Thanks for doing the dishes,

Honey," she said to my father, kissed him on the cheek, and slammed the door behind her before I was fully aware of what was happening.

"It is my greatest pleasure to wash the dishes for you, my wife!" my father called after her. Like a lot of things my father said, it was supposed to be a joke, or at least possibly interpreted as a joke, but I got the sense that he really did enjoy washing the dishes for my mother. He had his dishwashing station all set up the way he liked it—two stainless steel basins, one filled with soapy water and the other empty. Special mixture of soaps mixed in secret proportions all in a bowl next to his scrubber-hand for easy access. He plunged dishes into the soapy basin and while submerged scrubbed them either with steel wool or an abrasive sponge, depending on how attached the food-grease was to the dish. He piled the washed ones in the empty basin and once they were all in there he rinsed them with hot water, hot enough to burn the hands of most humans (he had specially increased the temperature of the water heater in the basement for his dishwashing), or at least make them sweaty and uncomfortable. Maybe it was love that made him wash my mother's dishes with such care. Or maybe he just liked how the soapsuds felt on his forearms. Both seemed equally possible to me.

"Are you mad I brought up the killing thing?" I asked. My father was singing an old Chinese love song to the dishes, or at least what I thought was a love song, since I didn't understand most of the words, but he was acting all tender and using his cooing voice like he was about to make out with a plate. He didn't stop singing when I asked him. So I went downstairs to my room in the basement.

I lay in my bed and listened to the sound of my father singing upstairs. The water rushed above my head through hidden pipes up to the faucet in the kitchen. After some

time, the water stopped running, and Chinese love song stopped, and my father went up the squeaky stairs to my parents' bedroom on the second floor. Then I heard my mother get back and go upstairs too. She made less noise than my father did, but I could feel her flowing through the house, like she was made of wind.

My feet slipped into shoes and my arms slid into the sleeves of my coat. I grabbed my notebook and stepped out the door into the cold. In the woods behind my house, moonlight got mixed up with shadows and turned everything sliver and black.

Perhaps if I were cooler, I would have had hands that could twist a stick to make a friction fire, or at least a flint hanging off my keychain I could strike sparks off of onto tinder. As it was, I had a cheap plastic lighter in my pocket. I lit a page of my notebook and let the fire do its thing, creeping upward until it was too hot for me to hold it. Hours of useless observations ignited and became something much more impressive. I dropped the notebook. on the ground and it continued to burn, accelerating and hitting its peak.

My spidey-sense tingled and I looked up from the fire. Between the tree trunks, immense mammalian life glided through. The entire shape of it was never visible to me at the same time, but the fractions added up into something with the posture of an old man, the grace of a ballerina, the musculature of a circus strongman, and an overall size that made NBA players look like little punks.

"Bigfoot," I whispered.

The woods did not reply, and soon whatever was there was there no more. The moon bounced off the tree trunks and hit my eyes in waves. I struggled to make sense of proportion, of reality, of what was shadow and what was light. I took one step forward and snapped a branch under my foot that cracked so loudly it made me flinch and did not

continue any further.

I sat down crosslegged where I was and added twigs of increasing size to my notebook fire. When the fire could sustain itself, I said a prayer. I'm not usually the praying type, but I some kind of holy feeling was inside me. A message had come to me in the form of a bigfoot, and I wanted to send one back.

"Dear Bigfoot," I started. I suspected this wasn't the proper way to start a prayer, but I fumbled on. "Are you there? Can you hear me? My name is Davis. My father saw you many years ago in State College, Pennsylvania and I'm guessing that maybe you know that, and that's why you're visiting me. You are an amazing creature, and I admire the way you traverse the eastern woodlands. Why don't you show yourself more? I guess you have your reasons, and they're probably good ones. I'm sure most humans wouldn't understand you or would try to capture you or something. I guess that's already how we respond to you, so it makes sense." I felt as earnest as I had ever felt, strangely, while having a one-sided conversation with a creature that probably didn't exist.

"Hey, so, why did you visit me?" I continued. "What are you trying to say? Are you the only one of your kind? I'm asking a lot of questions. I am a verbose prayer guy I guess. I never knew that about myself. It's all unbearably difficult and also so easy. Nothing makes any sense. I'm sorry. I've got a great rocket-ship pajama onesie, a pretty good though perhaps somewhat dysfunctional but ultimately good family. I get paranoid and feel like everyone hates me and that I'm already dying of many diseases and that everything will go wrong no matter what. Please help me if you can. Thank you."

