

For Jasmin, of course

*I walk above grey skies but there is never a day  
I don't relive the ruin I ascended from  
And if there should be a day where I'm forced to descend  
Let me take with me my beacon.*

## The Bird That Flew Overhead

My dad died a few years back. The doctors told me after his liver failure that it was pancreatic cancer. He was always a secretive type, prone to hold in his emotions and ailments to a fault. When he started getting sick he suffered in silence, and even though it was obvious to others, nobody wanted to tell him to visit the hospital because of his aggressive stubbornness. This attitude ultimately led to his death; if he were to have started treatment early on, he could have survived. When he died, Mom came into a great deal of money from life insurance, and, ever since, my 26-year-old brother and I have been living with her. We didn't stay for emotional attachment or to give emotional support to the new, grieving widow, but for her money.

The sun had set hours ago, which meant Mom had been asleep for a few hours, and I was lying in bed straining to read over my brother's conversation. As he talked with his friend their volume increased, which caused the wall that the headboard of my bed rested against to vibrate gently with every word they said. I had read the same paragraph at least three times before I noticed I was getting distracted and instead opted to leaf through an old college pamphlet. Up until last year I was a psychology major at Arizona State University, where many of those from my hometown end up. It wasn't so much the course load as the doubt. The classes weren't fulfilling but the party culture was great. I couldn't escape the thought of the piling debt. Even if

I had a degree, there were people with master's degrees who couldn't find a job. I escaped that fate before I was overwhelmed by it.

I leafed through the pamphlet in a half-hearted attempt to avoid eavesdropping on my brother's conversation. But when I gave in and started to listen, their voices had dropped to whispers. Overwhelmed by curiosity I placed my ear against the cold, thin wall, but the most I could hear was the word "casino." My brother, Dave, who had been working at a convenience store since he graduated from high school, never had gambling money and had never even been to one, a casino. I thought he wanted to have a good time at the Sonora Casino; it was Friday and would've been a perfect time to go. I didn't want to be left behind on a night of certain debauchery, so I ran to the kitchen in hopes of catching them mid-plan and guilt them into inviting me. They must've been distracted because they didn't even turn their heads to acknowledge me when I heard Dave's friend Carlos whisper, "And I know where we can get the guns."

My mind went blank and tried to find sense in his words while the gravity of their meaning forced its weight onto my chest. I was stunned. I wanted to say something but only thoughtless stutters came out of my mouth. Carlos twisted his head away from my brother and looked at me and past me simultaneously. They sat on opposite sides of the table wearing nearly identical clothes: hoodie and jeans. Dave had never been particularly fashionable and chose comfort over pleasing his aesthetic sense, but he still held an air of unmistakable attractiveness. The opposite was true for Carlos, who had surrendered himself in his war on acne and had no

standards of hygiene. Not knowing what to do, I sat in a chair between the two conspirators and waited. The clock's ticking seemed to grow into consecutive explosions before Carlos finally spoke.

“Dre, I want to let you in on a project.” His eyes darted around as he whispered. After a brief pause he continued, “Before I say anything I need you to promise you won't snitch.” It was my turn to pause; I knew the plan would only be trouble and the recognizable danger that rested in my brother's eyes seemed to prove what I felt. But despite my hesitations I promised I wouldn't say a thing.

Carlos detailed the plan in a way that made him seem the mastermind. “You know that casino on the highway? Well, heard from some friends that the security is pretty loose there.” I looked at him as he spoke and recalled then how his every sentence needed an intermission before he could begin again. He continued, “There's a the cash exchange on the first floor that's loaded. They even got a safe in the back. All we would need to do is hold the floor hostage. Take the money in the register and the safe and by the time the police come, we'll be gone.”

I winced at “hold the floor hostage.” I've imagined many scenarios for life and the myriad ways they could unfold, and this was not one of those. A more deviant recess of my mind was seduced by the prospect of money. I depended on my mom for food, clothing and shelter, and my idea of freedom that I yearned for crashed around me when I had to move back in. My legs shook and my palms were sweaty; even the promise of wealth couldn't rid me of my nerves.

“So...that’s it?” I said. Major portions of the plan seemed to be missing from the explanation and made me skeptical. The truth is the thought of an armed robbery made me uncomfortable to the point where any lack of detail would have turned me into a skeptic. If I tried to poke holes in the plan Carlos would postpone his scheme and ultimately forget about it, so I continued to emphasize the missing parts. “How would we even escape? There’s just a long stretch of freeway in both directions. The police would catch us by then.”

As if not hearing my plea, Carlos demanded, “You’re going with me. You both are. If you don’t go, I’ll make sure Jose knows. He’ll know if you snitch, too. He has ears everywhere, you know what I mean?” The bald-headed, muscular behemoth of a man that called himself Jose — even though his real name was Ernesto — was the right hand of Esteban de la Cruz, a prominent gang leader. Jose felt a certain pride in his position that he would tell anybody he had more than a minute-long conversation with about. I assume he told people to instill fear, and, in fact, when I had first learned of his gang origins I was intimidated and had made sure not to cross him since. But for others his willingness to divulge the information brought about rumors of him working for the police. If everyone had known, the police, too, had to know. But still, the man had a brutal air about him, and not only has he killed before but people who know Ernesto the most know that he has killed for as little as a spot in line.

With the threat of Jose, I had no choice but to follow along. I accepted the demand with a little nod and headed back to my room. It was certainly cluttered. When I was younger I had plastered the walls with posters of my favorite bands, all of which were now “on hiatus” or

disbanded. The only addition to the room since childhood was a small desk, and it happened to be the only thing I kept organized. I alphabetized each book on the shelf and always place my computer 6 inches from the ledge. At that time the computer was open and close to the back but my head was spinning and I was minutes from making my lasagna dinner reappear. So I shut off the three desk lamps that lit up the entirety of my room, kicked some dirty shirts into an increasing pile of laundry and tried to sleep. My rest was segmented by bad dreams and fits of sleeplessness, and by the time the sun rose, I had only slept two hours.

The whole world seemed to know it was Saturday morning — the birds tweeted songs of joy, children who were not at school were out playing in their yards, and even the sun was an uncaring, unwavering entity that seemed to shine with a happy light. I woke up wanting only to forget about the day I was going to be forced to have. Possible scenarios ran through my head, still misty from the first minutes of being awake, and all of them ended in death or prison, places I never imagined myself being before. I looked into a mirror as I brushed my teeth. The purple baggage under both my eyes and the looseness of my skin made it seem I had aged ten years in a night. Disgusted by myself, I decided just to put on fresh clothes to meet Carlos and Dave for our morning heist and high-speed chase down the freeway.

The rest of my morning was going to be a series of yells, sirens, and gunshots, so to find even a brief moment of silence I went to the kitchen for a cup of coffee, but they were already seated, surrounded by cups of coffee and cans of energy drinks. I looked Carlos in his bloodshot eyes as I asked, “So, when are we going?” He didn’t respond but grabbed the keys to his 2003

Nissan Versa, an efficient but ugly car, and signaled both me and Dave to follow. The car was filled with instant-food packaging and wrappers, and the papers that matted the floor smelled like they were decomposing. Being forced to the back seat, I had to move a mountain of clothes, a mix of clean and dirty. What I thought would be an endless onslaught of speaking our final words, the car ride ended up being the quiet moment I was looking for. The only noise, which kept me grounded in reality but didn't detract from the peaceful moment, was a radio playing a pop station I tended to avoid. Carlos drove down the desolate highway, and both Dave and I looked out into the expanse of sun-hardened sand and the lonely trees, which grew despite the devastating heat. The desert was still, even in the wind, and it had an innate calmness that could soothe the mindful onlooker. A solitary bird flew overhead with slow beats of its wings and screeched. I shouldn't have been able to hear it but the sound echoed within me. I stared into the desert hoping it would peer back and pass on its secret to endless tranquility.

The casino came into view. It was the sort that people built when they think a city is going to become popular. The type of place that is supposed to hold many guests who never come. A completely unnecessary building, the sole highrise tower amid a city of two-story buildings, a pillar of waste. I couldn't imagine this place being "loaded" like Carlos said, but I was in no position to question him, not while the threat of Ernesto "Jose" Rodriguez lingered. The parking lot was half-filled and there was a noticeable lack of luxury cars, like the rich had no need for gambling. Carlos parked the car without problem close to the restaurant entrance and bothered to back the car into the parking spot to help our escape.

I stayed in the seat, paralyzed by fear of holding up the place, running from the police, and the ultimate exchange of gunfire that the day would end in. The red-eyed, irritated Carlos got out of his driver's seat, originally grey but blackened through years of sweat, and walked toward the trunk. As Dave sat in an equal fit of paralysis, I found the strength to get out of my seat and meet Carlos, whose shaking hands prevented him from opening the trunk for a minute. He showed me a dull black duffle bag that rested on top of more compost paper and year-old food and opened it. Inside were rifles with names I could never remember or cared to know, gun magazines, rope, and black ski masks. My legs threatened to shake to relieve my nervousness but I didn't waver in front of the mad burglar. I looked at the rifles with an awareness I haven't had since: The hellbent mission would mean my death, and the guns would be the catalyst. I struggled to think of a plan. My brother continued to look straight forward at the casino as if he were looking into an abyss of horrors. He would spend his only time in a casino being afraid for his life.

"You know what would be funny and sorta cool?" I asked with unnoticed shakiness in my voice. "If we were to go to the bar and drink a bit before we rob the place. You know, make sure Dave has a good time at a casino?" It must have been his ever-apparent exhaustion, or sympathy for his childhood friend, but he nodded and closed the trunk. "Let's show him a good time," he said with a faint voice. We walked into the building, hardly dressed for the occasion, and took the elevator to the top floor, to "The Lucky 7." The elevator, small and ill-decorated with multicolored tiles and movie posters of old-school movies, rose silently. Carlos continued to

shake, but Dave was unchanged by the new plan with his eyes forever forward and slowly dying as their color faded. The vivid blueness had become dull and grey and I understood that as a sign of impending doom. The door opened to the brightly lit bar, which, aside from one other customer and the staff, was empty.

