

Codell Detroit Fiction

A collection
of very short
stories

By K.G. Jones
A pseudonym



Cass Avenue, Detroit 1976

Photo courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library
Wayne State University

Prologue.

THESE ARE micro-stories and events, tiny tales, written to be read or heard. The worst stories, of course, are not read, heard or ever written. They happen without witnesses. Or witnesses never testify. These stories, though, are their own witnesses, testimonies to an earlier time, mostly circa 1980 in the Cass Corridor of Detroit, Michigan.

Tennessee Williams wrote in *The Glass Menagerie* that “in memory everything seems to happen to music.” Indeed, a number of these little fictions happen to music. One song in particular, the Cars’ droll hit “Good Times Roll,” could play like an anthem for all of these stories: *“Let the stories be told/they can say what they want.”*

This prologue will introduce the stories through the conventions of literature - voice, characters, setting (including Detroit, its cars, its music and its sports), symbolism, plot and meaning.



Cass Avenue, Detroit 1976

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The voice in these fictions is the narrator’s, not the author’s, which is one reason why the author has written under a pseudonym: you’re less likely to think that the author and the narrator are the same person. The narrator’s voice is apt for the characters, not effusive. It’s understated. There’s little emotional excrement. The diction is dense, terse, truncated, like the word “apt” instead of “appropriate.” The narration is third person past tense, with the exception of one first person story and one in present tense. Second person is rare, but occasionally the narrator looks at you the way the subject of a portrait follows you with her eyes and addresses you, like this sentence does now.

Most of these fictions can stand alone, but many are connected, a polylogy, like *The Arabian Nights* in which Scheherazade improvised for the sultan so that she would live to see another day. Or like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, told on a spring pilgrimage. The font in these tales, Book Antiqua, is an homage to Chaucer’s Middle English text.

The main character in these fictions is usually Codell, a wandering urban pilgrim far from urbane. Codell is his first name, and almost everyone says it wrong. It’s co-DELL. His mother, a character mostly *in absentia*, had her reasons for naming him Codell. We

never learn his last name. He called himself one other name, Dr. Blood, a private name that he outgrew. Street names in these fictions are real, as are most of the places. Names matter as much in fiction as they do outside of fiction. They often have meanings hidden within. Names can survive death, for a time, and then names, too, die.

Codell is not easy to like. He's got issues that aren't visible. For example, gastric disturbances, intestinal concerns, we'll say. He doesn't always smell good. He spends time in bars. He fails with women - something comes along to thwart a relationship or he thwarts it himself. He's as likely to not do anything when he should as he is to do something when he shouldn't. He's a dynamic character, changing from an impassive tourist in his own life to a participant in the world around him and the people in it. At times he could be a kindred spirit with Prince Myshkin in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* or with Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, estranged. Codell might be *The Stranger Idiot* or *The Idiot Stranger*. At other times things happen not because of Codell but to or around him, without explanation or apparent reason, like they happen to Josef K. in Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. At times, Codell's life is fantastic like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or the stories and novels of Gabriel García Márquez.

Codell walks a lot and rides city busses, and as a kid he painted them. Painted on them. Tagged them in red with his name. On the busses and off, Codell doesn't always know where he wants to go, but he gets somewhere. Not that it matters where. Sanguine becomes him. It's a quick journey, unended. Before you know it, the stories are over, but they may not let you go. Your mind keeps going. At least that's the intent.

There are a couple of regular inhabitants in Codell's world, Michael Blumenthal (MB) and Victor. They're your casts and they're outcasts. Codell and MB live in the same tenement across the hall from each other. Victor sleeps next door in a building as abandoned as he is. Victor drinks; MB doesn't. MB has to remember to take his meds; Victor's medication is alcohol. Victor's heart, to quote William Butler Yeats' "Sailing to Byzantium," is "sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal." Victor and MB shape Codell in ways they don't plan or realize. They're the closest thing Codell has to friends. Probably not your friends, though. They're people whom the vast majority don't want to see, smell, hear or touch: vagrants, drunks, the mentally unsound, wanderers, the unemployable. Residents without residences. Imagine that.

There are a host of minor personas as well: barflies and bartenders, Detroit Tiger fans, beggars, aliens, Black Elk, blue collar workers, a Bohemian artist, a bookie, bus drivers and bus riders, a Chimera, civil rights activists, a petty drug dealer, at least two ghosts, Hecate, a shiny lawyer named Buckholdtz, a man of letters, Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, the Rolling Stones, Mitch Ryder, Charley Pride and other musicians, Cupid, three FBI agents, prostitutes, a rabbit, a rat, and a three-legged dog named Jesus.

In fiction, in life, you can't understand people if you don't understand the setting, just like you can't understand Russia if you don't know about the Russian climate, and you can't understand America if you don't know about slavery and the Civil War. The setting here is Detroit, Michigan, the Motor City - Motown - or, once upon a time, the

City of Churches. There are foundational excursions to the 1960s. After that, most of the stories are set in 1980, give or take a year or two. Not every story has a time marker.

The weather in Detroit that summer of 1980 started mild. June was wet. By mid July, heat and humidity pushed in from the south. On the morning of July 16, 1980, intense storms and a derecho ripped through southeast Michigan. Winds in Detroit blew harder than 100 miles per hour. The derecho foreshadowed a political storm in national politics from which there was no break, no escape, and no turning back.

The specific setting for most of these fictions is Detroit's Cass Corridor. Codell lived at the north end of the Corridor near Wayne State University, a couple of miles north of downtown. The Corridor was bounded on the east by Woodward Avenue. Cass Avenue bisected and ran parallel to that thoroughfare. In Detroit, you were East side or West side, but the south end of the Cass Corridor was so close to downtown that the East-West distinction didn't matter much. Almost all of the characters in these stories are pickled in the brine of the Corridor. Some of the stories are set in bars, a pickling of another kind.

On its western flank, the Corridor was bordered by the north-south John C. Lodge Freeway, a snake of concrete and traffic through Southfield, a city of glass boxes. The snake went underground near Greenfield in a sub-surface canal where drivers with death wishes hauled through at a hundred miles per hour. If you were outbound from Detroit, when you got to Telegraph and Lahser - is it "LASH-er" or "LAH-sher" or "LAH-ser"? - the Lodge opened up and felt suburban, the Lodge felt suburban. It's LAH-ser.

Detroit had a reputation, and within Detroit the Cass Corridor had its own reputation. Again quoting from "Sailing to Byzantium," the Corridor was "no country for old men" for reasons that Yeats never imagined. It was reputed to be a place you didn't go especially at night. That was the view from the outside. These fictions are a view from the inside.

Settings sometimes take on certain colors, and the colors of these fictions are black, white and red. Is any American city more Black than Detroit? Yes, if you only counted heads in Detroit's dwindling population, but no if you look at the percentage of residents. Overheard: "Black people run that city."

Detroit's history of black and white is anything but black and white. It was before "black" was capitalized. The characters see their shares of red, the richest of colors in symbol and meaning. The contronym "carbuncle" - meaning both the red gem and a severe skin abscess - serves both the lovers and the haters of Detroit and the Cass Corridor.

Detroit was, and remains, more than a setting. It's an identity. Detroit was a synonym for the American auto industry, a source of Detroit pride. The Motor City was home to the Big Three auto makers, Chrysler, Ford, and General Motors (GM). But by 1980,

Detroit had a lot of rattles under its hood. The glory days of the 1960s and the Ford Mustang were gone. The new American cars in 1980, cars like the AMC Eagle, the Dodge Miranda, and Plymouth's K-cars, no one remembers. The only car Detroit offered that year with any longevity was the Ford Escort - not exactly a car that made you say, "WOW!" What Detroit made rolled against a pack of international competition. Detroit pushed for tariffs on the imports that American drivers increasingly preferred. The city endured public shaming and mocking on account of the Ford Pinto, a car with an unfortunate penchant for the gas tank to explode in rear-end collisions.

Car culture was not only the car itself; it was the Interstate highway system. Detroit and the Interstate highway system began in symbiosis. The freeways were touted as progress. But they were definitely not free. They were a juggernaut of urban destruction:

(1) The freeways eradicated and separated communities. Detroit threw itself under its own wheels, razing the Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods, at the time called "the Negro community." Housing projects were built for displaced residents, and how did that work out? It didn't.

(2) Freeways and the Projects exacerbated racial conflict and the city's decline. "Urban renewal" became known as "Negro removal." The highway system that roped around Detroit was a noose. Detroit garroted itself with the ribbons of white concrete. When riots exploded in 1968, highways facilitated and expedited abandonment of the city, the "white flight." The Interstate paved an escape to new suburbs with shopping malls and parking lots. It's no small irony that Detroit lived by the car, by making them, and almost died by the car as the city bled population. Codell stayed in the city. As much as cars meant to Detroit, the characters in these fictions don't own cars. They didn't have the money to buy them, and they couldn't afford to insure them, maintain them, or buy gas.

As integral as cars and expressways are to Detroit, so is music. Detroit blues, soul, gospel and jazz laid the foundation for Motown. Bluesman John Lee Hooker came from Mississippi to Detroit in 1943. Della Reese signed her first record contract in 1953. Dinah Washington, a presence in Detroit through her marriage to the Detroit Lions' star "Night Train" Lane, and the dynamic Jackie Wilson sang in multiple musical genres. They performed big and lived bigger. Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul, transcended time, releasing her twenty-sixth album in 1980.

Soul and the blues were real and jazz was hip, but in the 1960s, pop music meant Motown. Motown was the city, a recording label, and the music itself. The founder Berry Gordy's self-proclaimed "Hitsville U.S.A." was no exaggeration. Motown had no rival in its reach, saturation, and its superstars. Diana Ross and the Supremes had hit after hit. In musical genius, there were the prodigious Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson and Marvin Gaye. Along with many others - Martha and the Vandellas, The Four Tops, The Temptations, The Jackson Five, The Commodores, The Miracles, Gladys

Knight and the Pips, The Spinners - they took your breath away. But by 1980, notwithstanding Michael Jackson's album *Thriller* and Diana Ross's single "Upside Down," Motown was done in Detroit. The label and the artists were gone to Los Angeles and elsewhere. The Hitsville U.S.A. building would become a museum.

Motown was far from Detroit's only claim to pop music. In 1980, rocker Bob Seger and The Silver Bullet Band released the album *Against the Wind*. The same year, Seger's Detroit-born friend Glenn Frey broke up with the Eagles, and hard rock guitar hero Ted Nugent, the Motor City Madman, released his sixth and most successful album, *Scream Dream*. Mitch Ryder, after the Detroit Wheels had fallen off, attempted a comeback with "Ain't Nobody White (can sing the blues)." Alice Cooper, the proto-punk godfather of shock rock, hailed from Detroit, left it, and returned to it from Los Angeles in the mid-1970s. "[L.A. was] on the wrong kind of drug for us," Cooper said. "They were on acid and we were basically drinking beer. We fit much more in Detroit than we did anywhere else." Inspired by Alice Cooper, the Detroit band Death in the 1970s became the first all African American punk band. Wendy O. Williams (WOW) brought the Plasmatics and her chaotic, sexualized antics to a Detroit club on September 20, 1980.

Shock-rock and punk rock took root in Detroit. The Motor City 5 (MC5) had "kicked out the jams" in 1969, having earlier inspired the Ann Arbor group Iggy and the Stooges. In 1980, Fred "Sonic" Smith of MC5 married Patti Smith, who five years earlier had ridden *Horses* to punk rock posterity. Smith and Smith settled in St. Clair Shores, north of Detroit.

Less subversive, less direct and more melodic than the punkers and the shockers was New Wave. The mostly-British music could be twitchy, coy, not always what it seemed to be. David Byrne and The Talking Heads, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, Blondie, and The Human League white-washed American pop sensibilities. Detroit contributed The Romantics. In matching monochromatic suits, they looked like shiny versions of the Temptations and the Four Tops. Their single "What I Like About You" was only moderately popular at the time. A year before Wendy O's Detroit shock-rock show, the Cars played Detroit: *let the good times roll*.

By 1980, Disco - the word, the music and the dance all imported from European discotheques - had fallen as fast and precipitously as it had risen. The mainstream initially embraced Disco, but the mainstream was fickle. Public sentiment turned so badly on Disco that on July 12, 1979, baseball's Chicago White Sox sponsored a Disco Demolition Night at a double-header with the Detroit Tigers. Between games, a crate of vinyl Disco records was exploded on the field. Thousands of fans chanting "disco sucks" cascaded out of the stands. The damage to the field was so bad that the White Sox had to forfeit game two.

Disco was declared dead, but the death pronouncement was premature because Disco survived in various forms and ways. In The Spinners' cover of "Working My Way Back To You," Motown met disco and morphed into a smooth amalgam of mirrors, lights,

choreography, vocals, and color-coordinated outfits with bell bottoms and wide collars. Incongruously, the Rolling Stones contributed their disco-like song “Emotional Rescue.”

Disco also survived in house bands and house music. Funk, soul and R&B meshed with Disco in dozens of dance clubs. They could draw a few thousand partiers and go all night. The DJs were the stars. Disco was giving birth to Techno and electronic dance music (EDM). In the mid 1980s, a trio of Bellevue, Michigan teens founded Techno EDM.

Perhaps the music least expected in the Motor City was country-western. Yet country, blue-grass, honky-tonk and rockabilly were vibrant on WJR radio and in live shows, notably one by Charley Pride. Night transformed Alvin’s Finer Delicatessen near Wayne State University into the Twilight Bar where the Rockabilly Cats frequently played in 1980.

Like cars and music, Detroit’s professional sports play in these stories. The Detroit Pistons (basketball) and Lions (football), however, were absent from the city because both teams had left for the Pontiac, Michigan, Silverdome, the Lions in 1975 and the Pistons in 1978, *de facto* making them the Pontiac Pistons and the Pontiac Lions. Detroit’s new downtown venue, the Joe Louis Arena, was hockey home to the Redwings, known in 1980 as the Deadwings due to their 26-43-11 record. The Joe was also home to boxer Thomas Hearns, AKA The Hitman AKA the Motor City Cobra. Hearns fought four times at the Joe in 1980, tallying two knock-outs and two TKOs. His 30 and 0 record earned him Fighter of the Year.

Detroit’s baseball team, the Tigers, played at The Corner, the local shorthand for Tiger Stadium at Michigan and Trumbull. They were frustratingly mediocre in 1980 (84 wins, 78 losses), but their roster included the phenomenal pitcher Mark “The Bird” Fidrych, a national sensation who, on the field, talked to himself and the ball, hand-manicured the pitcher’s mound, won games, and drew capacity crowds. In August 1980, nagged by injury, the Bird pitched his last game in Detroit before over 48,000 “Bird watchers.”

Beyond Detroit’s sports, cars and music, there was, of course, a broad background for these fictions. An economic recession was underway. The federal deficit was nearly double the 1979 deficit. Inflation and unemployment were up. “Trickle down” economics was the catch-phrase of the day. Nineteen-eighty was a presidential election year, and the Republican National Convention was at the Joe Louis Arena. On July 17, the day after the derecho, the Republican Party nominated Ronald Reagan for President.

Of politics and economics, the characters in these fictions knew little and cared less. They were getting by each day, and that was enough. Codell could count the population of his world on his hands. His world, ever so small, loomed larger to him than everything else.

What characters do in their worlds leads to questions of plot or, more accurately, of structure. "More accurately" because although these stories are structured, they don't always conform to the conventional plot form of rising action, conflict, climax, falling action and resolution. In that conventional plot, events are points on a time line. Leo Tolstoy was a master, weaving multiple plot lines (*Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*) and plot lines that cross like the letter X (*The Death of Ivan Ilych*).

Problematical for literary convention, however, is that not all events occur sequentially and knitted smoothly together. They don't always fit together easily or well. Instead, they occur dynamically, randomly, haphazardly; they occur simultaneously at different locations, *i.e. concurrently, i.e. "with current,"* with now, their arms open to be random or haphazard. Then plots are *current* in an existentialist sense of *here* and *now*. **Plot = here + now.**

Surely we've opened a door to metaphysics. When events are contemporaneous, all happening at the same time, all time is contemporary and, in a sense, time stands still in that moment. When multiple events happen at the same moment, that moment is infinitely crowded with infinitely different events. The iridescent beauty of fiction is that it can free itself of time and bring any moments to life via any structure. It can imagine past and future moments. As Codell imagines in "The woman in the dumpster 2," "the sun reverses course in the sky and we remember our future. As we can plan our past."

Whatever the structure of these fictions, you may find symbols. Like clothes hangers in a closet and paperclips in an office, in literature symbols are ubiquitous. Every little thing means something - well, maybe. A rose is a rose, a weed is a weed, a window is a window, a praying mantis is a praying mantis - until it whispers that it is not.

Characters, setting, plot, symbols; put them together and you might have a theme. What does each story mean? Taken together, do they mean anything at all? Meaning grows in an inductive process. Said Sylvia Plath: "[t]he artist's life nourishes itself on the particular, the concrete: . . . that's where the magic mountains begin." The magic mountains can differ from person to person. For that alone, I leave the meaning of these fictions to you.

Are these fictions true? It is self-evident truth, wrote Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal. But surely that's bootstrapping, a circular argument. It's self-evident because it's true; it's true because it's self-evident.

What truth is, is that it's fraught with difficulties. If all men are created equal (a debatable premise), they don't stay equal for very long. And what about people of color and women? No, far from self-evident, truth can be inconstant, hamstrung in hindsight by subjectivity, and debated endlessly. Today's truth will not be tomorrow's; or tomorrow's, or tomorrow's. Time will have its corrosive way. As for me, I emulate the great essayist Michel de Montaigne: "I speak the truth, not to the full, but as much as I

dare." My reward has been the intoxication of creativity. I'm a happy prisoner of my own imagination.

Last, an apology and a prayer. I pray for your patience and pardon when you encounter in my imaginings some roughness, sordidness, crass sentiments or words that offend. They belong to the events, the city, and the time, all of which are my duty to set forth plainly, remaining as faithful to the characters as a good editor remains faithful to the voice of a writer. Literature and the Holy Books themselves are rife with foul characters and barbarous events. They stretch across cultures and generations, not buried by the sands of time but boiling to the surface for anyone to see. They provide an escape into life for those willing to face it.

So, dear reader, rise above the dulling, numbing hum of life's profanities, indignities and atrocities. My stories are imperfect. Their defects are solely the result of my deficits. For what they lack in perfection, may they make up in entertainment. For what they lack in entertainment, I beg your empathy and forgiveness.

/s/ your most humble servant, K.G. Jones



Cass Avenue, Detroit 1976. Courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.

List of Fictions.

Font color for fictions primarily involving Codell = red.

Font color for fictions primarily involving Victor = green.

Font color for all other fictions = black.

1960s.

1. What's in a name 1.
2. Look what I found.
3. The mark of a good lawyer.
4. The silverleaf tree.
5. Pretending à la mode.
6. How to catch a bus.
7. Pretend you're a retard.
8. The woman in the dumpster 1.
9. When fear fails.

10. **What do those lights look like to you?**
11. **Boner 1 - the bone of invisibility.**
Inspired by a passage in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.
12. **The crush.**
13. **The Talk and the tornado.**
14. **What's in a name 2 - pastime paradise.**
Title taken from Stevie Wonder's song of the same name.
15. **For whom the siren tolls.**
16. **The night monster.**
17. **Petty peddlers.**
Inspired in part by Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven."
18. **The culprit 1.**
Inspired in part by Anton Chekhov's story of the same name.

Circa 1980.

19. **GAStromy 101.**
20. **Bleeding season.**
21. **Veronica.**
22. **We shall overcome.**
23. **The unremembered moments.**
Inspired by Iris Murdoch in a passage in *Under the Net*.
24. **Helter swelter: vignettes on Detroit busses.**
25. **Coney god.**
26. **To think that it happened on Trumbull Street.**
Inspired by Dr. Seuss, "To Think That It Happened on Mulberry Street."
27. **It's a good life.**
28. **A good lesson for the kids.**
29. **Howdy.**
30. **Givin' this joe shit.**
31. **Looking good.**
32. **Not waving but drowning.**
Inspired by Stevie Smith's poem of the same name.
33. **The rube, snortin' it.**
34. **Appointment on Telegraph Road.**
Inspired by "The Appointment in Samara" as retold by W. Somerset Maugham.
35. **The gargoyle.**
36. **The culprit 2.**
37. **I'm not your friend 1.**
38. **Don't bet on it.**
39. **Canned heat blues.**

40. **Two archetypes.**
41. **What happened at the RNC.**
Based on a written account in the early 1990s.
42. **The Chimera.**
43. **The trouble with trickles.**
Inspired by "The Trouble with Tribbles," *Star Trek* season 2, episode 15.
44. **The difference between a fool and a hero.**
45. **I'm not your friend 2.**
Inspired by The Alan Parsons Project, "Breakdown."
46. **Waiting for Bardot.**
Inspired in part by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.
47. **Pretending to be a person.**
48. **Show me your panties.**
49. **I'm not your friend 3 - scared sacred.**
50. **Grunts at the crossing.**
Inspired in part by *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.
51. **Driven buggy.**
Inspired by Franz Kafka, "Metamorphosis."
52. **Kingly continuity:**
The history leading to "Exploding the Moment."
53. **Exploding the moment.**
Inspired by a passage in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.
54. **I'm washing my windows.**
55. **Tar Tar.**
Inspired in part by Joel Chandler Harris, "Tar-baby."
56. **Busted.**
57. **The Rolling Gees.**
Inspired by the Rolling Stones, "Emotional Rescue."
58. **When the wheels fall off.**
59. **The dance.**
Inspired by William Carlos Williams, "The Dance."
60. **Scaling a bluff.**
Inspired by Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.
61. **Star-crossed.**
62. **Detroit's Main Vein.**
63. **Urban camping.**
64. **Hail Hecate.**
65. **What does that cloud look like to you?**
66. **Seeing eye to eye.**
Part 2 inspired in part by Steely Dan, "Rikki Don't Lose That Number."
67. **Backsliding.**
68. **So sorry.**
69. **Playing Cupid.**

70. The woman in the dumpster 2.

Inspired by Gabriel García Márquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World."

71. Pendulum.

72. Yelling man.

Inspired by Leslie Silko, "Yellow Woman."

73. Negative images and other paradoxes.

74. Jack and the beanshock.

75. The rube at the Garden.

Inspired in part by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Garden."

76. The man of letters.

77. Black Elk pukes.

Inspired by *Black Elk Speaks*.

78. The woman with no face.

79. The King of Careful.

80. Justice rides a sloe horse.

81. Your (m)ass is bangin'.

Inspired by the Human League, "Empire State Human."

82. Pride in Detroit.

83. Boner 2 - Cindereally.

Inspired by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Cinderella,"
and by Robert Graves, "Down, Wanton, Down."

84. The power of one.

What's in a name.

THE NAME was no more in doubt than that she would have the baby and keep the baby. She couldn't afford an abortion, anyway, and she was nobody's fool to risk a home remedy.

She had a favorite uncle, Odell, and a favorite singer, Ella Fitzgerald. Nobody could sing scat like Lady Ella, and scat was her life in four letters. All her life, she had to improvise to get by. She wanted her baby's name to honor Odell and Ella, but she wanted an original name that didn't copy their names. She went through every letter in the alphabet. There was only one letter she liked, one letter a natural fit. If she had a girl, her name would be Codella. If she had a boy, his name would be Codell.

She mixed two teaspoons of liquid Drano with two teaspoons of her morning urine. The solution would turn brown or gold for a girl and green for a boy. It turned green.

Her pregnancy was difficult and her labor long. She pushed Codell into the world at dawn, bringing light to an overcast life. He was a big baby, her first. He had jet black hair and flat black eyes, simultaneously without depth and depthless. Later, she realized that there was a code in his name, a message, an ode between the C and the L's, between the beginning and the end. That was her baby boy, his life her gift, a life to be sung.

#

Look what I found.

CODELL SCREAMED and sat bolt upright in his bed, clutching and shaking his head. He blubbered so hard that his mother rushed him, still in his Super Chicken pajamas, to the hospital emergency room. They huddled to protect themselves from the rougher elements, the boy whimpering the whole time that there was something inside his head.

After a short wait that seemed longer, a nurse escorted them to an examining room. Codell kept shaking his head. The nurse was perplexed. She left and they waited forever for the doctor. The curtain finally parted, startling them, and the nurse came back in with a bedraggled doctor. Codell's mother again explained what had happened.

The doctor shined her light in Codell's mouth, his nose, one ear and the other. "Oh!" she exclaimed. Then, "I need a cigarette."

"Doctor?" questioned the nurse.

"I need someone who smokes." The nurse left and minutes later returned with an ambulance attendant.

"Thanks for coming in," the doctor said. "Light up and blow smoke in this handsome lad's ear. This one."

"Sure, doc, whatever you say." He lit a cigarette, inhaled, put his mouth to Codell's left ear, and gently blew.

A few seconds later, a tiny cockroach crawled out of the ear. The doctor plucked the little bug with a tissue.

“Look what I found! A baby! It must have found its way in after you went to bed. Are you feeling better already?” Codell nodded, eye lids drooping, half asleep.

The doctor folded the tissue and squished the roach between her thumb and forefinger. You could hear it pop.

#

The mark of a good lawyer.

THE MORNING after the emergency room doctor extracted a baby cockroach from Codell's ear, red marks showed up on his face. His mother was furious. The marks sure looked like insect bites. Cockroach bites. They must have bitten him during the night. First the roach, now this. The landlord was going to pay.

She rummaged through a drawer and found the card for the lawyer who handled the divorce, Lester Buckholdtz, Esq. He got the facts he needed over the phone - what happened, when, and where. "Do you have a camera?" he wanted to know. She didn't.

"That's alright, I can get you into my office this afternoon and we can take pictures here. Do you need a ride? No, wait. Don't come to my office. I'll send my secretary over to take the pictures. Vera."

A couple of hours later, Vera showed up at the apartment and took close-ups of Codell's face, his bedroom, and the interior of the apartment. The bathroom was in bad shape, so she took pictures of that, too. She had Codell's mother sign two copies of a fee agreement with Lester Buckholdtz, P.C., and left one copy with her.

Attorney Buckholdtz had Vera find out the name and address of the apartment building owner, and he dictated a short letter to the owner stating that he represented the building's tenant in a claim for personal injuries suffered from cockroach bites during the night of ---, 1961. "Please promptly provide this letter to your property insurance carrier." Included with the letter were copies of the photographs.

Three days later, Attorney Buckholdtz took a call from the landlord's insurance claims adjuster.

"Cockroach bites," said the adjuster. "Seriously."

"What do you mean, 'seriously.' Of course seriously."

"Cockroaches don't bite."

"They very well do bite. Look at the marks on the kid's face."

"Those could be anything."

"The poor child was in the hospital to get a cockroach out of his ear. Stayed up half the night. I can get you the ER records."

"So what. Did they see anything on his face? Did they treat him? Did they say 'cockroach bites'?"

"Doesn't matter. He could've got bit after they came home."

"You got a doctor or someone saying cockroaches bite?"

"Listen, they're nocturnal and they're hungry. You got a baby cockroach hiding in his ear, munching on ear wax or something. They're all over that place. Did you see the pictures? The bathroom? It's a dump. Does your slum lord client want to go to court over that? What do you think my Detroit jury would do with that one?"

"What do I think? I think it's laughable, that's what I think. He's not a slum lord. But it's not worth it. I can offer the medical pay provision without any authorization from the high-ups."

Attorney Buckholdtz agreed to settle the claim for the med-pay coverage. The next week's mail brought the insurance check, payable to Codell's mother and Attorney Buckholdtz, and a release of claims. "One hundred sixty dollars," said Attorney Buckholdtz to Vera. "Not bad for a form letter and a three minute phone call."

Codell's mother took a bus to Buckholdtz's office. "I'm happy to present you with this settlement of 106.67 cash, to the penny!" he said, after she signed the check and a release of claims, in that order. "We're not charging you for the photographs. Would you like to keep them?"

"Oh, no, you can have them. A hundred and six dollars! I am so happy, Attorney Buckholdtz! You don't know how much this helps. You are The best attorney."

"Thank you, thank you, you're too kind. Do tell your family and friends, now. And how's your son doing with those bites? Kurdell?"

"Codell. He's fine, just fine. Oh, those marks cleared up the next day. I never expected so much money so fast!"

"Remember when we did your divorce, I had you out of court in half an hour? There's no lawyer in Detroit can finish a pro-con faster than I can, no sir. If that's not the mark of a good lawyer, I don't know what is!"

#

The silverleaf tree.

ONCE UPON a time there was a little boy named Codell who lived in a big yellow house in a big city called Detroit with his father, his mother and his baby brother Winston. One fall afternoon, under a sky blue as a robin's egg, when his father and mother were inside shouting, Codell went out to play in the sandbox under an ancient maple tree, its canopy an inferno of reds, oranges and yellows. Codell plowed Tonka truck roads in circles that led to where they started. He was in an idyllic reverie, freed from time. There was no past; there was no future. All of time was now.

Within his time-free bubble, Codell hummed motor noises and outside sounds faded - the steady, distant purr of the Lodge freeway, the occasional growls of nearby cars, his parents' fighting, his baby brother's crying. Simultaneously, his bubble amplified minute sounds near to him: enigmatic machinations of sand beetles echoed off the sides of the Tonka. Above him, a breeze crinkled the colorful maple leaves.

As the sun coasted east to west, the tree's shadow coasted away from Codell. Sunlight encroached on the sandbox, an eighth, a quarter, a half, three quarters until the sun drenched Codell with light and warmth. The breezes grew to gusts, and the gusts twisted together into a wind. The wind wound up and spun, picking up speed with each revolution. And then the maple leaves snapped off the branches.

Codell looked up. Maple leaves whirled around and above him, faster and faster in a centrifuge with him in the center. Their warm colors turned to silver.

As quickly as it picked up, the wind stopped. The silver leaves, instead of settling to the ground, rose and formed a ladder of steps, each step a broad pad of

dozens of leaves, a shiny stairway leading up and out of sight, inviting him to climb to - to where?

Codell gingerly put a foot on the first silverleaf step and pushed. It was stiff. He stood on it with both feet and jumped. It was still stiff. He walked up a few steps and then, where the next step was farther off the ground than he was tall, and because there were no railings, he climbed on his hands and knees. The leaves were firm and shiny.

The sun inexorably wested, turning the silver leaves to gold. He focused on the end point of the golden stairs in the deepening blue sky above him. From the distance below him, he might have heard his parents. It might have been something else, the expressway traffic or the wind or his brother wailing. He did not look down and he did not look back.

#

Pretending à la mode.

CODELL UNLOCKED the apartment door and, as if in jubilation, high-kicked it open to startle his little brother Wilson making a bologna and mustard sandwich. “HEY!” Wilson and his sandwich popped in the air.

“Mom call yet?”

Wilson shook his head no. He picked the bread and bologna off the floor, crookedly put them together, and lifted the sandwich to take a bite. Codell grabbed it out of his hands.

“HEY!” Wilson screamed again.

“You want this?” Codell feigned surprise. “I thought you made it for me. You got a samwich factory here? Oh, here you go.” He handed the sandwich back to his brother, who ran to the bedroom.

Codell began making his own bologna sandwich. “Hey dog boy! Your feet were twitching when I woke up this morning. Woof, woof!”

The phone rang; Codell picked up. “Hi, Mom.”

“ ‘Hi Mom’? I didn’t teach you to answer a phone like that. What if it was someone else?” Her voice pierced his ear. He switched the phone to his other ear. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Eating a samwich, Mom.” Codell chewed into the mouthpiece and audibly swallowed for her to hear.

“Don’t talk when you’re eating. People can’t understand a word you’re saying.”

“Mom, you asked me what I was doing.”

“Well - don’t do it. Did you make your bed?”

“Yes, Mom, I - ”

“I mean taking it apart and making it, smoothing it out. How many times have I told you. I’m not going to tell you again. Make your bed the right way. Hear?”

"Yes'm. After dinner tonight, can we - "

"What's Wilson doing?"

"He's in the bedroom eating his samwich."

"Tell him the bedroom is no place to eat a samwich - sandwich. Tell him to get in the kitchen and eat over the table. Are you eating over the table?"

"Mom says get out of the bedroom and eat your samwich in the kitchen!"

"Don't yell in the phone! Tell him don't be leaving the crusts."

"Mom says eat the crusts!"

"My ears!"

"Sorry, Mom. Can we have something for dessert tonight?"

"Dessert? You think about dessert and you haven't finished what you have?" She sighed. "Don't ask me about dessert, I'm so tired, I type and I type and I type, and then I get 'can we have dessert.' "

Codell eyed the freezer. "What about it, Mom?"

"I *said*, don't ask me now! When I get home I'm making chili. Stop pestering me."

"When are you gonna be home?"

"I'll be home when I'm home, I don't know. You boys are to stay inside, hear? I won't be too late. You can watch TV. And clean up the mess you made in the kitchen."

"Who made a mess, Mom? There's no mess."

"You made sandwiches? Oh yes you made a mess. You made the mess, you clean up the mess. You do what I say, hear?"

"Third time, Mom. Yes."

"Not third time. Bye bye, honey. I have to get back to work. Be nice to your brother."

"Bye, Mom."

Codell went into the bedroom, grabbed Wilson by an arm, and yanked. "OWWW! I'm telling Mom!"

"Go ahead and tell, I'll tell her you ate your sandwich in here. I'll tell her you threw the crusts outside." He dragged Wilson to the living room and turned on the TV. *George of the Jungle* was on. Super Chicken's lion sidekick Fred was falling out of an airplane, and once again Super Chicken admonished him. "You knew the job was dangerous when you took it, Fred!"

"Mom says for you to stay inside 'til she gets home. I'm going outside for a while." Codell once more high-kicked the door which, being hinged to open inward, remained shut. "Aaagh!" Finding the handle, he hopped out on one foot.

Wilson marched after him. "Aaagh!" he mimicked, kicking the door and falling down.

* * * * *

When Codell got home, it was after dinner time. As quietly as he could he unlocked the door and peeked in. His mother was not to be seen. He pushed the door the rest of the way open and strutted in. Wilson, munching popcorn from a large, crumpled bag, sat on the living room floor in front of the television. It was the only light in the room.

"Where's Mom?" Codell whispered. Wilson watched the TV.

"Wilson, is Mom home?"

"Uh-uh," he said through a mouthful of popcorn, his eyes on the screen.

Codell raised his voice to a normal level. "Where is she?"

"I dunno. She's mad at you. You weren't home."

"You have chili? I'm starved." Codell went to the kitchen and found the pot of chili, warm but congealed on top. He grabbed a wooden spoon, stirred the chili, dished out a big bowl, and ate hungrily. He scraped his bowl clean and came out to the living room.

Wilson poured popcorn into a toy dump truck, drove it around the living room, and dumped popcorn where it was needed.

“Better park that truck in the garage, mister,” Codell said. “Mom’s not going to like popcorn all over.” He plopped on the couch, and Wilson backed the truck into the popcorn bag.

“Did you have anything for dessert?” Codell asked.

“No dessert.”

“I bet there’s something in the freezer. How about some ice cream? Chocolate, vanilla . . . mint chocolate chip. Blue moon. I bet she got something. Lickwish.”

“I don’t like lickwish,” Wilson said. “Is there any candy or cookies?”

“I bet she got both and hid it. Fudge, peanut brittle, candy cigarettes. Dots. Milk Duds! I love Milk Duds. And Bit O Honey.” Codell licked his lips. Wilson licked his lips.

“Remember that time Mom froze a Hershey bar? There could be a Hershey bar in the freezer. Or a Snickers. You know what?! She could have an entire pie. The store has frozen pies, pumpkin pie and lemon mur-rage. Know what?!” Codell came to his feet. “Know what?! We can have pie AND ice cream!” He skipped to the kitchen, Wilson scooting in his wake, and yanked the freezer handle. Wilson opened his mouth like a nestling.

“You can close your mouth, Wilson. There’s nothing in here.”

“Nothing?”

“Chicken and ice cubes.”

#

How to catch a bus.

CODELL WAITED respectfully with his elders at a Line 4 bus stop on Woodward inbound to downtown Detroit. The bus pulled up curbside and wheezed to halt. People started boarding at the front of the bus, their coins clinking into the fare box. Codell loitered near the rear exit doors. They whizzed open and a passenger exited. Before they closed, Codell stepped into the exit and squatted on the lowest step.

The bus wasn't crowded. A woman seated across from the exit doors watched Codell dispassionately. He held still as a bowl of fruit. The bus remained as unmoving as he was.

In a few moments, Codell was aware of a presence above him. He looked up. The bus driver's face loomed over him like a storm about to burst.

"Did you forget about the mirrors, sonny?"

"No, sir, I don't have any money, sir."

"Off the bus!" Codell put an arm over his head.

"I have to get downtown, sir." Codell lowered his arm just below his meek and pleading eyes.

The driver hesitated. "Why?"

"I have to bring my father his . . . lunch money. Sir. He forgot it."

"You just said that YOU DON'T HAVE ANY MONEY!"

Codell jumped out the exit and ran until the bus pulled away. Sanguine, he turned around and walked back to the bus stop.

A cross-town bus stopped at the intersecting street, and a dozen riders got off and made their way to the in-bound stop where Codell waited for the next coach. It

didn't take long. As the line of passengers filed on, another line of riders left through the rear exit where Codell lingered, out of sight of the driver. As soon as the last person got off, Codell again stepped into the stairwell.

This time, the bus was crowded. Several riders stood in the aisle, blocking the driver's line of sight to the rear mirror. Codell rode all the way downtown to Grand Circus. He smiled so sweetly for the glowering elders.

#

Pretend you're a retard.

"What do YOU want?" Codell stared at his little brother Wilson who aped the stare back at him. They wiggled until they freed themselves from the bed covers.

Their mother had already left for work. How could she go to bed after them and get up before them, day after day? Codell lazily swung his fist at Wilson and play-punched him in the mouth. "Hey!" Wilson objected.

Codell padded to the kitchen and poured orange juice and cereal for himself and Wilson. Wilson wandered to the toilet and then to the kitchen. "Go back and wash your hands," commanded Codell. He poured milk on their cereal and sat down to slurp up breakfast.

Wilson joined him at the table. "What we going to do today?" asked Codell. "Can't do much in the rain." Wilson shrugged and slumped.

"Feel like seeing a movie? I was by the theater, there's a movie, *Planet of the Apes*. It sounds good. The apes talk like humans and treat the humans like animals." His brother sat upright, eyes agleam.

"Too bad, I'm going alone."

"AAGH!" Wilson smacked his spoon into the bowl. Milk splashed on his face.

"You really want to go? Oh, alright. Finish your cereal." Wilson fished his spoon out of his bowl and ate.

They dressed and ran through drizzle to the bus stop. At the rear doors they snuck onto the bus and crouched out of sight of the driver's mirror view.