It was a long prayer, and at the end of it I didn't feel good, exactly, but I felt empty and lighter, and maybe that had some value.

I went back into the house, didn't kill myself, and rolled onto my bed. My room has an air vent that connects to the bathroom above, and through it, I heard the faint sounds of gagging and retching. I could even hear the sound of toilet splashes. I doubted if anyone else in the family knew about the aural connection between my basement room and the first floor bathroom. It was mostly completely useless, and even a little annoying sometimes, when I could hear extra loud poop or pee splashes when my father used the downstairs bathroom. But tonight it was neither useless nor annoying. It was intriguing. The situation became evident: my sister was throwing up into the toilet. Quietly, secretly, but through the special connection between my room and the bathroom, I could hear it. Had she eaten too much beef? Or did she have some kind of food poisoning? The exact nature of her vomit could not be discerned by sound alone.

The fleece of my onesie was still infused with dirt everywhere. Being tired and dirty felt good, like I spent the interim between sleep and sleep doing something messy and full of danger and adventure. A stillness had settled throughout the house. Everyone was in their separate beds (my parents sleep in different beds—my father flails his limbs violently when he dreams, and my mother does crunches when she wakes up in the middle of the night). Our house contained us all, like a brain glowing warm and dim and producing fuzzy thoughts and memories mixed with memories. I pulled my blanket up over my onesie and rubbed my face against the chilly cotton. There are two strings next to my bed. They run through little eyelets drilled into my wall and ceiling, and are tied onto the light switch next to my door. I pulled the red string, and there was a click as it pulled the light switch down and my room was filled with blackness.

"Ooga booga," I said to the darkness of my room after a few moments of nothing.

"Ooga booga," the darkness said back.

3

Predictably, morning came a few hours later.

Not predictably, when I heard that second ooga booga, the one that came from the darkness of my room, I did not turn on a light. I did not prepare myself for immanent physical danger. I just put both my pillows on top of my face and went to sleep. This gave me many ooga booga-flavored dreams, which I won't go into, and made me flinch when I popped my head out from under the covers in the morning. What I thought was Bigfoot's head was actually my potted plant on the windowsill. The leaves had become scraggly and brown overnight, like Bigfoot's hair.

The sudden decline of my potted plant's health disturbed me much more than the fact someone had said ooga booga in reply to my ooga booga. It was hard to pinpoint the exact nature of my emotional attachment to my potted plant, but I guessed it was simply the result of being responsible for keeping it alive for so many years. Not that it was hard to keep alive—until now it had shown admirable resilience to the multitude of threats and negligences it had been subjected to throughout its life.

I had become a more responsible caretaker over the past year or so. Most nights I took a glass of water down to my bedroom with me. Before I went to sleep, I drank half of the water myself and saved the other half, which I poured into the dirt first thing the next morning. I had not always been so thoughtful. There were times when I had returned from multi-week forgetful periods to find my potted plant shriveled up and dormant, dirt completely dry, trying to suck moisture from the mildewy basement air. The fact that it

not only recovered, but came back even stronger than before was something of a miracle. As you know, my room is in the basement and has no windows, so the only natural light comes from a door outside my room. The photosynthesizing power of my potted plant—its ability to make something out of so little—always inspired me.

But the issue now was not with the natural forces of water and sunlight, but of synthesized chemicals designed for depressed and anxious humans. And even in my most negligent phases, my plant had never looked this bad. It looked less like a plant and more like a sculpture made of twisted burnt tissue paper. Every time I touched it, another leaf fell off. I searched the dirt for pills that were still hiding out, but found none. It seemed implausible that chemicals could have leached out of the pills and into the soil in such a short period of time, but I had no other explanation. Perhaps my plant, despite having supernaturally hardy DNA when faced with natural challenges, was particularly sensitive when it came to synthetic ones. As I poured the half-glass of water over the rim of the clay pot, I knew that water alone would not be enough. What it needed was a profound change in its life, something drastic that would keep it alive despite terrible circumstances, like in that movie where that family is in a concentration camp and the father convinces the kid that they're just playing a game, and that if he is able to evade the Nazis and stay alive, he will win a tank. My plant was not interested in tanks, as far as I could tell, so I would have to promise it something else.