The room was equally plastered with old movie posters that worshiped the aesthetic of another era while blatantly ignoring its history, which was filled with racism and bigotry. The staff seemed unsatisfied and many of their eyes looked like the dreary grey ones I saw in the elevator. We sat at the bar on stools that were higher than the counter making us slump like hunchbacks. On the other end was a man who winced at his whiskey every time he sipped, dressed in a suit obviously from the previous night. His presence made me uncomfortable, like he was an outsider to our world but looked like an ordinary man with disheveled hair and an unclean conscience. At this distance I could make out his deep brown eyes. Carlos ordered a Corona and lime. Dave, only a passenger in his body, ordered an IPA and a cup of water. That day would be the last one I would spend on Earth and I wanted what I drank to reflect that prophecy of my imagination: a shot of tequila, no salt or lime. A bitter testament to life and what I had achieved in it.

We drank for hours. Carlos consumed any type of alcohol he wanted and I stuck to the tequila. Carlos, drunk on rage and corona and vodka, started to shake aggressively, which alarmed no one but me and the man who sipped his third whiskey. The staff had come to ignore the crazed man because of his loud outbursts at nothing particular and perhaps at his own fate.

Dave only became present enough to pick up his beer and drink before falling back into his waking coma. As if a bell tolling to mark a death, Carlos slammed down his glass and yelled, “That’s it! I’m fucking sick of this shit.” He pulled out the gun that he kept tucked away in the back of his pants and ordered the cashier to open the register. I yelled not only to show how dumbfounded I was but also to show my innocence in the situation. “What the fuck are you doing, Carlos?” He didn’t listen and instead looked directly into the eyes of the cashier, whose shaking made it take longer for him to open the register.

The man who sipped whiskey made eye contact with me and put his index finger to his mouth to hush me. With the empty bottle of whiskey in his hand he walked, keeping his head low and knees bent, and despite having finished off the bottle snuck around behind Carlos with meticulous steps. Quickly, the hero smashed the empty bottle over Carlos’s. While Carlos was dazed he took the gun away and removed the clip, but he had forgotten to remove the bullets. Carlos rushed his assailant, who had been backing up, and tackled him to the ground. When the would-be-hero hit the floor under the weight of Carlos he howled. The red-eyed man pinned the stranger’s arms under his knees and started furiously punching his face like he was driving it into the ground. After a moment, the man stopped moving and was barely breathing. Carlos yelled at the bar employees to get him some rope as he found his gun and put the clip back in. They found him three strands of rope and a belt, which he used to bind the brave but stupid man. His arms were forced behind him and his legs bent as if in prayer, and he was tied in that position.

I sat at the barstool, helpless, as Dave ignored the world of inevitabilities and stared into his IPA. I'm not sure what would become of Dave if we made it out of this alive, but something had broken in him even though there was no audible snap and no complaints of being a broken man; just indifference and slight sadness is all that seemed to remain of him. Carlos looked beyond the glass windows that overlooked the unmoving desert town, and for a moment I thought I saw some humanity return to him. But instead he put the gun to the head of the man who fought to stay conscious and shook as he was about to pull the trigger but again stopped. He seemed dissatisfied as his eyes darted around the bar. Instead he aimed at a pane of glass in front of his victim. He fired five separate times, causing the glass to shatter and fall. With his gun, he broke a bigger hole into the glass, enough to push a man out. Then both men, the devil and the hero, looked directly at me, one pleading and one demanding, but I was well aware of my own powerlessness. Carlos turned back to the the man who looked at me still and started nudging him off the ledge with his foot.

I started to get off the barstool, but everything I did felt slow, and meanwhile Carlos was quickly pushing the man off the edge. I finally stood up, the man mostly out of the building, and tried to push Carlos out of the way but I had acted too slowly. The man began his descent to his concrete heaven below and I stood on the left of Carlos. A feather glided just in front of view. It was a magnificent red, pulsing with bright energy. I stared at the feather as it floated eye level with me, and then there was a bright light — it didn't come from the feather, but rather from outside. The brightness expanded and I soon saw that it wasn't just a light but a fire that was

growing fast. The fire rose to the top floor of the casino where us three desolate men contemplated our fate and faith. But the fire didn't burn. From the fire first emerged a shape that was as familiar as it was unfamiliar. It was a wing, bright red and vibrating with darker energy. Another wing emerged opposite that, then a beak, and slowly the massive fire-bird emerged from the fireball.

The god-like figure was adorned in flames and had eyes I recognized. It slowly beat its wings and looked from Carlos to me, and at that moment I knew where I had seen the eyes. The light-brown ones with black craters in the iris, that were both distant and unmistakably kind. The bird let out a screech and let the fire envelop the floor. The flames felt cool as they lapped at my skin, leaving goosebumps on the back of my neck, but just next to me I heard Carlos yell. The yell was cut short, and when I looked over to my right, Carlos was gone and the window was repaired. I looked around the clean and ordered bar, where everyone stood in equal disbelief. I looked to Dave and knew it had passed.

Carlos' car wasn't in the parking lot when we finally were able to go home after the police had questioned us about the fire and the gunshots, but we had no reason to lie. The police were incredulous but reluctantly let us go. When we got home we immediately slept. For the first time in five years I dreamt. The crimson bird followed me overhead with its wings that pulsed with unimaginable power as I drove away from the city oppressed by the sun. When the city was far enough behind, the burden of expectation vanished and I smiled to welcome the unknown.

## One Man's Sin

David J. Wilson, a middle-aged secretary of a Southern Californian insurance company, slowly typed the agenda for his boss's following day. His fingers — because of both his ailments and frigid climate caused by the air conditioning — creaked at each pressing of a key, which created minute pain. Due to atrophy in the joints of his wrist, Mr. Wilson, as his co-workers called him, wore braces to support his weakening hands, but even with the added support, they trembled. The cold made it worse. But in his years of working at Desert Trust Insurance he had not complained about the office's climate. In the midst of the desert heat, it was the sole convenience that motivated people to come to work. Desert Trust Insurance ran its A/C at all hours of the day, effectively creating weather that was twenty degrees cooler than outside. It was a massive money-sink, Mr. Wilson knew, but in the summer days, it was the only way management could keep morale high.

To alleviate the growing burning sensation, Mr. Wilson, with some strain, got up from his desk to take a walk outside. No other employee, even Roger Ebbs, the insurance salesman with whom Mr. Wilson often chatted, batted an eye at his leaving; ever since his diagnosis people expected him to take a few laps around the building before coming back to work. Usually Mr. Ebbs would join him on a few of the walks as part of his physical therapy. Mr. Ebbs, a former

soldier, was prone to the aches and pains caused by the nature of his military career. It was, more specifically, the added weight of his flak vest and the rest of his “battle rattle” that had expedited the wear of the cartilage behind his patella. Instead of following his friend outside, Roger refrained from making eye contact and instead focused on his work.

Tendrils of sunlight entered first at the base of his neck, causing him to shiver twice, then licked at his face as he looked toward the sun, which left warm impressions. The pain, although still present, was now bearable. The heat chased away the icicles forming in his wrists. Warmth permeated his body and caused him to smile wide in relief. He then took a deep breath, the last breath he would take, and welcomed his anticipated fate.

#### THE OLD MAN, YOUNG

The Wilson family was a well-to-do Christian family that went to church every Sunday. David’s mother, Angela, was the breadwinner and nurturer of the house; a wholly independent woman with a strong support system in both God and family. The family didn’t make a lot of money, however, and because of that, they lived in a poverty-stricken area of the city. They lived in the northern outskirts of town in a formerly abandoned townhome that had been “remodeled” into an apartment. The company that bought the townhomes decreased each unit’s average size twofold to make a few more apartments. They rented the places out for cheap and ignored the renters’ constant complaints of bug and rodent infestations. The apartment building, resembling an inner-city project, was a bustling area for drug trade and gangs. But that was all Angela, the three-job-working mother of two, could afford.

Angela never expected that her oldest son, Charles, who was four years older than David, would fall in with a gang. The only sin she had been guilty of was pride, which she had in excess for both of her children. She believed they had the best moral compasses of any in the area. But Charles, who had to be tough to protect his family, was acquainted with the gang on East Street by a friend. He had made the last year of high school without falling victim to it, but when he turned 18 he made a conscious decision to join, which made a large profit by selling dope.

David didn't think anything of it when his brother started hanging out with Aaron Grube, East Street gang's most loyal heroin seller. He, like his mother, believed Charles would always do the right thing because they were raised on Christian values. But these values could only hold up so well in the face of staggering poverty and couldn't provide the same type of support that money could, at least to Charles. David was determined to not follow in the step of his brother. He heard stories from friends about gang members who got shot in the streets. Their bodies lay there before somebody finally calls the cops, and when they question the neighborhood, nobody claims to see them. He learned in his health class the harrowing tales of heroin's effects, and he personally knew a few couples who have broken up due to addiction issues. He couldn't imagine himself pedaling that junk.

#### SOMETIME VALUES DIE

By his senior year of high school, David and his mom learned of Charles's involvement with the East Street gang. "Involvement" was actually a word Angela used to lessen the grief for her son's descent because not only had he been part of the gang, but by now he was running

the whole operation — this, of course, followed the strange disappearance of Aaron Grube. Angela begged her son to stop and to welcome Jesus back into his heart, but he had grown happy with the power money had given him.

On June 15th of that year, David received a phone call from his brother. He didn't pick up then because he was in physics class, but he checked his voicemail as soon as he finished. Charles's voice was muffled, sporadic and only consisted of single words, "help," "Mom," and "danger," followed by sudden silence. David sprinted home, ignoring the traffic signs as he crossed city blocks. He saw a group of his friends walking home from school but ignored them, too. He was bombarded by images of his mother being held at gunpoint and being shot. He envisioned the pool of blood that would trail out of the front entry, which only caused him to run faster. He opened the door with caution and was prepared to see the worst, but his mom was fine. She was humming a familiar gospel tune while straightening the house on her break between her first and second job. Charles, however, had returned from banishment and was sipping a glass of cold water. "I see you got my message," Charles joked, then told his brother to sit.

After Charles's explanation, they both walked out of the house, not telling their mom where they were headed, but David understood his involvement was a complete necessity. Charles had conned a neighboring gang's dealer into giving him his supply. Unknown to the dealer, he would sell the heroin for twice the price and give the dealer back only the money he would have gotten if he were to sell it at market value. The night before, Juan Hernandez, the dealer, saw Charles selling the product for twice its value. Instead of taking it out on the crafty dealer, he threatened the life of another: his mom, who was known throughout the city for her

charitable work through church. Only the most wretched of scoundrels deserved such a threat, and that's exactly what he was. With East Street Gang refusing support, Charles was left with only one other person to defend his mother.