The buildings raced by the bus's windows. A couple of blocks from the theater, Codell pulled the cord to exit and grabbed his brother by an arm. Wilson looked as if he would scream again.

"Don't you say a word." Codell tightened his grip on the arm. "This is where we get off." The pair exited; the drizzle had stopped.

"Walk right next to the buildings and stay way back from me," Codell said. "When I get a ticket, sneak up to the ticket booth when I tell you to. You got to sneak up. By the time you're in front of me she won't see you because you're a punk. Understand?"

"I'm not a punk!"

They approached the ticket booth, Wilson hanging way back and hugging the buildings out of sight of the ticket booth.

At the ticket booth Codell stood on his toes. "Good morning, ma'am. *Planet of the Apes*, please."

"It's just starting. If you hurry, you can make it before the doors close."

She punched a button; a ticket popped from the metal slit in the counter. Wilson bounced to the doorway of the adjoining building. Codell put down a five dollar bill, and the woman swiveled to a cash drawer. Codell glanced sidelong at Wilson and fluttered his hand at his hip like the wings of a sparrow. Wilson scurried, water from the building's roof dripping on him, and squished himself between Codell and the ticket window. With his legs and belly, Codell pressed Wilson against the booth.

The woman swiveled back to the window with the change and looked left and right. "Did someone just run by here?"

“Someone run by here?” Codell pushed his knees into Wilson’s back. “No ma’am.”

Change and ticket in hand, Codell stepped to the lobby door, Wilson caterpillaring along the wall in the same direction. Codell opened the lobby door and turned back to the woman in the booth. “Do you have the time, ma’am?”

She looked at her watch. Wilson scooted through the door. “11:15.”

“Thank you, ma’am!”

Past the concessions in the lobby stood a resolute young ticket-taker in a pasted-on smile. “Pretend you’re a retard,” Codell whispered to Wilson.

“Aagh,” croaked Wilson. “Better than that,” Codell whispered imperatively. They closed on the sentinel and Codell presented his ticket, Wilson two steps behind, dragging a foot.

“Wait a minute,” said the ticket-taker. “Where’s his ticket?”

Wilson raised an arm in front of him and dangled it at the elbow. He contorted his fingers and limped his hand at the wrist. “Ouoh-ouoh-ouohg,” he drawled, dribbling spittle. The ticket-taker’s face wrinkled.

“Ticket! Are you making fun of my brother? Can’t you see he’s not right?” Codell tried to make himself cry.

“No, no - I didn’t know.” Codell and Wilson kept walking into the theater like they belonged there.

* * * * *

The lights were down, *Planet of the Apes* was rolling, and the two boys struggled to constrain their laughter. “Did you see him look at you? I can’t believe it! That was perfect!”

Wilson raised both of his hands and dangled them from his wrists. “Ouoh-ouoh, ouohg,” he drawled, pushing out his lips like some kind of primate.

#

The woman in the dumpster 1.

DUMPSTER DIVING gave pleasures and treasures, so Codell made it his habit. They stank sometimes, so you held your breath. Every once in a while it was worth it. Usually nothing good, but you never knew.

This time Codell was in luck. He lifted the lid of a dumpster, and there on top was a magazine with a naked woman on the cover. The title of the magazine was in big red letters that seemed to throb: *Female Masturbation*. Codell snatched it, rolled it up, and pushed it into his backpack.

In his bedroom that night, Codell pulled out his find. It was full of black and white pictures of women touching and holding their crotches. Some of the pictures had writing underneath them, like "Lolita's a nice girl: a girl who puts it in for you." "Maria's pretty religious. You have to date her a couple of times before she puts out." "Dolly hopes you enjoy her pectoral pictorial."

Codell flipped to the center of the magazine where a color picture took up two full pages. A woman with boobs larger than Codell knew existed sat on a red blanket, her legs spread. With both hands she held a long, thick, sausage. One end of it was between her legs, inside of her. Her head was cropped off in the picture so that she only showed from the neck down. Codell couldn't stop looking.

After several minutes, he rerolled the magazine into a stiff coil, held his breath, slipped it into his back pack, and went to bed. He kept thinking about the woman's missing head. It was like she had been beheaded.

#

When fear fails.

“WAYNE, WAYNE,” called out a man’s voice from a ball of light above Detroit’s Fort Wayne. It was a ghost. Codell and his little brother Winston stared as the ghost broke up into luminescent motes and floated the way bread crumbs drift soundlessly under water, and in their fearless ignorance they ran toward it, but it flickered like a defective street light and went out.

The fort was cool and so ancient that Indians were buried in the mounds outside. It was in the shape of a star and overlooked a narrow part of the Detroit River, strategically located lest the Canadians cross the river and attack. Codell and Winston lived there with their mother, downriver from Detroit. Not in the fort, but in a soldier building. They got moved there a year ago, after their house burned in the riots.

Not long after they had braved the ghost, the two boys set out with their mother on a day trip up to Belle Isle. It was Wilson’s first time to the park, and it was a picture-postcard Saturday morning in June. They put on shorts, packed lunches, and rolled towels. Codell got his fishing string, tied to a safety pin for a hook and a nut for a sinker, and his cockroach cage. It was a Chinese cricket cage that his mother had given him when he was little.

“Hold it right there, young man.” His mother looked pointedly at the cage.

“I need to find out if cockroaches make good bait!”

“I don’t care what kind of bait they make, I paid good money for that. It stays home. Take a piece of bread.”

Belle Isle was a long bus ride from Fort Wayne, Line 19 up Jefferson Avenue with a lot of stops along the way. They got a transfer at Cass and Lafayette to Line 67, and

the bus got crowded. A woman settled heavily across from them and spilled into both adjacent seats. Wilson's eyes widened. "She's *fat!*" he exclaimed. The woman frowned at the impertinence and looked disdainfully over their heads.

Codell punched Wilson in the shoulder. "Don't go calling people fat," he said. "She's not fat. We say 'large.'" The woman shifted her eyes to their mother.

"No, we do NOT say 'large,'" his mother reprimanded. "We say NOTHING. I am so sorry," she said to the woman. "I am mortified. *Mortified.*" The corners of the woman's eyes twitched wanly.

The bus rode Jefferson up the Detroit River, and Belle Isle came into view. They transferred to another bus and took a wide, long bridge out to the island. Wilson gawked at the river. "How deep is it?"

"Over your head, that's all you need to know." Codell and his brother had no more experience in water than a fish had on land.

The bus dropped them off near the center of the island. It was huge. In the middle of it, you can't tell that you're on an island. The island is so big, it has lakes on it, and the lakes are big enough to have their own islands.

A 15-minute walk from the bus carried them to a shady table inland at the park. They ate their lunches and scrounged up a stick to use as a fishing pole, and then it was a short walk from the table to the beach. Before they even spread their towels, the boys splashed headlong and hooting into the river. They both stayed close to shore. Their mother watched until they returned and dried off.

Codell picked up the fishing stick with the string, safety pin hook, nut sinker and bread crust. "We're going fishing," he declared.

"Pardon me?" said his mother, with more ice than the mid-day sun could melt.

"May we please go fishing?"

"Yes, you may. Be careful. I'll be here reading. Keep an eye on Wilson."

"Don't worry, he's more afraid of water than I am."

A short distance from the beach, the Detroit Yacht Club dominated the island shoreline. Codell and Wilson contemplated the grid of docks. Two men on their way in from the docks carried fishing gear and life jackets.

"Excuse me," asked Codell, "which dock is a good one to fish off?"

"Fish off a dock here? Take your pick, they're all the same," one of the men laughed. He surveyed the two boys with their fishing stick. "What are you, kid?"

"What am I?"

"Mulatto? Hawaiian?"

"No, I dunno, we're jus' fishin'."

"It's a private club, you're not supposed to be here unless you know a yacht club member."

"Yes, sir, yes sir, we do know a member," said Codell. The two men looked doubtful. They continued in toward the club.

Codell and Wilson walked out on a dock shaped like a T, turned left at the top of the T, and walked to the end. Codell tied the string to one end of the stick, tore a piece from the crust, hooked it on the safety pin, and dropped it into the murky water. The nut sinker quickly carried it out of sight. After some few seconds, he pulled it up. The bread was gone.

"I want to catch a big fish," Wilson said. "Use a bigger piece of bread."

“That won’t help. We need better bait. I wish mom would’ve let me bring my cockroach cage.”

“You should’ve brought goldfish crackers.”

Codell baited another piece of crust on the safety pin and handed the stick to Wilson. “Here, you try.”

Wilson dipped the tip of the stick into the water. “Keep the stick out of the water,” Codell ordered. “You’ll scare the fish away.”

“I think I caught something!” Wilson yanked the stick up and, because the string and safety pin were still in the water, he walked backward – off the other side of the dock. He barely made a sound.

“WILSON!” Wilson plunged straight down, the top of his head sinking out of sight. He let go of the fishing stick. The stick hovered below the surface.

“**HELP!**” Codell jumped in feet first and tried to grab the fishing stick thinking that he could reach Wilson with it, but the coldness of the water, and the realization – the instant, tardy, fearful realization that the water was over his head, too – these stunned him. He flailed and his hand hit something hard, a wooden dock pylon; it was green and furry and the water was green and above his head the blue sky was warping and getting farther away. With both hands he grabbed the pylon, cold and slimy, water up his nose, gasping water into his lungs, and he shimmied his hands up the slimy pylon, pulling himself up until his head broke through into the air, sweet precious air.

“**HELP ME! HELP ME! HELP!**” He slipped back under the water, again water up his nose, everything under water colored and clouded green, again pulling himself up the slippery wood, head again above water, coughing up water and crying for help, the

pylon above the surface dry and warm, clinging to the pylon putting splinters in his hands, sobbing for Wilson someplace deep beneath him unseen and horrifying. In a matter of minutes strong hands lifted Codell out of the water.

* * * * *

In their nest of towels on the beach, the boys' mother listened to the sirens cross the Belle Isle bridge. She watched the police and fire department race to the yacht club. She felt it in her stomach, in her chest, in the entirety of her being, and she ran to the docks where a crowd had gathered. In the pandemonium, someone's foot kicked the bread crust into the water where it drifted down and the fish fed on it.

Hours later, their towels remained on the beach where they'd left them. The police drove Codell and his mother home. The June air was warm, but Codell could not stop shivering.

#

What do those lights look like to you?

THE LIGHTS appeared the night after Wilson's funeral. His big brother, Codell, tossed in the bed that the two had shared. It was all wrong, the empty bed. It didn't feel right; didn't sound right; didn't smell right. Everything that should've been, wasn't.

At the funeral, people he had never seen before looked at him. Adults hugged too tight. "We're so sorry." "We're praying for you." Everyone wore black.

Not black, however, but every color of the rainbow were the lights in the boys' bedroom. Through closed eyes Codell sensed light puncture the darkness of the room. When he opened his eyes, tiny, intensely colored lights flitted every which way above him. Unimaginable shades of red and violet pulsed and glowed. "MOM! MOM!"

His mother rushed into the bedroom. "What is it?!"

"What are those lights!?"

"What lights?"

"Those lights!"

"I don't see any lights, honey. I don't see any lights." She wrapped herself around him. "You're okay. You're safe with me. It's okay."

Codell relaxed in her arms. "They're gone. They disappeared."

"I didn't see anything, honey."

"They were at the top of the room, like flying Christmas lights, smaller."

A few nights later, the lights showed up again in the bedroom, and then a few nights after that in the living room. Codell was afraid of them. His mother took him to

an eye doctor, who dilated his eyes and examined him. She had no explanation for the lights.

After church the following Sunday, they told their pastor. He had a quick and ready explanation: "Those are angels."

"Angels?"

"Angels. Everyone's been praying for you. People you don't even know."

"Angels?" repeated Codell's mother.

"Do you think he's lying?" said the pastor. "He was afraid. It was real. When you see something you've never seen before, something no one else sees, you're afraid and you can't fake it. That's what happens in the Bible every time anyone sees angels. They're afraid. You're special, young man. Praise the Lord, sister!"

"I thought angels were like giant birds," said Codell.

"Birds, eh?" said the pastor. "Birds of pray, maybe. Birds of prayer. They can look like birds if they want. They can take whatever form they want. Did you see a lot of them?"

"Yes. I don't know. They were fast."

"They're there for you, to reassure you, to put you at peace. Like your brother's at peace, now. Don't you feel reassured?"

* * * * *

That night in bed, at some infinite time long before dawn, Codell woke from a shot of adrenalin. He lay on his back, tense, eyes open, scanning. The bedroom ceiling went opaque, translucent, and softened like a melting marshmallow. Through it, a human-looking creature, like the angels in pictures, sliced down through the ceiling, its

huge white wings outstretched to slow itself, wings wafting a breeze through the entire room. He, or she, Codell couldn't tell which, knelt silently, odorlessly, at his bedside for the longest time. When it started to get light outside, the creature opened its wings and lifted itself up through the ceiling, the longest of its feathers brushing Codell's shoulders. He felt cold in the down-draft and pulled the covers over his head.

#

Boner 1 - the bone of invisibility.

Inspired by a passage in T.H. White's trilogy, *The Once and Future King*.

HARVESTING THE bone of invisibility was a mistake.

It started when Codell's uncle Odell said that rats were impossible to catch. They have a secret bone, his uncle said, that made them invisible. Codell wanted that invisibility bone more than anything.

The opportunity came when he found a freshly dead rat by a dumpster. He didn't want to be disgusting, so he picked up the departed rat by the tail and dropped it in a plastic bag to bring home and boil. The next day, as soon as his mother left for work, he got out her biggest kitchen pot, plunked in the rat, filled the pot with water, covered it, and lit the burner. His mother would be proud that he turned the fan on.

It went swimmingly. After a while the water percolated, giving the rat's limbs and tail the illusion of vitality. Codell, no stranger to his mother's kitchen, got a carving knife to cut the rat into serving-size pieces to speed up the process, but thought better of it so as not to damage the bone of invisibility.

By late morning the rat and water, indistinguishable from one other, bubbled in a thick, furry gunk of blood, bile and innards. The tail, undissolved, twisted like oversized spaghetti. Codell put a big colander in the sink and strained the steamy stew. Just like his mother did when they colored Easter eggs, he spread newspapers on the kitchen table and dumped the gooey - *substance* - onto it. Bones were abundant - long ones, knobby ones, big ones, small ones, dark ones, light ones. One bone, two bones, red bone, blue bone. There were a lot of bones. Dozens. Only then did Codell pause.

He would have to test every bone for invisibility. Every. Single. Bone.

He got a mirror from the bathroom so he would see when he turned invisible. It occurred to him, his clothes would still be visible, so when he went outside he'd have to go naked. How long would he stay invisible? What if he was outside and he became visible without any clothes on? Would he have to hold the invisibility bone the whole time? Maybe he could put it on a necklace. But wait; if he was invisible, wouldn't his eyes be invisible, too, and he'd be blind? No, he'd absorb light or the light would wrap or warp around him or something. That's the only way invisibility made sense.

With a long handled wooden spoon, he spread the oozy rat matter over the newspapers. Were those teeth? They were so tiny; how many teeth does a rat have? The long bones, they must be ribs; they were flexible. The skull broke up into multiple bones. What if the invisibility bone broke up, too?

It was past time for lunch. Codell wasn't exactly sure when his mother would be home, but he had too many worrisome questions to stop and eat. What if it had to be inside of him to work? What if the invisibility was enough for a rat but not enough for a human? What if he had to do something for the invisibility bone to work? Were there magic words? Was there a rat king he had to pray to? What if the bone had to be from a live rat? *What if the invisibility bone was invisible?*

The questions overwhelmed him. He was thinking too much. It was just as possible that the bone of invisibility could stay mixed together with all the other bones. After all, it worked that way for the rat. All he had to do was get it to work for him.

Codell placed both hands palm down in the warm sludge. He believed with all his heart, the invisibility bone would work. It would work. He closed his eyes,

breathed deeply, and imagined himself invisible. He could scare his teachers, get on a bus without paying, hide from anyone, spy on anyone, go into the girls' bathroom.

"Rat King, oh Rat King, I summon you to vanish me, please make me vanish."
He concentrated on his fingertips and they became numb and invisible. He did the same with his toes. The invisibility spread up his arms and legs to the rest of his body and his head. He concentrated so intensely that he didn't hear the key turn in the apartment door lock.

"WHAT IS ALL THIS?" It was definitely not the voice of the Rat King.

* * * * *

It took a long time for Codell to clean up the kitchen. Memories of the consequences, too severe to put into words, faded over time. Their disappearance was a grand irony. It was not those consequences, but his mother's words, that he remembered years later:

"You got it all wrong. Your mistake was not boiling the rat. It was thinking that you need a bone to make you invisible. You're already invisible. It's the bone of visibility that you should search for."

#

The crush.

Codell's mother had forgotten the Tide. But on the floor of the laundromat, she found some left-behind laundry detergent. They were nuggets of gold when you didn't have money for soap from the vending machine, enough to get a load started.

Not far from Codell and his mother, a woman in tight jeans and a loose low-cut top folded clothes. "What are you staring at, boy?" spat Codell's mother. Codell blushed.

"What ridiculous eyelashes," she sniffed, glowering at the woman in the jeans. "Spindly legs." She shook her head disapprovingly. "She took a eggbeater to her hair." The woman flicked her hair with the back of her hand the way you'd shoo a fly.

His mother started a load of clothes and left to fetch her Tide, leaving Codell to safeguard their laundry. Over the rumbling washers and dryers, a transistor radio played the Temptations' "I Can't Get Next to You:" *the things I want to do the most / I'm unable to do . . .*

A loud clang sounded from just outside, startling everyone. The woman in the low-cut top swiveled to look outside, knocking her stack of clothes to the linoleum. She frowned and bent low to pick them up.

Something quickened inside of Codell. He quickly stepped toward her and gathered up her laundry. "Why, thank you!" said the woman. For no reason that Codell could name, he stepped close to her, tongue-tied, feeling warm. She was so close, he thought she could hear his heart pounding, that she could feel the clamminess of his hands, that she could smell some kind of aroma he exuded. But she did not move away from him. "How nice of you to help me."

"You're welcome." It was reflexive, what his mother had taught him to say, and it was all that he could say, not knowing what else to say. She dipped her chin towards him, eyes smiling. "What's your name?" she asked.

"Codell." He yearned for her to take him seriously.

The washing machines groaned. "COD - el? Like the fish?" She leaned in to him.

"Co-DELL, like co-operate."

"How old are you, Codell?"

"My birthday was last week." His voice was flat.

"Happy Birthday!" She clapped her hands. "What toys did you get?"

* * * * *

Codell, lugging the clothes basket, and his mother walked home, his would-be manliness washed away with the Tide. He couldn't understand. Her words replayed in his head, "*What toys did you get?*" It came from her heart, or whatever organ occupied that place within her.

"You need to start using deodorant," said his mother. "I can smell you from here."

#

The Talk and the tornado.

CLOUDS CONGEALED in the south-east, obscuring the sun. A strange shade of yellow dulled the sky and the air settled dead and heavy upon everything. Codell's uncle was anxious to have The Talk before the storm was forecast to start. His nephew was thirteen. No silly birds and bees; he was going to be direct. He'd promised his sister.

"Come with me for a little drive," he said to Codell. "There's something your mother wants me to talk to you about."

"Okay," said the boy. "Why don't we talk here?"

"We need privacy. Don't worry, you didn't do anything. It won't take long."

Codell's uncle drove them to a park and turned off the engine. They sat in the car and looked to the horizon, where clouds piled up in a dark vista of cumuli. In easy-to-understand, age-appropriate, and anatomically accurate terminology for both genders, Codell's uncle explained procreation. Out of sensitivity and lack of necessity, dear Reader, in this account the details are omitted.

By the time Codell's uncle finished, fat tears of rain splattered the windshield. "I hope you understand," the uncle told his nephew. "Do you have any questions?"

"Yes," said Codell. "How does the sperm get through the clothing?"

In the distance a charcoal rotation dropped from low, flat-bottomed clouds and spun itself into a funnel. The entire sky poured into it, a twirling spectacle of immense force. It belittled everything on the ground.

#

What's in a name 2 - pastime paradise.

"Pastime Paradise" title taken from Stevie Wonder's song of the same name.

MY NAME is fearsome, Dr. Blood thought, and some day it will be world famous. It wasn't the name his mother gave him; it was the name he gave himself. No one would mess with someone named Dr. Blood. He imagined being a doctor, and blood was what doctors dealt with. The name sounded right, like a dentist named Dr. Smiley. Like his shop teacher Mr. Wood.

* * * * *

Painting was a pastime of Codell's when he was young, but he was shy about it. He had a brown paper bag to carry his paint; it passed for a lunch.

With a swagger, Codell got off the Detroit city bus downtown. Some store doors yawned open, some remained closed behind metal fencing. The oblique morning sunshine diffused through the haze and heralded another blazing afternoon.

Codell headed for the Greyhound depot. It covered a block. The sleek coaches entered at one end of the bus garage and departed from the other. Codell approached the garage exit. Inside, the behemoths were parked diagonally, some rumbling, some silent.

A security guard sat on a stool at the garage exit. A coach rolled out, its driver and the guard exchanging waves. Codell strode into the garage as if he belonged there.

"Hey! Hey kid, you can't come in here."

"Pardon me, sir. Is this the Greyhound station?"

"Yes, it's the exit for buses. You have to go through the front for tickets. Go left and then to the end of the block."

"I'm sorry, sir, where?" Codell walked to the guard and read his badge: Carl Wickman.

"Around the corner. Left."

"Uhhh . . . which way is left?"

"What are you, stupid, boy?! You don't know which way 'left' is?" Carl Wickman motioned with his arm like a swooping bird and jerked his head to the left. "Left!"

Oh, yes, sir; thank you, sir." Codell retreated out and around the corner, walked the length of the block, entered the terminal, and located the depot's offices. He pulled open the office door and took a few steps, his head barely above a tall counter before him. The door bumped closed, shutting out the terminal hub-bub.

A woman behind the counter stood to see him. "May I help you? Are you lost?"

"No, Ma'am." He held up his brown bag. "My dad forgot his lunch, he works in the garage. Carl Wickman. Can I bring it to him?"

"You're Carl Wickman's boy? I didn't know! You can't go in the garage, sweetie, but I can make sure he gets it." She held her hand out.

"Is there a way I can give it to him myself? So I can surprise him?"

"As easy as you said it, honey. That will be fun." She picked up a microphone and pressed a button on its base. "Carl Wickman to the front office," her voice echoed through the building. "Carl Wickman, front office."

"Thank you, Ma'am." Codell picked up an old magazine. The woman sat down. Neither could see the other above the counter. Codell quietly put down the magazine,

crouched, cracked the door open, and squeezed out. A few minutes later, Carl Wickman came in. "You paged me?"

"Your son's here with your lunch! He's the most polite young man - "

"What? I don't have a son."

The woman stood up, puzzled. "He was sitting right there."

* * * * *

By the time Carl Wickman got back to his security station, Codell was inside the garage. He darted between two parked buses. In the few feet separating the buses, he took a can of cherry red spray paint out of his paper bag and popped off the cap.

From inside the bus station where passengers waited, through large windows, light spilled into the garage. Some passengers sat; some wandered about. Ensnared in the shadows between two buses, Codell's heart pounded. He didn't dare to shake the can; it would be too loud. He jammed his forefinger down. The nozzle spewed red.

The first letter on the Greyhound took shape in red slashes. Codell rushed each stroke, down and right, right and down. The hiss of the nozzle echoed in the confine between the two buses. By the time he had painted the **B**, the first **D** had started to drip. Codell cursed the imperfections but kept painting, too hurried to correct any flaws.

As Codell finished the first **L**, footsteps fell in the garage and fell nearer to him. He flattened on the concrete floor and shimmied under the bus. Two voices talked about air conditioning and moved past. Dr. Blood slid back out from under the bus and resumed: **O**. Each letter brought him closer to the windows and the passengers' tattle-

tale eyes. He worked closer and closer, perilously close. When he finished the final **D**, he was only thirty feet from full light. He admired his completed name: **DR BLOOD**.

He dropped again to the garage floor and wriggled to the other side of the bus, leaving the paint can behind. From there, he walked to the garage entrance, his pounding pulse betraying his nonchalance. "Hi!" he said exuberantly to the entrance guard.

Dr. Blood needed to get home, but first he circled around the Greyhound building to the exit where Carl Wickman sat eating a sandwich, not far from an empty four wheeled luggage cart. Dr. Blood skipped to the cart and leaped on, the cart clattering, his inertia sailing him by Carl Wickman.

"Hey, Dad!" Dr. Blood said. "How's your lunch?"

"What? YOU!" Dr. Blood hopped off the cart and pushed it as fast as he could out the exit, Carl Wickman in pursuit. The cart careened on the sidewalk and a pedestrian, jeopardized by the erratic course, jumped out of the way. The cart bounced against the depot wall. Carl Wickman, half eaten sandwich in hand, gained ground. "HEY! HEY!" he shouted, waving his sandwich, and the cart vaulted the sidewalk curb, skating in front of a car and the car lurched to a halt, horn blowing, and Dr. Blood tried to stop but the forward motion pulled him farther into the street and collided against the front tire of a second car. It screeched to a halt, driver wide eyed, unaware as to who or what she had hit or been hit by. Dr. Blood abandoned the cart and ran. Carl Wickman dropped his sandwich, swore, and dashed after the cart. Traffic stopped in both directions, horns sounding in urban cacophony. The driver of the car got out and started a Chinese fire drill, searching for damage or, for all she knew, a body.

* * * * *

Dr. Blood grinned all the way home. The Greyhound would take his name all over the country. He would be famous. A jet flew far above, and he pictured his name on the side, carrying him to the whole world. He would have to learn how to paint DR BLOOD in other languages - Chinese, Mexican, Canadian.

#

For whom the siren tolls.

DAILY EXPERIENCE proves that one person can safely violate a rule while for others a violation could be fatal. The difference is fundamental, but the first person is oblivious to it. To the second, the difference is definitive, obvious, and life-shaping.

Case in point:

NO TRESPASSING, read the oversized block letters on signs adorning the chain link fence around the private high school's football field. A sign hung every fifty feet, NO TRESPASSING. At the bottom of each sign etched in red were the school's name and a tiny red cross. A padlock secured each gate to the field. NO TRESPASSING.

Inside the fence, the field was a still-life in the breezeless autumn day. Football fans the night before had decorated the stands with colorful candy wrappers, pom-pom fronds, plastic pop bottles, styrofoam cups, and the occasional single glove, all waiting for the weekend custodian to pick up.

* * * * *

On the Sunday after the game, a man got out of his Buick outside one of the gates at the football field. He reached up his arms as if to pluck the sun from a picture-postcard sky. He wore blue running shorts with a matching top. After checking the gate - sometimes the groundskeeper forgot to lock it - he walked to the far end of the field, water bottle in hand, where the fence was only waist-high. At the base of that section of the fence, a cinder block served as a step to hop the fence. He tossed the water bottle over the fence, turned the cinder block on end and stood on it, grasped the top of the fence, and vaulted in. In another minute he was on the track stretching, then

jogging. In the announcers' box above the bleachers, the weekend custodian prayed: *I sure hope that old guy doesn't have a heart attack.*

From afar, a siren sounded, its urgency screaming louder and closer to the field. The jogger spotted the custodian and felt relieved. He took comfort in the certainty that, if he needed help on the track, the custodian would call 911, and an ambulance would be on the way to help him.

* * * * *

On the Sunday after the game, Codell and his homeboys walked to the football field and inhaled the picture-postcard day. They wore old shorts and dark, comfortable hoodies. After checking the gate - sometimes the groundskeeper forgot to lock it - they walked to the far end of the field, football in hand, where the fence was only waist-high. At the base of that section of the fence, a cinder block served as a step to hop the fence. They tossed the football over the fence, turned the cinder block on end and stood on it, grasped the top of the fence, and vaulted in. In another minute they were on the field throwing the football around. In the announcers' box above the bleachers, the weekend custodian prayed: *I sure hope those hoods don't see me.*

From afar, a siren sounded, its urgency screaming louder and closer to the field. The kids on the field spotted the custodian and felt afraid. They took off in the certainty that the custodian had called 911, and the police were on the way to bust them.

#

The night monster.

CODELL SWEATED himself awake, his heart a pounding creature trying to escape his chest. The nightmare was so real. He was on some kind of battlefield in a red haze. There was a lot of smoke drifting upwards; it smelled of marijuana. Soldiers fought each other at close range. Two of them were at the trunk of a tree. A giant arm and hand came down out of the haze, and the giant thumb and forefinger lifted one of the soldiers by his head. As the soldier's hands pushed against the monstrous fingers, the monster squished his head and dropped the writhing body.

It got worse. The haze began to clear and revealed that the huge tree was actually a leg of the giant monster. From out of the dissipating smoke, the monster's torso and its head became visible. The monster picked up a second soldier, the one that the first soldier had been fighting. He started screaming. The monster held his body with one hand and with his other hand tugged one of his legs. His scream increased to an ear-splitting shriek. The monster pulled the leg off. With the oozing stump of the unattached leg, the monster smeared the soldier's body with the soldier's own blood, and popped the soldier and the leg into his mouth.

Codell ran. The battlefield ruptured open into a huge chasm, swallowing all the soldiers. Then through the red haze, the monster reached for Codell.

#

Petty peddlers.

Inspired in part by Led Zeppelin, "Stairway to Heaven."

ON A BLUSTERY day Codell once again went to JP's. He walked to the covered stairway that had been added to convert the two story house into a two-unit. The lower door of the covered stairway was closed but unlocked. He opened it and peeped up the steep steps. The stairway had settled so much that you could see through the cracks between the stairway and the house. The wind blew like a whisper through the gaps.

A single light bulb illuminated a second door at the top. Codell climbed the crooked stairs. At the top, he raised his hand to knock, saw that it was slightly ajar, and instead knocked on the door frame. "JP? You here?"

"Codell?" JP's voice was high pitched. "Jista minute. I'm on the can."

Codell shifted from foot to foot. He studied the textures and curls of the door's peeling paint. A toilet flushed and a minute went by. He knocked again. "JP?"

The door sprang open. Codell lurched back, grabbing the rail to catch himself.

JP towered over Codell and laughed. "Don't be alarmed now! Let me guess what you want."

"I need some weed, JP. I gotta make some money."

"Do you?" squeaked JP. "Why don't you broadcast it to the world?"

"Alright, c'mon in," he squeaked again. "Close the door behind you."

Clothes and fast food trash littered JP's living room. The aroma of marijuana permeated everything. JP pushed aside a cluttered coffee table and plopped on a worn couch. Codell cleared an area in front of a clothes dresser and sat on the floor, back against the dresser, facing JP.

"Hey, that's my dresser." Codell scooted forward and sat upright.

JP turned on a small television set. A black and white picture wavered. He turned up the volume. "Presented by Blue Liquid Wisk!"

"How much weed?" JP asked.

"What?" asked Codell.

JP scrounged on the coffee table and came up with a potato chip bag. From it he pulled a quart size plastic bag of dry, yellow-green marijuana.

"How much?" repeated JP, indicating the marijuana.

"Johnny, tell us about our first item up for bid," said the TV.

"Ten joints," Codell answered. "And two nickel bags."

"Bill, it's living room furniture."

"What?" squawked JP.

"Twenty magnificent pieces and they're all yours if THE PRICE IS RIGHT!"

"Ten joints and a dime bag," said Codell, scootching closer to the coffee table.

Leaning against the couch was a cafeteria tray, which JP set on the coffee table. He put the bag of pot on the tray and frowned. He removed the seat cushions from the couch and dug with his fingers in the cracks of the couch.

"Higher! Higher! Bid higher!" The voices in the audience blared and overlapped.

"Twenty-four hundred, Bill."

"I'm going to freeze," said the TV.

"Damn," muttered JP. He started taking everything off the coffee table, one thing at a time.

"The actual retail price is: one thousand - six hundred - AND ONE DOLLARS!"

“What are you looking for?” Codell asked.

“AND a dashing red velvet ascot,” said the TV.

JP went to the dresser and redistributed what was on top of it. He ransacked the drawers, removed the couch cushions again, replaced the cushions again, got down on all fours, and reached under the couch. After several handfuls of waste and one shirt, he pulled out a packet of rolling papers. He plunked the papers on the cafeteria tray and plunked himself back on the couch.

“Oh! Oh! I’ve always wanted to go to Rome! Oh, oh! Oh, Bill!”

“You were looking for papers?” Codell pointed at the window sill. “There’s some Zig Zags right there.”

“What? I know that. I wanted these ones.”

“It has two full baths and three bedrooms,” announced the TV.

“I can’t hear you,” said Codell.

“Elegantly carpeted.”

JP began rolling skinny joints. The TV picture flickered; the show contestants and audience shouted. Codell’s head was humming. He watched JP roll the joints quickly, adroitly. JP came up with a box of plastic sandwich bags. He snapped a bag open, put ten freshly rolled joints into it, and dropped the bag on the cafeteria tray.

“Next in the home sweepstakes - ”

“Ten joints,” JP squeaked. “How many bags? How much?”

Codell looked at JP quizzically, cocking his head to hear.

“Yes, it’s a player piano!”

“I can’t pay right now,” Codell said.

JP lifted the cafeteria tray and his voice. "How much do you want?"

"Oh! A dime. Dime bag."

JP snapped open a second sandwich bag and dumped some pot in it. He shook the bag, rolled it up, and licked the inside top. Pressing the inside top against the outside of the bag to seal it, he tossed it to Codell.

"Mr. Lowell, it is yours, congratulations!"

Codell bobbed the bag in the palm of his hand and scrutinized it. "Not a dime bag."

"Final item, final item, comin' up - an INBOARD BOAT!"

"WHAT did you say?!" shouted JP. He turned the TV down. "It's a dime bag. That's good shit. Lots of flowers. Heavenly."

"Heavenly," concurred the TV in an odd coincidence.

"Okay, it's a dime bag." Codell stuffed it in his shirt. "Can you give me my joints?"

"Five thousand five hundred."

" 'My' joints?" said JP. "Where's my money?"

"Elizabeth?"

"I told you I couldn't pay right now, JP." Codell fidgeted.

"Five thousand six hundred."

JP held up his hand and rubbed his thumb against his middle finger. "Money first, dope second."

"All of you overbid, so we're going to give you one more chance."

“I don’t have it right now, JP. I got to sell it to pay for it. I’ll pay you after.” He looked imploringly at JP.

“Do I look like a bank? Pretend there’s a sign on the wall: no credit, no loans.” JP crossed his arms and Puckered. [sic] “There are two paths you can go by. One, pay now. Or two, pay now. You can’t change the road you’re on.”

“JP, you did it before with me. You know I’m good for it.”

“You can be sure all that glitters IS gold on this lamé suit with matching boots!”

Codell grabbed the bag of joints off the cafeteria tray. “You can trust me, JP!” He turned for the door.

“Give us the big winner there, Bill.”

JP grabbed Codell’s wrist and twisted him around. Codell winced. “I take pity on you, kid. Ten bucks by next Friday.”

Codell pulled free and bolted out the door and down the steps, the wind whistling through the seams of the stairway, his feet following the cry of his spirit.

“You come back and see us again, Elizabeth.”

* * * * *

At home, Codell closed his bedroom door, reached beneath his bed, and retrieved a checkerboard game in its box. He inverted the box cover and dumped in the contents of the dime bag. From a pocket he procured the Zig Zags from JP’s window sill. He rolled several thin joints from the dime bag and divided the rest of the bag into two new “nickel” bags. Next, he broke open the ten joints that JP rolled and rerolled them into twelve thinner joints. He would have no shortage of buyers. He’d pay JP for the joints

and double his money on the bags. It was too easy. It made him wonder. It really made him wonder.

* * * * *

Long after, JP turned off the TV. A couple of flies buzzed around, and from the kitchen came the hum of the refrigerator. He looked around the room. "Where's that dime bag?"

#

The culprit 1.

Inspired in part by Anton Chekhov's story of the same name.

HEAD HANGING, Codell balanced in uncomfortable shoes between an assistant prosecuting attorney and his court-appointed attorney in a Wayne County courtroom.

"Step forward," intoned the judge. An undertone of murmuring from behind the empty jury box went silent. "You stand before this Court charged with larceny from a building in violation of Michigan Compiled Law 750.360. My understanding is that you wish to plead guilty to this charge. Do you understand the charge against you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You think so? Did your attorney explain the charge to you?"

"Yes."

"Do you understand that this charge, larceny from a building, is a felony that carries a maximum prison term of four years?"

Codell shifted from foot to foot. "Yes."

"Very well, then. How do you wish to plead?"

"What?"

"How do you wish to plead? Guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

"Say 'your Honor,' " prodded the court-appointed attorney.

"Your Honor."

"So you took the candy bar from the Mobil station?" asked your Honor.

"Yes, I took it. If I didn't take it, I wouldn't be here." Codell gave a side-long glance at the courtroom wall behind the jury box. Half a dozen dark old portraits of dour old judges watched the proceedings.

“What was it? An Old Henry candy bar?”

“O Henry.”

“The report says you put the candy bar in the pocket of your trousers. You were leaving the gas station when the attendant stopped you. Why did you take it?”

“I was hungry.”

Did you plan to take it?”

“Plan? No, no plan. I was hungry. How can you get through the day without eating, your honor?”

“You know that was wrong. You chose to be dishonest.”

“Yes sir, dishonest was better than being hungry.”

“That candy bar wasn’t yours. You knew that.”

“They had lots of candy bars. Boxes and boxes. I only took one!”

“What if every hungry person took one? There wouldn’t be any left.”

Codell, incredulous, screwed up his eyes at the magistrate. “I’ve been in that store lots of times. There’s always a lot of candy bars.

“It was my bad luck to be hungry right then,” Codell muttered, looking downward.

“We’re not making much progress here,” the judge said to the two attorneys. “Is there a plea agreement?”

“Yes, your Honor,” responded the defense attorney. “The plea is offered under Holmes. We move that the Court withhold judgment of conviction and assign the defendant to youthful trainee status.”

The judge turned to the assistant prosecuting attorney. "Is that acceptable to the state?"

"Yes, your Honor."

The judge turned to the defendant. He was watching the court reporter. Whenever anyone said anything, the court reporter typed, and when they stopped talking, the court reporter stopped typing. "Pay attention," the judge chided Codell. "Is that your request as well?"

"Pardon?"

"Something like a pardon. Has your attorney told you about youthful trainee probation? The Holmes Act?"

"Yes. Sherlock Holmes." The judge eyed the defense attorney, who inhaled deeply.

"Is it your request," said the Court, "that the Court accept your guilty plea pursuant to the Holmes Youthful Trainee Act?"

Codell lifted his eyebrows inquisitively to his attorney, who nodded his head.

"Yes sir." His attorney let a big breath escape.

"The Court accepts the guilty plea. No judgment will be entered at this time pending successful youthful trainee probation, to which status defendant is assigned. Thank you, counsel.