After some deliberation while lying in bed, I decided it was time to bring my care-taking to the next level. Like a dog-owner who cooks their dogs meals on the stove and even adds seasoning, I would no longer treat my potted plant like a plant. My potted plant was my friend, and friends don't let friends sit in basements and die from drug-

poisoning. I scooped up the plant and carried it upstairs in my arms.

As I mentioned before I have had some issues with substance abuse—not overly dramatic issues like I robbed a bank to pay for my crack habit and ended up in jail brewing hooch in my toilet, made a name for myself as a man of his word and emerged from jail a ready-made drug kingpin with contacts on the inside, only to have my best friend rat me out in the end and die alone—old, defeated, and full of regret—in solitary confinement: a prison of my own making. My issues were much more ordinary and invisible and hard to explain, like "I have a problem, I need a thing to help me with my problem," and "This is hard and I can't do it, but there is something that can help me do it." Or "this is especially hard and I especially can't do it and can't cope with not doing it, but there is a thing that will make me not care." The more you put off learning to do the difficult thing, the more you can't do it and the older you get and the more embarrassing it all becomes. I still can't do the difficult thing, or even remember what the difficult thing was I was supposed to learn how to do.

When I emerged from the basement into the kitchen I was surprised to find everyone awake and scurrying around, making a big communal breakfast set out on our dining room table. Eggs, fried chicken still sizzling in oil, peppers and onions, pancakes, potatoes, rice porridge, and dried pork fu. Pork fu is that fluffy light brown thing that comes in a plastic container and is also called "pork floss," which I think is a disgusting name. You put it in the rice porridge, where it soaks up water and becomes much more natural looking.

I sat at the dining room table and no one said anything to me for a while. So I said something.

"Greetings earthlings," I said.

"Davis, set the table," my sister said.

"Why is everyone up so early?"

"It's our anniversary," my mother said. She seemed giddy and slightly unhinged as she poked at the peppers and onions.

"Your anniversary is in July," I said. I put my half-dead potted plant on the table and waited for someone to say something about it.

"Not our wedding anniversary," my mother said. "The twenty-fifth anniversary of our first date at Clucky Clucks."

"Hence the fried foul," my father said in his dignified voice.

"I don't see the connection." I sampled some of the eggs on the table covertly, using my fingers. I disliked the rule that we were supposed to wait until everyone was sitting down at the table to eat.

"Clucky Clucks was the fried chicken restaurant where we had our first date," my mother said.

"So romantic," I said.

"It was," my father said.

"We made love for hours last night," my mother said. "The golden sun rose over our glistening bodies."

"Mom!"

"Davis, it was a beautiful and natural thing."

"Yeah, but still. Jesus."

"Great sex," my father said. "Great sex. Extremely aerobic. Doesn't get any better

than that."

"Please stop. I don't want to hear about you getting turned on by fried chicken, or whatever it is that we're talking about."

"*So sensitive,*" my sister said.

"Hey, that reminds me. Why were you puking last night?" Initially this felt good to say, because it distracted everyone from the athletic chicken sex. But then I felt bad for having brought it up.

She came over to me and whispered in my ear. "I have an eating disorder. I don't want to talk about it."

"What's so disorderly about it?" I said.

"You're so stupid," she said.

My sister and I glared at each other with a combination of confusion and dislike and something else I couldn't place. Then the fried chicken was set on the table and the sizzling and popping of oil entered our ears. The intense chicken smell that signaled edible and highly caloric food entered our brains and we both became distracted and unable to maintain our glares.

Breakfast was ready for consumption, and so I consumed. I was used to eating rushed meals alone—peanut butter bread, cold tortellini with applesauce, chunks of cheeses I didn't know the names of, black beans with hot sauce in a can—those were a few of my staples, eaten while sitting alone at the table while my parents were at work. Or else grabbing granola bars or bananas or leftover fried rice when no one was in the kitchen and bringing them back down to my basement lair like some kind of weird subterranean predator. But now we were having family meals again, like old times. For

the first time in three days, I really ate. I ate eggs, I ate pancakes, I ate onions and peppers, I ate potatoes, I ate rice porridge with pork fu. I even ate the fried chicken which had somehow come to represent the sexual union of my parents in my mind. I probably could have even eaten the bacon in the refrigerator, the stuff that came from a dead pig's belly and was covered in congealed fat and wrapped in thin plastic. I felt bottomless.