David sat in the passenger seat, with the weight of a handgun in his lap. He'd never shot one before, but he'd seen many of his friends shot, some killed. He wrestled with the idea of rolling up on the man who threatened his mother's life. He imagined rolling up on Juan on the corner where he slung dope and opening fire on him. By repeatedly imagining the scene, David hoped to detach himself from the reality of killing a man, but the visions he had were entirely based on movies. So his overly cinematic imaginings helped little in providing him detachment. Despite his mental rejections, the drive-by happened exactly as his mental dramatizations had, and when it was over he didn't feel guilt for protecting his mom.

#### THE MAN WHO WOULD BROOD FOR YEARS

Joseph Hernandez, now 57, was there when his brother was killed forty years ago. He saw the two light-skinned men pull up in a white sedan with no license plates and one man, the younger of the two, fired three shots, one of which hit his brother in the chest. The driver stuck his gun out the window but didn't fire a single bullet, something that would always strike Joseph as odd, but ultimately unimportant. From that moment his thoughts were fixed on the curly-headed boy who had murdered his brother. He found out where he went to school, learned his name and his schedule, and he followed him around for weeks. His daydreams were only of his ultimate revenge for killing a brother who had not only recently got out of prison, but who

was ready to act like a brother and son to his family again. Dreams of murder fueled him for the coming weeks, but he never worked up to killing the boy.

He watched David graduate and followed him from workplace to workplace. He wouldn't tell the police who killed his brother; he wanted justice for himself. But the months and soon years passed on and eventually both men married and had kids. All the while he would still keep his eye on David, now an assistant at an insurance company, and still the murderous daydreams festered, causing Joseph to live life as an insomniac. But divorce followed soon after, leaving him entirely isolated while David was still leading a happy life. The stark contrast of Joseph's life to his made him angry, so much so that for the rest of his life he would only see in shades of red. It was as his world turned crimson that Joseph finally made up his mind.

#### THE EXPECTED DAY

David remembered the scrawny scar-faced man from the day he killed the dealer and all the other moments he had seen him, which he convinced himself were mere happenstance. As he caught glimpses of him more — at work, at high school reunions, at the hospital when his son was born — he accepted the man was keeping tabs on him. Joseph, although intimidating, seemed to lack the will to kill a man and, moreover, never approached him, just glared from a distance. This changed when six months ago David noticed his presence more frequently. He was at every restaurant, every event and every outing his son's school planned, and each time the man would flash him his gun, the one David used to shoot Juan. As a caution, David warned Mr. Ebbs not to go on walks with him anymore.

David took a deep breath, accepting the mistake he had made in believing his brother's now-apparent lie, that was made only to erase a long-standing debt, and hoped he taught his children well enough not to repeat the same mistakes he made. Joseph was there and saw the crimson red sun pour its light onto David's head. He placed a beretta against David's skull. He didn't offer his long-term prey any last words. He only pulled the trigger and embraced the blood spatter on his face that cemented his 40-year-long revenge.

## Radiance

George was always diligent in expelling extraneous things from his office desk. He assigned every document a one-up serialization code the instant their cellulose contacted the table. Before closing the work away in one of the many gunmetal filing cabinets, he would place it in a folder with a color that indicated its urgency — Green was unimportant, yellow meant semi-urgent (but even George knew the looseness of the term), and he carefully selected blue as urgent. He had been anxious around any text or labeling remotely crimson since middle school due to the abundance of red highlights and strikethroughs on each of his essays. The sole survivors of the organisational massacre were his computer, a single grey-brown stapler and a quote of choice, either handwritten or printed, and thumbtacked on the wall. This week a single strand of paper held up by two same-colored thumbtacks read, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.” Creative IT Solutions lauded George’s cleanliness so much it made his desk the standard in the recent revision of the employee handbook.

When he woke up on the morning of the 23rd of May, George had a premonition in the form of a dull ache in the pit of his stomach that someone had been in his office. He drove more distracted but he made sure to always drive exactly the speed limit. With the elevator out of service, George had to walk up six flights of stair before entering his floor. He opened the door

to his sanctuary, tucked away from social commitments, and noticed his office chair was an inch tucked in more than normal. He made it halfway around the long L-shaped desk before he froze. Someone had taped a lined page that still bore the frills of a notebook with only three strips of flimsy transparent tape. The page taunted him in the middle of the right monitor of his two screen setup with its obnoxious flaws: odd numbers and intact perforated edges. The intruder wrote in all capital letters and in red pen "HELP ME!"

George, following the onslaught of blows from the red pen and ominous plea, stood fixed in his place at the side of the desk. It took conscious mental strain not to topple over. His mind normally was bombarded by thoughts but his brain had reformatted its drive and left no processing power for thought. Time's ticking didn't provoke swaying or adjustment; George out of anxiety had become still. The minute it took for him to recover felt closer to ten, but when he did move he did so quickly. He ripped the page of the screen, crumpled it and threw it in the waste bin. To his own dismay and contrary to his will, George was preoccupied by the message, even as he relaxed in his chair. It was coded in his nature — and certainly a deliberate product of how he was raised — to yield even his urgent desires to those who needed help. But with no name, George was trapped between his wanting to help and his craving to restore his day to its normal schedule.

Following a clench of his fist and the slight grinding of his ivory-whites he opened the bottom draw of a smaller filing cabinet with a blue magnetic strip on its face. He needn't even look as he pulled file 0523001 out of its gloomy shelter. The package of 60 papers only required three signatures for approving the acquisition of new monitors, but he signed joyfully, even taking the time to read details of the purchase. Like in a well-executed play an employee with a

goatee picked up the folder from the “Outbound” section of his two-tiered system. The other label read “In progress,” but due to a particular employee’s efficiency, that section had assembled a near-invisible layer of dust. HELP ME!

This was the first time the words involuntarily played in his head. George noticed it as much as he would have noticed the microscopic lives of bacteria. He continued filling out papers from first the blue-label cabinet, then eventually the yellow. He was unaware of the bacteria self-replicating within his body. Inside that bacteria’s genetic code was the message “Help me.” As the repeating mantra was loud enough to cause a slight stir just below his navel he saw the clock’s hands ticking just past 10. Lunch would be soon. And with that would be a new energy and a chance to further suppress the morning’s event.

But time yielded to dread, as that once faint stir traveled to his chest and upper stomach, which threatened to make George’s omelet and oatmeal breakfast reappear. The man who had been captain of his ship since birth had been swept away in a mutiny of his own concerns. The mantra, faint no longer, reverberated on the canyon walls of his ears, but instead of growing dim like an echo, the sound became a cacophony thundering within his ear drums. As the aural assault endured, a single clip flooded the view of his mind’s eye. He was working on a project that had taken him three weeks to get to a state of near-completion, but it wasn’t perfect. He fussed over format and font. When he broke from the detail-hypnosis he noticed the red blip on his phone that indicated he had a text message. It was from his wife.

I feel so alone when I’m with you but I can’t be without you, either. The loneliness has been too dreadful to bear anymore and you aren’t doing anything to help. All you do is work. So I’m going to put an end to my misery. By 4:30 today I’ll be no more than a memory to you.

With a series of deep breaths and a fierce clenching of his jaw, George fought back the flood of memories but the chanting remained. Help me, help me, help me, it droned. George couldn't fight back, at least not from his office desk. He needed the one thing that could soothe his nerves: a walk. George had always linked his efficiency to the deliberate walks. In fact, he convinced upper management into mandating a 10- to 20-minute walk prior to working on a new project. George left his office, ignoring those who stared at him. He knew how he looked. He looked like a frantic madman who just decided to gun down his workplace; he was viciously sweaty and his eyes darted to and fro before he could even fixate on an object. When he escaped outdoors he felt the warm spring sun caress his skin, causing him to let out a deep breath. He was not completely relieved from the grasp of his anxieties, but it certainly helped. Help me, help me, help me continued in his head.

George's route was always the same. Walking the same route and realizing that it doesn't transform as much as life — or even himself — was therapeutic. It was a constant reminder that some things don't change. Some enduring beings can outlast the metamorphic power of life, for better or worse. George's route had always been two clockwise cycles around the building in which he worked followed by a seat on the bench across the street. So he let his feet do the work and let his mind observe the scenery. This hiatus from reality was interrupted no sooner than it had started. On a wall behind the building was a page from a notebook taped to a dark blue maintenance door with three pieces of tape. George's arms shook and it permeated to his wrists. His quivering hands grabbed the sheet and he looked at the writing. It was a lot more deliberate than before, he thought. But he quickly rescinded this thought. Even though the first page had only been two words — a mere six letters — each one was

deliberately crafted to the point where both the “E”s in the message had been identical. It wasn’t the frantic writing of someone acting on a single suicidal urge.

I see the way your expressionless eyes look at the world, now. It was my doing. Things got so intense so fast, I got lost in it. By the time I’d come to my senses it was much too late but I tried to fix it anyway and that’s why your eyes look that way, forever reminding me of what I’ve done.

He didn’t know how to make sense of the message. Someone felt responsible for his expressions and felt guilty about it. But “expressionless”? That’s hardly the adjective George would use for himself. “Distant” was closer and “aloof” even more so, but he still had feelings.

George went through a brief list of those who knew him enough to notice subtle changes in attitude and also knew his peculiar peeves. The list was a whole two people: Daniel Barber, from accounting, who would spend time with him on weekends at the local library and cafe, and the rising star of Creative IT solutions, VP of Public Affairs, Joseph Decker. George and Daniel would spend their time exchanging books and offering literary suggestions to one another, and after a few hours they would saunter to the mom-and-pop cafe around the corner and would discuss what they had read; George from the logical perspective and Daniel the side of irrational passion. There were days, especially while reading the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, where he radiated with so much fervor it caused George physical discomfort, but Dan was a good man and a better friend. Joe was the gelled-back hair, alpha-extrovert type who had no business hanging out with George due to their wildly different personalities. But through a series of persistent persuasions he started frequenting bars and clubs with Joe and spending time with him. George had actually met his wife because of Joe. They were at a small pub — something

more to George's liking — when he saw the curly-haired woman who had a passionate gaze. It immediately conquered his heart. It was Joe that had convinced him to say the simple hello that ignited a marriage just a year later.