"This is a break for you," the judge admonished Codell. "Don't let there be a next time." Codell wanted to ask why the judge was wearing a bathrobe.

* * * * *

The courtroom emptied for lunch, and the venerable jurists in the frames on the wall above the jury box, as they were wont to do, talked it over.

“He wanted a candy bar, so he took a candy bar. It was spontaneous.”

“How could he understand the charge or the consequences. Taking a candy bar, a four year felony!”

“Of course he didn’t plan it.”

“Is it better to be an honest thief or to go hungry?”

“The boy did not repent or reproach himself, only his bad fortune, his circumstances.”

“He will be no better than his birthright and his actions.”

“He has already established himself in life. His character, his inclinations, his shortcomings.”

“To the contrary, the Stoics would have him recognize and remedy his shortcomings.”

“He didn’t comprehend the purpose of the tribunal. You could hardly say that he attended.”

“He attended as much as we did,” said the paintings on the wall.

#

GAStromony 101.

TUNA PACKED in oil had more calories than tuna packed in water for the same cost, so that's what Codell bought. He got out a couple of cans, a bowl, and a spoon. He opened the cans, used the tops to strain and drain, and dumped the tunafish into the bowl. From his refrigerator, he took a jar of Miracle Whip sandwich spread - ersatz mayonnaise - and scooped a mound of the gelatinous substance on top of the tunafish. He mixed it together and dug in. The Miracle Whip hit the spot, smooth and cool. He ate an apple to the core and washed it all down with water. He washed the cans, bowl, and spoon. The empty cans went into a plastic bag under the sink, tied up to thwart his cockroach roommates.

* * * * *

In making grilled cheese sandwiches, don't spare the margarine. Spread it to the edges. For crisp, even grilling, use frozen bread. Use Wonder Bread and Velveeta cheese. Nothing costs less or tastes better. It's fast and filling. Dark bread is good too, but Wonder Bread never spoils. That's the wonderful wonder of it. It's genius. Like Stevie Wonder singing happy birthday to Martin Luther King.

* * * * *

Apples. Apple sauce. Bananas. Bean soup. Bisquick. Bologna. Cheerios. Chickens, whole. Cooking oil. Everything green from Eastern Market. Frozen fries. Hamburger Helper. Mac and cheese. Margarine. Milk, two percent. Nuts. Onions. Oranges. Orange juice, frozen. Peanut butter and jelly. Pickles. Popcorn by the pound. Potatoes. Quart-size beer on sale. Ramen noodles. Spam. Tuna in oil. Velveeta. White bread and dark rye.

* * * * *

Nothing is more black and white than binging on White Castle sliders. Those oniony, miniature square burgers were a luxury, but they were worth it. For a couple of bucks and a long walk, you could get eight of those suckers. The grease will coat your throat all the way home.

* * * * *

Codell was a mess inside. He variously had bad breath, acid reflux, bloating, and gas at both ends. His flatulence was so rank that a blind man with a dog mistook Codell's gas for the dog's gas and apologized. Codell didn't correct him. At the Bronx one time, Codell expelled gas that sounded like a duck quacking. The guy on the stool next to him made a face but didn't say anything. "Par-DOON," Codell minced, and the guy next to him used his middle finger to scratch his cheek. The bartender was more direct: "sometimes you smell like you're dead on the inside."

* * * * *

His gas metamorphosed into a more substantive element. In the Bronx's men's room, on its only working throne, he oozed. He sat for a few minutes, waiting to make sure that his anal discharge had ceased, listening. Someone had come in and gone out twice. He wore black boots. He came in a third time and knocked on the door to the stall. "Shit or get off the can!" Codell flushed and, grinning, surrendered the reeking premise. Black boots closed the stall door behind him: "stinking scum!"

* * * * *

Codell needed to work out some gas. He stood in his apartment a few feet from a wall, facing it. Then he stood on his head, now facing away from the wall, with his

heels against the wall for balance. From his headstand he pushed up into a handstand. From headstand to handstand to headstand to handstand, Codell pressed up his body weight. Blood rushed to his head. With each extension up, his arms quivered a little more. Up and down, up and down, up and down; down and up, down and up, down and up, his inverted room was in motion. After ten times, he dropped to his hands and knees, breathing hard, face flushed and heated. He caught his breath and repeated the routine three more times. Shoulders aching and arms rubbery, he stood gas free and reacquainted himself with the upright perspective of his room.

* * * * *

After beer, Codell's piss was pale as water. It was insipid. *What's more insipid, your grin or your will?* There was safety in the Cass Corridor for the insipid, even for the tepid. But never for the meek or the timid.

#

Bleeding season.

“FIVE DOLLARS! STADIUM PARKING!” Codell hollered. There was ease in his manner and pride in his bearing. “STADIUM PARKING! FIVE DOLLARS!”

The stadium rose from Michigan and Trumbull, the Corner, the local moniker for the Detroit Tigers’ home field. As sure as April heralded the arrival of spring, the Corner attracted Tiger fans and opportunists. The fans sought parking places, peanuts and popcorn; the snacks drew sparrows breeding in the overhangs at Brooks Lumber, Checker Cab, and the TIGER STADIUM PARKING billboards. Every vacant space, gas station, driveway and front yard became a source of parking lucre.

Codell worked a lot on Trumbull north of I-75 where some structure had been razed. At the driveway entrance, he waved in the automobilized Tiger fans. It was easy to spot them flowing up from the expressway ramps in slow moving, clean new cars full of Tiger regalia.

One of them rolled down his window. He and his wife and kids were all decked out in Tiger navy blue, orange and white. “Five dollars? That’s it?” he asked Codell.

“Yes, sir,” Codell said, doffing his Tiger cap.

The driver handed over a five spot. “You got the cheapest parking around!”

Codell smiled with Christian charity. “The less I charge, the sooner I fill my lot; the sooner I fill my lot, the sooner I’m done working!”

“You gonna stick around and keep an eye on the lot, right?”

“Yes, sir!” Codell said.

For a second, doubt flickered in the driver’s eyes, but he wanted to believe just like he wanted to believe in his Tigers. They’d started that 1980 season losing six

straight games, but hope sprang eternal. Hope was named Trammell and Whitaker, Parrish and Petry, and Mark “The Bird” Fidrych. Hope meant anything better than last year’s fifth place finish.

For Codell, 1980 was the season of hope rewarded. Directing the Tiger faithful to park in “his” lot, he was where he was meant to be. He was content with the lot to which he had been led. The cup had been poured for him; should he not drink it?

The game started at sunset and by then Codell, \$150 richer in parking charges, had already hopped an outbound bus to his neighborhood pub, the Bronx. It was Friday and the place was full, but he snagged a bar stool. The Tiger game was on TV, just starting. Codell stayed for the whole game. The Tigers blew a lead in the ninth and gave up three in the eleventh to lose. But hey, they were in it to the end! Tomorrow was a new day, a new game. The fans couldn’t wait! And neither could Codell.

* * * * *

It was after 11 p.m. when the Tiger fans who had paid Codell the bargain parking fee of five dollars made the long walk over I-75 back to their cars. When they got to the lot, they found a steel cable across the driveway that blocked them from leaving. The owner of the lot and his sons were charging ten dollars a car to get out. “Fraud!” they cried - less genteel words to that effect. The owner called the cops on them.

#

Veronica.

THE CHURCH of Our Father of Detroit, always on the left side of liberal causes, towered like a Michigan lighthouse, beacon to a safe harbor. A destitute mother and her three children, fear in their eyes, suitcases and teddy bears in tow, sought refuge at the rectory. “Mi esposo tuvo que regresar a Mexico,” she said. “No tenemos documentos de identidad.”

There was no hesitation. The rectory’s dormitory could accommodate the family and the church could provide sanctuary until they obtained legal status and housing. The mother - Veronica - wept tears of joy and gratitude: “es un milagro.” “I wouldn’t go that far,” said the rector.

Members of the Church of Our Father of Detroit adopted the family and provided a wealth of resources, not only food and shelter, but counseling and health care. The nearby Free Legal Aid Clinic put Veronica in touch with immigration attorneys.

The days ticked by. As close as her children kept to their teddy bears, Veronica kept to her rosary and a faded, thin, rose-colored cloth the size of a handkerchief. She carefully, precisely folded the cloth around the rosary, tucked them into a small pouch, and went nowhere without them. The cloth, she said, was sacred. It was impressed with the image of Jesus. He looked weary and gray, older than he was usually portrayed, and unhandsome. He had thick eyebrows and a big nose.

She reverently exhibited the cloth to anyone and everyone. “¿Ves Su rostro?” she asked, holding the cloth up to the light the way you would a hundred-dollar bill. The

response was always the same. “No.” “Él te hablara,” she replied, smiling. Some of the church-goers avoided her as if they were afraid.

The rector had to admit that he did not see the face of Jesus, either. As for whether Jesus spoke to him, well He did his gentle, tolerant best with Veronica, trying hard not to be dismissive or condescending. Veronica could not explain the inexplicable, but her faith was as strong as it was humble. She read from her book of devotions: knowing our own unworthiness, we should not be surprised if an encounter with the Lord is uncomfortable or distressing. Is there anyone in the Bible seeing an angel who was not afraid, stunned or stricken? Did not the apostle Paul himself fall to the ground?

On a too-warm late June day, Veronica sat on a bench in front of the church to pray her rosary. A work crew was putting the finishing touches on a newly-poured section of the sidewalk. A lanky teen-ager stepped around the fresh concrete. Veronica respectfully declined her head and lifted her rosary to him. He paused, contorted a heavy eyebrow, and went into the church. She spread her rose cloth on her lap and prayed the Mysteries of Identity that Jesus of the cloth had spoken to her:

1. God is all, forever.
2. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of Man, the Son of God.
3. The Holy Spirit animates us as it animates the Church.
4. The source, the life and the destiny of our identity is communion with God.
5. We are children of God and therefore heirs.

She finished the Hail, Holy Queen - *that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ* - knowing surely who she was, she crossed herself. At the same time, the lanky

teenager burst out of the Church of Our Father of Detroit and bounded down the steps.

On his heels was the rector:

“STOP!”

Veronica’s English was limited, but **STOP!** needed no translation. The boy was no good Samaritan - and her reflexes were inspired. She stuck out her foot; he tripped over her lower leg and face-planted in the new sidewalk, impressing his image into the cement. Veronica jumped up, clutching her rosary. Her hallowed cloth popped up from her lap, carried in the breeze, and settled next to the teenager, stunned and gray, the suffering face of Jesus joining him in the slop.

#

We shall overcome.

CODELL WAS a regular at the Bronx bar, a block away from his apartment building. In Detroit's Cass Corridor just about anything could happen, and the Bronx bartender put up with just about anything. Late one weeknight, no one was in the place except the bartender, Codell, and two saturated patrons sharing a couple of pitchers. Maybe it was more than a couple. The two friends realized at the same time that their bladders were full, but the men's room only had one working urinal. The other urinal was out of order and taped off. Should've been no problem. One drunk would use the working urinal and, because the bar was empty, the other would use the women's room, right? Nope. Instead, one drunk went to the men's room. The other stood, turned his back to the bar, and urinated in a beer pitcher.

When he finished, he turned unsteadily to see if the bartender was watching. The bartender, a conglomeration of sternness, tolerance and restraint, crossed his arms.

"If you ever do that again," the bartender warned, "I'll have to throw you out."

That depravity was, surprisingly, more tolerable than the everyday annoyances that Detroit's Cass Corridor could throw your way.

Take, for example, one of the other Bronx regulars, a middle-aged man with silver hair and glasses with thick, black, plastic frames. He wore a dark suit that looked like he'd been wearing it since the 1950s. Stolidly affixed to his bar stool, he drank his beer interminably slow. He always sat at the corner of the bar near the door. He and Codell knew each other by sight but not by name. Codell named him his "buddy."

Buddy moved little and talked less, so when he slammed his hand on the bar one night, it made Codell and the bartender look. A second later, he slammed the bar again,

harder, palm down. Codell turned toward him and shrugged his shoulders and raised an eyebrow as if to ask, *what?* Buddy frowned.

“Cockroach. Missed it.”

“Both times?”

“Yah.”

“Didn’t know they were on this side of the street,” Codell deadpanned.

Buddy pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “They *own* this town.”

* * * * *

Unfortunately for the human inhabitants of the Cass Corridor, Buddy was substantially correct about cockroach prolificacy. Cockroaches were a fact of life that the Bronx bartender, and pretty much everyone in the neighborhood, put up with. Detroit was the City of Churches, but the Cass Corridor was the Corridor of Cockroaches. From the temple of the cupboard in Codell’s efficiency apartment, the scurrying of cockroaches reverberated like a distant hymn: “We Shall Overcome.”

The building management fumigated every month to kill the roaches and who knows what other vermin. The super never said when they would do it, but you could always tell by the smell. The poison didn’t seem to do much, at least to the cockroach population.

The failing fumigation meant that tenants all shared their apartments with cockroaches. Codell got used to them. He scared them more than they scared him. At first he tried to kill them, but their shells were so hard, they didn’t squash easily, and there were too many of them. If one was out during the day, Codell spied on it,

fascinated by the back and forth motion of its head and its methodical roaming for offal. They reigned as scavenger T Rex in the urban insectarium.

Cockroaches were voracious and indiscriminate eaters. They ate what you ate, and what you wouldn't eat. Codell kept his food in containers, but cockroaches didn't limit themselves to the kitchen. You would think that they couldn't get into refrigerators or that the cold would kill them, but Codell found them there alive. If you left out an unsealed envelope, they'd eat the glue off it. They'd eat the glue off postage stamps. In the bathroom, they would eat off your toothbrush if you didn't wrap it up. Their droppings looked like caraway seeds.

If a roach roommate was really large, Codell would catch it and keep it for a while in an Oriental cricket cage his mother had given him when he was a kid. They were hard to catch. They ran in straight lines, but they ran a lot faster than you'd expect, incredibly fast, and they leapt when they were in danger. When Codell came in late or was up during the night, in the kitchen sink there would be dozens of them. If he had the right equipment, a big net or trap or lure or something, he could've caught hundreds. He could be the Pied Piper of cockroaches. He could process them into high-protein food. He could end world hunger. He would win a Nobel prize.

#

The unremembered moments.

Inspired by Iris Murdoch in a passage in *Under the Net*.

THE LINE 4 outbound bus was late. Codell paced behind the bus bench with no place to go. On Woodward Avenue, cars blurred by, a stream of motion and colors.

A flag on a building across the street stopped fluttering, not drooping but stiffly suspended as if a bell jar sealed the whole scene.

In the street in front of the flag, black lettering on a yellow van proclaimed *A to Z Adhesives*. The van's exhaust hung in the air, the driver hitting the gas. *I'm going to make this light*. He clenched his teeth and the steering wheel.

Behind the adhesives van that did not want to get stuck at the light, the driver of a beige Colt turned her head toward Codell. Her windows were rolled down. In the back seat, a terrier thrust its head out the window and sniffed. *What smells, they thought*. The terrier and the woman wore red scarfs over stringy hair.

On the opposite side of the street, a silver Civic with purple wheel rims bounced to a deep beat. Behind tinted windows, the passengers passed a joint, their minds open. *Cause I'm on, I'm bad when I'm talking to you, there are four fly brothers who can do it, too.** The car crawled forward.

Behind that thumping slow ride, a Caprice eased off, the driver tapping the brakes, imagining the naked body of a coworker.

Waiting to cross Woodward, a man in a suit grimaced. His wallet was missing. *She took it!* he thought, but he had dropped it. He wanted to strike back at the galactic Force that always brought him bad luck.

Hurry, thought a bicyclist on a heavy-framed Kuwahara with time-warped wheels. On the handlebars hung an oversized basket; cloaked in the basket knelt a large faced, large eyed extra-terrestrial creature. They were pedaling to 1982.

On the sidewalk, a man in red and white plaid pants and a tee-shirt stood almost toe-to-toe with a petite, irritated woman in white questioning up at him. They'd seen each other before or would see each other again. *She's Brigitte Bardot*, he thought.

A young person with hair cropped like David Bowie's hunched on the bus bench, bewildered by genders, pronouns and names: *Robin, Pat, Chris, Kim, Terry, Casey, Tracy*.

Two seats away, an older woman sat legs together, purse on her lap, hands on her purse. Her mind was far away. *How long has the dent in the microwave oven been there?*

Catching a puff of breeze, the flag fluttered on the building across the street. The exhausted driver of the adhesives van ran the red light, the Colt ground to a halt, the Civic and the Caprice stopped, the bicycle left the pavement on a rising trajectory, the man in the suit sputtered, the man in plaid and the woman in white passed one another, the young person channeling Bowie ruminated like Rodin's Thinker, and a mysterious dent befuddled the older woman. Codell walked to nowhere, indifferent to the urgency of each moment, moments continually born, continually dying, ephemeral, trivial and vital - essential to this timed and timeless phenomenon we call life.

* *Sha-Rock* of Funky 4 Plus 1, "That's The Joint" (1980).

#

Helter swelter: vignettes on Detroit busses.

AS BIG and cool as a refrigerator, the Line 4 bus driver took a long slug from his Vernors bottle and blindly, nonchalantly, dropped it back in the cup holder. Beads of condensation dripped down the sides.

There was nothing quite like an ice-cold Vernors Ginger Ale on a summer day, golden and caramelized, its sweet hyper-carbonation energizing you from the first sip. Made and bottled right in Detroit on Woodward Avenue, "it's what we drink around here," Vernors touted.

Codell stepped off the bus to be blasted by 95 degrees Fahrenheit. When the bus pulled away, you could see the air distorted and wavy. The super-heated exhaust smacked him. It stank.

Codell stopped, turned around, crossed to the west side of Woodward, and walked to the Vernors bottling plant. It was a long, two-story, green and yellow building, the front of it all glass from floor to ceiling. From the sidewalk you could watch the bottles flow through the bottling machinery getting filled, capped, labeled and boxed. There was no end to it, no rest for the conveyors. The syncopated clacking reverberated through the windows. Codell's mouth watered. Beads of sweat dripped into his eyes and stung him to the quick.

He wiped the sweat away and stuck his hand in his empty pocket. Kicking a pop can into the path of the next bus, Codell drank the heat.

* * * * *

The Woodward bus is almost full. Codell gets on; he's looking for someone or something. He sits next to an old lady in love with Jesus. He knows this because she tells him. Fennie is her name.

A woman in a pale green sleeveless dress and a thousand-yard stare sits across from Codell and the old lady.

A woman gets on, pays the fare, and slumps into the first open seat. She wears brown pants, a matching top half unbuttoned that exposes her bra, and a plastic name tag that says "Jacey" in script. She sticks a hairy arm into her top and pulls out a pack of Virginia Slims. She taps the pack on her thigh, staccato style.

A man with a womanly face takes the seat closest to the bus driver. He's smooth shaven and maintains a beatific smile of alabaster teeth. His lips are full and the nostrils of his nose wide. His eyes, beneath long lashes, focus on the floor. His knees are close together. He clasps his hands in his lap as if in prayer.

From a faded black backpack, a teenager pulls a thick book and opens it. He wears glasses with metallic red frames. The frames have no lenses.

A loquacious young person with short-cropped hair talks to a man and a woman across the aisle. "Some days I feel like a boy and some days I feel like a girl. Today I felt like a girl, so I put make-up on."

"My son got hit by a city bus," a heavy-set woman says to the woman next to her. Neither of them looks at the other. "The driver didn't see him." The other woman shakes her head. "Mmm-mm," she hums mournfully. "Did you sue the DOT?" "No. The lawyer say it too late. Jus' chalk it up to the sad."

Two elderly women share a seat and lean into each other. Their hair is the same color, the same length. They hold hands. One says to the other, "I'll stay with you."

Two women talk about the recession. "You got *two* jobs, girl? I can't find *one*."

A man with a Bible is impeccably dressed. He has hazel eyes, heavy eyelids, and rimless spectacles. His lips are pursed as if he's about to say something, as if his mouth will pour ten thousand words. Codell waits expectantly, but Bible man says nothing.

A man at the front of the bus vomits into his hands, which he wipes on the legs of his pants. A person in a dress directly across from him promptly moves to a seat farther back. Another passenger says, "that's hard to take. The only thing that makes me throw up is someone else throwing up." Several stops later, a passenger pulls the cord for a stop and asks the driver to stop in front of the church. The driver can't understand her; "WHAT DID YOU SAY?" The person in the dress who had moved away from the vomiting man says loudly, "she wants you to stop in front of the church." Her voice is a man's voice.

The man who vomited on himself moves to a new seat. He drags a black plastic garbage bag of empty cans. As soon as he sits down, he pulls the cord for the next stop and tips over sideways into the back of another seat.

A man in a three-piece banana-colored suit and a belly that overlaps his pants drops his McDonald's cup on the floor at his feet. He frowns. He steps on the cup when he exits the bus.

A man sits forlornly wearing layers of clothes and two stocking caps. Under the seat across from him lies a red and white hard candy. It's unwrapped. He gets up, kneels, and picks up the candy. He sits back down, inspects his find and brushes it with

his fingers. He gingerly places it on his tongue, closes his mouth and eyes, and sweetly smiles.

A woman in a baby-blue blouse sneers at him as she stomps up the aisle to leave the bus. "Jesus FUCKING Christ," she spits.

Fennie spills out of her seat and into Codell, her bare beefy arm hot and sticky. "I got a job in a kitchen," she says. "Praise the Lord."

The woman in the pale green sleeveless dress pulls back her hair, tosses her head, and gazes over Codell's shoulder out the window. Her eyes are limpid pools into which he dives for what he cannot name.

* * * * *

Codell will get on the Woodward bus, line 4 outbound. It will be night. It will be raining. A man will exit the bus and the doors will malfunction: they will stick open.

The bus can't move until the doors shut. Rain will blow in. The driver will take a swig from his Vernors, but it has long since gone dry. His pudgy face will fill the rear view mirror: "somebody unjam those doors!"

Only two people will be riding, a bottle-blonde woman and Codell. Codell will be closest to the stuck exit doors. He will sit motionless. Because it's night, the windows will be like mirrors. Codell will look at himself looking back, his image warped by fat drops of water running down the outside of the window.

The blonde will glance disdainfully at Codell, rise, walk to the rear doors, take one door handle in each hand, and pull in. She will heave and yank.

“You got to push OUT on it,” the driver will shout. She’ll push out on the doors and they will wheeze like a whoopee cushion and close. The bus engine will throb as it pulls away. Codell will stare through his distorted self at the blackness outside.

A few stops down the line, the blonde will get off, and the doors will stick open again. The driver will peer into his rear view mirror. The doors will remain wide open. The bus will go nowhere. Codell will sit and watch nothing out the windows. Light from the bus will pour out the jammed-open doors into the darkness.

“Jeezis,” the driver will mutter. He’ll slam the bus into park, lumber back to the open doors, and slap one of the handles outward. The doors will hiss shut. He’ll glare at Codell, shake his head, and mumble back to his steering wheel. The bus will lurch away from the curb, and Codell will immediately pull the cord to get off.

In response, the driver will lead-foot the accelerator, throwing Codell back in his seat. Then the driver will coast past the stop Codell had rung for. When the bus finally stops, the driver’s face will glower from the mirror with contemptuous glee.

Codell will calmly step to the rear exit doors. He’ll shove one of the doors outward, activating both doors to swing out. As he steps to the sidewalk, he’ll hang on to one of the doors and pull it farther out - ensuring that both doors will stick open and stop the bus, forcing the driver to once again get up and unjam them. Codell will melt into the dark, and the rain will feel as cool and refreshing as a Vernors.

#

Coney god.

THERE'S A coney dog place in downtown Detroit right next door to another coney dog place. They're both narrow places that bridge two sharply intersecting streets, Lafayette and Michigan, like the horizontal cross bar in a capital letter A. They've both been there for years. The one's got a shiny façade and plate glass windows. Above the door is a relief of a robed woman with the heads of three dogs. It's always busy. The fast-paced, organized bustle calls to you like a shrine.

The coney dog maker, dressed in white with a white cap, prepares the dogs in front of the plate-glass window, right in front of you. You knew from a glance that these dogs were not to be taken for granted.

Codell stood at the window and watched the white-frocked, white capped coney dog maker. He was intense. He sucked a toothpick that was constantly in motion, and he never took his eyes off his work. His hands were a blur putting together one coney dog after another. To him every dog came. Then he bunned them in chili, diced onions and mustard, creating perfect dog after perfect dog, dropping them into paper trays. Behind him, other workers doled out the dressed dogs to countertop customers. Through the glass storefront, Codell could see them talking, see their lips moving, but he couldn't hear them. He ignored them. It was as if they didn't have anything meaningful to say, or what they had to say meant nothing to the coney dog maker.

Codell was mesmerized. The coney dog maker ministered to order after order. The toothpick darted from one side of his mouth to the other. His hands vivified the dogs with exquisite timing. The bun spread open and waiting, each dog jumped into its bun. The coney dog maker splashed chili in a red wave over each dog. With a flick of

his fingers, chopped onion rippled down the length of the dog. From a practiced squeeze with his other hand, bright mustard squirted over the onion. It was done.

There was a break in the orders. The toothpick rested; the dog master wiped his hands on a towel and looked up. A crop of hair jutted from under his cap. He had jug ears, a snout-like nose and unshaven cheeks. He looked out the window. Codell was face-to-face a few feet away. Their eyes locked.

Codell pressed his hands together, raised the tips of his fingers to his chin, and inclined his head. "Dog god," he intoned.

#

To think that it happened on Trumbull Street.

Inspired by Dr. Seuss, "To Think That It Happened on Mulberry Street."

THOSE HOPE-FILLED fans on their way to Tiger Stadium were the same every day, streaming past the tattered panhandlers on another June evening. Some of them sat on the sidewalks with a hat or a cup, eyes downcast. Others looked up plaintively at the hastening Tiger fans, always avoiding eye contact. Some of the vagrants held hand-made signs. "VETERAN." "GOD BLESS YOU!" "PLEASE HELP. ANYTHING."

Marco was as different from the other beggars as Detroit was from Houston. He was out of jail on an assault charge and stalked around like a beaten animal. A family, decked out in Tiger jerseys and caps, neared him and Marco jumped in front of them. "Please, please, do you have change for bus fare! Just eighty cents! I have to get to Flint, my sister is sick! I have to!" He was frantic and effusive. "Please, eighty cents!"

Without looking at him or breaking stride, the family swerved. Another group of fans approached. He leaped in front of them, too. "Please, please, do you have change for bus fare! Just eighty cents! I have to get to Flint, my sister is sick! I have to! Please, please, eighty cents!" The fans had so many lies not to give.

"I don't have any cash."

"Please, please, eighty cents!" A thousand lies.

"I got nothin'." Marco's nose grew longer.

"I'm sorry." Marco sprouted donkey ears. Nobody would look at him.

"The bank's closed." Marco's hair grew to cover his face, his eyebrows shaggy.

"Bus fare? Isn't Greyhound closed?" A tail pierced the rear of Marco's pants.

"I left my wallet in my car." Red horns poked through the foliage on Marco's head, and his eyes turned red and glowed. His nose became a snout.

“Get a job, ya bum!” Marco’s fingers thickened and curled.

“Sure, I’ll give you eighty cents if you can tell me who’s pitching today.”

“Jack Morris,” Marco snorted. “The Tigers will win.” The Tiger fan kept walking without paying up. Marco scratched his tale.

Marco grew a second head. It looked like Bud Abbott. “Who’s on first?”

Marco grew a third head. It looked like Douglas Adams. “The answer to everything is 42.” Still nobody saw him. No. No. No. “No, have a great day!”

“Go to hell,” said Marco.

“Get out of my face, dude. Back off.”

Marco jumped in front of a man in a Jack Morris jersey. “Please, please, do you have change for bus fare! Just eighty cents! I have to get to Flint, my sister is sick! I have to!” He was frantic and effusive. “Please, please, eighty cents!”

“Slow down, my man.” The Morris fan looked Marco in the eye. “Don’t give me crap about your sister. Here’s a buck.”

Marco’s two extra heads shriveled and fell off. His horns and tale retracted and his fingers uncurled. His face returned to human form. “Morris is pitching today.”

“I know.”

“He’ll throw a shutout, three to nothing. Complete game. Trammell’s gonna hit a two run homer.” And that’s what happened, June 17, 1980. You can look it up.

#

It's a good life.

Ignore people. Unless you're asking them for money. Most of them avoid you. If someone says anything, say something like "God bless." Get used to kids gawking.

In the evening, there's a flophouse that the police can put you into. Problem is, they don't let you drink. There's shelters, but they don't let you drink either, and people steal your stuff. Shelters are dangerous. You're safer outside.

There's a camp next to the library, but you got to get there early if you want to stay out of the wind. People set up under blankets and umbrellas. One lady has a tarp. You can't even tell how many people are in there, all of those bodies. A lot of them are sick. They're all wretches, wretches clinging together. It helps knowing that there's always someone worse off than you.

Victor went elsewhere. He found a spot next to a storm sewer and sat in the rays of the declining sun. He pictured *them*, two girls in pink he'd seen that morning, giving away dollar bills outside the Pontchartrain. It was a high-end glass and steel hotel near West Jefferson.

Dusk dwindled to darkness. Victor heard a voice and ignored it. "I'm hungry," he said. There was no one near him. *Go back tomorrow*, the voice said.

Victor tucked into a fetal position, and Jesus, his three-legged dog, circled the way dogs do and settled snug next to him. They shrank lump-like into the sidewalk, the sky alive with angels as numerous as the stars.

In the morning, mist drifted hazily up around them, specters rising in the drama of a new day. The ascending sun fired golden bolts, and distant traffic rumbled. Victor curled and uncurled his toes and fingers back to life and pulled himself upright, his

lower back aching. He must have slept on it wrong. His legs were stiff at the knees. He located his pint and took a long draw, burning out the aftertaste of yesterday. He stood, relieved himself, and stretched. Jesus got up and stretched with him. Only then did he find what was left of a panini on the sidewalk; someone must have left it for them.

They ate what there was, a few bites, not enough. *Go back tomorrow.*

Victor and Jesus wound their way towards the Pontchartrain, plodding through long streaks of sunlight, cruising dumpsters rich from the night before. There was always something to be found if you were early – a pizza box with a couple of slices, loose change, dropped cigarettes, an unopened can of pop. It was a harvest.

Victor stopped at a sun-drenched bench to dry his yet-damp clothes. As early as it was, the day had already started to sizzle. Flies buzzed, only to be drowned out by the rise and fall of a cicada chorus, like electricity in the wires. Jesus snapped at a deer fly. A street musician played harmonica. Victor pressed his lips together, hummed, and trod west on Larned to the towering Pontchartrain.

Across the street from it, he sat with Jesus. To either side were others like him, shabby, smeary people, their eyes glistening and enormous and round as a newborn's, studying the well-dressed denizens of the Pontch. They waited.

In no little time, the family came out of the hotel, just as they had yesterday. The father in a suit, the smartly coiffed mother, and the two girls. The girls wore blue outfits today. The man took out his wallet, extracted a thick fold of bills, and gave ten one dollar bills to each of the girls "for those people across the street."

The girls crossed the street, shadowed by their parents, and entered a gauntlet of need. They solemnly dropped dollars into pleading hands and hats. There were

murmurs of thank-yous and god-blesses. Within minutes, they'd given away all the dollar bills, and then they got to Victor. He looked at the girls, his eyes asking.

"We don't have any more," shrugged the taller girl. Her words fell to the sidewalk like dead things. Victor eyed their pretty blue dresses.

"Don't get close!" said the woman. The girls jumped back. Jesus looked rueful. Victor's face reddened and strained, facial muscles shifting like lava beneath his skin.

"God bless you," he dripped to the children. To the mother: "did you forget your ten-foot pole?"

The father huffed and grimaced. "Well, that's gratitude for you."

Victor hissed, scaring Jesus as much as the girls, who scampered to their mother.

"Let's go, girls. You'll always run out of money before you run out of *them*."

#

A good lesson for the kids.

THE PANHANDLER approached the young couple and their two children as they headed to one of Detroit's Greektown restaurants. "Can you spare some change?"

"No, we're not going to give you money," the husband said. "Do you need food? Are you hungry?" The wife hurried the children toward the restaurant door.

The beggar hesitated. "Here, come with me," the husband said. "We can buy you something."

The beggar and the husband followed his wife and children into the crowded restaurant, full of warm music and Greek aromas. Customers thronged around the cash register. One of them dropped a couple of dollars into a tip jar and left with his party, making room for the young couple to advance.

The wife shot her husband a questioning look. "You go ahead and get seated," the husband directed her. "I'm ordering some take-out for him. This will be a good lesson for the kids."

The hostess seated the wife and kids at the back of the restaurant. Their server brought waters and menus. After the customary wait, the server returned. "Do you want to wait for your husband?"

"No, he should be here any time." She ordered for herself and the kids and ordered a dish for her husband that she thought he'd like.

After several more minutes, loud voices erupted from the front of the restaurant.

The wife had a sinking feeling. She was torn between going to the front of the restaurant to find her husband and staying with the children. "Where's Dad?" they

asked. A minute later, he finally joined them at their table. His frowning face was red, and he carried a white paper bag of take-out food.

“What happened?” queried his wife.

“They brought the take-out. I was paying for it and the bum we brought in grabbed the tip jar and took off outside. They ran after him.”

“Are you okay?!”

“I”m okay. They got mad at me for bringing him in.”

“You were right, honey,” said the wife. “It’s a good lesson for the kids.”

#

Howdy.

VICTOR UNZIPPED his fly as he limped into the parking lot behind Codell's apartment building, trailed by his raggedy three-legged dog, Jesus. He reached the shade of the abandoned building where he lived, spread his legs, and began to urinate. After several seconds he relaxed, glanced around, and looked up and over his shoulder where Codell watched from his fourth floor efficiency apartment.

"Howdy," Victor grinned. Codell opened his mouth to reply.

"Howdy," replied a woman's voice from the floor below Codell.

Victor finished his chore and zipped up. He turned to face Codell's tenement, looked up again, tipped an imaginary cap to either, or both, Codell and the woman below him, and sauntered back to the street. Jesus lingered, panting.

#

Givin' this joe shit.

"WHEN I close my eyes, I don't fall asleep. I pass out." Victor explained his drinking to Codell. "When I open my eyes, I don't wake up. I come to."

Victor and Codell sat on the stoop of the empty building adjacent to Codell's tenement. Victor lived in the empty building, having gained access by prying open plywood where a lower window had been. The stoop had several steps, giving Victor and Codell a commendable view of Prentis Street and an imposing presence over the sidewalk. Handkerchief-sized patches of grass, dormant but sturdy, remained from years gone by in the dry strip of earth between the building and the sidewalk. Weeds pushed up from gaps between the steps and invaded cracks in the porch as well.

Victor stood. He was lean to the point of emaciation and tottered, his arms and legs twitching once in a while and his head bobbing like a pigeon's. He had long, stringy hair dyed dark by dirt and grime. His clothes matched his hair.

"When I come to," Victor explained, "a' firs', you wouldn't believe." His eyes darted as if he was looking for something. "But after tha' firs' hit, I feel good. 'Hair a the dog.'"

"Hair of the dog," Codell repeated.

"Tha's what we use to say on the line," Victor said, "'hair a the dog.' We laid rail for Chessie. The C & O Railroad, Chesapeake and Ohio. Out in the country, it was nothin' but farms and cows. I work with this joe one time who fucked a cow. Actually fucked a fuckin' cow."

"Naw!"

"Yah, he did. We was workin' an' there was some trees nex' to the rail line, so we

all decide to take a break in the shade. On the other side of the trees there was some cows. We're lookin' at the cows. One of the guys says, 'you ever hear of anyone fuckin' a cow?' Another guy says, 'I been to shows, watched a woman blow a dog once. Saw a movie where a man fucked a pig. Come is come, right? Y'know? But things would have to be bad. I could never do that.'

"While they was talkin', I was watchin' this joe still lookin' at the cows, an' he was real quiet. So I dare him to fuck one. 'How much?' he says. No one think he's serious. 'Ten bucks,' I says. 'Make it twenty?' None of us could believe it. Foreman says, 'You'd fuck a cow for twenty bucks!?! In front of us!?! Hell, I'll throw in ten!' We all starts screamin'.

"So this joe pops up an' puffs out his chest an' struts over to the cows like he's some he-man. The cows, they jus' stan' there. He picks one tha's off a ways and tries to get behind her, but she moo's further away. He catches her hind quarters an' steadies her 'til she stan' still. He drops his drawers an' star's playin' with himself. We all hootin' an' hollerin', cheerin' him on, givin' him shit.

"To this day I don' know if he was in her asshole or her cunt, but it don' matter a whole lot. After a minute or two of him poundin' away, she gives out this giant moo. 'MOOOOOOOO!! MOOOOOOOO!!'"

Victor paused, eyeing a young woman on the sidewalk pushing a baby buggy, its wheels clacking rhythmically with each revolution. Victor's head bobbed like he was keeping time. The woman, stared dead ahead. Before she got anywhere near them, she crossed to the other side of the street.

Codell turned back to Victor. "So? What happened?"

Victor paused and his eyes took on a far away look. "I'll be damned if that cow didn't shit all over him. It was dis-gus-ting. We laugh so hard, we cried. I never laugh so hard my whole damn life. Hell, I'd still be laughin' if I wasn't here."

"You paid him the twenty, didn't you?"

"Yeah, we gave him his twenty. He made nuthin' on it. Had ta buy new clothes."

#

Looking good.

The Wayne State University basketball courts were open to the public, and there was always game. Codell stuck around until he was the only one there. Left behind he found a couple of shirts, shiny yellow shorts, and a pair of Asics running shoes. The Asics were dark purple like a badly bruised Barney the dinosaur. They fit Codell better than Cinderella's slippers fit Cinderella, so Codell took up jogging. The next Saturday, he went to the Wayne athletic complex.

Like other joggers there, Codell ran on the sidewalks that encircled the football stadium, tennis courts and recreation fields. He ran shirtless, the early summer bringing a purifying purge of sweat. The longer he ran, the more rhythmic his stride and breathing. Bill Bowerman would have been impressed. The runner's high, that endorphin-laced euphoria, fed Codell's pace, his confidence and his ego.

As he started his second mile, a few fans watching a softball game looked at him. He passed the flag football field, and someone there turned to look as well. People were watching him run! How good he must look, glistening in the sun in his new shoes. He quickened his pace, pumping his arms harder to keep up with his legs.

His third lap brought him back around to the softball field. There was no mistaking it. The spectators were watching him, not the softball game. The sidewalk took him right in front of them; they smiled broadly. Children stared. Several players glanced over.

As he slowed to turn the corner at Warren and Trumbull, he felt something, some substance, on the backs of his arms. He swiveled his head to see what it was.

A yellow-white, softball-sized mass of foam was stuck behind each of his armpits. Whatever soap and deodorant he used that morning had worked into a lather as he ran.