No one had commented on my potted plant. I kept it on the table next to my plate, as if it were part of my meal.

"I think I made contact with Bigfoot last night," I said.

"Don't shit me," my father said. Issues concerning Bigfoot seemed more serious to him than almost anything else.

"I don't shit you," I said. I smushed another pancake into the puddle of Aunt Jemima's on my plate. "I prayed to him last night and then he came into my room and said ooga booga to me before I fell asleep."

"How do you know it wasn't just like, a homeless guy or something?" my sister asked.

"I guess it could have been," I said. "I don't know, this is stupid. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No," my father said.

"What?"

"No," my father said again, slowly, like he was making quick and complicated calculations in his mind. "Ooga booga is a code word. It means we're in danger."

"Davis, are you sure he said ooga booga?" My mother asked. "Maybe he said oola poola, or hooka tooga?"

"It was definitely ooga booga," I said. "I said it first, then he repeated me."

"*You* said ooga booga?" My father said. He dropped his fork mid pancake-bite. He pulled the pancake off his fork with his fingers, submerged it in Aunt Jemima's, ate it, then shook his head like he was trying to rattle something out of his ear.

"You must have really pissed him off. But no matter," my father said after he had finally recovered. "This is actually a good segue into the next part of my story. Funny how these things work out. But first we have to pack up and get the hell out of here. It's not safe to stay. Get everything you need for the next few days. I'll get the tent and the sleeping pads. You bring your own food, water, clothes, and whatever other modern comforts you want. Jaki, I guess you don't need to bring food since you have an eating disorder. I heard you whisper that to Davis because my hearing is super-hearing. I wish I had one too so I wouldn't have to feed myself so often. It's a lot of work."

"That's not what it means," my sister said.

"Right, so let's get packing," my father said.

"But what's going on?" I asked. I was tempted to challenge my father's assertion that his hearing was super-hearing, but I held myself back.

"Always with the questions," my father said.

"We'll figure it all out in the van," my mother said. "And Jaki, we will have to talk about your eating disorder at some point. I won't bring my headset, so I will be fully present and open to hearing you."

That's how I knew it was serious. My mother without her headset was like Abraham Lincoln without his beard.

"My potted plant is coming with us, wherever we're going," I said.

"Who cares," my sister said.

It was weird—normally I would have been resistant to going anywhere with my family. I would have protested and made excuses and made mean-spirited remarks that pooh-poohed them. But a side effect of being suicidal was that I was totally open to whatever happened. I felt like I kept getting swept up in the wind, and since I no longer had the sense that there was something better I was supposed to be doing, I didn't mind it. If I was a cliché dodo-head, I would say that being close to death had finally made me feel alive. But I am not a cliché dodo-head, and so I do not say such things. I scooped up my potted plant and started to descend into the basement to pack. Everyone else sprang into action also, conditioned no doubt by our impromptu camping trips when we were younger, and we hurried to gather our survival essentials.

"Oh, this is perfect!" I heard my dad call out to us from the kitchen. "I'll bring my baby food. Nothing like baby food over an open fire. It will be like old times."

"By old times, do you mean when you were a baby?" I heard my sister ask.

"All the most important times in my life have been marked by an upturn in baby food consumption," my father replied.

I entered my room and closed my door. I pulled my backpacking pack out of my closet and started stuffing things in. Mostly clothes and boring stuff like that. I ditched the platter thing my potted plant sat on, scooped the pot back up into my arm, and went to the upstairs bathroom to fill up my water bottle.

"Get ready to see the sun," I said.

My potted plant could not talk, and so it didn't say anything. But its leaves rustled against my shoulder extra-kindly as I walked.

* * * *

We met up again in the driveway, behind the cargo van, each of us with our stuff. Our packing was comical and revealed our idiosyncrasies—what we owned, what we valued, and what we looked to for comfort.

My mother brought an old Mister Potatohead that she had loved as a child and still loved. She brought four yoga mats, which meant she was going to try to lead a yoga class for the family again, despite her previous failures to engage us. I also saw her putting practical things like matches, a compass, toilet paper, flashlights, etc., neatly into a bag. This bag was no doubt filled with all the things that everyone else needed but couldn't be bothered to bring.

My father had his knife, which he had tied a rope onto and now wore on his back like a ninja. When I questioned the need for the knife, he reminded me, once again, that there might be bad guys, to which I responded that maybe he was the bad guy and didn't realize it. This seemed to wound him, because he scrunched up his nose and burped and then started talking about something else.