George was confident neither of these personalities could be burdened by some misplaced guilt as to kill himself. He circled the building one last time, decided not to sit on the bench and reentered the building. George felt no eyes on him this time as he made his way back into the office, but before he could make it, he caught the sight of the last page on the elevator door. He didn't know how he knew it was the last one but he felt it. It was like something Dan would say: He just felt it in his heart that the letter deliberately left for him would be the ultimate.

George,

Your wife and I fell in love six months after you married her. I fell hard for her even though it was me who got you to talk to her, I couldn't even look you in the eye after we first hooked up. I was ashamed but I couldn't stop seeing her. I was so enthralled by her passionate way of life I lost control of my own. I started doing poorly at work and my finances were being dumped into courting her. When I finally wisened up she had already fallen head over heels for me. We were even talking about her getting a divorce. I had fallen, too, but I had to get my life back in order. I cut her off and lived as if nothing happened. Honestly, I'm surprised you didn't catch on. But you were always so busy with work. When I cut her off, she became desperate to get me back, but I was persistent. Then I heard about her suicide, and I knew it was my fault.

From beginning to end it was all my fault. I'm going to jump from this building now. I can't bare to look in your eyes, but they're there even when I'm asleep.

As he read the note, George began to tear. He was betrayed and abhorred that two people who had been instrumental in enhancing his way of life in miraculous ways were equally capable of destroying it. And now, Joe was trying to escape the life he had created for them both. George crumpled the page, crammed it in his pocket and ran up the stairs. Each step of his brought him deeper into a recent memory that he'd struggle for months to suppress.

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After he read the text from his wife he looked at the clock, which had just changed to 4:10. This left George with no time to waste if he were to make it in time to stop his wife. He got up from his desk and started to run, but a powerful force in the back of his mind began to scream, "Push in that damn chair." And so he ran back and tucked in the chair. He didn't waste his time with the elevator, which had spent more of its operation out of service than not, and ran down the stairs. The voice commanded him to count each one as he descended the six stories. By the bottom floor George's eyes were blood-red and covered in snot. He was able to resist the command to check the backseat and trunk before driving, shaving off a few minutes, but when he looked at the time he became furious. It was 4:13. George drove recklessly for the first and last time of his life. He ignored stop signs and ran reds when he could. The clock was minutes from 4:22 when he entered his home. He couldn't fight back the impulse to lock and unlock the door four times before he ran upstairs and saw what would drain any joy and passion that Joe saw into a permanent state of indifference. His wife dangling from the ceiling, already hanged, already dead.

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George ascended the steps and gritted his teeth until he felt they would crack. The voice was still there, berating him for each non-counted step, but one death in a year was enough. Each step was a chore even beyond the physical component. Each became an act of defiance to 31 years of a meticulous life. If someone else died because of the twisted web that had to be woven, he wouldn't forgive himself. He would be unlike the entities that remain prostrate in the face of catastrophe; he would bend so far he would split like a flimsy tree in a storm. Then the mantra from the first page made a resounding resurgence. It was so loud it shook the walls of the stairwell and made the handrail shake, but George couldn't waver. Even as the pointlessness of saving a man who betrayed his trust set in, he continued the ascent. Then, "Roof Access" sign.

George opened the door and saw the man he once looked up to pacing in a frenzy. His hair was standing more on ends than normal as if the gel too had realized the meaninglessness of further existence. He then nodded to himself and his eyes returned from the hell they visited and he looked over the edge. George was 50 yards away when he saw Joe's knees bend and unbend as he decided just how he would jump. Exhausted and wanting to quit, George sprinted toward the man who had just decided how he would spring to his death. Joe spread his arms wide, put his feet together and took a deep final breath. He started to fall forward, enjoying the realization that his life was over. But his descent was stopped by an embrace and a yank backward. Both men fell back onto solid ground.

George was the first to stand, and though his body trembled, for the first time since deciding to get married he felt resolute. "Joe, I can never forgive you. You're a fucking bastard

for going behind my back. But not even you deserve to die,” George said. He repeated, “Not even you deserve to die.” George had wished that Joe had gone ahead and jumped before he made it, then made sure Joe knew. “I wanted you to die, you know that? I ran up here trying to save you. The more I ran the more I realized that I should let you die. But more than anything, you need help, Joe.” The ice behind George’s light brown pupils had melted and an unknown heat permeated his body. He took notes as it filled his body to the brim and started to pour out of him. There were many emotions he couldn’t understand but there was a boundless spectrum mixing their way into their new host: fear, anger, happiness, and excitement

## The Outsider

Even the sweet peppermint and frothy eggnog of winter couldn't wash away Derek's bitter fall. Fall was disappointing the moment it started with a massive snowstorm. Derek despised snow; it reminded him of nature's indifference.

Derek took a walk around the block of his apartment building. He was smiling again, slightly, but still. Christmas might not have ditched the fall, which was bitter and coarse like Turkish coffee, but the memories associated with it temporarily vanished in the holiday cheer. He walked along a sidewalk that ran parallel to the city park in which he usually relaxed. Today he wanted to walk by it but stopped. Derek heard the distant echo from fall embodied in the sound of a trombone. He forced himself to listen, but straining made him taste the grit of coffee. It was then, as he was straining, that he recalled his disappointment.

He wanted to turn back immediately, but his legs carried him through the park where a brass quartet of young black men were playing jazz tunes. The trombone player, who moved the slide deftly, was the oldest of the group, a solid thirty. The trumpeter, the other trombone player, and the tubaist all looked to be in their early to mid-twenties. There was a young saxophonist, too, no older than seventeen, his notes floating on top of the carefully nestled brass band. Every note seemed to get cheer out of the audience. Even though frustration was seeping into him, he was enjoying himself. Even simple pieces like When the Saints Come

Marching In became animated through their performance. Derek knew as long as he kept his eye off the tuba, frustration would remain distant and be only a dull ache. The lack of eye contact lasted about a minute. The tubaist started a solo in the middle of one of their original pieces. It was a syncopated, staccato work of art. Derek rampaged through the amassed crowd and headed home.

The Pacific City Wind Ensemble held three major concerts a year: Christmas — renamed to the Holiday Concert — Spring, and Fall. Last year's Fall concert had been reviewed as the "best the ensemble had ever performed." The mayor of Pacific City, with his white hair and shaking hands, gave the band director a certificate of appreciation for his twenty years of work with the ensemble and the masterful performance of his band. A few days later, a story about it ran in the city newspaper, Palm Weekly. The writer, Joseph Hitch, neglected to mention the ensemble's overall performance but repeatedly described masterful playing from the trumpet, clarinet and trombone soloists. Derek's only problem was that he was a tuba player. No newspaper runs an article about that. In fact, the sound of the tuba is only noticed when it's not there, much like its rock music counterpart, the bass.

When he got home, Derek reflected on ending up with a ridiculous, no-praise instrument. Across the way sat the brass instrument, massive on its black metal stand. Derek started when he was sixteen; he was a saxophonist his freshman year of high school but had grown bored of it. He picked up his first sax at eight years old and felt like there was no more room for him to grow on the instrument. It was a lie he told himself to cope with being mediocre. His sophomore year, the band needed a tuba player and Derek, desperate for praise, volunteered to play. The gesture was congratulated with applause throughout the band but praise died shortly after. He

improved greatly on the instrument only for the seldom acknowledgement. For those early years it occupied every processor of his mind. After class was band practice, and after band practice was individual practice. Even his thoughts fit comfortably in bass clef measures. By the next year Derek was first-chair tuba. The director chose pieces out of reach of Derek's ability, but he rose to the occasion. Each time he conquered the chosen piece; each time he would appear apathetic to praise outwardly but desperately sought it out as he mastered each composition. But he was a tuba player.

The tuba was the backbone of the band, the spinal column of every chord that the band played. The audience expected the bass voice to do its job: to be audible enough to drive the piece but not enough to be noticed. In fact, most audiences wouldn't even care for the former part. Melody was the primary concern to the general audience; they could understand and feel the beauty of a wondrous trumpet or clarinet line. Harmony was an appetizer to the more discerning ear. The bassline? Hardly a necessity, and anyone could play it.

He looked at his tuba with equal amounts of scorn and appreciation. It had taken him to places he had never seen. Pacific City Wind Ensemble traveled across the United States as well as to Britain and France. Pictures from those tours hung on the walls of his studio apartment. The low brass section — trombones, baritones and tubas — had a bond inspired by the bass clef that made every tour enjoyable. Derek tried to force a smile. When he saw the reflection of his crooked grin in the tuba, he had a realization: He was only attracted to things with no acclaim. He played tuba, bass and wrote poetry. He was living in accord with his nature, but his desire for attention wasn't being fed in these areas. "What a load of shit," he said as he threw a shoe across the room. Derek felt an unknown emotion rise within him. He wanted to hit

something, scream and cry simultaneously. Tears streamed down his face against his will. Then he sobbed.

Between his outbursts Derek repeated to himself, “Men don’t cry.” The mantra was an echo of his father. His father wasn’t an emotionless man, in fact, and was very open with him. But in his childhood Derek would cry wherever the emotion struck him — even in public. This prompted the phrase-turned-mantra, “Men don’t cry in public.” But in time, false memory distorted the words. He forced deep breaths and demanded the return of his rational mind. What he was feeling wasn’t sadness or any emotion similar to it; it was an emotion so dissimilar from his nature that he didn’t know how to cope. It wasn’t jealousy or envy, though it felt similar. He was upset for crying and disappointed that every step of improvement was met with indifference. He remembered his parents would often say, “You guys sounded good.” It was a gentle reminder that all of his effort faded into the background, where only ears attuned to the subtle could take pleasure in it. He felt heat in his heart, and it urged him to do something — anything at all — but he only cried louder. Fed up with feeling the way he did, Derek punched the wall next to his bed. It was followed by a loud bang, then silence.