Codell scooped the balls of foam off his arms and shook them to the ground. "Looking good!" laughed one of his admirers.

#

Not waving but drowning.

Inspired by Stevie Smith's poem of the same name.

TWO SKINNY dippers flailed in the dark water of the Detroit River. From a distance, it looked as if they were embracing. A hundred feet away, Codell leaned on the safety rail at the river and watched. All three of them were a football field from the Bob-Lo boat, the ferry to Boblo Island between Detroit and Canada. The amusement park had been there forEVER.

It was night. Music and laughter from the Boblo floated above the skinny dippers' cries for help. Red lights from the boat rippled on the water like ribbon candy.

Codell had watched the skinny dippers strip off their clothes, hop the rail, and jump in. They'd been in the water for quite some time. They were much further out than they thought.

One of the skinny dippers sunk below the surface. He grabbed at his companion, who treaded water and reached for him. She managed to hook her arm under one of his armpits and awkwardly, slowly, swam them both toward Codell. She struggled to keep their heads above water. "Help, help!" They dipped under, muffling her cries, "eurg, eurg." Like gargling.

The nude pair neared a ladder below Codell that led up to the river walkway, the man gasping and sputtering. The woman lunged for the ladder and missed it. She lunged again and reached it. She clung tightly to the ladder with one arm, and the other she wrapped around her limp companion. She breathed heavily, first heaving, then sobbing.

From far upstream, Belle Isle perhaps, sirens howled down the river, the sound of

hope drowned by anguish. Codell shivered, always chilled around water. He ran, cold in the summer air.

#

The rube, snortin' it.

JOHNNI'S CAR was a poop-brown 1967 Plymouth Valiant, pure Michigan, made and rusted in Detroit. The Great Lakes were fresh, but when the snow fell, Michigan roads were salty as an ocean.

"What is this ride?" asked Codell. "Detroit Ferrari?" He laughed at his own joke.

Johnni returned the quip. "It's on us!" Johnni, his brother Jimmy and Codell were friends since they were kids, but they hadn't seen each other for a while. Johnni was a couple of years older than Jimmy and Codell.

They got in, Jimmy in back, Johnni in the driver's seat, and Codell on the front passenger side. There was a rusted out hole in the floor. "What the hell!" Codell laughed. "I can see the ground!"

"Put your feet on the side of it," said Johnni. "We get on the Lodge, crank the radio, and this hauls." He started the engine and revved it a few times.

"I like it," Codell said. "What you got to smoke?"

"Guess what, bro? We're not smoking!" Jimmy said.

"We got something better," said Johnni.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Nose candy."

"Coke? Cocaine?"

"Hell, yeah!"

"You into that?" asked Codell.

"It's good stuff, C. Know what I mean?"

"Never done it."

"Never done it? For real?"

"For real," Codell said. "Do tell."

Johnni unzipped a black pouch. He pulled out a small mirror, a tiny spoon, a razor blade, a short straw and a baggie of white powder. "You're gonna dig this, C. You're gonna feel so, so good."

Johnni put the mirror between them and spooned powder onto it. With the razor blade he formed three short, precise parallel lines of cocaine.

"What do I do?"

"Snort a line," said Jimmy. "You don't know?!"

"Like this." Johnni leaned down close to the mirror, pinched one nostril with a finger, placed one end of the straw at the base of a line of coke and the other end at his open nostril. He quickly inhaled through his nose. Half the line of cocaine disappeared up the straw.

"Easy," Johnni said, his voice an octave or two higher. He handed the straw to Codell. "From me to you," he said. "My gift, old friend. This shit is expensive."

Codell leaned his head over the mirror. He pinched one nostril. He positioned one end of the straw at his open nostril and the other end above one a line of cocaine.

"Snort it!" said Jimmy.

"Whew, I'm blowin' up," said Johnni. "I'm blowin' up!"

Codell snorted OUT of his nostril. All of the powder on the mirror exploded into the air and drifted down, like the snow it was, on the front seat and the floor.

"Oh man," Jimmy said.

“Oh, man,” Johnni said.

“You told me to ‘snort it,’ bro.”

“You just blew two and half lines, Codell. Two and a half lines.”

“Sorry, Johnni. You said ‘snort it’.”

#

Appointment on Telegraph Road.

Inspired by "The Appointment in Samarra" as retold by W. Somerset Maugham.

THE CAST(OUTS):

Jerome Pearl (JP), petty drug dealer.

Reagan Spenser, known as Ray-gun or Ray.

Johnni P — —, Jimmy's older brother.

Jimmy P — —, Johnnie's younger brother.

Act 1. JP's place in Detroit, 1980.

JP was high, Johnni and Jimmy shared a bottle, and Ray's fix was speed. Ray twisted one open, a black and yellow capsule, and dumped it into a glass of water. The powder hit the surface and darted like angry bees. "THAT'S why they're called yellow jackets," Ray said. "You can party all night and drink on it, too. Damn good, eh?"

"'Eh'? What are you, Canadian, eh?" They all laughed too loud.

"What's that fat ass joint ya smokin, JP?"

"Thai stick. From my Nam boys. It's dipped in hashish. Or opium. Yah, opium.

"I got em to deal. But this one," JP said, waggling his stogie, "I pinched for personal use."

"No wonder your voice is so high," said Johnnie. "What's higher, JP, you or your voice?" They laughed until they cried. "You got em to deal? Hell, you don't sell shit."

"I can sell anything," said JP, offended. "Anything I get my hands on, I can sell. Coke, Tylenol #4, Vicodin, T's and Blues. Anything. Acid. It's all money in my pocket. Don't have to ask mama or daddy for nuthin, like you fairy queens."

"I dropped acid one time in one eye," Ray said, speed-walking around the room. "My right eye. Just my right eye."

All four of them paused.

"That's bogus, Ray-gun."

"Tripping in one eye not the other," Ray said, reversing direction of his pacing.

"You sit here, sell that smack," Johnni said to JP. "You gonna get busted."

"Not if you bros got my back. This is our street."

"We need a name," said Ray. "Every hood's got a name. "The Flynns. The Young Boys."

"We could be the Dog Boyz," JP said. "B-o-y-z, boyz."

"Lame," said Jimmy, eyes closed, slumped on the couch next to JP.

"And a hand dance," Ray said. "We need a hand dance. And a move." He experimented, his hands and his feet hyper, bumping into the coffee table.

"You gonna end up in jail, prison or dead, guaranteed," said Johnnie. "You drivin' on the wrong side of the road."

"Prison or dead," JP repeated. "What the fuck."

"The world's gonna be a cold and lonely place when you admire it from inside a prison wall," Johnnie continued. "They gonna tell you when you can piss, eat, sleep, wash your body. Take a shower, drop the soap, get eight inches up your ass. You gonna be fresh meat. They take turns on you like you wearing stockings and high heels."

"Prison or dead?" JP repeated. "I don't think so." Jimmy stirred on the couch.

"Staring up at that razor wire fence," Johnnie said. Wishing things could be different. You got money in your pocket now? Mr. Wanna-be so popular. Your lawyer paid by the state, you won't have shit. You think you somethin special, like you the only one not gonna get busted? You think Ray-gun got your back? Better let him know what color dress to send you, little sister."

"Prison or dead," Jimmy repeated, eyes closed. He shuddered.

"Get real," scoffed Ray, ever pacing. "You don't know shit. Want to get real? Let's get out of here. Right now. I got the Caddy. That's what's real. It hauls. C'mon."

"I got Codell coming over," said JP. Got to wait on him."

Ray-gun shrugged. "Whatever, man. Prison or dead? Not me. Death's got nothin on me. Not if I blow this hell-hole."

Act 2. The Caddy.

Ray's father's black Cadillac was a boat, a luxury automobile with a full tank of gas siphoned from Johnni's rusted out, hole-in-the-floor, dogshit-brown '67 Plymouth Valiant. Ray drove, Johnni next to Ray. Jimmy sprawled in back, dead drunk.

They took I-94 west, racing, weaving in and out of traffic out of Detroit. Exit at Telegraph Road, speeding south through Taylor. A few more miles and Telegraph narrowed to a two-lane road with a yellow center line, a straight shot past Pennsylvania Road and then Sibley Road. Ray crossed the center line toward oncoming traffic, their headlights blazing closer and bigger until at the last second the oncoming car swerved off the road and Ray swerved back onto his side. "Woo-ee!" Ray yelled. "Why did the chicken cross the road?!"

Past King Road, the Caddy drifted across the center line, headlights coming at them again, Johnni looking at Ray behind the wheel, Ray's eyes closed, Johnni alarmed: "Ray!" Ray's eyes opened, headlights of a pickup truck so close that they could see the driver in silhouette, the pickup veering onto the shoulder to avoid them, at the same time Ray yanks his steering wheel to the right, the Caddy's weight shifting to the

passenger side, lurching off the right shoulder, Ray jerking the wheel to the left, finally regaining control. Jimmy in the back seat, passed out the whole time.

“I did that on purpose,” said Ray.

“Like shit,” said Johnnie. “You’re fucked up.”

They came to a ROAD CLOSED sign on Telegraph. “They paved it,” said Ray, blasting onto new blacktop.

Ray-gun floored it, throwing their heads back. The Caddy trembled. At West Road, they blew through more ROAD CLOSED signs, the pavement so fresh that the yellow lines had yet to be painted. The road arced to the right but Reagan aimed straight ahead, leaving the rainbow of the road at a hundred miles an hour, crashing through a chain link fence bordering Oak Ridge Cemetery. In an instant far louder than you might imagine, the Cadillac met a tree and exploded in a cloud of debris, the Caddy, Ray-gun, Johnnie and Jimmie transfigured and strewn into pieces.

#

The gargoyle.

THE GARGOYLE beckoned Codell as he walked to the Bronx for a beer. A dwarf stone beast like some statutory embodiment of Detroit's Nain Rouge, it squatted impishly at 700 Prentis on its haunches, knees to its chest, claw-like paws clutched in front and feet splayed as if it were about to pounce. Between sharp teeth its long tongue stuck out, a narrow trough for water that no longer gurgled from its fountain throat. It wore a snarky, menacing grimace. Was it merely a whimsical decoration? Was it meant to scare people, or worse?

It was the end of the day; the wind had died; the air hung heavy and motionless the way it does before something bad happens. Everything was less than slow-mo; it was no-mo. The setting sun swelled on the horizon, glazing the gargoyle red. The gargoyle shimmered and shimmied. It watched Codell. What did it want; what would it do? It was certainly breathing. Is that the smell of sulfur?

Codell pulled himself away from the creature and quickened his pace. When he stepped into the Bronx, he did a double-take. His bar buddy was not alone on his customary stool at the end of the bar. Instead, Buddy sat at a table with a woman.

She was built like a file cabinet, short and solid. She looked strong and capable. Her face was round and pleasant, her features proportionate and her complexion smooth. Her thick brown hair was bound girlishly in two tight braids. She was, perhaps, twenty years younger than Codell's buddy. She was closer to Codell's age than to Buddy's.

Codell got a bomber, quaffed off the head, and watched the reflections of his buddy and the woman in the mirror behind the bar. His buddy wasn't himself. Buddy

giggled and blabbed, his hands keeping pace, his face a bundle of expressions that Codell had never seen on him.

The woman got up to leave. Codell's buddy escorted her to the door, exchanged pleasantries, and returned, not to the table they had sat at, but to his usual stool next to Codell, nodding to Codell as he sat down. Buddy perched on the front edge of his stool, knees raised, both feet on the stool's middle rung. His face was flushed and he was mouth-breathing. His teeth were sharp and yellow. Codell wished that the rupture in his face would close and the face return to its normal pallor.

Leaning into Codell, Buddy clenched his hands, his fingers long and pointed. Their faces were inches away; Buddy's breath smelled like rotten eggs. The corners of his mouth pulled up in a smirk. His incisors grew longer. Codell trembled.

#

The culprit 2.

SOMEONE WAS knocking on the door of the apartment next to Codell's. Codell stood inside at his door and listened. After a long pause, metal clanged against metal and with each blow came the sound of splitting wood and then nothing.

Several minutes later, quick footfalls echoed in the hall and faded down the stairway. A few more minutes passed and Codell opened the door of his apartment. His neighbor's door was wide open, the jamb ripped out and pieces of wood on the floor. Codell closed his door and went to sleep.

A couple of hours later heavy footsteps and voices in the hallway woke him. A knock came on Codell's door. "Police, this is the police."

Codell, half asleep and yawning, opened his door. Two uniformed officers identified themselves. "Your neighbor was broken into this afternoon. Have you been home?"

"Yeah."

"All afternoon?"

"Yeah."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Of course I heard." Codell glanced sideways up at the ceiling like the cop was an idiot.

"Don't get smart with me."

"No, ma'am. Just the facts, ma'am."

"You heard the break-in and you didn't do anything? You sat here and did nothing?"

Codell stiffened, arched his back, and screwed up his eyes incredulously. "Can you do anything if you don't know what you're jumping into? Can you do anything like that? Something's going down, you have no idea what; nobody's going to jump into that. I got no gun and no phone. Would you jump into that without your service revolver? Would you?"

"You don't need a gun or a phone to do something," said the officer. "You're a big dude. Make some noise. Scare him away."

"Easy for you to say. 'Make some noise'," Codell mimicked and fluttered his hands. " 'Boo, run away.' The dude's got a crowbar, far as I know. Take the crowbar to my head just like he did to her door. Get myself killed."

"Maybe next time it'll be your apartment," said the lead officer. "I'll make sure to write you into my report." To her partner: "Let's get out of here, Joe."

"Crime is never going to go down until you people start watching out for each other," Joe said. He sneered at Codell. "*Chicken shit.*"

"Whatever." Codell closed his apartment door and locked it. He stood inside at his door and listened to the officers' footsteps fade down the stairway.

#

I'm not your friend 1.

June 1980.

THEY MET when each left his efficiency apartment at the same time. It may have been a sign or a coincidence, you don't know yet, but you will. "Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal," Michael Blumenthal said, and it was hard for Codell to hear if he said Blumenthal or Lumenthal because his speech was low and thick. He stiffly stuck out his arm to shake hands, and his hand was thick, too, wider and paler than Codell's. They shook hands. Michael Blumenthal's hand was warm and dry, and his grip firmer. He kept shaking too long, like he didn't want to let go of Codell's hand. When he did let go, he kept his arm stuck out for a second or two.

They lived across the hall from each other on the top floor of a roach-infested, four-story tenement in Detroit's Cass Corridor. In Detroit, you were East side or West side, but the Corridor was so close to downtown that the East-West distinction didn't matter much. It was as stark an urban landscape as any American city had to offer, if you consider poverty an offer. It was as stark as the voice in this story. They were pickled in the brine of the Corridor.

After that first meeting, whenever Codell left his apartment, Michael Blumenthal's door would be open, and Michael Blumenthal would come out to greet him. The two were in their mid-twenties, each living alone. Every time Michael Blumenthal greeted Codell, he reintroduced himself the same way, "Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal," as if they'd never met. Each time he stuck out his big-boned right hand in the same way. Codell shook hands with him every time, the same way. Michael Blumenthal pumped his hand from the elbow, stiff-armed, always for too long.

After three or four greetings, Michael Blumenthal appended his introduction. "Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal. Do you want to come over for a cup of coffee?" His gaze was direct.

"No thanks. Late for my bus."

"Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal. Want to come over for a cup of coffee?"

"Maybe next time."

"Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal. Want to come over for a cup of coffee?"

"Had too much already. Gotta run."

"Hi, I'm Michael Blumenthal. Would you like to come over for a cup of coffee?"

Codell squelched a sigh. "Okay. Sure."

Michael Blumenthal's efficiency apartment was the same size and layout as Codell's, but oriented differently. The door opened opposite a small closet. From the vestibule between the door and closet, you entered the one large room. On one side of the room was an alcove for the stove and refrigerator with cupboards above the stove; on another side of the room was an alcove for a bed. Opposite the bed alcove was the bathroom. Michael Blumenthal's room was furnished more sparsely than Codell's, having only a card table, folding chairs, milk crates for furniture, and four or five knee-high piles of magazines lining the wall underneath the windows. A large kettle whistled from the stove.

"Here, have a seat." Michael Blumenthal pulled one of the folding chairs out from the card table and put two empty coffee cups on the table. He dumped a heaping teaspoon of instant coffee into each cup, poured steaming water into them, and put the kettle back on the burner.

“Want some sugar?”

“No, no thanks.”

Michael Blumenthal dumped two teaspoons of sugar into each of the cups and stirred them. Dark froth lopped over the sides and onto the table. Codell looked at him. “O-kay . . . guess I will have sugar.

“How much water you got on the stove? You gonna turn it off before it boils away?”

Michael Blumenthal got up, turned off the burner, and sat again. “I like sugar in my coffee.”

“I see that.” It was silent for a couple of minutes.

* * * * *

“You got cockroaches in your apartment?”

“All over,” said Codell.

“Is your apartment really hot?”

* * * * *

“Did you hear the break-in next door?” Michael Blumenthal asked.

“I heard it.”

“You heard it, too?”

“Yeah, I heard it happening.”

Codell added, “Did the cops talk to you, too?”

“I didn’t answer. I don’t do well with people.”

* * * * *

“Where do you get your food?” asked Michael Blumenthal.

"Farmer Jack. On Warren past the medical school. It's new.

"Where do you get your food?"

"My mom."

* * * * *

"Do you have any friends?"

"I know some people," said Codell. "Do you have any friends?"

"I used to. They didn't believe me about stuff. They told me things were good news when it wasn't." He reignited the burner under the kettle.

* * * * *

"You been to the Bronx?" asked Codell.

"No."

"You should go. Might do you good to get out."

* * * * *

"The weather in Viet Nam is hotter than here," said Michael Blumenthal. "A lot wetter."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I was in Viet Nam." The kettle began to hum.

"How's that? You wouldn't have been old enough."

"Sure I was."

"Not even close."

"You sound like my friends."

"I'm not your friend," Codell said. The kettle hum went up to a whistle. "So tell me how you were in Viet Nam."

“I don’t have the words.”

Except for the tea kettle, it was silent for a minute. “Do you have pictures?”

Codell asked.

“I have lots of pictures. I’ll show you.”

Michael Blumenthal went to the magazines under the window, pawed through a pile, and came up with something glossy. He brought it to the table: *Popular Photography*. The cover featured *Life Magazine’s* photo exposé of the My Lai massacre. He flipped through the pages, stopped, and dropped the open magazine in front of Codell. The kettle was shrieking.

“There!” Michael Blumenthal pointed triumphantly at a photograph of corpses strewn on a road. “That’s me, the body right in front.”

#

Don't bet on it.

THE BRICK building had no name. The door was always locked. In the door was a mirrored window the size of a lunch plate and next to the door was a doorbell.

Codell had seen men press the bell and wait for the door to open. He'd seen men leave. "What is this place?" he asked an old guy in a Robert Hall suit who'd just left the place. He looked Codell up and down. "A private bar." "A speak easy?" "Not exactly. You can buzz Edmund to get in."

So Codell pressed the button by the door and waited. The door frame was neatly painted, black and white. Codell looked at his reflection in the window, pasted on a smile, and held up the two-fingered peace sign in front of the window. The lock clicked; the door opened. "C'mon in, brother," Edmund said. He wore a crisp white apron and took up a station behind the bar.

The place was cool, darkly furnished. From a portable radio, Ernie Harwell cheered on the Tigers. "It's a long fly down the left field line - hooking - into the seats."

Codell sat on a stool in front of Edmund and asked for a Stroh's. On a stool at the far end, a man in a stop-sign red sports jacket perched sedately and wrote on a yellow legal pad. No one else was in the tavern.

"Here's your fresh Detroit River water. Ninety cents." Edmund was a middle-aged man with a bulbous nose and short-cropped hair. Scars from ancient acne pockmarked his face. "First time here," he said, a statement, not a question. "How'd ya find me?"

"I live a block away. On Prentis." Codell dug a dollar bill out of his pocket. "Been by here a lot, didn't know what was up with the doorbell."

Edmund's mouth twitched. "Just making sure I don't get too many people in here at the same time. It's just me. Been here on Third for twenty years.

"Ya been on Prentis for long?"

Codell took a pull from his beer. "Too long."

"I know what ya mean. The neighborhood ain't what she used to be."

"Paul," said Ernie Harwell on the radio, "do you remember where we were a year ago? Disco Demolition Night in Chicago. A game we'll never forget!"

Edmund slapped a dime change by the Stroh's, and Codell absentmindedly balanced it on its edge.

"That's a nice trick," Edmund noted. "You should buy a lottery ticket."

"My luck doesn't last long enough." Proving the point, the dime fell over.

"Hey Eddie," said red jacket at the other end of the bar. "Look at this." Edmund coasted to him. "At the end of two in Boston," Ernie said, "it's the Red Sox 5, Tigers 1."

Codell took an inventory of the place. Four tables with four chairs each were all it took to fill the floor space. Everything was dated, comfortably worn but maintained. A miniature pool table with discolored balls squatted at the far end. At the front end, a juke box pulsated red and yellow, and next to the juke box was an antique slot machine.

Codell sauntered to the juke and flipped through the forty-fives. All the songs dated to the 1950s and some earlier. The slot machine rested on all sevens. Above the slot machine, a foot-tall ballet dancer made out of pink paper twisted at the end of a string hung from the ceiling. She seemed to pirouette.

"That's Felecia," Edmund said, drifting back to the front of the bar. Some guys say she calms 'em down. Others say, 'she makes me dizzy.' "

Codell finished his Stroh's. "Nother one?" asked Edmund.

"Sure. That first one goes down fast."

Codell paid with another one spot, got another dime in change, and balanced both dimes on their edges. "Sure you're not feeling lucky?" asked Edmund.

"Always feeling it, never being it."

Edmund nodded. "I can help ya with that. Ever been to the DRC? The Detroit Race Course, out in Livonia. Play the ponies."

Codell shook his head. "Never been there."

"You should try it. Ya got the touch, pal. Those dimes." Edmund leaned toward Codell and tilted his head in the direction of red jacket. "My friend," said Edmund, lowering his voice, "he can give ya some tips. Help ya pick some winners."

"Strike three!" exclaimed Ernie Harwell. "Petry caught him looking. He stood there like the house by the side of the road."

Codell drained half of his new Stroh's. "You got me wrong, brother. No thanks." He chugged the rest of his beer and left. Felicia spun around, and the dimes fell over.

#

Canned heat blues.

THREE PUNKS jumped Victor on Warren Avenue. In broad daylight, in the morning, for God's sake! They knocked him down and went through his pockets. It seemed like three seconds. All he had on him was his bottle, which they smashed on the sidewalk, and then they ran. Jesus whimpered and licked him.

The bottle had been almost empty, but it was Victor's lifeline. He walked to Wayne State University, put a pathetic look on his face (not that he needed to try), and lowered himself once again. By early afternoon he'd scored a home-made sandwich and a handful of coins. By late afternoon, the world was vibrating around him. He didn't have enough change for a pint, but he had enough for canned heat.

Victor took the crosswalk over the Lodge freeway, Jesus hobbling on his three legs behind him. It was close to ninety degrees Fahrenheit. The crosswalk, long and white, reflected sunlight and blinded him; it was shadeless like the railroad right-of-ways Victor worked on when he was young. There was never any break from the sun. He could hear a train in the distance, the sound somehow rising from underneath him. Where was the train? He squinted and shook his way to the university's athletic complex and crossed Trumbull. The party store there seemed like every other party store, Chaldean, family owned and operated. The clerks stayed behind thick bullet proof glass. Always watching. Everyone could see that they carried.

Victor knew right where the Sterno was. He picked up a container and a single serving of orange flavored juice. "Trying to warm up?" the clerk jabbed. Victor's coins jostled in his hands like jumping beans.

"Don't drink that stuff, seriously," the clerk said. "It's killing you."

Victor got outside and couldn't wait. He rounded the corner of the party store, put his back against the cool wall and slid down until he bottomed out. Jesus laid down with him. Shaking, he peeled off the Sterno lid, used his fingers to squish the gelatinous substance into something softer, plopped a glob of it into the juice container, put the palm of his hand over the top, shook it, and put it to his lips. It went down like liquid fire.

Much later Victor's eyes opened. His abdomen hurt. The windows in the houses across the street had lit up and were talking about him. The sun had set. The sky was textured velvet, a royal blue that got darker and darker until it wasn't a sky at all. Something was alive in it, murmuring. The darkness swallowed the housetops and hushed the windows and crossed the street until it reached Victor's outspread feet. And waited.

#

Two archetypes.

I'M ED Bradley for the *CBS Evening News*. We're in Detroit for the Republican National Convention and also for our on-the-street interview series, "Faces of the Recession." Nineteen-eighty has brought hard times in Detroit. Today we're on Cass Avenue talking with "Victor." Thanks for talking to us, Victor. And he's got his dog with him. His three-legged dog. Care to introduce America to your dog, Victor?

"This is Jesus."

Your dog's name is Jesus?!

"Yessir! Jesus. Only dog I ever know."

That's a different name for a dog, for sure. Do you work, Victor. Your job?

"Out of work twelve years. My job, fin' somethun' to eat evry day."

Are you able to do that?

"Usually."

What was your last paying job?

"Paperboy."

'Paperboy'? How old are you?

"Goin' on fiffy - I think. Yah, fiffy, 1930, 1980."

What happened to that job?

"Someone register my gun for me, boss foun' out. That burn me. I'm a law abidin' citizen. You never know when you gotta protec' yaself."

Do you have a gun now?

"No sir, no, they took it. Haven' had it for years. Coulda use it a time or two."

Do you feel safe without a gun?

“No, no. Las’ week these three punks jump me on Warren. Knock me down, go through my pockets, three seconds. Three seconds! I can’ believe it, I sat there.”

You weren’t hurt badly, then? What did they take?

“My bottle! Smash it and ran. A waste, that what it was. Total wase.”

Did you report it?

“Report it?”

To the police.

(laughter)

You didn’t report it.

(laughter)

You’re having a little difficulty with your balance, Victor. Are you okay?

“Yessir, yessir. Holdin’ my own.”

Do you have a place to stay tonight, Victor?

“Oh, yes; yessir. I got a good place. Regular place.”

That’s a bright spot. That’s good.

“Real good. Rent-free. Empty buildin’. All to ourselves, me, Jesus, the rats.”

I see.

Victor, do you get the news? Have you heard of the Afghan Freedom Fighters?

“Freedom fighters? No, sir. I got all the freedom I can stan’ righ’ here.

“You got any change, man?”

#

What happened at the RNC.

Based on a written account in the early 1990s.

You say, TELL ME A STORY ABOUT THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION.

I swear to you, something extraordinary happened there. You may not believe it now, but you might by the time you finish reading this. Seeing is believing. Adults do neither easily, but children do both. A young girl witnessed everything.

It was in Detroit in 1980, the middle of July, at Detroit's new Joe Louis Arena. The great boxer Joe Louis had died three months earlier, and for Detroiters an aura of pride emanated from the entire facility. Because of the Republican Convention, the national spotlight shone on the city. It seemed like the entire galaxy was watching Detroit.

A lot of the RNC attendees, including Ronald Reagan and Jerry Ford, stayed in the shiny hotel cylinders of the Renaissance Center, walking distance on Jefferson Avenue from the Joe. The young girl was skipping ahead of her parents when she saw on the sidewalk before her two creatures with large heads, huge dark eyes, and thin lips.

STOP RIGHT THERE. ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT ALIENS?

Yes. Alien abduction.

THAT'S NUTS. THAT DESCRIPTION SOUNDS LIKE A CARTOON. LIKE EVERY OTHER DESCRIPTION OF ALIENS THAT'S EVER BEEN MADE.

Of course. That's because they're all the same species. All the descriptions sound the same because that's what they all look like. Just like all flowers look like flowers and all fish look like fish. All people look like people.

EVERY FISH DOESN'T LOOK LIKE EVERY OTHER FISH. YOU CAN'T EXPECT ANYONE TO BELIEVE YOU WITHOUT MORE DETAIL.

That's not what the girl was thinking about at the time. Everything happened so fast.

She saw a beam of light come down from the sky. She traced the beam to a large silver object hovering over Windsor, Canada on the other side of the Detroit River. The light beam pulsed faster and faster and moved closer and closer until the girl was in it, in the beam of light. It was so bright, she closed her eyes. She couldn't control herself. She was sucked up into the aircraft.

THIS WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A STORY ABOUT THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION.

It is, it is.

Inside the craft she opened her eyes. The creatures stood all around. They were too many to count, but she guessed there were about twenty. They were communicating in some language she'd never heard. She knew they were talking about her because they were looking at her. They put her on a glass table and strapped her ankles and wrists to it, and they rigged machines with crystal levers to her head and chest. They examined her thoroughly. She had no idea what they were looking for; she just hoped they found it soon and sent her back home.

WHAT ABOUT THE TWO ALIENS THAT SHE SAW WHEN SHE WAS SKIPPING ON THE SIDEWALK?

We'll get to that.

After what seemed to her a few days, the ship made a quick turn. They turned on the beam of light and put her into it. She floated in the light beam, and then it went back to the ground.

HOW COULD SHE KNOW THE SHIP TURNED? SHE WENT THREE DAYS WITHOUT EATING? WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL THAT TIME?

She felt the entire ship shift, like when you're in a car or on a boat. It felt like three days, but she didn't know. She had no clear memory of the time. Like when you're sleeping. You know time passes, but you have to look at a clock to know how much.

The beam of light returned her to the exact spot she'd been taken from on the sidewalk outside the RenCen. She ran to her parents. She was scared to death. She was crying and shaking. She couldn't tell them what happened because no words would come out of her mouth. When she finally did get the words out, they laughed at her. "You watch too many television shows," her parents said.

THERE YOU GO, RIGHT THERE.

She was so shaken up that they went home. At home, she told her big sister. "That's stupid," her sister said. "You have quite some imagination," her parents said. They had her explain again to see if her story changed. It didn't.

WOULDN'T THERE BE MARKS ON HER BODY FROM BEING EXAMINED?

There were. There were marks on her wrists and ankles. "You must have gotten them while you were playing," her parents said. "What about the odd bruises on my chest? They came from playing, too?"

WEREN'T HER PARENTS RIGHT THERE? DIDN'T THEY SEE HER GET BEAMED UP?

Her parents said they were watching her the whole time, and they said they didn't see anything. Maybe the aliens did something so that her parents didn't see or remember. Maybe they froze time so it only seemed to her parents that they were watching. Nobody knows what they can do.

The girl couldn't sleep at night for weeks. Her stomach was too upset to eat and she was scared to leave the house. She cried constantly. She jumped at every noise.

SHE SHOULD SEE A DOCTOR.

That's what her parents thought, too. They thought she was making things up to get attention, so they took her to a doctor. A mental doctor. The doctor didn't believe in aliens, but she didn't think the girl was looking for attention, either. She found that the girl had been traumatized. The doctor didn't know why and she couldn't find anything wrong. She couldn't explain the bruises on the girl's chest and the marks on her wrists and ankles. The doctor was dealing with something she'd never seen before. Something like aliens.

The girl was crushed that her parents and sister didn't believe her. Almost half of all Americans believe in aliens, and almost a third believe that aliens have made contact with us. If so many people believe in aliens when they don't have proof, why couldn't the girl's family believe her when she was living proof?

JUST BECAUSE PEOPLE BELIEVE SOMETHING DOESN'T MAKE IT TRUE.
YOU SHOULDN'T BELIEVE SOMETHING JUST BECAUSE OTHER PEOPLE DO.
WOULD YOU JUMP OFF A BRIDGE IF EVERYONE ELSE DID?

Believing in aliens is not like jumping off a bridge. Some respectable people believed in aliens. Eddie Vedder, Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon.

RESPECTABLE?!

The girl tried to understand why her family didn't believe her. They may have been afraid of the aliens. They may have been scared to think that aliens are here with us. They could be afraid of what people will think about them if they admit that they believe in aliens. Would you be afraid if you saw strange creatures on the sidewalk?

I'M NOT WORRIED; I'M NOT GOING TO SEE ANY.

We shouldn't be scared. Think of all the people who've seen them and describe them the same way. Don't ignore them. They've been here a long time. They've always been with us.

CAN WE GET BACK TO THE REPUBLICAN NATIONAL CONVENTION.

Okay.

Future President Ronald Reagan, former President Gerald Ford, and an entourage of politicians and media left Detroit's Renaissance Center and walked down Jefferson on their way to the RNC at Cobo Arena. On the sidewalk before them sat two creatures with large heads, huge dark eyes and thin lips. They wore shabby clothing and held up a crude cardboard sign that read **PLEASE HELP GOD BLESS YOU**. They sought the eyes of Ronald Reagan and Jerry Ford, the eyes of anyone, *anyone*, but nobody saw them except a young girl.

The Chimera.

HOMER SIMPSON of Detroit (no relation to the cartoon character Homer Simpson) was the first person who saw the Chimera that summer of 1980. It was July 16, the next to last day of the Republican National Convention. A news junkie, Homer was enjoying his first cup of coffee over the *Detroit Free Press* when the storm sewer grate in front of his house started spewing steam. Homer went out to investigate. Before he reached it, the grate popped off and, in the expanding hot fog, a grotesque, muscular, four-legged creature materialized. It had three animal heads – a lion’s up front, a goat’s in the middle, and a serpent’s at end of its tail. All three heads looked right at Homer. One of its mouths, the lion’s, told Homer that his lottery ticket would be a winner. *“The realm of fulfillment awaits thee,”* the mouth said. Fire blasted from the mouth of the goat’s head, and the Chimera raced off in the direction of downtown. The stench of methane hung in the air.

Shaking his head, Homer went back inside and called the city to complain about the sewer system. He had no illusion that they would do anything anytime soon. He returned to his coffee and the *Freeep*. An above-the-fold, front page headline proclaimed: *“Storm wreaks wide damage, blackens sky.”* Hmm, thought Homer Simpson. Maybe that explains the sewer creature. The storm blew it in.

The Chimera roamed Detroit for the rest of the summer. Time after time the scenario was the same. A cloud of steam, appearance of the Chimera, and its lofty prophecies:

Before the sun sets, the love for which thou quests shall quest for thee.

The gods shall smile on thy family.

Tread tenderly and grasp good fortune. Tomorrow, treasure shall fill thine abode.

The scales of destiny shall tip in thy favor.

Thy power begets thy fate, and Fate shall beget thy power.

Chosen for healing thou art.

Luna shall bring the sleep thou craves.

Cast thy lot with me.

The animal control office went on alert. The city dispatched crews to search the sewers, but all they found were rats. Swirling shapes rose from the hot shimmering pavement. Something alive seemed to form, but when the crews reached the spot, the shimmering had moved down the road. They could no more catch the Chimera than dogs could catch the moon.

Despite the Chimera's fearsome appearance, fiery exhalations and noxious odor, Detroiters fed it their dreams. Detroiters longed for the happiness that the Chimera foretold. Indeed, many were soothed, and some tripped ecstatic. Others became less happy and angry.

At the Simpson house, Homer kicked back after work on his porch with a cold one and the *Detroit News*, the second front page recounting yet another day's reports of Chimera sightings. There seemed to be more than one of the creatures, especially in the Cass Corridor. "Good Lord," Homer said out loud. "All the guns in Detroit, why hasn't someone shot it already? Someone ought to do something about that thing."

His words were barely out of his lips when the clippity-clop of horse hooves startled him so badly that he knocked over his Stroh's. In the street, a white winged horse slowed, trotted to Homer, and stopped. Astride the horse sat a middle-aged,

balding, round-faced man with owl eyebrows and a fat cigar. In his lap nested a lemur.

The equestrian addressed Homer: "You have summoned me?"

"Not me," said Homer.

"Yes, you. You distinctly implored, 'someone ought to do something about that thing.' I am that someone. Allow me to introduce myself, sir. Cyril Connolly."

"You sound British."

"Truly, sir. An observation, sir, you do not appear to be Greek."

"You trying to get to Greektown?"

The lemur purred dismissively. Cyril Connolly, as if he hadn't heard the question, drew deeply on his cigar and exhaled a cloud of realism. "You may beckon the Chimera now, if you will."

"The what?"

"The Chimera," said Cyril Connolly, "'that thing' of which you wish to be rid. I am here to dispatch the Chimera." He sounded full of promise.

"Where's your gun?"

"Firearms will not be needed," said Cyril Connolly.

Homer crossed his arms and went into a lilt. "This is Detroit. You ain't dispatchin' NUTHIN' 'roun' here, NO how, without NO gun."

"To the contrary, sir. I will confront the Chimera with reality and dispatch it with my wit, as Pegasus" - he nodded to the winged horse - "is my witness and Polyp" - he nodded at the lemur - "is my scribe." Polyp's tail moved in the air as if it were writing.

"You may now summon the Chimera."

"No! But I may now summon the police!"

"You need merely state a desire, and the Chimera will come to you."

Homer looked blankly at Cyril Connolly. Polyp's tail floated laconically, waiting to record the next words. Cyril Connolly frowned, his eyebrows dipping to the bridge of his nose.

"Forgive me this estimation, sir; your station in life appears menial."

"What the - menial! My station in life! I'm on track to make foreman!"

"Thank you," said Cyril Connolly. "That will suffice for an entreaty to the Chimera that you accomplish a career goal. I'm sorry to have manipulated you in that manner." Polyp stood like a periscope, his reddish-orange eyes searching the horizons.

From the storm sewer grate in front of Homer Simpson's house, steam shot and the grate flew off. Pegasus reared. The Chimera took shape and the serpent mouth addressed Homer. *Thy benefactors shall bestow upon thee an esteemed and gainful title.*

"Poppycock!" exclaimed Cyril Connolly. "For all you know, you could be the Village Idiot. In the past the clods were the peasants, now the brute mass of ignorance is urban. The village idiot walks in Leicester Square." *

Today I shall prune the vine, intoned the Chimera, such that thou shalt reap grapes of pleasure tomorrow.

"No, no, no," said Cyril Connolly. "Permit me to quote Sainte-Beuve's *Mes Poisons*. 'The wine of remorse is trodden from the grapes of pleasure'."

Seek pleasure, and pleasure shall seek thee! Thou shalt pluck feathers of prosperity from the wings of wealth!

"Nonsense!" sniffed Cyril Connolly, tapping ash off his stogy. "How valuable unhappiness can be; melancholy and remorse form the deep leaden keel which enables

us to sail into the wind of reality; we run aground sooner than the flat-bottomed pleasure-lovers, but we venture out in weather that would sink them, and we choose our direction." *

The Chimera dwindled in the barrage of words. Polyp's calligraphy was exquisite.

Return to nature, said the Chimera, and nature shall return thy love.

"Who said anything about nature?" Homer asked.

"Well stated," said Cyril Connolly to Homer Simpson, and to the Chimera: "You're drifting. I need rebut you nevertheless. Nature doesn't love us. Nature doesn't care about us. Return to nature for a few days and doubtless you will pray for civilization. For our part, we've obscured our nexus with the physical world. If another learned quote may be excused, from Father Hopkins, 'nor can foot feel, being shod.'" **

The Chimera shrank some more.