My sister did not have anything but the clothes she had on and a battery-powered record player she must have brought back with her from college. There was only one record with it, already placed on the turntable, though I couldn't see which one it was.

The back seats of our cargo van had been removed years ago, for reasons that were never clear to me. The purported explanation was that it would create more cargo space, but I never really bought that. I suspected my father had sold them to help pay for

the treehouse he built, as the treehouse appeared and the back seats disappeared at around the same time. Though who was willing to pay my father for cargo van seats I did not know.

Regardless, the result was that our cargo van had only two seats, which my mother and father sat in, and a vast expanse in the back where me and my sister, the cargo, inhabited. It had been some time since I had been in the cargo van, and I was surprised to find that it was just as comfortable as I remembered. There was a memory-foam mattress topper laid out in the back, and despite being much larger than I once was, I could still stretch out fully with room to spare. I opened the storage compartments on either side of me to find mini travel games I had forgotten about. As we left our driveway, I found myself sitting crosslegged next to my potted looking out the rear window. Someone rolled down the windows and a cold wind hit my face.

The wind gave me the feeling that a cold wilderness was out there waiting for me, and that I would taste that wilderness. I felt...beyond. Beyond money or house or car or family or the logistics of life such as eating or sleeping or peeing or even life or death. It was the chilly autumn stew that comes every year where I live, swirling me around in it, making my molecules bounce, bumping into all twenty-three of my former selves (one for each year of my life). It's a feeling vaguely akin to hearing a choir of angelic church voices that transforms into a group of girls laughing from somewhere beyond my field of vision while a silky fabric brushes across my face.

Or something like that.

"Back to the violence," my father said when we were on the highway. "Now that we're all in in the cargo van and you can't run away. Today is day three of my story. I'm

finally going to tell you about the guy I killed."

We all shifted a little, maybe because my father's stories made us uncomfortable, but for me it also could have been because the hard-but-soft-ness of the memory foam felt so good against my skin.

"When we left off, I had just stolen your mother away from her loser boyfriend using sneaky strategies involving Bigfoot and cat urine. We are currently driving to the woods of Pennsylvania after receiving a warning from our big-footed friend, so we see how the present is being influenced by the past and how things tend to repeat themselves when given enough time."

"We're going to Pennsylvania?" I asked.

"You have somewhere better to be?"

We both knew I didn't.

"What about work?" I asked.

"This is more important than work, my mother said."

"*What's* more important than work?"

"Saving lives. Being a hero and taking on bad guys. The whole spectrum of badassery."

"But what's going on?"

"I'm explaining it in story form."

"Your father values the oral tradition," my mother said. "He's an auditory learner."

I had never thought about that before. I supposed it was true, though it seemed if he learned anything he did it not by listening to others, but from listening to himself.

"Thank you," my father said. "Now. What's even more repulsive than cat pee in your boots on a hot summer night?"

My father paused for dramatic effect. He drove at fifty miles per hour in the passing lane of a state highway that had a sixty-five mile per hour speed limit. Somehow it seemed like part of his performance, though I don't know what he was trying to communicate.

"Porcupine quills to the face?" I offered.

"Try again," he said.

"The inverse relationship between human population and the earth's biodiversity?" my sister guessed.

"Getting warmer..."

"Climate change?" I asked.

"None of that conspiracy crap."

"You believe nazis live in submarines under the polar icecaps."

"You haven't seen what I've seen."

I knew that the only thing my father had seen was low resolution conspiracy theorists on YouTube. My father's conception of what constituted a credible source was notoriously terrible. He once told me he had "consulted a team of experts" and determined that my diet was lacking in walnuts. When pressed further about why, it was revealed that the "team of experts" was a mother and her baby who were shopping at the grocery store where my father worked. He had told them that his son seemed somewhat mentally deficient, and she had recommended he feed me walnuts, as they look a bit like brains. According to my father, the baby, whose diet was walnut-based, could keep a

running tally of the total price of everything in the shopping cart, even things on sale, including taxable items, and could lift a watermelon over its head that was bigger than its entire body. Even years later, my father still hid walnuts inside things he knew I would eat, like the leftover fried rice, as if he were trying to drug me.

"Oh shit," I said aloud without meaning to.

"Did you swallow one of the pieces?" my sister asked.