It took him until mid-afternoon to regain composure. With cloudy eyes, Derek glared at the tuba and scolded it for mocking him, but the cumbersome heap of brass pipe would make no apologies. Like his playing ability, the tuba had gathered a thin, palpable layer of dust that had been piling up since Christmas. “It’s been two months,” he said. “I’ve got to start practicing again.” By this small, noncommittal decision, the mere spark in Derek’s chest became a storm. Without dusting or polishing the brass, he picked up the instrument and pressed his lips to the frigid, silver mouthpiece. The first notes blared like a horn of war, and they didn’t stop. He

channeled the fury in his tempest heart, and it was only then that Derek knew he was angry. The abrupt roars from the metal beast calmed and smoothed into a short melody that he repeated. It was from his childhood; a small black-wood music box that played a waltz when wound. The waltz was normally light-hearted, but through the fiery bell of Derek's tuba it was angry and heavy.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He pictured playing in the symphony in the coming weeks, but the visualizations filled him with despair, frustration and anger. Despite it, he knew in two weeks he would be back sitting on the same black chair at the back of the band. It was a fact so well established that Derek pulled out the compositions the band would play for the Spring concert in May. He saw pieces from composers he recognized and admired like Tchaikovsky, Ticheli and Grainger. He placed the sheets on a metal music stand, started a wooden metronome, and began to play. He started slowly, making sure not to stumble on any phrasing, and then gradually sped the metronome to performance tempo. He spent the next two weeks reacquainting himself with his all-too-familiar practice routine.

March 5th came faster than he anticipated, and on the evening of that day he sat in the same hard plastic chair that he had occupied for the past few years. Everyone had returned to the stage, including the trombonist Joseph Hitch claimed as "one of the greatest living concert trombonists." Derek clenched his fists when he saw that Donald, the trombonist, had stapled the article from the Fall concert onto the interior of his case. "What a prick," he thought. He also had thought the first practice of the season would go much faster. Not only was he mistaken, but he had been so devastatingly wrong he wished to have never come at all. The clarinetist whined about some triviality and Donald, with his ballooning ego, played with no regard for balance or

volume. The stage lights had been so unbearably hot that Derek was sweating. All the while he played the same note for hours on end. He was furious. “I’ve wasted my life learning how to play this damn thing,” he thought as he rocked back and forth impatiently on the ridiculous chair. “My whole life of effort for this and without any—” but before Derek finished the thought the director dismissed his band with a feeble flick of his wrist. “Maybe he felt it, too,” Derek thought.

He wanted to quit. He had at last become aware of the ensemble’s pretentiousness. The trombonist’s super-superior mentality, the clarinetist who whined that pieces were “too easy,” the flutist who meant well but always had a snide comment about “non-traditional” musicians. When the ensemble went to Chicago for a performance, Veronica — the flute player — verbally degraded a street violinist for being unable to read music then walked away sharing giggles with the clarinetist, the trombonist, and the oboist. This was the group he had been playing music with all along. Derek recalled his time in high school band and noticed the same things: the egos and the haughtiness. These were present in a great deal of his friends and even within himself. Becoming a professional hadn’t created the egomaniacs, but it deemed it necessary and ostrichsized all others. Derek wondered, though, why his ego didn’t skyrocket after becoming a concert musician. In fact, his ego dropped significantly after joining the group and never made a recovery. Derek attributed the lack of ego to his undying connection to reality that others would often call him a cynic. If someone were to tell him that he played well at a performance, he would say that he did “okay.” He did it not because he was modest, nor was he confessing that everything was shit, but simply because his performance was riddled with micro-errors. No ego-stroking newspaper could change that.

He continued showing up to practice week after week, but it was different. He was an outsider to the group more than he had ever been before. Derek never joined in on the conversations about great composers and never chimed in on theory discussions about instrumentation. Now, he saw it for the self-indulgence it was. Conversations were like how they practiced: only to hear themselves and not to listen to others. Derek was now the foremost expert on the “traditional musician” in its native habitat, but he’d rather see the whole society of theirs collapse.

Practices got better, though. The ensemble started listening and responded to the ebb and flow of the music. This wasn’t out of choice, though; it was purely a necessity to produce good music. The goal of every musician is to interpret and reproduce the composer’s message in the most eloquent and organic way possible, but the goal served different ends. Most were like the trombonist, who wanted the praise. But some did it to connect with something greater than themselves. Putting on a performance was a transformative experience for those who tapped into the beyond. The proud cried and the silent sang, all releasing emotions and expressions they were otherwise unable to access. Derek remembered his first performance as he was packing up for the day. He was in elementary school and entirely too nervous to get on stage. His hands wouldn’t keep still and the saxophone rattled as he held it. Then he noticed all the other kids felt the same way, even the ones who had just gotten off the stage. They also shook and felt nauseous. He took a deep breath like his parents taught him when he felt any negative emotion and marched onward to the stage. It wasn’t a prodigious performance, but he had conquered an emotion he never could deal with before. He realized a lot of people who go out on stage must be nervous. He played out memories in his head, like how his principal

couldn't get calm enough to stop stuttering during a speech or how the winner of the spelling bee had a constantly wavering voice.

Even knowing the possible transformative experience that lay ahead, he was still ready to quit. He looked at the flier for the Spring concert in May and realized that time had breezed by him. He had spent most of it carefully researching the group he played music with and began to take pride in his otherness. With one week until the concert Derek decided it wouldn't behoove him to quit. Until the concert, Derek decided to play as if each time his mouth touched silver he was performing. He would imagine the reverberating sound from his bell reaching hundreds of ears. Hopefully one of them would hear that message. The happiness he would get from these imagined scenarios was constantly cut short by the blare of a trombone or indiscriminate whining. Practice was a balance between the divine and the material hell of pomposity. But he endured.

The day of the concert came fast. The rainfall from April, aside from some sparse floods, was ignored by flowers that still refused to bloom. The hot wind, a reminder of summer's approach, blew through the leaves of tall oaks. Derek sat outside a glass building, looking toward the sun. The anger hadn't left him, even after all these months. It was a sleeping predator, passive but ready to attack at the slightest irritation. The last ninety days of music had been stressful enough to cause grey hairs to appear on Derek's head. The inner voice that had once told him to become a musician was now telling him to leave it behind right there and then. But Derek steadied his shaking hands and breathed like he was taught and re-entered the building.

The practice area was filled with women and men in their finest formal attire: black suits, silk ties, elegant black dresses and elbow-length gloves. Each musician talked with those who played the same instrument as them and never deviated from their circles. This forced Derek to try to mingle — he was the only tuba player — but no one wanted to talk to him. He was the “other,” the outsider in a group he had once cherished. Somehow they knew he was judging them. Maybe it was instinct. They began to perform warm-up exercises individually, creating a chromatic cacophony. Derek closed his eyes to fight the spell of dizziness caused by the dissonance but was immediately aggravated by the appearance of Joseph Hitch. He wore a black tuxedo vest and slacks with a carefully placed crease. His ill-fitting and anachronistic fedora was placed purposefully off center, and he began to introduce himself to the trombonist. He was doing an interview with him. They talked for ten minutes and likely only asked simple questions, but Derek’s imagination took off with their meeting. To him it was sinister. A near-silent plotting against a man who could never have an ego like they had; a deliberate attempt to pay him and his ability no mind. Hitch made his rounds to a few other musicians, then left without ever speaking or making eye contact with the outsider.

Derek’s anger broadcast itself to the world. It was so fierce it scared the first flowers of spring to bloom and the rest of the world felt in themselves a profound rage for a single moment before it passed. But Derek still trembled and shook. He fought back tears and wanted nothing more than to run away from the pretentious people who made a wonderful feeling so poisonous. He especially wanted escape the parts of himself that still wanted to be like his company. More than anything, he wanted to punch the trombonist in the face to make sure he didn’t play tonight. He entertained the idea for a moment and started for the lanky man who had just

finished his warmup. Derek walked slowly, clenching his fists in a way he had never felt before or since. He wasn't trying to stave off an emotion. He was trying to vent it onto the person who deserved it more than anyone else. He hated that man's face. Donald, with his constant smile and egotistical gait, never showed weakness or vulnerability. He was just ten feet away. He wanted to run and tackle him but maintained his brisk walk. He was face to face with Donald now and they stared at each other. Before he threw his punch, Derek noticed a change in the man. Actually, none of his features transformed, but something about him certainly changed. Then the director called the band to their seats.

"There's no sense playing now," Derek thought. "I'm distracted, I'm pissed. I couldn't play well out there." But he played the group warm up and waited for his fate anyway. He knew he had to play this concert. It wasn't in a trivial manner that he knew, either. He didn't feel obligated to stay simply because he was the only tuba player in the ensemble. It was the vague calling of destiny that promised something to him, but that something was never clear. Five minutes before showtime Derek started to shake again. He was still nervous after all these years, but he wasn't the only one. People playing every instrument battled their nerves — some visible, some not. They walked calmly onto the stage, fooling the entire audience into believing they were confident. The director said a few words Derek couldn't make out and then turned to the band.

The music began gently, an utter contra-testament to Derek's rage. It floated to the ears of the audience and softly nabbed their attention. Derek used all of his will to play in a way that was faithful to the composer, even if it hurt to lie to the audience. The melody and harmony danced in Derek's head and offered him to dance. Stubborn, Derek refused to mingle with the muse that called him but kept playing. His notes had no meaning and were just sustained

nothingness that all the meaning was carried on. That was his expected role. The hardly audible and hardly acknowledged support of meaning, like the comma and period in punctuation. As Derek played he became more disheartened at his realized meaninglessness. The notes seemed to fall right in front of him, not reaching a single ear. Derek cried as he played. Anger and sadness became one and melded with absurdity. His tears opened his heart another time to the beckoning muse.

Melody and harmony twirled together like ballroom dancers and asked that he join them. He accepted the offer and danced. It was on the wings of that inspiration that he might reach the audience or even that one unsuspecting person who was receptive to his anger. The dancers moved with the audience's hearts, and he learned of all the lives they lived. The disasters, heartache, triumph and glee that each member of the audience experienced and endured, and he was identical to them. He wasn't an outsider but another piece of the human empathetic puzzle that connected him with everyone else. It was the human condition of being fragile but not daring to show it. He talked with their hearts about his sadness and anger and loneliness and didn't leave out detail. Then they fluttered among the musicians for reasons Derek couldn't understand. He then became one with the sublime and at once realized his mistakes. His heart danced with Donald's, who wasn't after public acclaim but a different acceptance altogether. His parents never wanted him to be a musician and told him so multiple times, even after becoming a professional, that he should pursue a "real career"; he played for their acknowledgement alone. The article he kept in his case was the first time they had said anything positive about it. They read it in the newspaper and called their child and simply said, "Good job." But it was enough; it was all the approval he needed.