Within the fortnight, life dawns anew for thy taking. Carpe diem!

"*Diem perdidit*," retorted Cyril Connolly. "Another day wasted."

The Chimera seemed as tired as its rhetoric. "Cheer up, things could be worse."

"I cheered up," Homer said, "and things got worse." Cyril Connolly and Pegasus beamed approvingly. Polyp wrote an exclamation point. The Chimera drooped and shrank to the size of a cat.

Mounted one, said the Chimera in all three of its voices. Thou differ not from the mortals. Thine ambitions doom thy potential and condemn thee to bitterness. Thou art a venomous and cursed orator. Thy failure and sorrow shalt boil from thine own mouth.

Cyril Connolly hung his head. “That’s the first true thing you’ve said. But no matter my failings. I refuse allegiance to your trumperies. You are garish and vulgar. You are delusion, figment and fantasy, a banal bromide. The record is writ. Q.E.D. BE GONE!”

The Chimera was diminished to the size of a rodent. With one well-placed kick, Pegasus knocked it back into the storm sewer. Cyril Connolly pressed Polyp into his lap and spurred Pegasus. With a majestic spread of alabaster wings, they took to the air in the direction of Greektown.

Homer plopped in his chair, picked up the *News*, and rested his feet on the porch rail. He didn’t know the city had a flying white horse. Now I’ve seen everything, he thought. Keeping no illusions, he could not be disillusioned. It was enough that his lottery ticket had been a winner.

#

*Cyril Connolly, *The Unquiet Dead*.

**Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur.”

The trouble with trickles.

Inspired by "The Trouble with Tribbles," *Star Trek* season 2, episode 15.

IN THE days of trickle-down economics when wishes were still of some use, the first trickle cooed its way into the welcoming arms of future President Ronald Reagan's future Office of Management and Budget director in Lansing, Michigan. It, the trickle, didn't quite look like what it was, the way a Lionhead rabbit doesn't quite look like a rabbit. It was unimaginably soft, warm, cuddly and cooing. It sounded like the trickle said, "Love me. I can help."

The future OMB director, who represented mid-Michigan in the House of Representatives, drove from Lansing to Detroit to give trickles to attendees at the 1980 Republican National Convention. He had four trickles. By the time he got to Cobo Hall, there were twenty.

"Take stock, man," he said at the RNC. "Poverty is rampant. So many people who have so little. To ease the struggle, I bring trickles to snuggle." The fur balls, now forty where the twenty had been, purred. It was almost impossible not to want one.

"When everyone has a trickle," he continued, "no one will want for a trickle. Trickles will bring hope and comfort." Sixty trickles quivered in agreement. They smelled of sugary, fruity pheromones. Everyone in the room clamored for one.

George H.W. Bush, one of the candidates for President, crossed his arms in skepticism. "Supply-side economics," he harrumphed. "Voodoo economics. People can't live on hope and comfort." The trickles let out ear-piercing screeches.

“In the 1890s it was the horse-and-sparrow theory,” said another doubter. “Feed the horses plenty of oats, and the sparrows get what passes through.” The trickles emitted malodorous fumes. Someone opened the windows.

“Trickles won’t reach the multitudes of have-nots,” said Candidate Bush.

“They’ll flow up to the big corporations and the people at the top. People at the bottom need more than a trickle.”

Candidate Reagan stroked his trickle. “Let’s get these over to the convention hall right away,” he said. The trickles, all 100 of them, puffed up as one.

* * * * *

At Cobo, the oratory was most impressive, and hundreds of trickles scurried their ways into the hands of delegates. Delegates and trickles were everywhere, on tables, in seats, and stuck to walls. Ronald Reagan won the Republican nomination for president and George H.W. Bush was nominated for vice-president. All of the RNC delegates, over a thousand, took home trickles.

In November 1980, Reagan and Bush were elected and in January 1981 they were sworn into office, Reagan’s left hand on a Bible from his mother and his right hand on a trickle. Trickles abounded in the White House and throughout Washington. Over the next months, the government cut taxes while spending more on the military and huge entitlement programs. The burgeoning federal debt multiplied like trickles.

Reaganomics was spending the country out of a recession.

Yet something was wrong. If trickles made it to the poor at all, they weren’t good for much. They made good scrub pads. After that, they passed back up to rich people

faster than you could say Captain Kirk. The impoverished needed a waterfall of work, not a trickle of dole, but the concept of “waterfall economics” was inconceivable.

More surprising was what people at the top felt. No matter how many trickles they had, rich people were never satisfied, so they were always unhappy. They had more than enough, yet they wanted more. And when you have that much, the only purpose of having more was to have more.

Worse, trickles had a tranquilizing effect on empathy. Rich people could hear, but many of them were deaf to destitution and acquiescent in its persistence. They had sight but no vision. They didn't truly know trickles. “None of us really understand what's going on,” said the director of the Office of Management and Budget, quoted in *The Atlantic* in December, 1981. That exposé undercut the whole trickle-down theory, collapsing it. Nobody wanted trickles any more.

Deprived of love, trickles stopped reproducing and dried up, leaving nothing behind but dust and disillusionment. A “sanitary engineer” found the last White House trickles in a leaky toilet, one of many leaks over the years. He beamed them into the future, where, he said in a Scottish accent, “they'll be na tribble at'all.” That's why they can still be found to this day, emblems and carriers of a debunked economic theory Klinging on to billionaires.

#

The difference between a fool and a hero.

FARMER JACK, a plastic giant in bib overalls and a straw hat, watched over the parking lot from where he was affixed above the doors of his new name-sake store on Detroit's Warren Avenue. The store was a godsend to residents of that urban food desert, an oasis of fresh meats and produce, a variety of choices, and low costs.

Codell clattered his empty cart over the asphalt of the Farmer Jack parking lot. He was but 150 feet from the store when a dark-clothed man clutching a black satchel bolted out of the doors. Simultaneously, serendipitously, two of Detroit's finest were in the lot and getting out of their squad car. The dark-clothed man saw the cops and started sprinting in the opposite direction. The officers were on it. Leaving their car doors open, they took off after the dark-clothed man. Codell froze. A few parking spot away, a paunchy guy in a Detroit Lions Charlie Weaver jersey also froze. The dark clothed man was headed right between Codell and the Lions fan.

The Lions fan sprang to life. He jumped in front of the running man and stuck both arms out as if he were about to hug someone. The running man swerved right; the Lions backer lunged left; the running back spun; the Lion backer tackled the running back and clung to one leg; the running back kicked free, his heel hitting the linebacker's lower face; the running back stumbled; the linebacker collapsed, clutching his jaw; the running back pitched forward; the police officers closed in; the running back regained his balance, tucked the satchel under one arm like a football and broke loose; one of the officers chased him but couldn't keep up. Two more Detroit cherry tops whipped into the parking lot. One of the new officers knelt to help the Lions fan, laid flat out in a handicapped parking space.

"I think my jaw's broken," the Charlie Weaver wanna-be mumbled through a mouthful of blood.

The officer daintily picked up two teeth on the blacktop. "These must be yours. You didn't need to put yourself in harm's way," he chastised. "That was foolish, my man."

* * * * *

Let's play that tackle again, Charlie, and see what might've been.

* * * * *

The Lions fan sprang to life. He jumped in front of the running man and stuck both arms out as if he were about to hug someone. The running man swerved right; the Lions backer lunged left; the running back spun; the Lion backer tackled the running back and clung to one leg; the running back kicked free, his heel hitting the linebacker's lower face; the running back stumbled; the linebacker collapsed, clutching his jaw; the running back pitched him forward; the police officers closed in; the running back lost his balance and fell; the satchel squirted in the air like a fumbled football; one of the officers jumped on the no-longer-running back. Two more Detroit cherry tops whipped into the parking lot, the new officers kneeling to help the Lions fan, laid flat out in a handicapped parking space.

"I think my jaw's broken," the Charlie Weaver wanna be mumbled through a mouthful of blood.

The officer daintily picked up two teeth on the blacktop. "These must be yours. You didn't need to put yourself in harm's way," he lauded. "You're a hero, my man."

Codell clattered his empty cart toward the store. High above the doors, Farmer Jack wore an impossibly happy smile.

#

I'm not your friend 2.

Inspired by The Alan Parsons Project, "Breakdown."

July 1980.

"I'M MICHAEL Blumenthal." He stuck out his big-boned right hand to Codell as if they'd never met and pumped his hand from the elbow, stiff-armed, for multiple seconds too long.

"You can stop shaking hands with me. You do that every time."

"Okay," said Michael Blumenthal.

"You can also stop telling me your name. How about if I call you MB?"

"Okay.

"What can I call you?"

"Codell."

"Is that your name?"

"Of course it's my name. Who else would it be?"

"Where are you going, Codell?"

"Going to the Bronx for a beer. Want to go? It would do you good to get out."

"Okay."

"'Okay'? For real? You shock me, MB! This is a first."

"Are we going right now?"

"Yeah, right now. You need to get anything?"

"No."

"Do you have money?"

"No."

"Great. I ask so I guess I'm buying. I'll get you a bomber."

“What’s a bomber?”

“The biggest beer they have. The most bang for the buck. It’s a quart Mason jar.”

The two neighbors went back and forth down the four flights of steps, like switchbacks on a narrow mountain road, at the rear of their Prentis Street tenement. The Bronx was a block east. Codell led. They took a sharp right out of their building into the adjacent alley. At the end there was a blind corner where the buildings on either side of the alley blocked your view up and down the street. MB walked like he wasn’t sure where his next step was going to land.

“Why are you walking funny?” Codell asked.

“It’s my medication.”

“I should’ve guessed.”

“It’s not funny.”

The Bronx was empty but for two people. Codell nodded to the fixture of his buddy on his usual stool near the entrance and exchanged acknowledging glances with the bartender. “Pick a table,” he told MB. “I’ll get the bombers. Stroh’s,” he said to the barkeep.

Codell set the two huge beers on the table and sat at a right angle to MB. MB rested his chunky hands on the table, fingers above and thumbs beneath. As if it would fly away if he didn’t hold it down.

Codell raised his jar to his lips and sipped. MB, both hands around his bomber, mimicked Codell and then returned his hands to hold down the table. They sat in silence.

* * * * *

"Where do you go when you go out, Codell?"

"Work. I'm the best damn beer vendor Cobo Arena has. Get to see shows and fights for free.

"Where do you go when you go out, MB?"

"I don't go out."

"I noticed that. But you must go someplace. Farmer Jack's?"

"The library."

"Where do you get your food? Your money? From your mother?"

"Social Security Disability."

* * * * *

"Why are you nice to me, Codell?"

"What? Where'd that come from?"

* * * * *

"What do mean, you 'used to' have friends?" Codell asked.

"They always wanted something from me. That's why they weren't friends."

"Good news, MB, I don't want anything from you."

"That's why we're friends."

"We're not friends."

* * * * *

"If you never see someone, you're not friends. If someone's kind to you, you are friends."

"Not always."

* * * * *

"Sometimes people I've never met are kind to me," MB said. "My friends weren't."

"No wonder you're confused."

* * * * *

"Why don't you have friends, Codell?"

"I never said I didn't have friends. I'm happy with my own company."

"You don't say much."

"That's right. You don't say much, either."

"That's right."

* * * * *

"MB, don't wait on your beer. You hardly touch it. It's going flat on you."

"Sometimes you smell bad," MB said.

"We never know where the conversation is going to go with you, do we."

* * * * *

"My friends always told me what to do," said MB.

"You did what they said?"

MB clung to the table and stared straight ahead.

"No one made you," Codell said. "It's not like you had to obey them. This is America. Freedom."

"Can we leave now?" MB asked.

"You hardly touched your beer."

"I don't like beer."

“You let me buy you a quart of Detroit River water and now you don’t like beer. Thanks. Really, thanks. Yeah, we should leave now.”

Codell pushed himself away from the table, hard enough to shake MB’s beer. MB got up like he was getting up from a toilet, pushing both hands down on his chair.

“This has been a bust,” Codell announced.

“It’s been good.”

“ ‘Good’? I bought, we sat here with awkward silences, and you didn’t drink your beer.”

“No one made you buy it,” MB said. “This is America. Freedom.” He led the way out.

“You can stop telling me we’re not friends, Codell.”

#

Waiting for Bardot.

Inspired in part by Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

“FREE BEER tomorrow,” promised a sign in the window of a bar on Cass Avenue. The sign was there every day. In front of the bar was a street light and a bus stop where a woman shuffled, her steps short as if her legs were locked at her knees. Her dress, which was white, extended to the tops of white socks in thick-soled white shoes. Her purse was white, too. She wore a large PETA pin above her heart. Rather short, she looked to be in her mid-forties. It was dusk. Against the background of the bar and spotlighted by the street light, the woman in white radiated like a light herself.

Codell walked past the woman, startling her. She peered up at him through thick glasses, eyes narrowed. “Excuse me.” She pointed downtown. “Is this the way to the university?” She spoke through some sort of wire loop attached to her upper teeth.

Codell loomed over her. What lone woman would stop a shirtless man in the Cass Corridor? At any time, much less at dark? You could tell by her clean clothes and coiffured hair that, if she knew anything about the Corridor, it was from a distance, not from breathing it day in and day out. Her eyes lacked that numb, unfocused look.

She checked her watch. “I’m supposed to be at the university by now.” The wire in her mouth clicked like consonants. “Did I get off at the wrong stop?”

Codell pointed the same way she had. “That’s the way downtown, not to the university. You need to - ”

“This way?” She pointed downtown again. “This IS to the university, isn’t it?”

“No. That’s downtown.”

“Why do you smell bad? Don’t you have a shirt?”

"It's too hot for a shirt. You need to go *that* way."

"Thank you," she said forcefully. "I'll have to get back on the bus."

"You're only a few blocks from the university. But go *that* way."

"Oh! I got turned around."

"Lady, this bus don't run much at night. If you're waiting on this bus, you'll be here a while."

"What line is this?"

"Sixteen. You're better off walking."

"That would be tedious." She adjusted her dental device and checked her watch again. "What time do you have?"

"I don't have a watch."

From Canfield, a man in red and white plaid pants and a white tee-shirt joined them.

"If you're not going to walk, take the Woodward line," Codell said.

"Which way is Woodward?"

"A block that way."

"What street is this?"

"Canfield. Look, lady - "

"What line number is Woodward?"

"Line 4. Look, lady - "

"Why is it line 4?"

"The Woodward bus isn't running," said the man in the plaid pants.

"Why wouldn't it be running?" The woman stomped her feet. "Of course it is!"

"It's not," said the man in plaid. "The Cass bus isn't running, either."

"She just got off a Cass bus," Codell said.

"The line's not running."

"I just got off!" The woman stomped her feet again, adjusted her glasses, and tried to read the schedule on the bus stop sign, but it was too small for the dim light.

"What time do you have?" she asked plaid man.

"Now," Plaid said.

"What? That makes no sense."

"It's the only thing that makes sense."

"The Cass bus won't run tonight," added the plaid, "but surely it will tomorrow. You can wait here all night if you want. Do you know where I can get a burger? I'm hungry."

"You shouldn't eat red meat," said the woman. She looked up at Codell. "You need to put a shirt on. I'll take the Woodward bus."

"You can wait all night if you think that bus will ever arrive," plaid man tossed at her. "Who knows, you might get Lucky [upper case intended]. Have we met before?"

"'Lucky' my foot. Don't make me pepper spray you."

#

Pretending to be a person.

“YOU DON’T mean shit to me. I know your type and I know where you come from. Stay out of my way, stay in your section, and push the Stroh’s. That’s it.”

So commanded the king of the vendors at Detroit’s Joe Louis Arena, and that honest simplicity suited Codell just fine. His boss was so full of himself and so far above Codell that friction between them was impossible - as long as Codell sold his beer, kept his mouth shut and stayed out of his boss’s face.

Codell executed those three things to perfection. In February, 1980, the National Hockey League All-Star game drew a record 21,002, and Codell felt like he sold beer to half of them. His boss showed his approval by ignoring him. With each trip Codell made to the storeroom, his boss had some smart-ass thing to say as if Codell wasn’t there at all. “I’d do anything for this fuckin’ place,” said his boss, “as long as it don’t go over my shift.”

On March 2, a guzzling crowd packed the Joe to watch Detroit’s own undefeated Thomas Hearn, AKA The Hitman AKA the Motor City Cobra, punish Ángel Espada for four rounds with his left, the way his left punished everyone. Codell broke a sales record that night. What his boss had to say was, “Those front-office bean-counters want an inventory? Hell, I made up the last one.”

It went that way all year. Codell and his boss wordlessly passed each other in the corridors. HR wanted everyone to have sensitivity training, and the king of vendors almost seemed to slightly turn his head to Codell and came near to intensifying an expression that, if he would’ve prolonged it, could have been an acknowledgement that

Codell was a person. "HR is clueless," the boss said. "Who needs 'training.' Those clowns wrote the book of stupid."

On August 2, Hearn fought at the Joe for the world welter-weight title. Pipino Cuevas lasted all of two rounds. By the time the ref stopped the fight, Codell had hawked a few hundred brewskis. "Lazy spic shoulda stayed in Mexico," said the head honcho. "Up here, people actually have to do things."

Hearn didn't have another fight at the Joe until December. For the first time since Codell was hired, he talked to his boss.

"I'm not working Hearn-Primera," Codell told him.

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not. I'm gonna go work at Cobo Hall. They got more goin' on. Some big rock shows comin' up."

"You tellin' me you quittin'?"

"Just for now."

"Like hell, 'just for now.' Go ahead, go to Cobo and don't come back. Go back to where you came from. Make the Joe a better place."

* * * * *

On December 6, Hearn KO'd Venezuela's Luis Primera in the sixth round. Beverage sales at the Joe were down a little. After his shift, Codell's boss, the king of vendors, headed for a cold one at the Lindell A.C. It was THE place to spot Detroit's pro athletes. That night, the Lions' Alex Karas was there and so was the Tigers' Norm Cash. The place buzzed in the afterglow of Hearn's knock-out. The line at the bar was

four deep. The king of vendors pushed his way to the front. "Gimme a beer!" he commanded.

The bartender knew the type and knew where he came from. "Get the hell to the back of the line," he said to the pretender. "You don't mean shit to me."

#

Show me your panties.

THE THIN man with the hook nose dropped coins into the bus meter and swaggered into the aisle. The bus doors sighed shut, cooping everyone inside, and the bus pulled away. The thin man stood, hands agitating. He scanned up and down both sides of the bus. His eyes moved like a hawk's. Finally he sat in the closest seat and leaned forward.

"Whutzat on yo leg," he said, loudly, to the elderly man next to him. The entire bus quieted and warily watched. Before the elderly man could answer, the thin man moved two seats deeper into the bus. Across from him sat Codell.

"What are YOU looking at?" The thin man sneered at Codell, rose again, and moved a few rows farther back. He hovered over a diminutive woman, her hair a neat bun on the back of her head. "Gimme yo seat," he told her.

She looked straight ahead.

"Gimme yo seat." The bus driver watched in his rear view mirror.

"I paid the fare," the thin man spit at her. "I want yo seat."

"I don't give a stitch what you paid." She continued looking straight ahead, her eyes piercing behind rimless glasses. "I didn't move then, I'm not moving now."

The thin man rocked on his heels. "I'm tired of you," he snapped. "Old school."

He strutted to the back of the bus and perched next to a young woman in a sun dress. "Show me your panties," he leered. He scratched her thigh with his fingers.

The woman sprang from her seat as if she'd been launched. **"GET YOUR HAND OFF MY LEG!"**

The driver slammed the brakes, lurching everyone forward, and threw the bus into park. He stormed down the aisle with taut face and clenched fists.

Before the driver could reach him, the thin man hopped to the rear door and punched the release handles.

“Take your sorry ass out of here!” the bus driver yelled, but he’d already taken flight.

Everyone exhaled, then twittered.

#

I'm not your friend 3 - scared sacred.

August 1980.

"ARE YOU sure you're okay to go out around people?" Codell asked Michael Blumenthal. "You take your meds?"

"I'm okay." Michael Blumenthal, arms hanging, stood in the door of his apartment, half in, half out.

"Let's go then," Codell said. "No sense sitting on the fence, MB." They headed down the hall of their tenement, down the four flights of stairs, and out the front door on Prentis Street. The morning summer sunlight made them shade their eyes.

"Where are we going?" MB asked.

"Willis Show Bar. Three blocks down Third."

They walked two blocks. The cross street was narrower than other streets, paved with stones, with stately houses well kept. MB stopped half way across the street.

"What are you doing, MB?"

"What street is this?"

"Canfield. Is there a problem?"

"It's different."

"It's a historic neighborhood. It's the only nice neighborhood around here. Get out of the street. You can't stand there in the middle of the street."

"I want to go that way," MB said, looking east on Canfield into the sun. Not waiting for Codell, he started walking. Codell double-stepped to catch up. Trees and vintage street lamps lined both sides of the street in front of restored century old Queen Anne homes. "It's like walking into the past," Codell said.

MB stopped next to a couple in formal dress as they got into a Model T. The gentleman wore a bowler, gold pince-nez, and a red cravat. He opened the door for the gentlewoman, she resplendent in a rich purple dress and tall matching hat. He stepped into the T and pressed the starter button.

“Doin’ alright?” Codell asked. “Not hearing voices?”

“Good morning,” MB smiled to the gentlewoman. She declined her head demurely. “No voices,” MB said to Codell. The gentleman engaged the gear and the Model T sputtered away.

“Who you talking to, MB? Snap out of it.”

They strolled the length of Canfield. Others walked east with them, all in their Sunday best, the women trussed and some with parasols, women and men both in hats, everyone going towards the churches on Cass Avenue.

At the end of Canfield, Codell and MB circled the block back westward to the Willis Show Bar. Its roof wrapped distinctively around the corner of the building. Signage was abundant: *Live* EXOTICS. Below that, BAR WILLIS BAR & GRILL. Below that, above its double-doors, BAR. The doors were padlocked.

MB looked at Codell. “Should’ve known it was closed on Sunday,” Codell said. “How about the Bronx.”

“I don’t want to go to the Bronx.”

“Ruby Slipper?” Codell suggested.

“Like *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“Yeah, you got it, *The Wizard of Oz*. A magical place. Let’s go. It’s already getting hot out here.”

They backtracked to Cass, which was oddly devoid of traffic and thus oddly quiet. Just because he could, Codell walked to the center of the street and stood there defying fate, easy to do with no motor vehicles. On the east side of Cass was The Ruby Slipper. On the west side was the Church of Our Father, the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, a towering edifice.

"Codell, is the Ruby Slipper a bar?"

Codell straddled the center line on Cass.

"I don't want to go to a bar, Codell."

"You got a better idea?"

"Let's go here." MB headed for the house of worship.

"That's a church!"

"Get out of the street," Michael Blumenthal said, walking. "You can't just stand there in the middle of the street. What's the matter, scared?"

"I don't know what I'm doing," Codell said, following.

* * * * *

Michael Blumenthal and Codell sat softly at the back of the church. The minister spoke about God and free will and reason and helping one another and justice and God. He wound himself up, gesticulating, sweating, and pausing for effect before his pinnacle: "*God is NOT the best answer!*"

"No!" "No!" A chorus of disbelief resounded. "*What are you saying?!*"

"*God is not the best answer,*" the pastor repeated. "*God is the ONLY answer!*"

The congregation went hallelujah crazy.

* * * * *

On the walk back to their tenement, Codell's brow furrowed. "Why didn't he talk about Jesus?" Codell mused. "Why didn't he talk about the Bible?"

"They don't believe in Jesus," said Michael Blumenthal.

"What? How would you know?"

"They believe he was just a man."

"What are you talking about? Jesus was Jesus!"

"Let's not argue about it. I don't want to argue."

"Besides, it's Sunday."

"Sunday!" Codell harumphed. "What does Sunday have to do with it?"

"Ever hear of The Truce of God?" asked Michael Blumenthal. "The Catholic Church commanded people not to fight on certain liturgical days, and people obeyed."

" 'Liturgical days'! How do you know this shit, MB? As messed up as you are? That's the most words I ever heard you say."

"That's why I know it," Michael Blumenthal said. "Because I'm messed up."

* * * * *

Outside their apartment building, Michael Blumenthal stood with his arms drooped at his sides. Codell sat on the stoop. "I don't know, MB. Did you understand what he was saying?"

"Yes. I got a message. The minister."

"MB, MB. Don't start."

"He was looking at me."

"He was looking at everybody!"

"There were signs."

"You said you took your medication, MB."

"Never said that."

"You sure did."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Did not."

"Did to."

"Did not, last word."

"Stupid Last Word game. Did too, last word yourself."

"Did not." Michael Blumenthal is looking right at you. "Go back and read it for yourself, right after 'August 1980.' "

"What are you talking about? That's disconcerting."

"What I said was, 'I'm okay.' "

"Alright, MB," said Codell. "Go ahead and scare me. What signs. Get it out."

"The minister was looking at me and coughing."

"Coughing is a sign?!"

"He confused the days. He mispronounced 'empirical.' The candle went out. The candle went out!"

"Jesus, MB. So what. And since when are you the English teacher?"

"The usher's collar - " Michael Blumenthal hushed his thick voice - "was up on one side."

Codell hung his head. "Okay, MB. Okay, I know where you're headed with this. You tell me. I can't stand it. Go right ahead. What'd the signs mean."

“Pray.”

“That’s it? ‘Pray’?!”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier,” Codell continued, “if the preacher just came right out and said, ‘hey, everybody, pray!’ without a long sermon and a bunch of secret signs? How do you know it wasn’t ‘prey’? With an ‘e’?”

“Very funny, Codell.”

“Yeah, well how come you’re the only one getting signs? Ever notice that? How come I don’t get a sign?”

“Look on your leg,” MB said. A praying mantis had hopped on Codell’s thigh. MB smirked. “You know what that is?”

Codell backhanded it off his leg with a flourish. “Yeah, I know what it is. it’s a dead coincidence.”

“Not a coincidence, Codell. Mantis rhymes with Prentis. No coincidence. The signs weren’t from the pastor. He was just the instrument, a minor character. We’re all characters, Codell.”

“Oh, what! – get out of here, just get out!” Codell got up and, without knowing why, checked to see if the mantis was dead. They silently climbed the four flights to their apartments, one step after another, caught like all of us between fact and fiction, message and madness.

#

Grunts at the crossing.

Inspired in part by *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

SOMETHING WAS afoot in downriver Detroit. The railroad crossing in Delray had settled so much, it badly needed repair. The crossing was on Dearborn Street next to the Fisher Freeway ramps where traffic for the Ford plant was heavy. Ford executives could be spotted, chauffeured in their new Lincolns and Cadillacs.

The railroad, Conrail, subcontracted a local company to fix the problem. The work crew showed up at seven a.m., and you could already tell that it was going to be another oppressively hot day. They blocked off the first lane on Dearborn, leaving the other lanes open for traffic to squeeze through. Cars backed up immediately. Motorists had some choice words. "Why ya doin' this on a Friday?" "Who owns this line? The C&O? I'm filin' a complaint!"

The crew didn't know who owned the line and didn't care. Their job was to level the track. They had to breathe foul air from the plants and black smoke from trucks. They had to shout over the constant rumble from the expressway and semis. It would be an all-day job, one lane at a time, in an open-air oven with irate drivers. One thing about a railroad crossing, there was never, ever any shade. Their only defenses against the heat were their jugs of water and the shadows of their trucks.

And so they hopped right to work. The foreman sighted along the rails to identify spots that needed leveling. The other four crew members shoveled crushed rock under the rails and then used sledge hammers to pound in the rock. The repetitive clash of metal against rock was a constant, piercing auditory assault. The rock had to be tamped solid under the rails. Drivers thought it would make the road smoother. "This crossing's been bad a long time. Mighty glad you're fixing it."

“No problem,” said the foreman, twitching his nose. What he didn’t say was, *we’re fixing the track, not the road. When we’re done, the road will be rougher than it is now.*

By ten a.m., the sun-bake was well underway and traffic lined up out of sight. They’d finished two lanes, not close to half done. The foreman would sight and level, give tamping directions to the crew, a little more rock, a little less, repeat, repeat, repeat. Waiting for the foreman drove the crew rabid. A lot of the time, they looked like they were just sniffing the air. Drivers were incensed. “Whatcha standin’ round fer? Get ta work!”

By noon, the sun beat down and a wind had come up, a parching wind that blew dust. They broke for lunch in the shadow of their truck. Their water, what was left of it, was warm.

“Hey, look,” one of the crew said, peering down the rails.

“A rabbit!”

“Where?”

“There, on the track!”

“What’s it doing here?”

“A rabbit around here, there’s nothing but ashfault!” [sic]

“That can’t be any ordinary rabbit.”

“What do you mean? Of course it’s an ordinary rabbit,” scoffed the foreman.

“Look at the size of it. The teeth. The claws.”

“They can leap. I wouldn’t cross it.”

“Don’t get close. It might be sick.”

“It might attack us!”

“They make noises when they’re going to attack.”

“Noises?”

“Hissing, grunting, I don’t know.”

The foreman had enough. “You twats, it’s a rabbit. It’s not going to attack anything. It’s a harmless little bunny that one of these limos is going to run over.”

By late afternoon their water was depleted, as were they. They were all mute with exhaustion and darker than when they’d started. They smelled, and their clothes, soaked through, clung like wet fur.

In the procession of traffic, a shiny air-conditioned Lincoln eased over the tracks and stopped mere feet from the foreman. Its tinted rear window slid down. Cool air gushed out. A clean shaven man in a dapper jacket, crisp white shirt and red tie grinned maliciously.

“How ya doin’?” He drawled to the foreman. His eyes were cold shards that glinted and cut. “Enjoying the day?”

They locked eyes and the foreman straightened up on his haunches.

“Bite me,” he grunted.

#

Driven buggy.

Inspired by Franz Kafka, "Metamorphosis."

THE VERMIN awoke one morning transformed into a huge, soft creature. Gone were its exoskeleton and the others of its kind.

Fearfully alone, it dropped to search for cover. Instead of its six short, sturdy legs, it had four long, jointed appendages. Its whole body was soft. It only saw directly in front of itself, in a dull way, and it could smell nothing except the strongest odors.

It tried to secrete its pheromones, but there were none that it recognized. It tried to make its sounds, but those failed, too. Its jaws shifted strangely. It inhaled and expelled air through its mouth rather than its body, its body immense in size and weight.

There was a knock on the door to the room. "Good morning, Gregor! You need to get ready for work!" The creature - Gregor - froze stock still.

"Gregor! Come out for breakfast! You're going to miss the bus!"

Gregor flattened on his belly next to a couch, but he was too big to fit under it.

"Gregor? Are you awake?" The door opened.

"Gregor, what are you doing on the floor?! What's wrong? What happened?!"

Gregor's mother stepped toward Gregor, but Gregor, bug-eyed, moved into a corner by the fireplace. He pressed his arms and hands against the wall, knocking down a reproduction of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. He tried to press his legs against the wall, too, but they didn't stick to the wall any more than his arms, and he collapsed. He landed on the dog iron from the fireplace and, to his great shock, he felt pain.

"Something's wrong with Gregor!" the mother cried out. "Hurry!"

Gregor's father rushed into the room followed closely by Gregor's sister. "Lift him! Put him on the couch!" Gregor's mother watched and fretted.

The father and sister sat Gregor upright on the couch. "Gregor, say something!" said the mother. "Look at him, his eyes are dilated. We need to call the doctor!"

"His blood sugars are low," said the father. "Get him some juice." The sister ran out and returned with a glass of apple juice. She poured a little in Gregor's mouth; he coughed and dribbled. "I think some went down," the sister said. "He swallowed."

"Be careful, you're spilling," said the father.

"He's going to be late for work," said the mother. But Gregor was not late for work, not in a technical sense, because his mother called in sick for him. He stayed on the couch for the rest of the day.

* * * * *

Gregor's sister brought him an assortment of food. He made noises but did not talk; he seemed to have been struck dumb. The mother washed him from a basin as best she could. The father cleaned around him, and the sister rehung the Venus print, the frame of which had cracked. Gregor watched listlessly, his mouth partly open, jaws slowly working, turning his head left and right occasionally.

Night brought darkness, and darkness brought comfort. Gregor slid to the floor in a fetal position and longed for others of his kind. He hurt inside.

* * * * *

In the morning, the sister softly swung the door open to the smell of urine and feces and the sight of Gregor curled on the floor, eyes blankly open. The food she had brought him was untouched. She tried to hoist him to the couch, but she couldn't manage it by herself. The father took one look, stifled a gag, and retreated for a bucket

of hot water and his mop. The mother stripped Gregor, washed him from the basin again, and called his work to tell them he was still sick.

The sister took refuge in practicing her violin. She was off-pitch, and the notes dropped off precipitously and screeched like fingernails on a chalkboard. "It seems to touch him," said the father. "He's crying."

Gregor tried to call out and moved his hands and feet in tapping motions. "It looks like he's trying to talk," said the sister. "It's as if he doesn't know what to do." The pain in Gregor's abdomen got worse.

* * * * *

That night, the family heard scuttling in Gregor's room. In the morning, they found Gregor in front of the fireplace smeared with soot. The mother spread a sheet on the couch; the father and sister half carried, half dragged Gregor onto it; the mother stripped and cleaned him; the father mopped rigorously.

The sister offered Gregor apple slices. She wedged one between his lips; it fell out. "He can't go another day without eating," she said. "He'll starve."

"This is revolting," the father said. "We can't continue to suffer this."

"What if it's contagious?" asked the mother. "He was right next to the fireplace. What if he caught a flue [sic] bug?"

The pain inside Gregor had stopped, and in its place he felt nothing. He was unable to move of his own volition, although "volition" was far from the right word. His body and his brain could not initiate movement. He remained vaguely aware that he was solitary and that something was missing or lost. Thoughts of others of his kind had evaporated, and in their place he felt a strange relief.

“He can’t miss work again,” the mother said. “I’ll take him in the morning.”

“He has to go,” the sister agreed.

* * * * *

The family dressed Gregor in his work clothes and the mother left him sitting outside the doors of his company before it opened, his hands neatly folded in his lap. He was scrubbed, shaved and groomed so well that, to look at him, you couldn’t tell he was comatose. He looked like all the other employees.

Later that morning, the family got a call that Gregor had died.

“If only he would’ve had more sympathy for us,” Mr. Samsa said. “I can’t wait to sanitize that room.”

Gregor’s sister, too young to work, was invigorated. Her name was Grete. She played her violin with new subtlety and confidence. She felt fluorescent, self-consciously voluptuous, her days scented with possibility that she mistook for promise.

For a few days, Mrs. Samsa took all their temperatures and called the doctor’s office to inquire, had there been some bug going around?

#

Kingly continuity:
the history leading to “Exploding the Moment.” *

KING HENRY I born circa 1068, two years after the Norman conquest of England. Short, stocky, barrel chested, black hair. He seized the throne when his brother William died in a hunting accident. A harsh but effective leader, strengthened the justice system and encouraged ecclesiastical reform. First wife **Matilda of Scotland**, second wife **Adeliza of Louvain**. He ruled from 1100 until his death in 1135.

King Henry II born in 1133. Red-haired, freckled, bow legged from riding, scruffily dressed. Famous for his energy and drive. Piercing stare, bullying, temper outbursts, impulsive. Laid the basis for English common law. Married **Eleanor of Aquitaine**. He ruled from 1154 until his death in 1189.

King Henry III born in 1207. Strong build, a drooping eyelid, mostly amiable, flashes of temper. Known for his piety, lavish religious ceremonies, generosity to charities, extraction of huge sums from Jews in England, and the Statute of Jewry. Married **Eleanor of Provence**. He ruled until his death in 1272.

King Henry IV born in 1367. Suffered from a disfiguring skin disease. At his coronation, anointed with holy oil purportedly from the Virgin Mary. Faced a number of rebellions. First wife **Mary de Bohun**, second wife **Joan of Navarre**. He ruled from 1399 until his death in 1413.

King Henry V born in 1386. Very tall for his time (6'3"), ruddy complexion, face scarred from battle. Military successes in the Hundred Years' War against France, which he initiated. Married **Catherine of Valois of France**. He ruled from 1413 until his death in 1422.

King Henry VI born in 1421. Timid, shy, passive, well-intentioned. Averse to warfare and violence, he inherited the Hundred Years War. Suffered military failures and mental breakdowns. Miracles were attributed to him; regarded as a saint and a martyr. Married **Margaret of Anjou**. He ruled England twice and was the (disputed) king of France from 1422 - 1453. He died in 1471; may have been assassinated.

King Henry VII was born in 1457. Tall and slender, small blue eyes, bad teeth, a sallow face and fair hair. Extremely intelligent, detail-oriented, shrewdly decisive. Seized the crown in 1485 and restored power and stability to the monarchy following a civil war. Married **Elizabeth of York**. He ruled until his death in 1509.

King Henry VIII born in 1491. Charismatic, attractive, an extravagant spender. He ushered in the divine right of kings and expanded royal power. Married six times; the annulment of his first marriage to **Catherine of Aragon** resulted in the Church of England separating from papal authority. Beheaded two of his wives, **Anne Boleyn** and **Catherine Howard**, for alleged adultery. He ruled until his death in 1547.

King Henry Ford born in 1863. Persistent and shrewd. The Ford Motor Company revolutionized transportation and mass production, making him one of the richest men in the world. Known for his pacifism during World War I. Hired large numbers of immigrants and Blacks, fueling a great migration from south to north. Had a virulent and obsessive hatred of Jews. Married **Clara Jane Bryant**. He ruled until 1945 and died in 1947.

King Henry Ford II born in 1917. Charismatic, egotistical, roguish with a rowdy grin, an extravagant spender. Espoused a divine right of corporations ("the king can do

no wrong"). Married three times, first to **Anne McDonnell**, second to **Maria Cristina Vettore Austin**, third to **Kathleen DuRoss**. He ruled from 1945 until his death in 1987.

Henry Ford II was devoutly devoted to corporate profits. He lobbied against vehicle safety regulation. *See* the next fiction, "Exploding the Moment."

#

*Most information is from Wikipedia.

Exploding the moment.

Inspired by a passage in T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

IT IS a sublime thing when the side mirror of a Ford Pinto rockets into the air, slows as it ascends, and comes to a stop at its apogee, suspended like an agnostic between heaven and earth, *supra* and *infra*. The mirror, *supra*, spinning silently, lethargically, even indolently, seems ever so much more dignified than the chaos, *infra*, from which it had been jettisoned and to which gravity, inevitably, will return it.