I pushed the travel-size box Chutes and Ladders away from myself to disassociate myself from it.

"No, I have a therapy appointment tomorrow."

Since I had told my therapist I was going to kill myself, it felt like I was letting her down by still being alive. Maybe that kind of peer pressure was the reason I told her, in the hope that the humiliation would help me take the plunge. I imagined seeing her walking down the street in the town where I lived and hopping gracefully into a trashcan and closing the lid above my head all in one motion. The trash bags cushioned my fall and no one on the street noticed my disappearance, not even my therapist, who looked around as if she sensed something was amiss, then shook her head and kept walking.

"You can miss one appointment, can't you?" my sister said.

"She might miss me?" I said it like a question.

Nobody answered, though I knew they all must have thought of something and chosen not to say it. We all listened to the sound of the road for a while after that, waiting for my father to remember that he was in the middle of telling a story. I held my potted plant slightly out the window so that it could feel its leaves blowing in the wind, like green hair. I imagined the pot-bound roots sucked out in one pot-shaped chunk,

popping on the highway, and standing erect and proud as tires approached. I lay down and closed my eyes. My notebook no longer existed, so I made a poem up in my head to pass the time as we drove:

Monsieur potato, O potatoey head of wonder

I bow to thee

Tuberous deity

I taketh thy nose

and replaceth thy mouth

* * * *

One man's floor is another man's ceiling. Living in the basement over the past few months had made this obvious to me. Lying down there listening to the footsteps over my head, the toilet flushing, etc. made me regularly ponder the literal and metaphorical implications of it. I liked the saying. It was much better than something like "one man's trash is another man's treasure," because it didn't have connotations of good and bad. Floors and ceilings are the exact same thing depending on where you are. There's nothing inherently wrong with being upstairs or downstairs, and even if there was, it would be an impossible thing to avoid.

We were at a rest stop and I had gone inside and bought a croissant sealed in plastic. It was stale, obviously, and probably had never even been fresh to begin with. I imagined it was grown inside the plastic rather than baked in an oven. I started to feel

bad for the croissant, which grew up inside a plastic bag and then proceeded down the tube of my throat and into the acid pool of my stomach. I probably got too mentally involved with that croissant's life for my own good. I also bought some bottled water to give to my potted plant, and a postcard to send to my first ex-girlfriend.

The reason I was thinking about ceilings and floors was because my mother had climbed up onto the roof of the convenience store and was scanning the area with binoculars. Her athletic powers allowed her to jump and catch the bottom rung of a fire escape with one hand and pull herself up. There's nothing like seeing an old person engage their super-spring-legs to make you feel weird. She was "scouting for danger" but it didn't appear that she had found any. I tore into my croissant and entered the cargo van through the back doors.

The postcard I planned to send to my first ex-girlfriend had a picture on it of a dolphin flying through the air with a sunset in the background, trailing water streams that reflected the pinkish-orange light. It was a postcard that despite being cheesy was also incredibly beautiful if you actually looked at it. I knew my first ex-girlfriend would actually look at it.

Sending a postcard is like freezing the flow of time into an ice cube and putting it in your pocket and to be later examined under magnification. I knew that everything was changing, too fast and too much, or too slow and not enough, and that I would never be satisfied ever. So sending a postcard seemed like a good thing to do. I was still on the lookout for some interesting stamps to complete it. Also some words to write on it.

"A knife is a good prop," my father said when my mother had come down from the roof and we were back in the van. "Anything can happen when you've got a knife on

you. Things are subconsciously just a little more tense. You don't know why, but it's the knife. The knife is what's doing it. Plus you can use it to kill people."

We were driving again. I had no idea where we were and did not care enough to try to find out.

"The story of the murder weapon is often just as interesting as the story of the murderer," my father continued. "You already know about how Fat Head forged it from scraps, and how he accidentally stabbed himself after I crashed the motorcycle. But you don't know about how it was stolen away from me and was used to slash my femoral artery. That's the one on your inner thigh. I have another scar there, but you never see it because I never show you my inner thigh. Your mother can confirm."

"It's true," my mother said.

It had become obvious, or perhaps had always been obvious, that my plant was not half-dead, or even three-quarters dead, or even ninety-nine percent dead, but fully, one-hundred percent dead. Once you get to that one-hundred percent marker, there's no going back. When I touched a leaf, it crumbled into nothingness.