He danced with the high-status flutist. She was conditioned to hate those who were different by her parents. She was a product of two concert clarinetists who despised any form of music outside the realm of classical. Derek felt his sense of self fade away, and he became the wind that carried the music. He was free to float where he pleased, but he always found a way to a listening ear. That's the way it worked, though, Derek realized. Whenever music pours from the soul there will be an ear, no matter how insignificant, to listen to it. He was the conductor, the trumpeter, the euphonium player and each percussionist. Each with their own story and path to music that was as vibrant. People of various backgrounds and various classes played music from composers of different centuries and decades, and all of that variance was sure to create a wholly unique experience for the listener. It was then that Derek realized what he had noticed in the trombonist. For a moment, he realized that that man had a myriad of experiences and reasons for doing what he did. Nothing that he had done had been malicious, and he was completely innocent in any emotion that he drew out of Derek. He was no longer shackled to those emotions; Derek felt free.

The concert finished and was followed by the customary applause. They took a bow and left the stage. The band went back to the waiting room and started chatting with each other and were visibly more happy than before. Mr. Hitch, whose fedora somehow still managed to stay teetering on the side of his head, entered the room and interviewed the same people, asked questions similar to those he had asked in the fall and left. Derek walked to the conductor, shook his hand and smiled. "I quit." The old man demanded an answer and perhaps the Derek from last fall would have given him one, but he was a free man.

## Of Flowers

The room smelled of flowers. Haralson was altogether disgusted by the sweet smell wafting from the rose bush just outside O'Connor's bar. He didn't want to be there. The scent of roses was overpowering and it distorted the taste of his IPA. There was also the problem of the bar's patrons. Mobsters, loan sharks, and other undesirables met there daily. They spoke in loud, drunken voices, not intimidated by police. Freelance criminals made the bar home, too; they used the protective umbrella of the mob to run their private enterprises. Most were money-lenders, some were fences, and there were some black-market dealers as well. James Haralson had a meeting with the infamous loan shark Dan Flanagan.

A month and a half ago, Haralson borrowed fifteen thousand dollars from Flanagan to pay various overdue expenses. The biweekly payments didn't matter, neither did the high interest rate. Keeping his apartment and car was enough to justify the desperate mean. Haralson already missed his first payment two weeks ago. Haralson learned through rumors how Flanagan operated, so he expected Flanagan to beat him with a metal bat. He only got a friendly phone call. Yet, he wouldn't be able to pay the second payment, either, which is why Flanagan forced this meeting.

Flanagan walked into the bar and brought with him a sweet rosy aroma. Everyone fell silent. High ranking mobsters rose to greet him. Flanagan smiled as he shook the hands of men who told stories about the many men they had killed. Haralson straightened his posture as Flanagan approached. He stammered but Flanagan silenced him with a lift of his index finger. “You fucked up, friend.”

Haralson nodded. “You, you know I’ve got a problem. I just need time to recover. I can get you the money. I promise.”

“I’m not looking for promises anymore. You know how well I’ve treated you in comparison. If you weren’t a friend of mine you’d be in deep shit, but here we are having a polite fucking conversation.” Flanagan’s eyes were sharp and refined through the years. He looked at Haralson and asked, “You haven’t forgotten what happens to someone who misses a third fucking payment, right?” Flanagan hated swearing, but it was effective.

Haralson said, “Yeah, you’ll off ‘em. I promise you, Greg, I’m good for this. Next payment — two weeks from now I’ll have exactly what you need.” Haralson clenched his fist under the table, trying to hide his overwhelming fear and anxiety. He knew Flanagan could read anybody, though he still tried to mask his terror.

“Yeah, I’ll kill you. So what are you going to do exactly two weeks from now?”

“Pay you.”

“Good. So we have an understanding. Fifty-five hundred dollars saves you from a bullet.”

Flanagan snatched Haralson’s IPA from the table and downed the rest of the bottle. He left the pub, reminding Haralson a last time of the consequences of missing another payment.

Haralson’s head spun. He felt dizzy and ready to surrender his chili cheese nacho lunch back to the world. The room spun, and loud voices that were once tolerable grew to cacophony. He stood but his shaking legs urged him to sit back down. Haralson confronted the singular idea he didn’t normally consider: death. It was unpleasant. Memories he once used to calm himself were seeped in the dye of mortality. The people in his memories would one day die, just like he would. Just like he will if he doesn’t give his money to Flanagan. Doing so would be difficult; he was a chronic gambler.

Payday was soon and Haralson knew he would have a problem saving the amount needed. For the following week Haralson stuck to eating cheap meals and avoided bars and clubs. He needed to avoid any scenario in which he would be urged to spend money. Haralson scheduled his day by the hour: from teaching classes to his commute back home. As long as he had specific appointments to keep — even if the appointment was with sleep — he would be less inclined to devolve into his gambling.

He attempted to replace gambling stimulants with blaring television and equally loud background music. When he graded papers he listened to the radio and watched hospital dramas. The method stopped the brunt of the gambling desire, but it still lingered. He had the same plan for the following week. He increased the distractions by adding books on top of music and TV.

There was a pervasive idea that seeped into Haralson: the simple thought that he would die alone. He was thirty-two and starting to feel his prime slip by. He hadn't showed interest in anybody who showed him overt affection. It was a habit. His nature was to refuse affection directed at him. He had moments where he considered settling down and finding someone to spend his life with. They were fleeting, though, and easily distracted by casino lights and sounds. He had no choice but to confront his thoughts now. The fears grew as the distractions became less effective. For the first time in awhile, he had to think that unwelcome thought:

“I'm lonely.”

Following were aches in his chest and a palpable emptiness. He wanted to share his life with someone, but he had rejected everyone. There was no one to call — everyone was too busy for him. Haralson paced around the house desperate for a solution to his growing discomfort. He knew, as all addicts do, that only gambling would soothe the ache. I'm stronger than that, he thought. His arms and legs shook anyway. He wanted to sleep, but loneliness dominated all assets of his mind. Unable to sleep or relax, Haralson decided to take a walk.

It was dark, just past 10 a.m., and there were already a few people wandering the streets. They were loners, bar wanderers and the lonely-hearted moving desperately to find a group to which they could belong. Haralson remembered being a drifter of that sort. He would walk into bars to buy a single drink and made conversation with other patrons. Most of them gave Haralson a cold shoulder and continued with their conversations. Following rejection, he moved to the next bar. There were also groups that spent their time outside; they would have loud

conversations as if the quiet of the general public didn't matter. Haralson was rejected from these crowds, too. The longer the night endured, the more he resembled a drunken bum. There were times, too, when he ran into his students' parents. They always acted like they hadn't seen him.

Haralson walked to achieve an idle mind. As he saw people laughing in the streets, Haralson's loneliness overwhelmed him. Each group, each person was a reminder of his past rejections and fortified the idea of his loneliness. Haralson thought that no one would care if he died, and moreover, the thought was correct. He did the only thing he could to stop the line of thinking: walk five blocks west to the Springs Casino.

It was an obnoxious, bright place with signs that seemed stuck in the 1950s. People in suits walked in and out as frequently as those who dressed in sweatpants. Haralson entered the building. A young woman at the front desk greeted him. "Hello, darling, are you here to play?" He nodded his head and walked passed her. The bright lights instantly changed his mood. The colors and sounds reminded him of previous times he had spent there at the casino, and he was happy. The slot machines beckoned to him. They pleaded that he spend his money. They cried in high-pitched, 8-bit inspired voices for Haralson. He sat down in front of a dollar machine and started to play. The process was automatic: When he ran out of cash he pulled out more, and he repeated it until the banker told him his card was declined.

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Flanagan spent his time between cracking collar bones and maintaining his ties to the mob. He ran his gig independently of them, and he got respect for it. Flanagan made sure people

knew his name and why he had busted them up the way he did. It made him one of the most brutal criminals around, not out of malice. Those who associated with Flanagan by choice, rather than money-owed circumstance, had a pleasant time around him. It was a matter of business: If you didn't screw Flanagan over, he wouldn't do the same to you. If you happened to cross the line, you were more likely to end up with a bullet in your head than be forgiven.

Flanagan found it hard to spend his free time in the city. Whenever he walked into a bar or grocery store, the entire establishment froze. Patrons looked among themselves to figure out who messed up. Most of the time, he was just shopping or trying to unwind for the day. There is a luxury in being a feared criminal, but one of its perks certainly wasn't friendship or even basic human closeness.

The Friday Haralson spent his paycheck gambling, Flanagan was watching television and relaxing with a beer. He didn't watch sports and also didn't like many of the TV shows airing; he thought they were derivative, uncreative garbage. There was nothing else to do, and not even Flanagan wanted to work all day. He was into the climax of a hospital drama when one of his cohorts called. The ringing startled him. "Hello?"

"Guess who decided to spend their money at the Springs?" a gruff voice said.

"Was it Derek? The porn producer?"

"Nah. That teacher you like." Flanagan hung up the phone. He knew this would happen. He tried to convince himself Haralson would be different, surely he would pay up. However, the

banker confirmed Haralson spent all of his money, which meant he had to act. Even as his mind told him to let it go, he grabbed his 9mm pistol and headed downtown.

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Haralson, after coming out of his delirium, headed toward the exit. The bright lights and sounds couldn't soothe him. They cemented the mistake he had made. The ambiance of the casino reminded him of each mistake. The machine's video game noises reminded him of every time he won but kept playing until he had nothing. Now he truly had nothing. Soon Flanagan will find out, Haralson thought. At the front door were two large men who were not typical bouncers. Haralson recognized both brown-coated men. He turned to the back exit. He ran through a crowd but the henchmen weren't following him yet. He exited the building through the kitchen and heard a yell over the bustle of the casino; it was Flanagan. He ran through alley ways turning corners as fast as he could. He knocked over anything he could to slow his imaginary pursuers. He kicked down trash cans and moved dumpsters to block the way. He could feel Flanagan's presence. Haralson knew Flanagan would be armed with the 9mm; he had seen him fire it plenty of times before. If Haralson couldn't escape, the next bullet Flanagan fires will be in his skull.