The mirror at apotheosis hangs in the air in quiet, calm contrast to the exponential bursts below of scant minutes prior. The first burst - from a truck on West Grand Boulevard rear-ending the Pinto in front of the Conyers Ford dealership where the Pinto driver had purchased his "little carefree car" from Henry Ford II's automobile empire - this force ruptured the Pinto's gas tank and sparked an explosive fireworks of car parts and a rhapsody of flames from which the Pinto's driver extricated himself, stumbled and fell with a clumsiness and dispassion to everything except the immediate imperative of his survival, a clumsiness and dispassion which must be forgiven. The second burst - that of flames spreading to the front of the Pinto as the mirror launched skyward - continues in tandem with the flight of the mirror. The mirror, amidst the eruption of Pinto parts, is quickly forgotten, but not gone, placid at its zenith, waiting for the time and location of its delivery to Canaan.

In this inferno of vehicles and prose, obtuse prose confusing in its verbosity yet precisely subordinated, imagine, then, the thoughts of the Pinto's driver, collapsed and immobile, prone on his back, ostensibly safe from his burning car. But sunlight strikes the airborne mirror at an angle just-so that creates a single brilliant glint above him. An

object is falling, he realizes. He tries to discern, as it gains speed, what the descending object is. Is that my *car mirror*? Imagine his incredulity that the falling mirror is on a trajectory to hit him. Would he have time to appreciate the freakish ballistics? In the last seconds, does he see the chipped paint? Does he grasp the surreality, does he smirk at the irony, that he escaped his burning car only to be struck by the falling mirror of that car? Does it occur to him, “objects in mirror are closer than they appear?”

Like the mirror earlier, the driver and you, dear reader, reach apotheoses. Does the Pinto driver realize that his “little carefree car” had a defective gas tank? In the divine, dwindled moment when the mirror fatally fractures his face and skull, does he curse Henry Ford II’s devotion to profit and lobbying against safety regulation? Does he know light, or darkness, or anything, *anything*, as his final fraction of a second explodes into eternity?

#

I'm washing my windows.

SOMEONE THREW a hunk of brick through Codell's window. The crash of glass and thud on the floor had woken him with a start out of a heavy, dreamless sleep. Codell remained prone on his back, eyes wide, heart racing. After a few quiet minutes, he sat up. The piece of brick lay next to a wall. Beneath a gaping hole in the lower pane of the window, shards of glass twinkled in sunlight filtered by Detroit's urban haze.

Codell got up, picked up the brick, and threw it back out the broken window with an emphatic "fuck you!" There was no one to be seen out the window. "FUCK OFF!" he yelled, to no one and to everyone, to the whole deaf world.

Codell swept up the broken glass. He ran his index finger along the haphazard geometry of the remaining glass in the pane and breathed deeply. Although rain had cleaned the air two nights earlier, the day's heat was cooking a new blanket of smog. The sunlight was searing. He sat in the armchair in the corner of the room, out of the sunlight. Who the hell would heave a brick through his window and why? Probably just kids. Probably just kids, but it must have taken quite some effort to put a brick through a fourth floor window. With this type of crap there's always a darkness lurking that it's something personal or worse.

The brick, the brick, the brick. *Why me?* Codell puzzled. He simply couldn't see it, couldn't think clearly. Even without the brick, it had been a long, hot day. As the earth raced around the sun, the slant of its rays increased and brought into relief the filthy opacity and smears on the window.

Maybe if he cleaned his window. He took a plastic pail from under the sink and filled it with hot water. He took off his tee-shirt to use as a cleaning rag and exposed his upper body to the full force of the sun.

He worked methodically and with no haste, spending as much time watching the parking lot, sidewalk and street as he spent attending to the window. Two children, one chasing the other, raced past below him. On the sidewalk, a couple strolled hand in hand. Codell frowned and got to work in earnest on the interior of the unbroken upper pane, working from top to bottom, and then tracing around its edges and into the corners. In the unforgiving sun, he was sweating in no time. After using one end of his tee-shirt to wash, he used the other end to dry. He moved to the shattered lower pane and gingerly washed what was left of it so as not to break out any more pieces. He dabbed it dry, stepped back and surveyed the product of his efforts. The sun, twenty minutes lower in the sky, glared at him through the glass. Sweat lubricated his eyes. Both panes remained cloudy from a film of grime on the outside of the glass.

Codell sighed, rewet his tee-shirt, and cautiously snuck his forearm through the jagged hole in the lower pane. Supinating his forearm and wrist, he dabbed the exterior of the lower pane with his left hand while gingerly holding the jagged broken glass in place with his right hand. Changing hands, he did the same for the other side of the lower window and then dried both sides. To finish, he rubbed away a few lingering specks and smudges, invisible but for the glancing angle of the sun. Codell was illuminated and wore a sheen of perspiration. An ambulance pulled into the parking lot and turned around, its middle-aged driver glancing up at him.

To wash the outside of the unbroken upper pane, Codell carefully raised the lower window. The jagged pieces of glass trembled. Codell rewet his tee-shirt, turned his back to the window, arched his back, and ducked his head and torso outside. The edges of the broken glass were above him. Leaning backward out the window, he counterbalanced his weight by pushing the calves of both legs against the inside wall below the window. Suspended outside of his building, he peered down at the concrete below him. His perspective was novel and frightening in its potential.

Invigorated, and with a care born in no small part by the precariousness of his position, he defied the glare of the sun. He stretched one arm up, tee-shirt in hand, and cleaned the exterior of the pane.

The top of the outer pane seemed too far up. To extend his reach, he sat on the window sill, body outside, legs inside but no longer with his feet on the floor. He clutched his tee in one hand and with the other hand clung to the vertical frame of the lower window. He leaned out farther with his entire body and his arm up as high as he could. What if the wood gave way? If the tee-shirt dropped four stories to the concrete below, the cleaning job would be over. If HE dropped four stories to the concrete below, these stories would be over.

A few unclean inches remained at the top of the window. Codell lifted one leg over the sill onto a narrow ledge between his apartment and the one below. He straddled the sill, kneeling on the little ledge, grasping the vertical frame, sucking in his gut to stay away from the broken glass. With his torso outside and most of his weight on the ledge, he once more straightened and extended. With that, he touched the top of the upper pane, washed it and dried it. Finished, he remained more outside of his

apartment than in it. He discovered another new perspective - the inside of his apartment seen from the outside. In the nearly horizontal rays of the sun, the newly cleaned glass seemed to magnify the cracks in his discolored walls. The floor of his room was a faded, dull brown. They called to him.

On the sidewalk a slow-moving elderly gentleman spotted Codell. Codell dangled out the window, motionless on the ledge and holding the frame with one hand. The old man did a double-take and stopped, stock still. He stared at Codell, his eyes wide, eyebrows raised, crinkling his forehead. Arms out and hands shaking, the man glanced up and down the sidewalk, across the street, and back to the scene above him. His voice burst out with surprising amplitude. "DON'T JUMP! DON'T JUMP!"

Codell twisted his head to the man on the sidewalk. "Are you talking to me?"

"DON'T JUMP!"

" 'Don't jump'? I'm washing my windows!"

The elderly man stutter-stepped closer. "What?"

"I'm washing my *WINDOWS*." Codell made a circular motion with his tee-shirt over the window pane. The old man staggered backward. "Oh! Oh!"

Codell climbed back into his room and lowered the broken window. He wiped his face and torso with his cool, wet tee-shirt. He sat down in his arm chair. The fading sunlight condemned him to clarity. There was much to do.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, hot air still blew into Codell's apartment. When it rained, which was seldom, Codell taped cereal box cardboard over the broken window. The damn building superintendent still hadn't done a thing. Nothing had changed.

Codell kicked his desk chair so hard that it hit the wall. He picked it up and heaved it at what was left of the window. The chair legs knocked out most of the remaining glass, which flew out and tinkled on the concrete four floors below. Codell's intent was that the chair fly out, too, but it hit the sill and bounced back in. "It figures," Codell said aloud and alone.

He realized that he was hungry. Slowly he made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and slowly he ate it. No, nothing had changed, and that changed everything.

#

Tar Tar.

Inspired in part by Joel Chandler Harris, "Tar-Baby."

WASHING WINDOWS proved cathartic for Codell, the opportunity of a new day filling him with energetic desire. He was at the corner market when it opened and left it ten minutes later with liquid Future floor wax and a bag of apples. Behind his tenement, Victor the homeless, looking for breakfast, peeked into the dumpster.

"Victor," Codell said, handing him an apple. "You need a balanced diet."

"Thanks, man. An apple a day. Nature's toothbrush. I owe you." Victor eyed the floor wax.

"My floor looks like crap," Codell said.

"When did you start to care," Victor harrumphed. "Stuff like that don' change nuthin."

"It's going to heal my sick old floor."

A rat sniffed its way around the corner of the building and stopped. "One of my buddies," Victor said.

"Ever hear of the bone of invisibility?" Codell asked.

"The what?"

"The bone of invisibility. My uncle used to say, rats have a bone of invisibility that protects them, keeps them from being seen. If you have it, you can be invisible. I tried to find it when I was a kid. I boiled a dead rat. To get the bone of invisibility."

"Did it work?"

"Worked to get my hide tanned."

"That's the problem," Victor said. "People tell us everythin' in the world and we believe it. Fact is, if you think you know what's goin' on, you probably full of shit."

"Talk abou' a tan," Victor went on. "Look." He took off his black beanie cap and inclined his head toward Codell. On the crown of his head, rising through his thinning hair, was a walnut-size black disfigurement where his scalp curdled up and bled.

"What the hell!" Codell said. "That's nasty."

"I don' know," Victor said sheepishly. "I though' it was sunburn." Codell described it to him. Victor's face contorted.

"I'm fucked," Victor diagnosed. "It's cancer."

"Cancer? You didn't hit your head on something?"

"No, it's cancer. Skin cancer. I know it." Victor gaped at his feet.

* * * * *

In his fourth-floor efficiency apartment, Codell pushed his furniture into the alcove that served as a bedroom. The floor was dull, brown linoleum. Fresh morning light illuminated its every blemish. He swept the floor, opened the Future, got down on his hands and knees, and sponged the wax into the linoleum. The dingy surface hungrily absorbed the wax and transformed from faded brown to a lustrous dark chocolate.

Codell munched an apple while the wax dried. His desk and chairs, nicked and worn, begged to be polished. What could he use on them? Daylight diffused over his apartment walls, uneven beige plaster, cracked and smudged like a filthy floor-to-ceiling canvas. A breeze blew in from his broken window. That damned super still hadn't replaced it; he would have to get on him. After he helped Victor somehow. He had to stop the bleeding and treat the cancer, if that's what it was.

Where was that stuff his mother had given him? You could use it for anything, she said. He scrounged in the junk drawer of his dresser. At the bottom was a red tube. Blem! That's what it was. He fished it out along with a small jar of black shoe polish. Wouldn't the Blem work better with the polish to thicken it?

He got a paper bowl and a spoon, scooped a clump of shoe polish into the bowl, and oozed in a matching glob of Blem. He tried to stir them together, but they were too dense for stirring. He squirted in a shot of Future, and mixed. The lemon scent was refreshing. A little more Future, a little more mixing . . . the concoction morphed into a dark balm. But it was missing something to make it stickier. From the dresser drawer he fetched his Shoe Goo, squeezed it liberally into the bowl, and blended it all into a stiff paste. That would stick to Victor's head and pull the cancer out. He would stop the unstoppable right in its black tracks.

Codell, bowl and spoon in hand, jumped down the stairs two at a time and found Victor sitting on the stoop of the abandoned building next door. His palms were braced flat on the top step to balance himself. The summer breeze picked up, shifting Victor's thinning tawny hair like a field of wheat ready for threshing.

"I got a treatment for your head." Codell held out the bowl for Victor's inspection. I made it."

"I'm not eatin' that shit."

"It's not to eat. It's to put on the bad spot."

"It looks like tar."

"At least try it."

Victor threw a blanket of apathy over his skepticism. "What's it matter, go ahead."

"Not me. *You* have to put it on. I don't want to touch that thing."

Victor daintily dipped his index finger in the salve and touched the top of his head. His hair stuck to his finger. He yanked his finger away, and his hair came with it.

"Damn!"

"You missed the spot," Codell said.

Victor wiped his finger on the thin fabric of his shirt. His finger stuck and when he pulled it back, his shirt ripped.

"Put more on," Codell directed. Victor thrust two fingers into the paste. Codell guided his hand over the bleeding blotch, where his fingers hesitated, stopped, and hovered. "Go on," said Codell. "What are you waiting for?" He pressed Victor's fingers with two of his own, which promptly stuck to Victor's. Codell jerked his hand up, taking Victor's fingers, and more, with it.

"You're rippin' my hair out!"

"Hurry up, it's hardening! You need to get this on. Use more."

"Use more? How about THIS." Victor spooned all four of his fingers, dove them like a miniature back hoe to the bottom of the bowl, raised and pivoted his hand over his head, and smashed the glop on the crown of his head with enough force to squash a cockroach. When he lifted his hand, the black goop remained on his fingers along with another sheaf of hair. He winced.

"Hold it right there," Codell said. He took the spoon and scraped the adhering pâté into a pile on Victor's pate. "There." Codell tried to put the spoon into the paper

bowl, but it stuck to his hand. Folding the bowl like a piece of New York pizza with his free hand and using it like a pot holder, he pulled the spoon loose and tossed the bowl, with spoon, over the side of the porch. With no place to wipe his hands, he held his hands out in the warm wind, fingers extended and flayed like he was drying his fingernails. Victor wiped his hands on his shirt; again his fingers stuck and the shirt ripped. The top of his head wore what looked like a dollop of black mashed potatoes.

“Leave it on overnight,” said Codell. “Put a paper towel or something over it first. Tomorrow morning, peel it off. The whole cancer will come off with it. Your head’s gonna be smooth as a baby’s bottom.”

“You don’ really believe that, do you?”

“You have to believe that you believe,” Codell said. “You’re going to be cured. That recipe is gonna make me rich.”

* * * * *

The floor wax in Codell’s apartment had dried. The floor had refurbished beautifully, exquisitely, slick and satiny, just like he had hoped. There was always hope. And where one person has hope, someone else has opportunity.

That night, clouds boiled up into a thunderstorm and dropped fat pearls of water onto the paper bowl. A rat, invisible, twitched at the hardened residue. That’s all the farther this tale goes. You better run along, now.

#

Busted.

THE WORKING girl spoke quickly. "Hey wanna lady?" Her dress was cut so low, it was about to emancipate her breasts.

"No can do, Gloria," Codell said. "You're in the wrong bar. Try the Garden." Unfazed, she shrugged and left.

From outside Codell's neighborhood pub, the Bronx, a rumble pulsed and stopped. A motorcyclist burst in with a blast of hot air. He screwed off his helmet and set it on the bar. "Whoa, bro! I'm walking into this place and I get propositioned! Whoa! Women's lib, I dig that. That's cool. I lift that up. Her - "

The biker unzipped his leathers and smoothed his hands down the length of his beard. "Her, like I'd pay her for what she don't got, right. Get a job, floozy." He ordered a draft, paid from a long wallet chained at his waist, and took a slug. Dirt from his hands dissolved on the mug, and muddy water dripped on the bar.

From the juke box, the Queen of Soul resounded with the power of a Harley Davidson: *R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out what it means to me* - the biker talked at Codell over her. He discoursed about women, his motorcycle, rampant inflation, wicked motorcycle mamas, and the Army. After too long, his monologue transitioned, somehow, from Army out-pay to the Ruby Slipper. Something had happened there.

"What bar did you say? The Ruby Slipper?" Codell raised his eyebrows.

"Bra?" asked the biker. "I didn't say 'bra.' "

"Not 'bra,' said Codell. "'Bar.' What bar."

" 'Bah'? You from Boston?"

“From right here, Detroit. I didn’t say ‘bah,’ I said ‘bar,’ ” Codell enunciated.

“Did you say the Ruby Slipper?”

“Yah,” the biker said. “I was there that night. I wouldn’t shit ya.”

Codell said nothing. The biker said nothing.

Codell kick-started him. “Haven’t been there for a while.”

The biker’s eyebrows twitched and caved in. “I cannot stand the beer there. Over-priced piss, that’s what it is.”

“Yeah, it can be a tint warm. What were you saying about that night?”

“The cops came in, it was bogue, man. The bartender got busted and - ”

“The Ruby Slipper got raided?”

The biker’s mouth paused half open, his tongue flat as if it would fall out. “Like I was saying - ”

“Fred got busted?”

“Who’s Fred?”

“The bartender. At the Ruby Slipper.”

“It got busted, man.”

“Like you were saying. When was that again?”

The biker rolled his eyes to some spot a few feet in front of his face. “It was . . . three weeks ago. Or was it four? Maybe it was two. Yah, that’s what it was. Three weeks.”

“Why’d they bang the place?”

"I dunno, too loud or something, some deal going down, I dunno. Sure it's not the Rubenstein Slipper? I hear there's some conspiracy. This chick on stage was dancing and took her top off."

"Theresa Garnet?!"

"Huh?"

"Was it Theresa Garnet?"

"Who's she?"

"The chick on stage who took her top off, was it Theresa Garnet?"

"I dunno, whoever. She was waving her shirt around, singing."

"What do you mean, conspiracy?"

"Nothing. Are you sure you're not from Boston?"

"Detroit."

The biker leered at the spot in front of him. "Flat chested."

"Never mind." Codell looked at the spot in front of him, too, blankly, and took a gulp of his beer.

"Economy size. Maybe they busted her, too. She needed a bust, and they gave it to her." Bikey started laughing, but it caught in his throat and turned into hacking, and then trying to say something he choked on his words, and his face ripened and he teared up. He smudged the corners of his eyes with his thumbs. After a minute he recovered and chugged his draft.

"Whoa," said the biker.

"Ruby Slipper," he added, "I can't stand that beer there. Seventy-five cent piss."

"Did you ever ask for the cheap stuff?" Codell said.

“The cheap stuff?”

“They got a keg of Wiedemann’s, fifty cents a shell during the week. You gotta ask for it.”

“The cheap stuff?”

“The cheap stuff, Wiedemann’s.”

The biker lifted his empty mug, squinted at it, and slammed it down.

“Wiedemann’s, Rubenstein, it figures. Conspiracy, alright. Not any more, man. They are busted.”

After a few moments, his countenance softened. He smiled angelically. His smile grew as if wings would lift him off his stool.

“Dancing with her top off. I love women’s lib. I bet she was tight.”

“You’re a real feminist, bro,” Codell snipped.

#

The Rolling Gees.

Inspired by the Rolling Stones, "Emotional Rescue."

THE ARTIST dressed hyper-casually, his hair pulled back in a ponytail. It was Saturday morning; the weather was fine; attendance at the art museum would be high. Bourgeois suburbanites had thick wallets. The day was full of possibility.

He set up his wares in the sidewalk sun below his second floor studio on Kirby, not far from the parking lots for the Detroit Institute of the Arts. Unlike some of the struggling idealist Bohemians in the Cass Corridor, he harbored no qualms about being both a commercial painter and an artist. The first supported the second.

He would not stoop, however, to kitsch. There would be no cute tigers, no dogs playing poker, no Elvis Presleys, except for when he skewered them. He painted Elvis, overweight and bursting out of his white jumpsuit, on all fours on a leash, being walked by a bipedal hound dog. He painted in sharp, vivid strokes and colors.

Codell, on a roundabout route to the library, stopped to look.

"Do you like it?" the painter asked Codell. "The dog's singing 'you ain't nothin' but an Elvis.' Can you hear him? Can you hear Elvis howl? Can you see the dog gyrate his hips?"

"No, not really."

"Maybe you'd like this one." The painter conjured up The Rolling Stones. He had them in a large frame, all five frozen in the same choreographed Disco pose. They all had one hand on their hips and the other arm raised, index finger pointing skyward. They dressed alike, like some 1960s Motown group. Behind them were wall-to-wall mirrors; above them was a red Disco light ball.

“Can you imagine the painting come alive?” asked the painter. “Imagine the light spinning, flashing off the mirrors. Red shafts of light spatter around them as they perform. Can you imagine stepping into the painting with them?”

“No,” Codell said. “Why would you paint this?”

“Because something’s going on in music. Not just punk and new wave. Something with Disco.”

“The Stones don’t do Disco.”

“These Stones do.”

“Disco’s dead, man,” said Codell.

“No one told Disco. No one told Mick Jagger. Disco doesn’t want to die.”

“Disco’s staying alive because of Mick Jagger?”

The painter nodded confidently. “The person you would least expect.”

From around the corner on Woodward, a black limousine pulled up. The Rolling Stones piled out. They wore matching silver lamé jackets over wide lapel shirts. A young man with them lugged a huge boom box to the sidewalk, and the Stones spaced themselves out, Jagger, the quintessential front man, front and center.

A punch of a boom box button started Charlie Watt’s drums and then Billy Wyman’s base line. Jagger bobbed his head to the beat and sang falsetto:

Is there nothing I can say / nothing I can do

to change your mind? / I’m so in love with you

You’re too deep in / you can’t get out

You’re just a poor girl in a rich man’s house

“That girl needs some help,” said the painter.

"I know this singer, Theresa, *she* needs some help," said Codell.

The Stones moved like the Spinners, choreographed and synchronized. Jagger puckered his lips and made over-the-top faces as if he took himself seriously and you should, too. Keith, Ronnie and Billy put on rowdy grins. Charlie, the emotional counter weight to Jagger, looked the way he looked in every song every year. Impassively droll. Unimpressed. As if to say, *what the fuck am I doing here*. They sounded like the Bee Gees:

Don't you know promises / were never meant to keep

Just like the night / they dissolve off in sleep

Passers-by took note. "Is that Marvin Gaye?"

"No! It's Mick Jagger!" A crowd gathered.

I come to you / so silent in the night

So stealthy / so animal quiet

I'll be your savior / steadfast and true

I'll come to your / emotional rescue

"That sounds like me and Theresa," Codell fantasized.

"That's Gibberish" [sic], said the artist.

#

When the wheels fall off.

DELI BY day, dance club by night, Alvin's lived up and down to its name, a Finer Delicatessen and Twilight Bar. From outside of Alvin's, you could just about spit on the Edsel Ford Freeway where it passed under Cass Avenue. The bands at Alvin's were live and local. They set up at the back with plenty of floor space for tables and boogie. As hot as the days were outside, the nights inside were hotter.

Inside of Alvin's, the bar ran along the north side and the stools filled up early. A woman stood near the end of the bar, facing the bartender. She wore tight white pants. A brown stain the size of a coaster graced the crack of her lower butt. No one noticed the color of her blouse.

A man in his mid-thirties stood next to her at the very end of the bar. He faced outward from the bar, one hand holding onto the bar, the other holding a drink. He stood like a tree in the wind, rooted at the bottom, swaying at the top. He was Mitch Ryder, lead singer and owner of a dozen hit songs with the Detroit Wheels in the late 1960s. It had been 13 years since he had a record on the charts. No one recognized him any more than they noticed the color of the woman's top.

After a long break, the band returned to their instruments and the lead singer to his microphone. "I have to apologize, everyone, I can't sing the next set. I'm sick. Too sick." The crowd moaned. "But!" He gestured toward the end of the bar. "Mitch Ryder is in the house tonight! Mitch Ryder! Can you help us out, Mitch!" The audience turned as one to Mitch Ryder, the lead singer started clapping, and the audience joined in. "Mitch Ryder and the Detroit Wheels!"

Ryder gingerly navigated his way to the stage and stepped up. "Thank you, Mitch! Thank you! Give it up for Mitch Ryder!" The lead singer pushed the mike into Ryder's hand.

"Thank you. Thank you." Ryder's voice was rough. "Put me on the spot." He lowered the microphone and said something to the band.

"Here's one I've done once or twice," Ryder said. "'Devil with a blue dress.'" The crowd broke into applause. Several took to the dance floor.

Ryder moved the battered microphone stand in front of him. He put the mike in the stand and tried to adjust the height, but he couldn't get it to lock. He gave up and held the mike to his mouth. He held the stand with his other hand, balancing himself. With a nod to the drummer and a count, the band played. Ryder started singing out of sync. The mike crackled like Rice Krispies and Ryder moved it in and out. It screeched. People on the dance floor stopped and stared. "Alright," Ryder said, "stop, stop, this mike is bad." Some boos could be heard. "Give it up," someone yelled.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Ryder was sweating. He put the mike back in the stand and leaned on it like a walking stick. "Can I get a guitar?" The lead guitarist complied. "And a stool?" Someone brought a stool. Ryder sat down and tested a few chords. Then he played.

It was as far from the Detroit Wheels as Detroit was from the 1960s. It was rock that sounded like blues. It was blues that sounded like rock. The drummer picked it up and then the bass. Ryder half closed his eyes and sang. His voice sounded half gone and world-wise:

*Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
Ain't nobody white can sing the blues*

*No white man ever suffered
He never lived in pain
It's all been fish eggs and champagne
It's killing me*

The front of Alvin's chattered away, rowdy, but in the back by Mitch Ryder the crowd was rapt. Ryder lost his place in the lyrics. The band played long solos. Ryder repeated and finished:

*Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
Ain't nobody white can sing the blues
No white man ever died young
For the right to live
He opens wallets and he gives
It's killing me
You're killing me*

Something white moved at the end of the bar. Ryder squinted in that direction. The woman in the brown-stained tight white pants was leaving. Ryder knew the color of her blouse. It was red, and it was killing him.

#

The dance.

Inspired by William Carlos Williams, "The Dance."

THOSE DANCING boys never missed it when the Rockabilly Cats played at Alvin's Finer Delicatessen, aka Alvin's Twilight Bar, and the Rockabilly Cats played Alvin's a lot that year. On this September night, the boys were stoked.

There were five of them - five dancing boys, not five Cats. While the Cats set up, the dancing boys arrived, staked out one of the wobbly, scarred tables on the edge of the dance floor, and got their beer. The Cats, four of them there were, started jamming. Mitch Ryder, long after his Detroit Wheels fell off, swayed at the end of the bar. Next to him, Codell scanned the bar for women, anxious to dance with someone, anyone.

The dancing boys didn't wait; from the first number, they hopped to the floor. Five guys dancing together! Ignition! As quick as the beat they were five guys dancing with five women who joined them, and others crowded the floor, groups and couples in perpetual motion, frenetic, gyrating heat. You couldn't tell who danced with who.

They went round and around to the pound of the drums and the riffs of guitars as

the Cats did not stop. They played "Boppin' the Blues," "Hot Rod Lincoln," "Red Hot," "Flying Saucer Rocker and Roll" and more, worthy of Carl Perkins and Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, a marathon set, steaming under the stage lights, worthy of Robert Gordon and Link Wray and Billy Lee Riley. And the smells of sweat and stale beer melding, those dancing boys dripping, wringing out their tees, the Cats and the drinkers and the dancers pairing and coupling, like the fair-goers in Bruegel's great painting "The Kermess," because so much depends

upon Wendy O Williams, the Plasmatics lead singer. Was that her on the dance floor? It sure looked like her, on the far side, drink in hand, tipping and tilting off

balance, so sexy, someone said, she could bring paraplegics to their feet, someone said, Wendy O WOW, it sure looked like her, under a Mohawk, heavy eye liner, skimpy top, her triple X breasts, bursting before him, barely before him

it looked like, she's in town this weekend, somebody said, she's doing a show out at Bookies, and they strutted and wailed and romped with each other, and bumped as they danced, swiveling their butts to hold up under such. Rollicking rhythms, bass guitar driven

and one of those boys dancing close with one of those girls, so smooth, synchronized, lithe, smiling, merging, his hand on her elbow, they float to her table, he bends to her ear and says -

Codell winds his way onto the dance floor, follows patterns in the tiles, spasmodically hopping, hoping. He bounces to Wendy O, at least it looked like her, jumping like a Pogo Stick, *faux* dancing, his eyes seeking hers - she looks past him.

He reverses direction, reverses direction, her eyes look through him, Codell *faux* dancing off the floor, coasting to the exit. The Cats and the lights and the heat reached to him outside but September's sharp air brought clarity, and that smooth dancing boy with his hand on her elbow said something in her ear, and did not miss his chance.

#

Scaling a bluff.

Inspired by Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

THE LUCKY Strike that Codell bummed off his Bronx buddy deceived him, as Silvia had, in its own rich way. He took a long, calming drag, tattooing his throat and lungs, and wedged the cigarette in a notch on the ashtray. Wispy tendrils of smoke rose, buffeted in tiny cross-currents. The crisp tobacco glowed red, shriveled gray, and crumbled. Codell pulled a pen from a pocket and bled:

Ode to an Ashtray

*Lucky Strike relapse
After a lost chance
I bet a romance
On a phone dial.*

*Poor boy believing
Rich girl deceiving
Player got played by
Her Cheshire smile.*

It had all started two days ago. The juke box cranked out the Mills Brothers' "Cab Driver," and three tipsy guys next to the Space Invaders game sang along. It was another night at the Bronx.

At a table next to the sing-along trio sat Silvia Bellagatta's Wayne State girlfriends. They'd bopped over for some drinks after class. Silvia stood at the bar waiting to order her second drink, and Codell was sitting next to her. He was almost as tall sitting as she was standing. It made it easy to make eye contact. His eyes were ebony, a blackness that seemed to capture light rather than reflect it.

She smiled at him, but hers was not just any smile. It was dazzling, practically jumping out of a wide mouth that didn't seem big enough to contain it. Her teeth were straight and sparkling white. It was extraordinary.

"Do you smile like that for everyone?" asked Codell.

Impossibly, Silvia's smile got bigger. "What a nice thing to say! That's not a pick up line, is it?"

"No, I'm not that lucky, believe me."

"Another gin and grapefruit juice?" the bartender asked.

"Yes please," Silvia said. "'Grin and gapefruit,' that's what I call it. Is this stool taken?"

Not waiting for an answer, she took it. "I'm Silvia," she said to Codell. Her whole face smiled. She wore designer jeans and a billowy blouse that revealed a delicate gold necklace with a small red heart for the pendant. Medium length, jet-black hair framed her broad face.

"I'm Codell. Nice to meet you, Silvia."

"Codell?"

"Right, Codell. Good job on that."

"Nice to meet you too, Curdell. Thanks for letting me sit with you; I just had to get up. That sing along was starting to wear on me and my friends, all they want to talk about are school and their boyfriends."

"School - you go to Wayne?"

Silvia nodded. "I'm an accounting major. Do you go there too?"

"No, I live down the block."

"Really!" Her teeth blinded Codell. "You live here!"

"Native Detroiter. Where you from?"

"Grosse Pointe. Don't hold it against me."

"No, no, of course not. I'm sure it's a beautiful place."

"Some people there are super rich."

"If you don't live *here*," said Codell, "you're rich."

Silvia's grin and gapefruit arrived.

"You must drive in to Wayne, then," Codell said.

"Ten miles out I-94, just off the expressway, twenty, twenty-five minutes, depending on traffic."

"So, why accounting? You love numbers?"

"Not exactly. My papà wants me in the family business. He's paying for it." She sipped her drink. "What sort of people live around here? Detroit's got a reputation."

Codell raised his eyebrows in mock shock. "Crazy people live here!"

"Seriously?"

"No. Well, half serious."

"Are you calling yourself crazy?"

"Crazy to live here, maybe."

"Aren't there gangs around here?"

"Some whacked kids. Leave them alone and they leave you alone. Aren't there any drugs in Grosse Pointe? Just not on the street."

"Aren't there drug addicts and prostitutes?" asked Silvia. "Homeless people?"

“More harmless than homeless. You get to know your neighborhood. Y’know, watch out for them, give them something to eat.”

Silvia’s face clouded over. “I can’t imagine.

“Codill - Curdell - this is nice talking with you, but I should get back to my friends. I’m sure they’ll give me a hard time about talking to you!” She flashed her smile, and Codell melted.

“Listen,” Codell said, “I liked talking with you, too. This may be kind of forward, but can I call you? Maybe we can get together some time.”

“Um, I don’t know. I don’t date to speak of.”

“It wouldn’t have to be a date. We could meet after your class, talk some more. Go ahead, tell me your number.”

“What do mean, ‘tell me your number’? Aren’t you going to write it down?”

“No, I don’t need to write it. I’ll remember it. Go ahead.”

“No way!”

“Just tell me.”

“You won’t remember.”

“Yes. I will. Try me.” He focused on Silvia so intensely that everything seemed to evaporate except her eyes and her teeth.

“Okay,” Silvia said, “this rate’s pretty high on the scale of pick ups. I’m impressed. I’ll make you a bet. I’ll bet that you’ll forget my number and I’ll never hear from you. But if you remember it, I’ll not only go out with you, it’ll be on me. My treat. Within reason. But like my papà tells me, he plays poker, bluffing is like blowing up a

balloon. There's nothing but air in it. The more you blow it up, the thinner it gets. If you stretch it too far, it explodes in your face."

She put out her hand to shake. "Bet?"

"I'm not bluffing. Simple as that. Bet." They shook hands, long and warm. Codell grinned, but it was nothing to match Silvia's stunning smile. She told him her number.

"Repeat it?" he asked. She did. He repeated it back. "That's it."

"I'll call tomorrow night, early." Codell finished his Stroh's, headed for the door and pictured Silvia's phone number. He repeated it, repeated it, repeated it, repeated it, and by then he was outside where he plucked a pencil stub and a matchbook from his pocket and wrote the seven digits. Only then did he picture Silvia's face. As he walked to his tenement, she gradually dissolved until only her stunning smile remained.

* * * * *

The next night he called her. He didn't have a telephone, so he called from the closest pay phone at Prentis and Third.

"Hello, Bellagatta residence."

"Hello, is this Silvia? This is Codell."

"I can't believe it. You remembered!"

"Hate to say I told you so!"

"You did it - where are you calling from? Are you outside?"

"My window's open," Codell lied. "Thanks for the conversation last night. I never thanked you. When do you want to get together? Want to meet at the Bronx?"

“Well . . . I don’t know how to tell you this, so I’ll just say it. My papà only lets me date certain guys. Grosse Pointe guys. He’d never let me date a guy from Detroit. I just wanted to see if you’d remember my number. I’m really sorry.”

* * * * *

Codell lay in bed that night looking at the ceiling. Silvia’s smile came in and out of focus, disappearing and reappearing, twinkling, dimming, fading until it winked out in the darkness along with her bluff and everything else.

#

Star-crossed.

2009 April 13, Northborough, Massachusetts. Mark "The Bird" Fidrych, age 54 and born in '54, died underneath his dump truck when his clothes got entangled in the truck's power shaft and suffocated him.

1998. "If I could invite anyone in the world to dinner," Fidrych said, "it would be my buddy [former Detroit Tigers teammate] Mickey Stanley, because he's never been to my house."

1983. Fidrych, age 29, retired from professional baseball. Pitching for Boston's minor league Pawtucket Red Sox and wracked by injuries, he gave up an average of 9.68 earned runs per game.

1980 October 1, Toronto, Canada. Game as ever in trying to rehabilitate his ailing arm, Fidrych pitched his last game for the Detroit Tigers, giving up five runs in five innings and getting the win, 11 to 7.

1980 September 28, Detroit, Michigan. Tiger pitcher Dan Petry started the Tigers' last home game of the season, and so it was Codell's last parking scam of the season. He made a cool \$100 charging Tiger fans five bucks a car - just five dollars! - to park on a vacant lot that he didn't own. After filling "his" lot, he caught an outbound bus and went to his neighborhood pub, the Bronx, to watch the game on TV. The Tigers beat the Yankees 6 to 5 in ten innings. The tenth was a disaster for New York: the Tigers won on a double, a batter hit by a pitch, a walk, and a ground ball error.

"Hey," the bartender said, giving Codell crap. "Did you chauffeur for Fidrych again?"

1980 August 14, Detroit, Michigan. The Bird turned 26 years old.

1980 August 12. Detroit, Michigan. At the Bronx that night, Codell watched with special interest as Mark Fidrych pitched his last home game for the Tigers, going eight innings in a one run loss to Boston.

It had been a remarkable evening, so Codell bought shots and beers for himself and his bar buddy. "The Bird gave me this twenty," Codell announced.

"What, you crossed paths with a star?" asked the bartender.

"Yeah, there's his autograph," said Codell's buddy. "On the twenty. Secretary of the Treasury."

"Sure. Just like I met Ken Parker one time," said some Italian guy.

"And the Pope heard my confession," said Buddy.

"No, really," said Codell. "Fidrych gave me this twenty."

* * * * *

There was a big crowd - 48,361 - on August 12 because it was Mark Fidrych's last home game. Due to all those Bird watchers, parking was scarce and Codell had a rich night fleecing the lambs. He upped his parking fee to six dollars per car, waved 30 cars into "his" lot, and convinced a few others to pay for free street parking by promising that he'd keep an eye on their cars during the game. He would've thanked The Bird personally if Fidrych had given him his number.

Codell, who liked to be at "his" parking lot before batting practice, was running late that day. Instead of taking the Trumbull bus to the lot, for this game he'd had an unexpected ride in and a \$20 bonus.

* * * * *

Earlier that day, Codell had been on his way to the in-bound Trumbull bus stop, walking near the Lodge expressway, when a green subcompact struggled up the exit ramp and sputtered to a stop. The door swung open; a young man unfolded his lanky frame out of the car and popped the hood. Steam poured from the radiator and profanities from the driver. "Not again! This is the last thing I need right now."

"Hey!" the motorist called to Codell. "Can you take me to Tiger Stadium? I need a ride bad. My car's overheated all day."

"I don't have a car," Codell said.

"What about a bus? Where's the closest bus line?"

"That's where I'm headed. But you don't want to leave your car around here."

"Great. That's great." He took off his Tiger cap and wiped his brow. Long curly hair sprang out and bounced on his neck. "Is there a gas station around here? I need distilled water. I'll take any water."

"Closest gas station is a ways. I can get you water. My apartment's a block away. I don't have a lot of time. I need to get to Tiger Stadium, too."

"Going to the game?"

"Working it. Parking cars."

"I'm working it, too," said the motorist with a big lopsided grin. "I'm pitching today."

Codell peered closely with a should-I-know-you look. "The Bird? You're Mark Fidrych?"

"Yah, that's me. I'm already in deep shit for not being down there on time."

“Listen,” Fidrych continued, “get me some water in my radiator and I’ll give you a ride in. I’ll pay you.”

Fidrych and Codell double-timed it to Codell’s apartment. They were about the same age, height and weight. “We could be twins,” The Bird joked with a toothy smile.

They got a bucket of water and rags, and returned to Fidrych’s car. “Hope it cooled down enough to open the radiator,” said The Bird. “Hope one bucket’s enough,” said Codell.

Fidrych emptied the bucket in the radiator, flicked on the hazard lights, started the engine, and crawled the car down Trumbull. “What’s your name?” Fidrych asked.

“Codell.”

“Cordall?”

“Codell.” They didn’t have much to say, and it wasn’t far to the ball park. They were a few blocks from the stadium, north of the Fisher Freeway. “Can you drop me off here?” Codell asked.

The Bird swung over. He pulled out his wallet and gave Codell a twenty.

“That’s my number, man. Number 20. You’re a life saver.”

“Hey, no problem. I’ll be watching the game on TV. Good luck.”

“Thanks - I’ll need it. My shoulder’s killing me. Do what you got to do, throw through it.” Already, he was talking to himself again.

* * * * *

1977. The Bird, age 22, tore the cartilage in his knee and then tore a rotator cuff. He felt his arm go dead. He hurt like crazy, but he kept pitching.

1976. Mark Fidrych, age 21, burst brightly into major league baseball. He was phenomenal from the get-go. He pitched fast, he pitched with control, and he pitched complete games. It helped that the Tigers' defense was smothering. At one point, The Bird's earned run average dipped to 1.85. He started in the All-Star game for the American League, only the second rookie to receive that honor. He was rookie of the year. He was runner-up for the American League Cy Young award.

Measured by his entertainment value, by the love of fans who refused to leave until he took a curtain call, and by his ability to increase ticket sales, The Bird was beyond phenomenal. On average, 20,000 more fans showed up when he pitched than when he didn't pitch. When he took the mound, he strutted around, full of energy, talking to himself, talking to the ball, getting on his hands and knees to manicure the dirt. He was authentic and contagiously enthusiastic. By mid-summer he was baseball's national sensation, making the cover of *Sports Illustrated* twice, appearing on one of those covers with his namesake, the *Sesame Street* star Big Bird, whom he resembled. The rock music magazine *Rolling Stone* featured him; he was the only baseball player ever to appear on their cover.

The Bird was a star to be sure, but better than that, he was a blazing comet, shining brightly, briefly, in the baseball firmament and then vanishing as quickly as he appeared.

"But damn," he said, "it was great."

#

To the extent that this is factual, the facts are mostly from Wikipedia.

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Detroit's Main Vein.

AS IF they were waiting for someone, the *Detroit Free Press* classified advertisements lay neatly folded at the Line 29 bus stop on Trumbull at Warren. Codell picked them up from the bench and read an advertisement circled in red ink:

AORTA BAR 883-0452
376 W. McNICHOLS
Detroit's Original DJ Bar
Drink Spec.-Sandwich
Wed-Thurs oldies. Fri-Sat
Contemp. Dance Music.

Codell took it as a personal message to him, tore the ad from the *Freeep*, and tucked it in his pocket.

That Thursday night, he rode Line 23 out of the Cass Corridor, five miles north to McNichols. He got off; pounding rock music greeted him; the Aorta? No, Bookies Club 870. Live music, worth checking out. Two blocks east was the Aorta Bar: Detroit's Main Vein. Codell pulled open the door; the wind grabbed it and Codell was sucked into the Aorta, smoky and dim with black and red decor. Booths in the back provided a modicum of privacy to discreet couples. A disc jockey was spinning the Temptations; the dance floor percolated and the DJ segued to the "Tracks of My Tears" with nary a heartbeat between songs. Miraculously, the DJ looked like Smokey Robinson.

Codell joined the row of stool-stationed barflies, as diverse as the bridge of the starship *Enterprise*, and ordered a Stroh's. At a buck a draft, the price was right. Next to him, a woman was reading a paperback: *Atlas Shrugged*. "First time I've seen someone with a book at a dance club," Codell grinned to her.

"That's because you've never been here before," she said, cold as the ice in her drink. Pinned above her heart, a sky blue button with heavy black lettering swore,

S.H.I.T. The small print explained: **Sure Happy It's Thursday** and Aorta Bar HARVEY
MOTOWN AND ROCK N' ROLL.

"How can you concentrate to read?" Codell queried.

She slapped *Atlas* closed and said pointedly: "When people interrupt me, I can't."

"I'm sorry - just making conversation. I get it, not everyone wants to talk."

"No, that's fine, I'm getting bored, anyway." She caught the eye of the bartender, who brought her a fresh drink. "Here you go, Sadie." He bore a remarkable resemblance to Eddie Kendricks.

"The bartender knows your drink. You must live here," Codell speculated.

"Feels like it sometimes," said Sadie.

"Ever hear of the Bronx? By Wayne State. That place feels like home to me."

"Never heard of it. If that's home, what brings you out here?"

"I got a message from above," Codell said. "On a bus bench." Sadie scoffed.

"Thought I might get to dance with someone," Codell said. Treading quickly, he tread carefully. "Do you only come here to read?"

"I come here to not dance," said Sadie. She tugged a bell-bottom up to her knee. From there down, her leg was prosthetic.

"Oh!" said Codell. "That makes it easy to say no."

"It does indeed," said Sophie with a deep sip.

"Then why hang at a dance club?" Codell probed. "You just watch and tap your foot?"

"You got it." Sadie raised her glass. "I'm remembering a friend."

"A guy friend?"

"A girl friend. We used to dance here."

"What happened? Is that when you lost your leg?"

"No. She died. Alcohol poisoning. She drank herself to death."

"She was 27."

There was a long pause as Codell absorbed it. "No wonder you're drinking," he said. "I know this guy, Victor. A lot older, but same thing. Kind of blows your mind to watch."

The DJ took the pulse of the Aorta and shifted songs; the bar wallowed in "Reflections." The dance floor tilted as some couples got off and others got it on. They clung to each other in the half light, melting into one beating and living thing. Sadie sang along. It was transcendent. It was supreme. Codell saw her in profile and thought: You're Diana Ross.

"You can dance, don't tell me you can't," Codell said. "Your leg doesn't have anything to do with it. We can dance if you want. C'mon."

"I don't think so."

"Lean on me," Codell suggested. "I can't dance fast, anyway."

"Thanks. No."

"I'm not your girlfriend, am I."

Sadie's eyes glazed over with tears. She was a long way away.

"Don't cry!" Codell sputtered. "Don't. Don't. Oh shit, I didn't mean to make you cry." Sadie dabbed with a bar napkin that made her face wetter.

She breathed deeply. "I'm okay. It doesn't have anything to do with you."

The whole place was throbbing. The bartender was working his way back to Sadie. "Babe. You ready for another one?"

"Sure," Sadie surrendered. "Why not."

The bartender to Codell: " 'nother one?"

"No thanks."

"You're leaving," Sadie stated. "Hope I didn't drive you away."

"No, no, not at all. Thought I'd check out the club down the street. Long as I'm out this far."

"That's Bookie's," Sadie said. "Hope you like punk."

The DJ played the Spinners. Sadie nodded in the direction of a bouncing, round-faced woman. "You could dance with her. Ask her. I know her."

"No thanks," said Codell. "I want to dance with you."

"Next time, maybe."

"Next time."

Codell got up. Sadie looked up to him.

"By the way," she said. "Thanks for not asking. How I lost my leg. Thanks for not making some stupid comment about it."

* * * * *

Codell pushed himself out of the Aorta, against the wind, and exhaled regret. Something had shifted; the weather maybe. Why was it so windy? Did the air pressure drop? He took his bearings. McNichols and Second Avenue. Where was the bus stop? Did it run this late? Litter swirled, disrespecting his feet. Everything swirled. He didn't feel like he was anywhere.

He wanted to run, but at that time of night he didn't dare; someone might call the police. After a minute, he started to walk, one tentative foot in front of the other. In the small hours in the prison of himself, the emptiness of the street became more frightening than its darkness.

#

Urban camping.

OVER HIS fire inside a bathtub in the dilapidated building that he called home, Victor warmed his hands.

It's cold, the rat said to him. Throw another piece of that pallet on the fire.

"No," Victor said. "I have to save some for later."

You have plenty. You collected wood all summer, said the rat. You have a huge pile.

"It has to last."

Then burn a leg of that table or whatever it was. It's hardwood. It will burn slow.

Victor pulled a table leg from the wood pile and stirred his fire. Shadows and fall colors from the fire danced on the walls. Victor tossed the leg on the flames, pulled the collars of his shirts and coat up around his neck, and watched the fire lick the new wood. "Wish I had that leg when you were alive, Jesus. You could've used it."

What are you talking about? My name's not Jesus. I'm a rat.

"Not you. My dog, Jesus. He only had three legs. Followed me around, so I adopted him." The rat groomed her paws.

"He looked like a jackal. He was scrappy. You should've seen him try to dig. Should've seen him fall down. Jesus, he was graceful.

"I don't know what happened to him. Three legs, probably got hit."

Victor searched through his plastic grocery bags, found his bottle and took a hit. "Jesus was the only one who ever loved me, him and my mother." He paused. "I can't be sure about my mother."

Against a wall leaned a scorched DO NOT ENTER street sign. Victor laid it across the bathtub over half the fire. He sang:

The world is black / the world is white

*It turns by day / and then by night**

From one of his bags he took out half a loaf of bread and a couple of hotdogs. "What are you looking at?" he asked the rat. "These are mine. Codell gave them to me." He picked up a car antennae and skewered the hotdogs. On the DO NOT ENTER sign he laid two pieces of bread, rotated the hotdogs over the fire, and sang:

A child is black / a child is white

Together they grow / to see the light

*The beautiful light**

The rat twitched her nose and whiskers. *Give me some. I have a family to feed too.*

"Why are you bringing them up? Leave me alone." Victor inspected the toast and hotdogs. He ate them in nibbles.

Would you let your kids go hungry?

"They're grown by now."

The rat rolled on her side, revealing a pink brood suckling.

"Oh, don't show them! No, no, no! Leave me alone. Please." Victor went out of the bathroom and urinated, marking the floor in a spaghetti pattern.

Who do you think you are - Jackson Pollock?

"Jackson Pollock! Jackson Pollock! I'm Victor! Hail to the Victors!" He laughed and hacked all the way back to the bathroom. The rat was nosing around his bags. Victor kicked at her, took a long swig, and wrapped himself like a mummy in everything he had. He sat next to his fire, patted his bags behind him for a pillow, and contracted. His eyes closed. He imagined Jesus curled up next to him. The bottle and

Jesus warmed him in ways he could not express. Smoke from the fire smelled of resin and made him ache for something, but he couldn't name it.

After several still minutes, the rat climbed on the DO NOT ENTER sign and gently tugged Victor's bread bag out from behind him. She ate well. Empty, the bag drifted into the fire and melted, plasticizing, for a few moments, the insistent stench of misery. The fire shrunk to a glow, the color of sugar maples in October.

*Three Dog Night, "Black & White."

#

Hail Hecate.

SNUGGLED WITH his bottle in a bathroom of the condemned building he called home, Victor cocooned himself safe and secure on a late October night. Dogs barked somewhere, heralding the passage or approach of someone or something, Victor knew not who or what.

All summer and into the fall, he'd collected lumber scraps, pieces of plywood, abandoned furniture, anything that would burn. He was rich with fuel, all in easy reach adjacent to the bathtub. Victor basked in the heat of the bathtub fire. As unruly as a troop of Boy Scouts, flames blazed, jumping two and three feet high as if they wanted to get out. Victor drained what was left in his bottle, closed his eyes against the light and fell into the arms of Morpheus.

Something in the fire popped and shot an ember. More pops shot more embers, large ones. A few fell on a chunk of Creosote-soaked railroad tie in Victor's woodpile. He felt warmer and warmer. Was someone shining a light? The rat was agitated. *You have to leave*, the rat said.

Go away, said Victor.

He felt hot. He tried to kick off the blankets, but he'd wrapped them too tightly around himself. The fire spread to the woodwork and the walls. The smoke was acrid.

It's not safe here, said the rat. Her brood huddled next to her. She wore a tiara.

Who are you? asked Victor.

Queen Hecate, proclaimed the rat. *All hail the queen!*

Victor coughed and clawed without effect at his blanket cocoon. I'm Victor! Hail to the Victor!

The bathroom filled with smoke. Queen Hecate and her pups escaped out the bathroom door. Victor coughed and coughed until he didn't cough anymore.

* * * * *

In his fourth floor apartment next door, Codell woke with a start. Lights, unnatural lights from outside danced on his bathroom walls. Something roared continuously. Codell opened the bathroom window and the roar became ferocious. Flames higher than his building rocketed from Victor's building. Codell had no idea that fire could be so loud.

* * * * *

The Detroit Fire Department report was dated the next afternoon, October 25 at 600 hours. Contrary to speculation, the conflagration had nothing to do with Devil's Night. The investigators traced the fire to a bathtub. Next to the bathtub they found what was left of Victor, radiating heat. His incandescence floated up through where the ceiling used to be, as if beckoned by someone - a woman crowned by a tiara, perhaps, with two torches. For a few moments, his essence colored the sky pink, opaque and free from time.

#

What does that cloud look like to you?

CODELL SPRAWLED face up in what passed for his bedroom. The “room” was a doorless alcove and the “bed” was a mattress on the floor. The wall at the head of the bed served as a headboard.

The smell of smoke wafted in from the charred ruins next door. Codell’s warm, wet, sporadic flatulence punctuated the quiet. Head on his pillow, hands behind his head, through his screenless, curtainless window, Codell watched clouds scud through the little piece of Detroit sky visible to him. One edge of a cloud would be fluffy and another edge of the same cloud might be wispy. Later, you never knew when, another cloud would drift into view.

The clouds looked like cold clumps, like bleach stains on a blue tablecloth. A rectangular cloud with round corners looked like nothing so much as an old gravestone. RIP would be engraved on it. Rest In Peace, Victor. Where will you be buried? Anywhere? Or will they incinerate the incinerated you and dump your dust in the trash like so much dirt? Where are you?

Where were any of them? There was his cousin Terrell at Woodmere Cemetery, OD’d on T’s and Blues when he was 20. And Ray-gun Spenser slept forever at Elmwood, and Jimmy and Johnni P, all three drunk and drugged playing chicken on Telegraph Road in Ray’s old man’s Caddie. DEAD drunk. There was Freddie Deerfield, buried five years ago at Holy Cross, who had had enough, enough, to blow his brains out after his girl broke it off with him. Where was his kid brother Winston, drowned so many years ago at Belle Isle? And Codell’s father . . . where was he? Where had he ever been?

Where were the gangs now, still killing each other? They were hooked on revenge, the deadliest drug. They couldn't see past their street corners. When the battlefield swallows every battle, it doesn't matter who wins. They never had a chance.

#

Seeing eye to eye.

Part 1.

"HE'S ALRIGHT," the Bronx bartender said. "A regular. Quiet. He's okay."

Buoyed by that benediction, a threesome - a short woman, a tall woman and a man - picked their way to Codell's table where he sat alone. "Care if we join you?" asked the short woman, vivaciously. "This place is packed!"

On Friday nights, the Bronx was a small bar with large talk, most of it from a gaggle of Wayne State University theater students. The theater was two blocks away, so the theater group and their groupies drank at the Bronx in a show after the show. They talked loud and laughed louder. They seemed bigger than themselves, bigger than life.

"Sure, no problem," said Codell.

The three sat. The short woman smiled broadly at Codell. "I'm Rikki. This is my boyfriend Donnie and my friend Yolanda. Yola."

"Yolo?"

"Not YOLO," Yolanda grinned. "Yola."

"Are you Spanish?" asked Donnie. "No hablas español."

"Hungarian."

To Codell, Rikki asked: "And you are - ?"

"Codell."

"Codell?" questioned Donnie. "That's different. What country are you from?"

Codell showed his teeth. "Right here. Detroit."

"Way to blow it, Donnie," Rikki said. Donnie took a slug of beer and pivoted to Codell. "What do they call you for short?"

"Codell."

"Not Cody? Or 'hey, Code'?"

"Codell."

"You're priceless," Rikki said to her boyfriend.

"I'm from Detroit, too," Yolanda said. "Ever hear of Delray?"

"Delray?" Codell asked. "When I was a kid I lived at Fort Wayne. My mom got moved there after the riots."

"What a coincidence!" said Yolanda. "We were almost neighbors. I didn't know people lived in Fort Wayne."

"Not in the fort itself. In the other buildings."

"Where the hell are you talking about?" Donnie asked. "I never heard of Delray."

"It's not a place people go *to*," said Yolanda. "It's a place people *leave*."

"It's downriver," Codell said. "I remember walking down Jefferson and seeing mountains of slag."

"That's Delray," Yolanda said. "Delray is Delray. It's Detroit, but it doesn't look like Detroit or feel like Detroit. It feels like a small town, surrounded by smoke stacks. It stinks. Literally. My mom has to sweep up the soot every day. And there's the pleasure of Zug Island."

"What?" asked Donnie. "'Zug Island'?"

"Zug Island," said Yolanda. "It rumbles. It's a mystery. There's only one bridge and it's gated off. You can't get in."

"Man, that's some weird shit," said Donnie. "'Zuuuug Island.'"

“What are you doing up here?” asked Codell. “Do you all go to Wayne?”

“No, just me,” said Rikki. “I work in the theater department and there was a play tonight. This one,” she said of Donnie, “has never been to a play in his life! And this one,” she play-pushed Yolanda, “is here for the party.”

“I might see a play if you were in it instead of backstage behind it,” said Donnie.

“What’s the play?” asked Codell.

“*The Iceman Cometh*,” Rikki said.

“The iceman what?!” Donnie said. “What the hell kind of name is that?”

“It’s a great name! It’s supposed to be THE best American play.”

“Yeah? Who decided?”

“I dunno, it’s a classic. It came out in 1940 something, after World War Two.”

“Oh, that explains it. ‘*The Iceman Cometh*.’ What’s an iceman got to do with it?”

“It’s a symbol. Death.”

Donnie rolled his eyes. “How uplifting.”

“It’s part of the play, kind of a gag, a traveling salesman joke, y’know? The husband’s on the road, and his wife’s at home getting it on with the iceman. The guy who delivers ice. This is like, back when they used an icebox to keep stuff cold.”

While Donnie and his girlfriend were talking it up, Yolanda shifted so that one of her legs brushed up against Codell’s leg. He left his leg where it was. A few seconds later he felt pressure from her leg and she kept it there. A permeating warmth spread through his body.

“There’s a lot left unsaid,” Rikki continued to Donnie. “You have to see it for it to make sense. You should go see it.”

“Yeah? Talk me into it. What else is it about?”

“Basically, it’s a bunch of drunks sitting around in a bar talking. Living in the past, deluding themselves.”

“Wow, that’s original. That could be any bar in the world.”

“They all have their ‘pipe dreams’ they talk about. One of them, ‘Hickey,’ tries to reform them.”

“Hickey!” Donnie exclaimed. “What a stupid name.”

Two tables away, one of the Wayne theater crowd stood on his chair. He made a face meant to be a pained expression, threw back his head, gestured dramatically, and loudly proclaimed: “‘By God, there’s no hope! I’ll never be a success in the grandstand or anywhere else!’”

A voice piped up from another table. “You said it, Kevin!” The theater groupies erupted in laughter.

“Can you believe him?” Rikki lowered her voice to mimic Kevin’s. “‘I’m Kevin Washington and I never miss a chance for an audience.’ He can’t stop talking.”

“How does it end?” asked Donnie. “The play.”

“I can’t tell you that! You have to come and see it.” Rikki smiled enticingly.

“I dunno. Sounds boring to me.”

“Okay, then I won’t tell you how long it is. But maybe you’re just scared.”

“I’m definitely not scared. It sounds depressing. I don’t like symbolism. Things should be what they are.”

Kevin Washington stood on his chair again. “Time to go, boys and girls!”

“Should we get going to the party, Rikki?” Yolanda asked. “Everyone’s leaving.”

“There’s actually a party?” Codell asked.

“Yeah, for real,” Rikki answered. “At an apartment, some of the cast, block away. Do you want to come with us? Yola and Donnie won’t know anyone there. She glanced conspiratorially at Yolanda. “We can make a nice foursome.” Codell stood up, and then Donnie, Rikki and Yolanda. Yolanda was exceptionally tall, almost as tall as Codell.

“We might,” Yolanda said, turning to Codell. “I think we’ll see eye to eye.”

Part 2. Inspired in part by Steely Dan, “Rikki Don’t Lose That Number.”

THE TWO couples left the Bronx, Yolanda and Codell shoulder to shoulder behind Donnie and Rikki. At the party it was standing room only. The apartment had the cloying smell of pot. Music was playing from somewhere. Everyone was talking to someone, voices mingling. The kitchen glowed florescent, but the rest of the apartment was dim. Donnie, Rikki, Yolanda and Codell staked out a corner of the main room. Rikki and Yolanda chatted, engaging Codell, and Donnie drank. The Blondie song came on, “Call Me.”

“I love this song,” Yolanda said. She draped an arm over Codell.

“Me, too.” Rikki murmured and snuggled against Donnie and sparkled up at Codell and Yolanda. “You two seem to be hitting it off pretty good.”

“Understatement of the year,” Donnie harrumphed, and pulled himself from Rikki. “I need to hit the head.”

In a few minutes he returned. “The bathroom is a hundred degrees! If you got to go, go now. There’s no line.”

Codell took his advice. When he was done in the bathroom, he opened the door

- to find himself face to face with Yolanda. She took a quick step in to him. There was no need for conversation. with a back kick of her foot, she closed the door behind her.

The party music and voices faded and went mute. Time became irrelevant.

Someone knocked on the door for the second time, louder. "Anyone in there? I really have to go. It's urgent."

"It's too cramped in here," Codell breathed to Yolanda.

The door knob turned; the door swung all the way in. Kevin Washington stopped in his tracks, his mouth open, no sound coming out. Yolanda and Codell untwined.

"Excuse us," said Codell. "We were just leaving. Sorry you had to wait."

Outside the bathroom, Codell asked Yolanda for her number. Her brow furrowed. "No, I can't."

"Why not? We have something. I really want to see you.

"Say something!" Codell said.

Yolanda put her hands on his shoulders. "I'm married. I can't give you my number." Codell's heart slowed. "But," Yolanda said, "you can give me your number," and Codell's heart skipped. "Let's find something to write on."

They went to the kitchen, found a scrap of paper and a pen, and Codell wrote

Codell
262-6087

"Don't lose it," said Codell. "Can you call at four?"

"Does it have to be right at four?"

"Close to it. I share a phone. Is that time okay?"

"It should be."

"What about your husband?"

"He drives a Coke truck; he probably won't be home. If he is, I'll call from somewhere else."

"That's not what I meant, about your husband," Codell said. "I meant - are you sure? You could have a change of heart."

"I won't." She leaned in to kiss him.

"Wait," Codell said. "He drives an ice truck?" Yolanda looked at him as if he had a screw loose.

"No, a Coke truck."

* * * * *

The next day promptly at four, Yolanda dialed the number Codell gave her, 262-6087.

"Shield's Pizza, can I take your order?"

"Wha - what?"

"Shield's Pizza, can I take your order."

"Sorry, wrong number." Yolanda hung up, checked the number, and dialed again. 262-6087.

"Shield's Pizza, can I take your order?"

"Shield's Pizza!" Yolanda slammed the phone down. "Shield's Pizza!"

* * * * *

The pay phone at Prentis and Third was a new one, on a post, not in a booth. Codell was there at quarter to four to make sure that no one tied it up. At 4 p.m., the

phone didn't ring. At 4:05 p.m., it started to rain. At 4:10 p.m., dripping, Codell checked the number on the phone. It was 262-6078, not 262-6087. He had transposed the numbers. There was no way Yolanda could call him. Wet through, he returned to his apartment.

#

Backsliding.

AT FIVE p.m., Detroit's downtown buildings ejaculated office workers onto the sidewalks. The carriers of briefcases and tote bags clogged every street corner. At the busiest intersections, uniformed traffic cops braved vehicles and pedestrians, stopping and starting them with whistles and hand signals. To bystanders, it was a cacophony of honking and jostling. To a traffic cop, it was a symphony, and he was the conductor.

The City National Bank Building towered at the corner of Fort and Griswold. Everybody called it by its past and future name, the Penobscot Building. With its forty plus floors and express elevators, the Penobscot was one of the most virile buildings when it came to restoring feet to the street.

In this two-legged milieu, Codell found himself on the street curb at the corner at the front of a restless crowd held back by one of Detroit's finest. The light was red for pedestrians waiting to cross Griswold. In an eerie moment, as when all conversation in a room stops at the same time, there were no cars or busses, nothing, coming from either direction on Griswold. Everyone on the corner stood there, waiting for the light to change.

In that silence, the Penobscot Building spurted another dozen parishioners into the street corner congregation. Pressed from behind, the congregation surged forward. Codell took two steps off the curb and looked both ways. The street was still empty. Codell took a few more steps into the street. The traffic cop glared at him. A few people behind Codell also stepped off the curb. The officer's shrill whistle froze them all.

"The light's red! What do you think you're doing?!"

Codell was well into the street. The officer approached him.

"Nobody coming," said Codell. "Look for yourself."

"I don't care if nobody's coming, the light's red."

"Why should everyone stand here waiting when nobody's coming? Why wait for nothing?"

"It's irresponsible! The light's red! Get back!"

"That's not responsibility, that's blind obedience."

Codell's eyes wavered from the officer to the crowd behind him, and the officer turned around. The pedestrian mob had left the curb, advancing across the empty street *en masse*.

"To hell with all of you! You can all get hit!" The cop, emasculated and muttering, traipsed out of their way. "You people think you can do anything you want."

Codell did his best backslide* the rest of the way across Griswold.

*A dance move dating to the 1930s, popularized and renamed "moonwalk" in the early 1980s by Michael Jackson. It was a *Thriller*.

#

So sorry.

ON THE crisp cusp between fall and winter, Codell left the over-heated protection of his Cass Corridor tenement and shuddered into the outside chill. He thrust his hands into his pockets, inhaled and exhaled deeply, and watched the fog of his breath evaporate as ephemeral as dreams. Everything seemed monochromatic – the sky, the buildings, the pavement. Codell dropped his chin into his coat collar, eyes on the sidewalk and his feet. He strode quickly to reach the warmth of an in-bound bus.

A loose cough, not distant, lifted his eyes. On the sidewalk fifty feet away, a woman shuffled toward him. In thick layers of dark clothes, she was as gray as the day. Stuffed plastic bags the size of bees' nests sagged from her arms. She wore beige knitted gloves and a matching hat pulled low from which bedraggled hair escaped. As the two neared each other, her cough became a wet hacking that gurgled up from her lungs. They both shortened their gaits, the bag lady slowing to a hobble and Codell's lope slowing to a walk.

Nothing but a dozen feet separated them when the woman stopped and churned up phlegm. She turned ninety degrees, so that she stood in profile to Codell, stepped off the sidewalk, bent at her waist as far as her bundled girth would allow, placed a gloved index finger on the side of a nostril – bags swaying from her arm – and blew. A long strand of snot dangled and dropped into the dirt that passed for a yard.

Codell, engrossed, gingerly walked past her. "I'm so sorry," she said. She took a second step away, well off the sidewalk, and cleared her other nostril in the same manner. What else can you do when you don't have as much as a tissue?

* * * * *

Codell got on the bus. The hot air blowers hummed to the bus's starts and stops, the openings and closings of its doors. A man in a pin stripe suit sniffled. He extracted a tissue from his pocket, blew his nose, and disdainfully dropped the tissue in the aisle. "Hope I'm not getting sick," he said to no one in particular. "Can't afford that."

#

Playing Cupid.

Part 1.

THERESA GARNET was in love with Codell, he thought. He had first seen her show several months earlier, in the fall of 1979. He'd been back to the Ruby Slipper at Cass and Forest every Saturday since then to see her and the All Night Good Night band. On the weekends she played, he was a habitu  of the Bronx early and the Ruby Slipper late, late enough to avoid the cover charge.

Half of a concrete block propped open the Slipper's door, not that it made the place any cooler. Codell stepped in, nodded to the bouncer, and blinked against the stage lights. Bands played at the front of the Slipper, only a few feet from the door, so everyone who entered practically shared the stage with the band.

The band was getting ready for its last set. Codell flashed a smile to Theresa Garnet, poised at her keyboard, and she half smiled at him in return. At the bar it was standing room only, his Stroh's draft a dollar rather than the week day seventy-five cents. The head of the beer boiled up like a cartoon, half the thickness of the draught itself. Rumor had it that the owner added chemicals to make the beer foam. Defective refrigeration left it warm. It was flat, a notch above skunk beer.

The band started. Codell slid closer, under an autographed picture of Judy Garland. In 1967, Garland had played the Cobo Arena in downtown Detroit. The original owner of the Ruby Slipper scored the photograph that, forever since, watched over the bar and affirmed that "there's no place like home."

The sound system chirped and crackled as the All Night Good Night band broke into a compelling, driving synthesis of jazz and rock. Theresa Garnet's rich vocal

joined, weaving in and out, above and below the melody, alternatively blending with and dodging the instruments in scat virtuoso. She hunched over her keyboard, engrossed. Then she straightened, stood up, and flipped her tousled hair. Her jeans clung tight at her hips. Her breasts teased beneath a red V-neck t-shirt cut off above her navel. On one side of her T was a faded **Whip Inflation Now** pin from the Jerry Ford years. On the other, over her heart, a pin informed or commanded, **WOMEN VOTE!** Codell couldn't take his eyes off her.

The next number was a hard, throbbing mix of punk and shock rock that stood up the crowd. Frenzied, they hooted their approval and danced wherever they happened to be; there was no dance floor. The tempo and volume picked up. Theresa Garnet grabbed the mike from its stand, left her keyboard and gyrated in practiced ardor. Her belly flat and her thighs muscular, she was as athletic as a gymnast. Testosteroned drunks in the back catcalled. She pulled a short whip from under her keyboard and snapped it to the drummer's beat. She sang faster to keep up and louder to be heard. How long could it go on escalating?

As if the amplifiers had been cut, the music stopped dead. Theresa Garnet dropped to the floor. The audience yelled. The band members rushed to her. The saxophonist helped her up, rising slowly as if through Jell-O. Codell gulped the head off his draft. He'd seen the act, seen her collapse every time they did that song. The All Night Good Night Band returned to their instruments. Theresa Garnet gathered up the whip and the microphone and cued the band. The music quickened, the audience livened, and soon she was prowling about the stage on all fours, her mane shaggy and swinging. The song ended, the show lights went out, and the audience raved.

“Do you know, man,” the sax player shouted, “do you people know you were dancing to seven-eight meter?” The stage lights flashed on and off and on and off, and the house lights came up on the wasteland of bottles, cans, glasses, puddles and haphazard chairs that was the Ruby Slipper after a show. The place smelled stale. Sweaty, disheveled and disoriented inebriates cast about the tables trying to focus. The juke box lit up and came back to life. Someone played the Stones’ “Emotional Rescue.”

Codell hailed the bartender - “Fred, last call?” - and tried to catch Theresa Garnet’s eye as she thanked her stumbling fans. Codell stayed at the bar. Theresa Garnet warily made her way to a bar stool. “My feet have enough tired in them for the whole week.” Fred fetched her a glass of water and departed to straighten chairs, collect empties, and wipe tables.

“Great show!” Codell gushed to Theresa Garnet. “I’m Codell,” he said, indicating himself as if they were meeting for the first time. He looked at her chest. “I like your pin.”

“Hey, thanks,” she said, draining her water, not looking at him.

“I’m not bad, not bad,” said Codell. “How ‘bout you?”

“Same ol’. Glad you liked the show.”

“Yeah. About that,” Codell said, “I was wondering, you write your own stuff, right? Original songs?”

“Mostly.”

“Yeah, I thought so, I was pretty sure of that. I really like it. I’m your biggest fan.” The band was packing up.

“I like it so much that I wrote a song, too. For you.”

Theresa Garnet looked at him for the first time. "Oh?"

Codell tugged a creased notebook page from his pocket and stuck it out to her.

She unfolded it and read:

Yours

Yours until Niagra Falls [sic]

Yours until the popcorn balls

Yours until the toilet bowls

Yours until the dinner rolls

Yours until the horses fly

Yours until the fabric dyes

Yours until the airplane struts

Yours until I'm nuts

"This is a song?"

"It still needs the music. What do you think?"

"Uhhh . . . it's . . . interesting. Definitely original."

"I knew you'd like it!"

Fred returned with a tray loaded with empties.

"I was wondering, watching your shows," Codell said, "do you need any help?"

"Help?"

"Yeah, like help with your shows. Or anything."

"No! No, no. We don't need any help."

She took a step back and looked at her band. Codell turned and looked, too. In that split moment, Theresa Garnet made a face to Fred, gestured at Codell, and jerked her head sideways toward the door.

Fred said, "looks like you're done with your beer, pal." He confiscated Codell's glass. "I gotta lock up."

"Sure, no problem." Codell tossed a blind wave to Fred and focused on Theresa Garnet. "See ya next time." He headed for the door, and Theresa Garnet rolled her eyes. "What's up with him?" Fred asked. "Drunk?"

"Worse than drunk. He gave me a love poem. A really bad one."

Fred chuckled. "You got the power, Super Chick. You knew the job was dangerous when you took it."

* * * * *

Many times Codell had walked the two blocks from the Ruby Slipper to his apartment on Prentis, but this one seemed longer. He prided himself on his independence and was not given to prayer, much less an invocation for help. Thus, he didn't know what he'd done when, heart-sick for Theresa Garnet, he cried out in despair and loneliness: "CUPID, where are you when I need you?!"

Part 2.

THE VERY next Saturday night, Cupid was waiting for him. Cupid very well indeed could change your life forever, though you wouldn't think that to look at him. He was built like a Romanian weight lifter, barrel-chested and much younger in

appearance than his years. His diminutive stature and baby face belied his confidence and transformative power. He wore a short-sleeve, collarless, buttonless, form-fitted baby-blue pull-over Izod and matching blue jogging pants. His bare arms were emblazoned with tattooed sleeves of Venus and Diana, inkwork worthy of Rafael, Rubens and Boucher, that glowed and sparkled with unworldly gold leaf. He toted a custom-made ArmaLite Rifle, baby-blue to match his clothes and his car. He called it his Rifle of Romance. He filled the AR magazine with bullets of aversion, libido-negating bullets that would convert amorousness to repulsion. The more ardent one became, the more repulsed was the object of the ardor. Smoothing down his jet-black mullet, Cupid drifted into the Ruby Slipper.

The band was Your Mother, three guitars and drums, four screaming punkers draped in black, outside on break. Theresa Garnet had the night off, but she was hanging at the Slipper anyway, chatting with Fred the bartender. Codell stood next to her and ordered a Stroh's. Cupid hovered in the back of the bar, his AR raised, waiting for a clear shot. The AR wasn't easy, but Cupid had the skill of a *bersagliere* and a stabilizing brace from the future.

"Hey, Fred," Codell said, "I heard you got shut down a while back."

"Nasty rumor. We closed for a few days. License problem."

Codell parked himself next to Theresa Garnet. "Hi," he said. She glanced at him and frowned.

Fred slid Codell's Stroh's to him. As Codell was fishing money out of his pocket, one of the bills dropped the floor. He bent over to pick it up providing Cupid a clear line of sight to Theresa Garnet. He gently squeezed the trigger and held it for a three

count, more than enough to do the job, he thought. Theresa Garnet, pierced with Cupid's bullets of aversion, twitched like insects were crawling over her.

"How you doing?" Codell continued to Theresa. "Remember me from your shows?"

Theresa Garnet felt queasy. "Yeah, you're the guy who wrote that 'love' poem for me. How could I forget?"

"You remember! Well, uh, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I owe you an apology for that."

Theresa Garnet stiffened. Fred fled to the far end of the bar.

"I shouldn't have given that to you."

"Forget it," Theresa Garnet said. "Women expect men to be assholes."

Codell averted his eyes. "Thanks -- thanks? I don't know, can't you be any blunter? I don't expect you to forgive me. I don't know that I can forgive myself."

She softened. "Don't you think you've already been forgiven?" They both sipped their drinks. The moment felt longer than it was. Your Mother had returned to the stage and ruptured into a belligerent caterwaul. "This band gives me a headache," Theresa Garnet said, and after a pause: "everyone screws up. Be thankful you screwed up. That's the way we learn. The path to truth."

"Now you're a guru."

"Not a guru, just been there. Lived there. Know the neighborhood."

Codell pivoted the stool ninety degrees to face her. "Can I tell you something? I screw up with women. I don't know why. I must not be learning."

She pivoted as well. "Can I tell YOU something? I don't really know you, but I think I do know you. You're a nice guy, on top of that you're a hunk. For some reason you think you're worse than what you are. You don't realize what's worthy inside of you, what it takes - but you're persistent. That's what women want, someone who won't quit on them. When you find that woman, you're not going to quit on her."

"That woman's not you?"

She shuddered with uncontrollable revulsion. "No, not me." Cupid clicked the safety lock on his AR.

* * * * *

Cupid, a full foot shorter than Codell and downright buoyant behind him, exited the Ruby Slipper. They headed north on Cass Avenue, past Cupid's car, a baby blue Dodge Dart Swinger with front disc brakes, dual exhaust, and a 360 cubic-inch, four-barrel V-8 engine, and we're not talking vegetable juice. Cupid fired the remaining bullets of aversion into the air because that's just what you did in Detroit. They were nearing the Bronx. In place of the bullets of aversion and repulsion, he loaded bullets of arousal and desire (BAD) for his next mark. He never missed.

Part 3.

A HEAD taller than almost everyone else at the Bronx, Yolanda was a marked woman. She waited for her drink at the end of the bar closest to the door. The door opened; Codell entered, Cupid behind him bobbed with his AR ready; hearing the door, Yolanda turned and saw Codell; Cupid raised his Rifle of Romance and drilled her

point blank with divine BAD. She tingled all over and her face flushed. In three steps Codell was at the bar eye to eye with her. "Hi," Codell said.

"Hi," said Codell's bar buddy, affixed to a stool next to them. He bore a vague resemblance to Detroit's Nain Rouge. "I saved you a seat."

"Thanks," Codell said. "But I wasn't talking to you."

"Hello, Codell," Yolanda said tersely. There was no pretense, no artifice, no delay. "Why'd you give me the wrong phone number? I called, and instead of you I got Shield's Pizza."

"Shield's Pizza?!" Codell exclaimed.

"It wasn't funny!" said Yolanda.

"Shield's Pizza!?" repeated Codell's buddy. "You gave her the number for Shield's instead of your phone number? Jeez-o-Pete!"

"Did you order one?" Codell asked Yolanda with a lame smile. "A pizza?"

"That's not funny, either!" Yolanda tensed up ready to pop Codell a big one.

"He owes you a pizza," Codell's buddy opined.

"I can explain. I know what happened," Codell said. "Let's find a table."

Codell and Yolanda relocated between the Space Invaders game and the juke box. A preppy-looking girl punched in the Eagles' "Heartache Tonight." Cupid waved a hand, "Heartache Tonight" skipped, and a Sam Cooke song started playing instead. I must have punched in the wrong song, thought the preppy girl.

"Do you remember my name?" Yolanda asked.

"Of course. Yola.

“Hey, I’m sorry about the phone number. It wasn’t intentional. I waited for you to call me like we said, and then the phone didn’t ring. I waited probably ten minutes. In the rain. I must’ve given you the wrong number, and it turned out to be Shield’s.”

“How can you not know your own phone number?”