He wended the streets heading the same general direction. Flanagan would come looking for him, so he had to distance himself from the casino. He kept northward even as the street signs looked unfamiliar. The sun started to rear over the mountains. He was exhausted. Haralson had no choice but to find a place to sleep. It couldn't be in a hotel, that would be too obvious, so he

found a quiet alley beside a dumpster to rest. It smelled like decomposing flesh. He looked around to find the source of the smell and found a nest of dead rats. With no better place to stay, and certain that the smell would keep most people at bay, he put his coat over his body and closed his eyes.

Sleep never came, though. His nerves sharpened from adrenaline and his heartbeat rattled his body. Any sound, be it footsteps or otherwise, startled him. He wasn't safe outdoors. His only chance at even a little peace would be to find a hotel room with multiple exits. Haralson got up and walked among the public, who started to rise for their Saturday. He walked to the nearest ATM and got a \$100 cash advance. A hundred dollars was nothing compared to the debt he owed.

Haralson searched the city for a few hours. He moved through alleys and walked along bigger streets only if the crowds would hide him. He was looking for a hotel tucked away in the city. It had to be not far outside of town to be obvious but not too nondescript to look like someone may hide there. Haralson saw glimpses of men in brown coats, like Flanagan's men, in the corner of his eye. Haralson didn't know if he was actually seeing them or hallucinating from lack of sleep. He even saw Flanagan's face in some of the morning runners. He had to be near, Haralson thought. He stopped at a regional hotel whose name he had seen from the street but at which he had never bothered to stay. He felt the massive presence of the henchmen behind him, yet there was no one when he turned to face them. He saw Flanagan's face in the front desk clerk, too. He smiled in a crooked way, just like Flanagan did. Haralson froze in place and

started to sob; he realized that he had met his end. The man's face changed to one of a chubby, young male.

Haralson confronted the man. "I — I need a room. How much are they," he asked.

The clerk, after staring at Haralson, said, "A room is 80 bucks a night, sir. Do you have a preference of floor?" Haralson indicated the first floor by raising his index finger.

He handed the clerk the hundred-dollar bill and after a moment of typing the clerk gave Haralson his room key. Before he left Haralson asked the clerk, "What's your name? You look familiar. Did we go to school together?"

The man shook his head, "Name is Chris Thomas. I don't think we've ever—"

"Listen, Chris. There is a very dangerous man after me. He wears jeans and a sport coat and has his hair all slicked back, you know, like old school. He'll come in with at least two men. Those guys are large. Probably six-foot-five or so. If you see a man resembling him even a little, call the police, then call my room. I swear to God, Chris, if you don't call me when he comes, I'm going to leave your name on this sheet of paper," he said waving a page from a notepad with the hotel ledger. "And I will tell him before he puts a bullet in my head that you tried to help me escape. And you do not want to be his target. He might not kill you but he will certainly torture the hell out of you until you'll want him to. You got it, right? I hope you're not a fuckup, for both our sake." Haralson headed to his room still sensing Flanagan. I can't escape him, Haralson thought.

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Flanagan was pissed. By the time he arrived to the casino his crew had lost track of Haralson. He sent his men looking for him and got into a taxi himself to look around. Even when taking less-used roads, Flanagan was unable to find Haralson. He thought to himself just how much he regretted ever seeing this guy as a friend. Hours passed and Flanagan hadn't received a word from his henchmen. The sun was rising over the horizon and, despite how peaceful the sunrise made him feel normally, he was angry. It mocked his inability to catch Haralson. He called Bruce, the lackey who had called him the night before.

“Where the fuck are you?”

“We've been tracking him all night,” Bruce said after yawning. “We only catch glimpses of him, then he's gone. We're in the next city, Dover, just out of downtown. I'm sure we'll see him again, you should come down.” Flanagan called a taxi and headed to Dover. The taxi ride, although only 20 minutes, had been entirely too long. On his way to meet Bruce, Flanagan saw a homeless man sleeping on a park bench that looked like Haralson. He had his hand on his gun, ready to draw, but as he got closer the man's face changed. Flanagan sighed and continued on his way to Bruce.

Bruce mentioned to Flanagan that they had seen him again. “He came out of an alley a little ways back and took off. He looked tired as hell.” They didn't see him in downtown and none of the hotels there recognized his face — even when encouraged with the sight of a gun. Flanagan had a suspicion he was around, an intuition honed from working with people of Haralson's sort for years. Flanagan thought, Haralson decided to stop in this city. He tried to

walk the city in Haralson's shoes. He imagined himself a depraved man running for his life, hiding in holes and sleeping in gutters. Except, he thought, scared men don't sleep. Especially not in the open. There were too many opportunities for the hunter to sneak up on them and end their life. Haralson would be in a place where he could let his guard down, potentially even sleep, and still have a route of escape.

Until mid-afternoon Flanagan and his crew went to every hotel and motel in the area, and they asked each clerk if they had seen Haralson, to which they said no. In the late afternoon Flanagan found the Oceanview Hotel. The attendant there was about his age and a bit chubby. Flanagan asked the man, "Have you let a Haralson in here today? He probably paid in cash and looked like he hadn't slept. I'm a really good friend of his and I need to see him immediately."

The man stammered, "Yes he checked in a few hours ago. He told me to call the police and his room if I seen you. Then threatened to make me an accomplice. I didn't do anything. I'll give you his room number and everything but I don't want to die!" Flanagan nodded and the clerk wrote down room number 104 and gave him a coded key. Flanagan gestured to his men to go outside to block his escape. Flanagan walked down the hallway. He was sweating. He always sweated in the pending moments before killing someone, but he was otherwise completely adjusted to murder. He drew his gun as he passed 102. Then 103. 104. He slid the keycard to the lock and the light shone green.

He swung the door open. The last bit of the afternoon sun leaked into the room and filled it with a golden brilliance. The wind flew through the open curtains. The wind carried the distant

scent from the ocean but it was overpowered by a bittersweet smell that emanated from the center of the the room. In the middle, a ceiling fan tried to spin against an obstacle, which created a whirring sound. Haralson's belt was wrapped around the base of the fan and around his neck. He was limp and long dead. As the body dangled, his flesh changed in chunks from tanned skin to black rose petals that were carried by the wind about the room. Flanagan sat in the hotel room chair for hours watching his friend decompose into ebony flowers. An hour after sunset, the last petal started to fall. The wind swept the petal outside, where they both danced then faded abruptly.

## What Ails Us

The interviewer was already tired. His host's ceiling fan spun too fast for its supports and seemed ready to detach from the screws. The dining room was large and connected to a larger kitchen with black marble countertops. He and the interviewee, a red-headed woman, sat on opposite sides of a barnwood dining table. The legs of the chair he sat in were loose from wear and creaked as he rocked. He tapped his foot and drummed his fingers on the table; he hated silence. Unable to endure the man's restlessness anymore, the woman said, "All right, Mr. Price, I'm ready."

"Good," he said, opening a spiral-bound Meade notebook. "You know why I'm here, so let's get straight into it." He paused to give the impression of collecting his thoughts. "Do you hate him for what he did?" It was a calculated question, one he thought would get a reaction. A reaction, especially from the esteemed writer Glenda Smith, would be worth writing about.

But Glenda was an adept interviewee who had been through this before. She responded without missing a beat, leaving Mr. Price unsatisfied, "I guess I should. But I don't, really." Her eyes were sharp. She slouched in her chair. She was the type who could engage with anyone as

long as they kept personal distance. She continued, “Before we go on, I’d like it if we use his name.”

Mr. Price nodded. “How well do you know Damien Casey?” He followed the question with, “Official reports say you were his client, but there’ve been rumors, too.” There had been a single rumor, but Mr. Price preferred the gravity of the plural. Every breath on Earth had a rumor about it, but people made mythologies about the scandalous, damned and unfortunate. Mr. Price was also open to the possibility that Glenda had heard something he hadn’t — but it was unlikely; his ear was the closest to the ground for every story.

She knew the rumor well. People’s penchant for imagining complex stories about others both fascinated her and made her stomach churn. “They say we were lovers, plotting a getaway or some shit,” she said. “The truth is simpler. I was just a client of Damien’s and I didn’t know he existed until then. But he must have known who I was right away.” The latter statement was new. She hadn’t said it in other interviews or when she testified in court. Mr. Price perked up to Glenda’s statement, but she continued before he questioned her. “After going to the sessions awhile, I found out Damien was an avid reader. When we had nothing official to talk about, which happened a lot because of me, he would bring up bestsellers or other books he was reading. I didn’t think about it until later, but he must have read one of my books. It didn’t take long for me to find out that he did.”

Mr. Price wrote parts of Glenda’s monologue in the notebook; he preferred to use pen and paper over a recorder. When he was younger, he did an interview with an emerging

mixed-media artist named Joseph Hernandez, who had a reputation for being verbose. This caused plenty of interviewers to misquote him, which led to editors chastising their writers. He was nervous to interview him, so he brought along a tape recorder to ease his doubts. After the meeting, Price didn't have a single note of value, because he didn't ask any good questions. He interviewed best with a pen in hand and paper on the table. He felt free to think then.

“What do you mean you guys didn't have a lot of official things to talk about? Were you just not saying anything?” Mr. Price asked.

“Well, yeah. There were points in the therapy when we had to talk about why I was there, but I wasn't ready to. So there'd be a bit of silence. Then Damien would clear his throat, like he always does before changing the subject.”

Mr. Price nodded. “I'd like to talk about why you went to counseling. How did you end up in Damien's office?”

“My doctor recommended me to him,” she started, “for — fuck. You know why. You were there in the courtroom. Why do I have to say it again?”

“I apologize. That's the way I work. I find there's something liberating about stating the already-known.” He slumped back in his seat. Normally his intuition guided him in the right direction, but he was unsure why it had steered him to a question to which he knew the answer.

“Liberating for you, maybe,” Glenda said.

“Anyway, how often were you going to sessions? What did you think of him?”

“He was caring. He never forced me to say anything I didn’t want to. It was obvious he was intelligent, and he had a sense of humor that made heavy topics seem light.” She stood up, lit a cigarette and started to pace. “I started going in mid-February, three times a week. He always had room in his schedule for an emergency meeting.”

“I know how you feel about the rumors, but did you ever suspect he loved you?” The question could never mean anything, given the circumstance, and would strengthen rumors if she said anything other than no. That was a shit question, Price thought.

“I don’t know. It always seemed like a professional relationship. At least until we started talking about literature. Then it was more of a fan-boy-to-celebrity type,” she said after taking a long drag on her Marlboro. “But, for the record, I don’t see myself as a celebrity.”

The sun was setting. Mr. Price had been sluggish all day; it took him a half-hour longer to get ready, and even his noon walk dragged on. “Mind if we continue this tomorrow?” he asked, noticing she was tired, too.

“Sure,” she said, putting out the cigarette. “Tomorrow should be better.”

The following morning the local news station broadcast an hour-long special about the planned execution. The judge announced he would move the execution to “as soon as possible,” which meant within a week.

In the late afternoon, Price returned to Glenda’s home. He felt he would have to dance around sensitive topics. She would likely be devastated. Anyone in her situation would be. They

sat again under the wobbling ceiling fan. She didn't look as distraught as Price imagined; she looked as put together — or not — as she did yesterday. “Did you hear the news?” Price asked.

“Of course,” she said as she lit her first cigarette of the interview. “They're going to kill the poor bastard. And, I don't know. A large part of me believes that he doesn't deserve it.”

Price, with his notebook still closed, said, “I can't tell you if he did deserve it or not, but that's how the system works. You kill someone, and the government rehabilitates you for life or kills you. There's not much mercy there.” He had work to do. There was a cover-page story just beyond her mouth, but the day already felt finished. Truth was, Price enjoyed Glenda's company and wouldn't mind relaxing in the kitchen trading bullshit stories for a few hours. As long as he didn't have to work. After opening his notebook, Price said, “Yesterday, you said you went to Damien's office for grief counseling. I would like to give you another chance to say it. You don't have to if you don't want.”

“I was raped.” She was tired of the word looming without being said. Glenda Smith had told this fact to four people in her life. Once to herself the night after she was brutalized, the second to her doctor, who recommended counseling, to Damien, and to the judge after the incident. Now she told Mr. Price, who was not altogether wrong about the liberating feeling. She knew the moment would remain fresh throughout her life. The damage was irreparable. Still, each time she spoke about it, the pain eased a little.

Price fought hard not to retreat at her admission. He knew what happened, but hearing from the source was different. He wanted to do anything to soothe her, but that wasn't his job; it

never would be. He focused on the one thing that wanted his company: the narrative. “Your husband, Ivan Smith, committed the ... the act —”

“Rape. Please just say it,” Glenda interrupted.

“He raped you two years ago in August. Why did you wait to talk about it?”

“At first I was numb, you know? Actually a lot of that numbness hasn’t faded. I couldn’t believe Ivan, of all people, could do something like that.” She paused. “I also thought no one would believe me. Like people would think I was a crazy writer seeking attention trying to get a writing opp. When I was finally ready to talk about it, I wanted to focus more on getting okay than convicting him. We had been separated for about a year, anyway. It just wasn’t on my mind, I guess.”

“Last February you started your sessions with Damien. According to your testimony, you didn’t tell him about your rape until April, the same month as the incident. Was it hard to tell him?” Price wasn’t himself and had no energy to nudge her to harder questions. Maybe another day would be better. Also, despite Glenda’s insistence, Price knew she saw Damien as a friend.

“How could it not be?” she said. “I was going to a stranger to tell him something I felt ashamed about. I don’t even know why I felt ashamed, but I did. I’m surprised it took me only two months to tell him. It took me almost a year of regular visits to tell my doctor, so two months felt like a flash. It helped that Damien was kind and we had similar interests. In another life we could have been friends.”

“And when you told him, how did he react? Was there anything strange about him?”

“He was gentle, like he always was. He let me know I didn’t have to talk about it right away, and only if I was ready.” She eyed her cigarette as she spoke. “Even though I mentioned it to my doctor, I didn’t tell him the details. Damien was the first person to hear every detail as vivid as I could tell; they poured out of me. Ivan coming off of work. Beating the shit out of me. Forcing me onto my knees and tying me up. Him using me; him laughing. What pissed me off the most was how quickly he returned to normal. Ten minutes after he untied me, he was sitting down and laughing at fucking *Family Guy* or some shit.” Her hand shook and she lit her third cigarette. “But Damien was gentle. Maybe because he was trained to be, but I think he was genuine. Shit. Listen to me talk about him like he’s already dead. Damien Casey is a good man.”

“I think that conversation is best saved for another day. Let’s call it quits. I’ll come back tomorrow.” Price had been battling his exhaustion for too long. Despite his intent, he couldn’t stay focused as Glenda spoke. It was time for him to sleep, even though it was only 7:30. He wasn’t any more stressed than normal, and he slept as much as he always had — the exact same routine since he was 23. Still, the day wore on him. Maybe it was the high-profile work?

Price drove home and turned on the TV. He kept his TV fixed to CNN and only switched it for local news. He felt bad about his home after being at Glenda’s. Hers was a three-story beach-side property, and his was a shoddy studio just outside of the poorer parts of town. He lived alone. He liked to imagine many people did, but most he thought of were people like Damien: the reserved type. He felt he didn’t belong to that category, but in trying to find points to refute he found ones that pointed the other direction. He spoke when necessary and was

otherwise content with his thoughts. Even at work the isolated hours were more enjoyable than the ones when he was speaking. The truth was, he was a quiet man that life and work forced to speak.

Settled in the black leather couch with his feet propped up on a mismatched brown ottoman, Price thought of Damien's fate. "Death penalty ... seems rough," he thought. He recalled details the prosecution presented.

Before Glenda, Damien had never counseled a rape victim. He was properly trained but inexperienced. Literature and movies brought Glenda and Damien close and their similar personalities sustained the bond. The relationship stayed professional; the few hours every other day were all they needed for their yearning of close friendship. Their mutual introversion ensured neither of them would go to see the other. When Glenda detailed her rape, Damien became maddened with sympathy.

He had drawn up a plan the day after Glenda talked about her rape. He wrote it out on a notepad in his office and didn't bother to throw it away — the police found it intact on his desk later. He must have been of a sound mind to plan something days in advance, was the prosecution's theory. He went to the hardware store the next day to buy his weapon. He continued all his daily sessions. He had a motivation and a means to kill Ivan for seven days while still counseling Glenda, who knew nothing of it. Damien recorded his sessions and didn't once mention the plan to her. There were no cell phone calls, and office calls Glenda did make were brief; they were never seen in public together. From the recordings, though, the defense

used Damien's indifference as evidence of his inability to grasp his plan. They thought he was crazy, or at least wanted the jury to believe it.

Three days before, Damien asked an unknown man where Ivan Smith lived. He learned from Ivan's neighbors — in the apartment he stayed in after Glenda kicked him out — his entire routine and the fact that Ivan always came home drunk. Damien planned around that bit of knowledge. At midnight of the 20th of April, Damien drove to Ivan's apartment. He waited for an hour until he saw Ivan drunk like a madman heading home. He waited 30 more minutes, but nobody knew why he waited so long or what he did. But his car, a black Honda Civic, stayed in the parking lot. The defense reasoned maybe Damien was trying to psyche himself out. At 12:30 he broke into Ivan Smith's home.

Forensic evidence told a story that no surveillance camera could. Ivan Smith was too drunk to wake up to the door breaking or to hear Damien's heavy footsteps. Ivan slept in a twin bed much too small for his 6'5" frame. Damien stood beside him with an axe. There's no telling how long Damien stood there, but the consensus was at least three minutes. Then he lifted the axe overhead and swung it down on Ivan's neck. The first shot didn't sever the spine, and the second one missed it's mark slightly higher in the neck. Blood splattered on the walls and on Damien and puddled on both sides of the bed. He swung again, liberating Ivan's head from the body, then into Ivan's chest. Damien, covered in blood, called the police and sat bedside in a puddle next to Ivan's head.

Price knew Damien deserved the death penalty just as much as any other murderer; he calculated every step with no remorse. Damien never admitted to doing anything wrong, either. Whenever asked if he felt sorry, Damien said, “He deserved it.” Perhaps he did. Ivan was a rapist, even if some didn’t believe Glenda.

The following day, it was announced that Damien Casey would be executed tomorrow. Glenda called twelve minutes past 10 to tell Price she didn’t want to interview but would be there for the execution. Price would be there, too. Damien chose death by electrocution rather than injection, an option made available in the state of Florida. Price thought Damien’s decision meant something, but an answer never came.

On Friday, Glenda and Price stood behind a one-way window with an older woman and two thirty-year-old men. The woman was Damien’s mother; she had the same soft eyes and the two men resembled her. The family held their heads low as they waited, and occasionally, they would burst into sobs. The woman shook and eventually had to be held by one of her sons. Price avoided eye contact with the soon-to-be bereaved family. He was no acquaintance of Damien. He embodied “the press” to that family, but he couldn’t figure how to act. Should I be indifferent or should I express my sympathy, Price thought. An answer never came.

A deep purple surrounded Damien’s eyes, which were bloodshot. Prison had not been good to him. He looked already dead as the executioner strapped him to the chair. His exhaustion was self-inflicted but inevitable; now only death could cure it. Price looked at Damien, who

didn't seem like a killer but rather a sad man who wanted to die. He noticed Damien's gentle eyes that, despite exhaustion and tears, never became distant.

The executioner offered Damien his last human right: final words. He said, "I wish my mother told me the opposite was also true." The executioner pulled the lever. The body convulsed and then stopped. He stopped being Damien — was he Damien even after he died? The family teared up, and the mother collapsed and screamed. Glenda and Price left the building tearless but with sunken eyes that never completely went back to normal.

In the courtyard in front of the prison Price asked Glenda a final question. "What do you think he meant?"

"He told me a story sometime before I told him about my rape. He said as a kid he was constantly worried some stranger would come and kill him and his family. He was so afraid he refused to go outside and threw a fit if they forced him to. His mom told him one night, 'Everyone is capable of good and of doing good things.' Something about the statement moved him to go outside and socialize. Over time, Damien noticed how true his mom's words were. He volunteered alongside convicted felons who were not mandated to do so. He witnessed drug dealers hand money and food to poor children. He wanted to bring it out in others, too. And I'm sure there are people out there that owe their inner goodness to Damien Casey. But I guess I'm responsible for him."