“Well - “ Codell bit his lip - “I don’t have a phone number. I use the pay phone by my apartment. I thought I knew the number when I wrote it down for you. I obviously switched it around.”

“So you lied to me about having a phone.”

“Well -

“I wouldn’t call it a lie. It is the phone I use.” Yolanda held him with her eyes.

“Can we be done with that?” Codell asked. “I’m sorry. It seems like that’s all I’m doing tonight, apologizing.” They took refuge in their beverages.

“Anyway,” Codell said. “I was hoping to see you here again. Is your friend coming? Was it Nickie? Her boyfriend, what was his name?”

“Rikki. Donnie. They broke up.”

“Doesn’t surprise me, from their ‘love talk’ that night. They could’ve used a little help from Cupid.”

“Cupid!” Said Yolanda. “Hmphh. I bet Cupid only helps those who help themselves.” Cupid bristled indignantly. “Rikki” Yolanda continued, “should be here soon.”

“You just getting a head start on her?”

“My apartment’s kind of empty. I broke up too, with my husband. My apartment is no place I want to be, alone on a Saturday night.” Codell’s heart knocked.

"I don't know what to say," said Codell. "Why'd you break up?"

"He was cheating on me."

"Your husband the delivery man, cheating on you? Wasn't that the play Nickie was in the night we met? *The Iceman* something?"

"Her name's Rikki. *The Iceman Cometh*. Rikki wasn't in it, she worked on it," Yola said. "My hubby *cometh*, alright, but not with me. He *cheateth*, and I *lefteth*."

"Weren't you," Codell said gently, "going to *cheateth* on him, too? We had something that night that we didn't finish."

Yola frowned. "That doesn't make it any better. It makes it worse."

Codell considered his platitudes and chose two. "Nothing like a dose of divorce to make you eat humble pie."

"What?" Yola looked at him funny, then refocused. "There's no divorce, not yet. I don't have the money. I don't even know about rent. He just moved out last week."

The preppy girl came back to the juke and played "The Long Run." Yola squirmed. "The Eagles?"

The preppy girl put on a pained expression. "How can you not like the Eagles? Glenn Frey, he's from Detroit!"

"I can't stand the Eagles," stated Yolanda. "He's from Detroit, so what."

"I don't like the Eagles, either," said Codell.

"Well, SOR-ree," said the preppy, sashaying back to her table.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes of small talk later, Yolanda checked the time. "I wonder where Rikki is."

Codell said, "before she gets here, I need to ask you something.

"We're going to get together again, right?"

"That's more of a statement than a question," Yolanda said.

"We should get together again."

"That's definitely a statement."

Codell exhaled and adjusted himself in his chair. "Can we get together again?"

"We might," Yola said. "It's possible. Maybe." Cupid gave a little start and fingered the trigger of his love gun.

"C'mon! The best you can give me is 'maybe'?"

Yolanda straightened her back. "I feel for you, I don't know why I feel as strongly as I do. But 'maybe' is a safe thing to say. Because we don't know what's not going to happen."

"What's not going to happen'? I don't understand."

"I have a friend, Iris. She says, 'you never know what you won't want to do when the time comes.' "

"What? 'What you won't want to do' . . . I don't get it. She's either a genius or an idiot, I don't know which."

"Don't dis my friend! Codell, we don't know what we know, do we."

Codell shook his head, trying to clear a fog. "I do not get it."

"Do you have a girlfriend?" Yola asked.

"What?! No, I don't have a girlfriend."

"Why not? You look like you should have a girlfriend. Why don't you?"

"I don't have a girlfriend. What does it matter? I have bad luck."

"I doubt it," Yola said.

"The relationships weren't all that good."

"Was it love? Did you love any of them?"

"More than they knew," Codell asserted.

"Oh? How many?"

"That's not what I meant!"

"What do you mean, then," asked Yolanda.

"You won't laugh?"

"I promise."

Codell's stomach twisted. Cupid crossed his arms, closed his eyes and cleared his throat. "What I mean," Codell said, "when you love someone, you want them to love you back as much as you love them, and if they don't, it's painful. Agonizing. If they do love you, you may not know it. Maybe you think they don't even though they do. And if they shouldn't love you, that's worse.

"Does that make sense?"

Yolanda said, "I think so. Are you okay? I don't know how you make your voice change like that. Are you tearing up?"

"I think," she went on, "we don't see the people we love the way they really are. Instead we see them the way we want to see them, and that's what we fall in love with. Then one day we discover who they really are, and they're not the same. It's not that they changed, maybe they did, maybe not. But no matter how you saw them to begin with, if you can't love them the way they really are, it's over."

Cupid nodded his head approvingly. Over the hub-bub of conversation and the inexorable pinging march of Space Invaders, Cupid made the juke box play the Mills Brothers' "All of Me."

"There's something else," Codell said. "I have a, uh, physical problem. I'm sure you've noticed. My GI tract is messed up. That's not the bathroom you smell."

"I don't smell anything," said Yola. "I lost my sense of smell when I was a kid."

"You look shocked," she said. "Even if I could smell, I'm from Delray. You can't smell any worse than Zug Island."

They sat close, brushing each other. Cupid clicked the safety back on on his AR and slid it in its holster, an accessory from the Vatican gift shop blessed by the Pope.

"Does that mean we get together again?" persisted Codell.

"At Shield's Pizza?" teased Yola.

"Shield's Pizza?! No! Tonight. I live a block away, Yola."

"I can't stand Rikki up. I have to wait." They sat, wanting.

Cupid made the juke box play Sam Cook's "Cupid." Yola squirmed. "Who's playing Sam Cooke?" Cupid put on a pained expression.

"Y'know," Yola said, "if Rikki ever gets here, there's a dance club a couple blocks over that we could all go to. Live band, Theresa somebody. Ever hear of her?"

"Who?" Codell said with a start. "She's not my type. I mean, her music's not my type."

"Yola!" Rikki hurried to their table. "Sorry I'm so late! I had to work over."

"What a surprise to see you!" she beamed at Codell. "Look at you two, quite the snuggle-buds! How'd that happen?!"

Cupid bowed with a wave of his arms. His Venus and Diana tattoos swayed as if they were alive, sparkling in gold illumination. He holstered his AR, rocked up on his toes, and took his leave.

#

The woman in the dumpster 2.

Inspired by Gabriel García Márquez, "The Handsomest Drowned Man in the World."

DEATH IS as essential to life as waste is essential for creativity, and Detroit had plenty of both.

On the way home from treating himself at the White Castle one Wednesday night, Codell took the scenic route. The White Castle was at Warren and Baltimore, where Warren dipped about fifteen feet under the railroad tracks. This left a steep incline behind the White Castle leading up to the tracks. All the north-south streets dipped under the tracks, creating a miles-long east-west ridge on which the trains ran.

His hunger sated by White Castle sliders, Codell was fueled for adventure and prone to wander. He climbed up to the railroad tracks behind the White Castle, picking his way through undergrowth, fast-food debris, and unidentifiable organic detritus. He broke through at the top, where train track rails protruded like half-buried fossils. Standing on the track, you could see to the vanishing points of the rails in both directions. Walking was easy, lit by the moon in a clear sky.

Codell set out east. Below him was desolation, empty parking lots to his right and vacant lots to his left where only the foundations of buildings remained. He crossed John R Street and then Brush. At Beaubien he left the tracks, slipping and stumbling down into the habitat. Walking south, unhurried, he passed the old Piquette Ford plant, long stark edifices on both sides of the street, and crossed Piquette Street. To his left almost the entire block was empty, a cracked and weed-filled manscape bathed but not cleansed by moonlight. A block away, traffic hummed on I-94, an expansive, divisive seam in Detroit's urban garment.

From a dumpster in one of the empty lots, something shiny in the moonlight, a long cylindrical object, pointed to the stars. Codell veered towards it. It was a street light post, stripped of its lamp. When Codell was a step from the dumpster, a rat scurried beneath the bin mere inches from his feet. He leapt back, then laughed at the cheap rush the rat had given him. Out of his childhood habit, he lifted the top of the dumpster, peeked in - and gagged. The nude body of a woman sprawled face up. Her insides were exposed at her chest, dark and amorphous. Her eyes stared to eternity.

The dumpster lid fell out of Codell's hand and crashed, and he stumbled backwards. Heart pounding, he ran all the way back to his apartment.

* * * * *

The next day, Codell returned to the dumpster. It squatted the same as last night, the lampless post pointing to the heavens. He waited several long moments before he pushed the lid up.

The woman was still there. Her hair was matted. Flies crawled on her face. Her nostrils flared. Her legs splayed out and her arms were akimbo. She was young and thin, her hips narrow, her clavicles protruding. Codell held his breath against the odor. He did not stay long.

* * * * *

All Friday morning, Codell thought about the woman in the dumpster. He imagined her alive. She was attractive, even beautiful. She would've been a model. She must have been smart. She had the highest grades in school, A's in all her classes. She was one of those girls who got along with everyone and everyone liked her, not just the teachers but the girls who were snotty to other girls, because she was nice to them

even though they were snotty. She could've had any boyfriend she wanted, but she didn't; she was nice to all the boys, even the unpopular ones. There was a skip in her step and a twinkle in her eye. She was brave and courageous, able to take a stand and speak out. She was destined to do great things and be famous, Codell just knew it. Everyone would know her. Her name was easy to remember. Her name was Maria.

That afternoon when he opened the dumpster, the smells had dissipated and the flies were gone. Maria's wounds had dried and she seemed smaller. Her face looked less pallid. She did not look afraid. The air shimmered as if it would carry her up.

* * * * *

A day later, Codell laid newspaper over Maria's body. He gently closed the dumpster, and he tried not to cry, and he cried.

* * * * *

In the cool early air Sunday morning, Codell hurried to the dumpster. The top was open and sunshine lit the inside. Maria was gone. Church bells rang, the Baptist church and Our Lady of The Rosary and others, and their choirs sang, they sang for Maria. She was the most worthy victim in the world; she would not go to waste. Everything would change because of her, Codell thought. Because of her, we will be new creations. We will fill the streets, dancing, the streets so full that there will be no room for cars. We will join our voices in a song that will echo around the world and no one will ever forget. Like Stevie Wonder sang, we will "change our words into truths and change that truth into love" and we will live that truth until the sun reverses course, and more than anything we will remember our future. Remember our future, when we will be better than ourselves. Maria will make us better than ourselves. We

owe it to her. Maria is mine, thought Codell; she is all of ours. We created her, and she will recreate us. This is her city and our city. This is *Detroit*.

#

Pendulum.

CODELL HESITATED - but there was no guarantee that the future would be any different from the past. He got up to leave, looked long at her, and grabbed his clothes. It was meant to be. No surprise. It was the same forward as backward; the clock didn't lie. He wanted to leave, having made up his mind again yesterday. *There is a way of leaving without leaving.* His brain raced. *Is that what woke me?* She was breathing heavily, sleeping. Then something woke him again.

He fell asleep for the second time. She came to bed. It had to be. Just like, of course, at had been at 11:11 p.m. the night before. This time it was 1:11 a.m. He looked at the clock. It was she at the bedroom door; something woke him; please say yes

yes please; something woke him; it was she at the bedroom door. He looked at the clock. This time it was 1:11 a.m. Just like, of course, it had been at 11:11 p.m. the night before. It had to be. She came to bed. For the second time he fell asleep.

Then something woke him again. Sleeping, she was breathing heavily. *Is that what woke me?* His brain raced. *There is a way of leaving without leaving.* Having made up his mind again yesterday, he wanted to leave. The clock didn't lie; it was the same backward as forward. No surprise. It was meant to be. He grabbed his clothes, looked long at her, and got up to leave. There was no guarantee that the future would be any different from the past - but CODELL HESITATED.

#

Yelling Man.

Inspired by Leslie Silko, "Yellow Woman."

"I DIDN'T DO IT! I DIDN'T DO IT! IT WASN'T ME! I DIDN'T DO IT!"

You were panting as you stood in place. You turned in a circle and burst into another apoplectic spasm. **"I DIDN'T DO IT! IT WASN'T ME!"**

I was walking with my head down, lost in a reverie of an ice-cold Vernors Ginger Ale. My feet were swollen. The heat was oppressive, so saturated that it denied any escape. My clothes stuck to me with each step.

You were a short, wiry man in old black dress pants, a matching dress jacket, a soiled white shirt, and tennis shoes. Each time you shouted, you jumped a little and stiffened your arms and legs as if you'd gotten an electric jolt.

Until I saw you yelling, I didn't know if you were real. There were stories about you, how you would lure children into your rusty old van, or how you would jump a woman and grab her purse or worse. They could never catch you, it was said. Were the stories about you only stories?

I walked to within several feet of you. I wasn't afraid; it was the middle of the day and we were in front of the Detroit Public Library and there were people around.

"Yelling Man," I said to you. You stared at me, your head and chin jutting. You continued to breathe hard through your mouth; your mouth was wet. "What's your name?" I asked.

The blood vessels in your neck and arms stuck out. Your face shined with sweat. Your eyes bulged. **"NOT ME! IT WASN'T ME! IT WASN'T ME!"**

I understand why you didn't tell me your name. When someone knows your name, they have a power over you. To possess someone's name is to possess *them*.

“Do you know the stories about you, Yelling Man?”

You remained indignant. **“IT WASN’T ME!”**

Library patrons circumnavigated us like you were a leper. You ignored them. One of them dared to get as near to you as I was. “You really ought to get out of here, y’know? You’re scaring people.”

A police car pulled up, windows up against the heat and humidity, the officers peering at you. They drove by. They had more important things to deal with.

Across the street was a parking lot, mostly vacant. In it idled a late model van with a lot of rust. “Yelling Man, I know your name.”

You erupted in three staccato bursts. **“I! DIDN’T! DO IT!”**

“What are we waiting for?” I said, pointing to the van. “Let’s go.” I was sorry that no one would hear his story.

#

Negative images and other paradoxes.

MAYOR COLEMAN Young, a flamboyant, blunt and profane advocate of Black Power, sought to remake the Detroit Police Department (and much more) through affirmative action (and much more). His ally, law-and-order police chief Bill Hart, was later sentenced to ten years in prison for stealing \$1.3 million from police funds.

Movie star Lincoln Perry played Stepin Fetchit, a picture-poster of negative stereotypes - lazy and discombobulated. Stepin Fetchit, Perry said, "was pimping white audiences just as slaves had once done with their masters, pretending to be incompetent - 'puttin' on the old massa'." * It made Perry a millionaire.

A woman on a bus in Detroit wears glasses, but instead of dark frames and clear lenses, hers have clear frames and dark lenses. One of the bows of the frames is held on by red tape at the hinge. She sits like Buddha, still and dead-ahead. You don't know if her eyes are open or closed.

In 1963 at Detroit's Cobo Arena, Martin Luther King Jr. gave an early version of his "I have a dream" speech. Albert Cobo, former mayor, had campaigned against the "Negro Invasion" of white neighborhoods.

The *Jaws* effect. Negative publicity did to Detroit what the movie *Jaws* did to sharks. As if the oceans teemed with sharks in attack mode. The oceans are safe - but not for sharks.

In the 1980 presidential campaign, the predominantly white Republican Party held its national convention in predominantly Black and Democratic Detroit.

Jackie Wilson's upbeat, uplifting 1967 hit song "Higher and Higher" is about finding that one-in-a-million girl. Wilson was a womanizer.

The Supremes' upbeat and uplifting 1967 hit song "The Happening" is about breaking up.

Black country music: Charley Pride played his first big show in Detroit.

In east Detroit, Canada is south of the United States.

White rhythm and blues: Mitch Ryder.

White Motown: the band Rare Earth.

Black punk rock: the band Death.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Lewis Cass served as Michigan's territorial governor, Michigan senator, Secretary of War under Andrew Jackson and Secretary of State under James Buchanan, and he was the Democratic Party's nominee for President in 1848. Cass championed the doctrine of popular sovereignty which, if adopted, would have allowed the people of each territory to decide whether or not to permit slavery in their territory. Cass lost the presidential election. What if he would've won?

#

* Perry's connection to Detroit is that he helped Motown founder Gordon Berry write lyrics for a song to commemorate John F. Kennedy, a song sung at Martin Luther King, Jr.'s funeral. David Maraniss, *Once in a Great City: A Detroit Story*, pages 296-297 (2015).

Jack and the beanshock.

GAPS OPENED in the morning clouds, and sun rays poured down on Detroit's Eastern Market. With the confidence of robins in summer, Neil and Jack shopped the open-air plaza for farm-fresh fruits and vegetables.

Jack eyed a table of peaches. The vendor eyed Jack. "I don't like peaches," Neil said. "They're fuzzy."

"How can you not like peaches?" Jack asked. "Never had peach cobbler?"

"Never had it."

"Peach pie? Peaches and cream?"

"I would gag on the smell," said Neil. "My dad made me eat the skin. We were at war over it."

"Times have changed," said the fruit vendor. "Give peach a chance."

Jack and Neil ambled to the next booth. A woman in bib overalls and a *CWA* baseball cap was piling greens a foot high.

"CWA," Jack nodded approvingly. "Corn Workers of America."

"Communication Workers of America," the grower corrected.

Neil regarded the variety of leaves with reverence. "What is all this?"

Jack picked up a long, dark bundle. "Lettuce, Neil."

"Let us what?"

"Lettuce Neil!" Jack put the green bundle back. "Never mind."

Next door a man and a woman, he with the complexion of a cauliflower and she with her arms crossed, oversaw a dozen containers of unusual shapes and colors.

Neil gestured at a basket of exotic-looking glossy green-yellow things and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "What are those?" Peaked ridges ran their full lengths.

"Starfruit," said the man. "You cut them crossways like this" - he used his index finger as an imaginary knife - "and the slices look like stars."

Neil gingerly picked up a dark green something with small, stiff, tightly packed, pointed thick leaves. It was the size of a grenade. He examined it as if it might explode.

"That's an artichoke," stated the woman. Neil pricked his finger on a leaf point and dropped it back in its box. "Be careful with it," said the woman.

"Too late," Neil said. "It already pricked me."

"I meant the artichoke, not your finger. You bruise it, you buy it."

Behind the artichokes was a container of produce, palm-sized and oval-shaped, with dark green skin. "Avocados?" Jack asked.

"Avocados," said the vendor.

"No thanks," said Neil. To Jack: "Can we get something normal?"

They moved on to the adjacent booth. A vendor of legumes was reading *The Milagro Beanfield War*. The vendor sat with all the patience and empathy of the vegetables themselves.

"That's more like it," said Jack with admiration. "I've never seen green beans that big. It's like they're on steroids."

"Maybe they're magical," said Neil. "You plant them, they grow, and we climb the stalk to a castle in the clouds."

"We'll take a pound," said Jack.

* * * * *

At home that night, it was Jack's turn to fix dinner. So big were the green beans that he only boiled half of them to have with their hotdogs.

They sat at the dining room table and into their mouths popped the first beans, still steaming. "Are you sure you cooked these long enough?" Neil asked.

"Absolutely sure. Twenty minutes, more than enough."

They chewed with difficulty. The beans stayed mostly intact, hard and thick.

"Swallow yet?" asked Jack. There was a thickness in his voice, fuzzy from talking with his mouth full.

"I'll try" Neil swallowed, and gagged worse than he ever had on peaches. The bark-like substance in his mouth reversed directions, and out rocketed a shredded mass of masticated greenery. He retrieved it with his fork, and, through the dining room window, the setting sun drenched him with realization.

Jack spit out his own green wad and ripped it into two halves. Surprise - the product of ignorance - etched his face like cracks in a windshield.

"They're lima beans, Jack. We're supposed to open the pods, not eat them."

"It's LIE-ma, Neil. Not LEE-ma."

"Are you absolutely sure about that, too?"

#

The rube at the Garden.

Inspired in part by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Garden."

AGENT JOHN Ruben's two new friends, Peter Baglioni and Nate Wilson, took him to the Garden for a beer and a few laughs. All three were agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and all three wore dark sport jackets. Agent Ruben, from rural Oklahoma, had recently finished training and was newly assigned to the FBI's Detroit office. He was looking forward to some fun after work.

The full name of the Garden was Rappaccini's Garden, after the owner, but nobody called it that except the police and the prosecutors. The red neon sign over the door simply flashed BAR. It was on Third Avenue. Parked in front of the door were a late model Cadillac and a silver 1979 Anniversary Edition Corvette. The Garden faced west, so on a sunny day in the late afternoon, whenever anyone opened the door, sunshine slashed through the smoky interior. The floor was cracked linoleum on which sat wobbly tables fit for a Jesus Saves homeless shelter.

"Thanks for taking me to a high class joint! What do you call this style? Detroit Industrial?" Agent Ruben laughed at his own joke. Agent Baglioni, the oldest and most jovial of the three, returned the quip. "It's on us!"

They passed a shuffleboard table and found seats in back next to a pinball machine and a Top 40 juke box. Blondie's "Call Me" filled the bar. "There sure are a lot of women here," Agent Ruben observed. "I think I'm going to like Detroit." "They're the flowers in the Garden," Agent Wilson said, winking.

The waitress came over. She was as wide as the shuffleboard table and waddled when she walked. "What can I get you," she said. Her voice said, don't mess with me.

Agents Baglioni and Wilson ordered drafts. Agent Ruben said, “water and a menu, please.”

“We don’t serve water. Don’t have a menu.”

“No menu?”

This isn’t a restaurant. You have to order a drink if you want to sit here.”

“Really? Guess I’ll have a Schlitz if you got that in a bottle.” The waitress left.

“That reminds me of a joke,” said Agent Baglioni. “What do you call 24 naked women upside down in a box?”

“Case full of slits!” said Agent Wilson. They told a few more jokes of that ilk until the waitress returned with their beers. “Three bucks for the drafts,” she said, “two for the bottle.”

“One fifty for a a draft?” asked Agent Ruben. “Are you kidding?”

“Big city prices,” said Agent Wilson, putting down a five spot. “We got you covered.”

“You’re not from around here,” the waitress told Agent Ruben.

“I’m from Oklahoma. My first week here.”

“You?” she asked the other agents.

“Detroit.”

“Oohhh.” The corners of her mouth shifted; you couldn’t tell if it was a grin or a grimace or both. “Oh, I see.” To Agent Ruben she said slowly, “welcome to Detroit. I’ll make sure you have a welcoming committee.” Baglioni and Wilson laughed heartily.

The waitress went behind the bar and Baglioni and Wilson got up to play some pinball. Agent Ruben quaffed his expensive cheap beer and took it all in. At the bar but

facing out, not in, were three women. They all wore dresses and heels. They looked young from that distance. Two of them sauntered up to Agents Baglioni and Wilson at the pinball machine, and the third repositioned a chair next to Agent Ruben and sat down. Up close it was clear that the women's youth flowed from bottles and tubes.

The woman with Agent Ruben waved a hand in the direction of the waitress. "Big Beatrice," she said, "thought you might like some company. Care if I join you?" She smiled and glanced at his crotch.

"Please do!"

The two women at the pinball machine moved close to Agents Baglioni and Wilson and leaned into them. The woman sitting next to Agent Ruben became more familiar with him as well. She had adventurous hands.

Agent Ruben made small talk. But in the midst of him telling her about Oklahoma farming, the woman pulled her hands back from his leg and the smile dropped from her lips. "Powder room" was all Agent Ruben heard as she abruptly left. On her way she said something to Big Beatrice. The other two women also headed for the powder room. Agents Baglioni and Wilson sat back down with Agent Ruben.

"These women sure are friendly!" Agent Ruben said. His friends exploded in a paroxysm of laughter.

"What's so funny?" Agent Ruben looked around. All the women in the bar had disappeared. Only Big Beatrice remained, her head down, nonchalantly wiping the bar.

"That is so strange," he said, looking right and left. "Where'd all the ladies go?"

"John," said Agent Wilson. "Are you wearing your piece?"

"Yeah. Why?"

“Leg holster?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“Not for us, but it is for them. That woman had her hands all over you, right? She found your piece.”

Agent Ruben looked perplexed.

“She found your piece. She told the waitress. The waitress let everyone else know. They all left. We put them out of business.”

“At least while we’re here,” snickered Baglioni.

Ruben huffed. “I don’t understand why they left.”

“C’mon, Rube, get with it!” Baglioni said. “You think whores want to get busted in a recession?”

#

The man of letters.

L'HOMME DE lettres, in an ivory suit spattered with alphabet letters, climbed the steps of the Detroit Public Library shortly before it was to close for the day. Calm as Dostoevsky's idiot Prince Myshkin, he seemed apart from time and the universe, neither reflecting them or absorbing them, unconscious of them. He tipped his mortar board to a departing damsel, entered the library, and engaged the first person he met. "If it behooves you, *madame*," said the man of letters in an alluring French accent, "could you direct me to the master of this academy?"

The librarian lowered her chin to peer over her reading glasses. "What may I help you with?"

The man of letters looked askance. "You, *une belle femme*, help me? I would like some books."

"Of course. Are you a student?"

"A student!" The man of letters' face lit up. "Yes! A student of the world, a student of life, a student of ideas. Ideas reposed in books, books composed of words, words which I collect." His eyebrows tilted inward and he fixed on her eyes. "What books do you suggest, *mademoiselle*? My preferences are the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to which I am *nouveau*."

"Quite the challenging patron, aren't you. Very good. Let's see. You collect words. Some writers with notable vocabularies would be just the thing." She pushed up her reading glasses to peruse the card catalogue. The man of letters clasped his hands behind his back and considered her architecture. After several minutes she presented him with a list of authors.

“Here we go,” she said. “Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*; Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas*; they wrote all things marine. Thomas Hardy’s vocabulary was unique, but don’t read him if you’re depressed. To read Ambrose Bierce, you’ll need a dictionary. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ vocabulary is deceptive. He doesn’t use ‘big’ words; he uses short, dense words. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, if you can get through it. He coined a lot of words. Samuel Becket. Try the story “Yellow.” T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*; that antiquated diction is astounding.”

The librarian caught her breath. It was a *tour de force*.

“One more. Ludwig Wittgenstein. The Ws sounds like Vs. He wrote about language. *Philosophical Investigations*. He was a genius.

“And there are women of letters,” she continued. “Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Ayn Rand, Simone de Beauvoir.”

“Women of letters. Like Hypatia?”

“Something like Hypatia,” concurred the librarian. “But not flayed to death like she was.”

“*Très bien, très bien. Merci beaucoup.* Where may I find these books?”

“Do you have a library card?”

“Library card?”

“Library card. For the books. Are you a Detroit resident?”

“*Non.*”

“Then I’m afraid you can’t check out the books.” They both looked glum.

“Regrettable,” said the man of letters. “Just when we were finding common ground. Could you refer me, then, to a *salon*? Surely a *salon* is nearby.”

“You’ll be quite handsome with a haircut, but I don’t know of any salons around here. Do you mean a saloon? We do have plenty of those but they go by different names.”

“*Mon chéri*, you are so direct! It would be my honor and delight to partake of a glass of wine with you.”

“And mine as well,” assented the librarian. She put her hair up in a quick French bun and got her *petite* purse, and the two made haste for the door. “By the way, where in the world did you get that suit?”

“Is it not appropriate? Perhaps I should’ve worn the Greek or the Latin.”

“*Monsieur*, clothes do not always make the man. It is enough that you collect words.”

“You humble me, *mon amour*,” said the man of letters. “Might this saloon have parlor games?”

The librarian hooked her arm through his and giggled coquettishly. “Have you ever heard of Scrabble?”

#

Black Elk pukes.

FROM THE other world of living light that was everywhere, the Lakota holy man carried his people's dream to the tallest mesa in the world, Detroit's Renaissance Center, a sky-scraping cylindrical rosette of four 39 story towers surrounding a central 73 story hotel capped by a restaurant. Pleased that the towers were round like a hoop, he craned his neck and squinted to see the top of the world. The glass-covered sides dazzled his vision.

"How do I reach the summit?" he asked a passerby.

The Detroiter recognized a non-native when she saw one. "I'll show you," she said. "It's a first-class restaurant." She walked him through the pedestrian bustle and into the massive structure, past concrete balconies bedecked with greenery, through a terraced, multi-floor atrium, to the heart of the Ren Cen.

"Welcome to The Westin Hotel Renaissance Center Detroit," smiled a concierge. "May I help you?"

"He'd like to see The Summit," said the native.

"Visiting, are we?" said the concierge, smoothing the lapels of his smart Westin jacket. "Certainly. The Summit. A fine choice." They guided him to a glass elevator that whisked him to the top of the Ren Cen very much like the swift cloud that had brought him through time to Detroit in 1980. The elevator doors slid open and he stepped out.

"Welcome to The Summit," a hostess greeted him. "Do you have a reservation?"

The holy man nodded respectfully. "Yes, but much time has passed. I do not know if my people kept it."

“Well, hopefully they’ll show up soon. We don’t have a party waiting for anyone, but you’re welcome to wait in the lounge until they arrive. It’s on the observation floor. Can I take your name?”

“Nicholas Black Elk.”

“I’ll just use your first name, if you don’t mind.” The hostess smiled sweetly, patted him on his forearm, and escorted him to the lounge.

There, the entire observation floor of The Summit slowly revolved to provide a view in all directions of the compass, the whole circle of the day. On a clear day, you could see for thirty miles, the entire hoop of the world, up and down the Detroit River and across the river to Grandmother’s Land.

But rarely was a day clear. The summer sky was a nasty bruise on the horizons, yellowed by smog and smoldering. Inland there were countless buildings, square boxes of many sizes with vehicles moving between them in all directions. Nowhere could be seen open areas or horses. Black Elk felt unwell, shivering, his eyes half closed.

“Are you okay?” asked a waitress. “Let me get you a cup of coffee.”

Black Elk drank the black medicine and felt the rejuvenating power of the west. He summoned the lessons of his youth. *The Grandfathers have placed in this world many things, he recalled, all of which should be happy. Every little thing is sent for something, and in that thing there should be happiness and the power to make happy. Like the grasses showing tender faces to each other, thus we should do, for this was the wish of the Grandfathers of the World.** What had become of those happy things the Grandfathers had placed in the world? He remembered the grasses and the wind and the power of his horse’s legs, and he sang softly:

A horse nation all over the universe,

Neighing, they come!

Prancing, they come!

*May you behold them.**

“What?” asked the waitress.

“I’m remembering the power of horses,” Black Elk said.

“You’re in the right city for that,” quipped the waitress. “This place was built on horsepower. I saw Henry Ford the Second one night right here on this dance floor, gettin’ down with his new mistress. Robbin’ the cradle with that one, he was!”

Black Elk lifted his face to her. “This is a dance floor?”

* * * * *

On the dance floor of the lounge of The Summit restaurant at the top of Detroit’s Renaissance Center in the summer of 1980, alone and not knowing if his people had kept their reservation, Black Elk danced a Vision. He hoped his people would “walk the red road in a sacred manner pleasing to the Powers of the Universe that are One Power. . . . [He] believed that [his] vision was coming true at last, and great happiness overcame [him].” * He danced fervently.

The waitress and the bartender watched, fascinated, ignorant of his vision and the power it could give. “[They] seemed heavy, heavy and dark; and they could not know that they were heavy and dark. So heavy that it seemed they could not be lifted; so dark that they could not be made to see any more.” They were traveling the black road of trouble and hardship, everybody for themselves and with rules of their own.*

Entranced, Black Elk saw the entire nation. People lived in the small square boxes; the nation no longer had any center. He saw a thick mass of colorful butterflies, their wings making a sound like dry, delicate whimpering. From the west came thunder beings in a dark storm streaked with fire. The blackness shouted and dust rose; the dust was the swarm of butterflies, and out of the dust dog heads rose.* The dogs became people that were not people, and they rose clothed in unimaginable wealth and disappeared out of sight above the Renaissance Center.

Spectators in the lounge gathered around Black Elk as he danced. Some stared and some laughed, but Black Elk, deep in the Spirit World, didn't see them. Instead he saw darkness. He saw people lose jobs and pensions and sink to the earth. Hunger was among them. What food they did have was not good food. They grew sick and did not have medicine, and Black Elk too was sickened.

Nauseous and feverish, wet but still dancing, Black Elk saw the rot and stench of poverty, insecurity, and a future of social meania [sic]. He saw grandfathers of grandfathers, grandmothers of grandmothers, and generations of grandchildren poor and hungry. He saw faces grow thin and sharp, for some were starving. The nation's hoop was broken.

And then Black Elk saw the thunder beings leave and the frost come. In that cold time, the sky filled with lies more numerous than the stars, and they blotted out the western sun. There were many lies, but people could not eat them. He saw people label truth as lies, and he saw lies dishonor the Grandfathers and Grandmothers. He saw people lie to themselves and so deceive themselves. Many knew that the lies were lies and many did not know, but the result was the same. Lies slaughtered the truth and

trust, and then the people slaughtered the Great Fathers and Mothers and finally they slaughtered themselves. They had followed the black road and stained it red with blood. They killed first for the lies, and then they killed because they wanted to kill. The nation was dying. People did not believe that the nation could die, but it was dying, butchered by falsehood and violence.

Alone and powerless without his people, Black Elk felt weighed down with pity for the despairing and dying multitudes of this future. "And [he saw] that something else died A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream." *

Black Elk collapsed, heaving.

* * * * *

"Why did you let him dance?" the bartender asked.

"I didn't 'let' him," said the waitress. "I mentioned 'dance floor' and he got a look on his face and started dancing, like he was on drugs or something. I sure hope he doesn't sue."

"Sioux?" Black Elk said from the floor. His voice was weak, his eyes closed.

And so it was over. The bartender helped Black Elk to a chair and the waitress cleaned up the vomit. Black Elk, drenched with sweat and saddened beyond words, looked to the horizons, that spectacular panorama slowly rotating around him, its smog yellow with a warmth he could not feel, a harbinger of a greater and inconvenient truth, a truth denied but no less a truth.

The bartender escorted Black Elk into the elevator and offered to call for medical assistance, but Black Elk declined. He was free at last, free at last, the end of his dream

as well as his people's. The elevator doors closed and the bottom dropped out from under him. No one saw him leave the Renaissance Center.

** Black Elk Speaks as told through John G. Neihardt (Flaming Rainbow).*

#

The woman with no face.

IT WAS no secret that Detroit's Fort Wayne was haunted, but the ghosts caught tourists by surprise.

So it was, one Sunday afternoon, when a shadow seemed to pass in front of two sisters as they toured the fort. "Did a cloud just go over?" one sister asked.

"I don't think so."

"That was odd." They didn't give it a second thought.

They were history teachers, and twins, with their yuck-yuck husbands on a yes-dear vacation. The men, Tony and Terry, wore bright red Hawaiian shirts. They looked like they'd been dragged to a furniture store.

The restored facade of Fort Wayne's officers' quarters was impressive. The foursome entered and nodded to the docent.

"Hey Tone, check out this view," Terry said, gesturing at his wife's *derrière* as she bent to read a placard. "Looks like the same views I get," snickered Tony.

Terry's wife straightened up and frowned. "Don't you get sick of the same old joke? It stopped being funny years ago." She stepped to a window overlooking the parade grounds and, beyond that, the Detroit River. She peered out the window - froze - and her face blanched.

"What's wrong?" asked her sister, joining her.

"Oh my God."

Walking slowly toward them was a petite woman, opaque in a faded white skirt, blouse and bonnet. Where her face should've been was uniformly pale and featureless.

The sisters clutched each other's forearms so hard, they made fingernail marks.

Terry's wife turned to the docent. "There's a woman out there! She - "

" 'Oh my God' what?" interrupted one of the husbands. "What are you talking about?"

"She has no face!"

"She's gone," said Tony's wife. "Like she just evaporated." Her eyes had not wavered from the spot.

"Who's gone?" Terry looked back and forth between the sisters.

Terry's wife pulled her sister away from the window. "We have to leave," she said. "We have to leave, right now. *Now.*"

"What's going on?" Terry turned to Tony. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I have no idea," Tony shrugged. The sisters were already at the door. "Why are you leaving? You're not done with your tour."

"There was a woman out there," said Terry's wife. "We'll tell you in the car." Her eyes flamed. "We need to get out of here."

"Do you mind completing this survey before you go?" The docent pinned on a smile, careful not to sound glib.

The sisters and their husbands did not stop driving until Toledo.

* * * * *

One hundred years earlier, in the summer of 1868, Fort Wayne had serious structural and health issues, reported precisely by B.J.D. Irwin, Surgeon, United States Army. There were other issues as well.

The soldiers were ordered to bathe daily. The companies' first sergeants escorted their men at dusk to the Detroit River. On their return to barracks, they hauled barrels

of water to the officers' row and the laundries. Laundresses, married men and officers had separate quarters.

A first sergeant, one T.R. Phillips, escorted the water to the laundry. Although he was married, he was not shy in his affection for one of the laundresses, a petite girl whose comely shape attracted him from the moment he'd first seen her. Her simple white skirt, blouse and bonnet bespoke purity. Her countenance was demure, yet she felt flattered by the sergeant's attention to her. With each visit to the laundry, his affection gave way to infatuation, then desire, then love. Time has obliterated the details of their affair. Suffice it to say that the laundress, complicit though she was, felt powerless to object.

As it usually goes, something ended their relationship – not Sergeant Phillips' guilt about his adultery, but his commanding officer's discovery of the liaison. The C.O., indeed the entire garrison, would be shamed if word were to get out, and that was unacceptable. Above all, we cannot lose face.

Directed by his C.O. to stop visiting the laundress, Sergeant Phillips hung his head. But it was better to part ways with the girl than to lose his post.

The laundress was summoned to headquarters, a place appointed in an opulence that she had only imagined. She did not, however, imagine that Sergeant Phillips would be there, too. Seeing him, she felt light headed and queasy.

The commanding officer, ever so polite, welcomed her. He offered no chair and so she stood as he explained her transgression. The sergeant had acknowledged his dalliance, and they were grateful that there had been no emotional attachment between

the Sgt. and the laundress. At that, the laundress's face flushed. She tried to make eye contact with the sergeant. He sat head down, intrigued with a floor board.

We have prepared a confession for you to sign, the commanding officer told her.

A confession of what?

Surely you know, miss.

What she knew in her bosom was that they had loved and that her love had been betrayed.

I have nothing to confess but my love for Sgt. Phillips.

Very well, then. You will be reassigned, said the commanding officer.

* * * * *

Mrs. Phillips asked her husband, why did the commanding officer summon you?

It does not concern you, Sergeant Phillips told her.

It does concern me. People are talking.

It does not concern you.

* * * * *

That night the laundress's queasiness grew worse, and she was overcome by a fever that was spreading throughout the barracks. She suffered abdominal pain and severe, bleeding diarrhea. Dehydrated and delirious, within days she lost consciousness and succumbed. Dr. Irwin reported the cause of death as dysentery.

But not even death extinguished the laundress's love. In summers to come, she watched a certain company of soldiers bathing on the shore of the Detroit River. Sometimes tourists glimpsed her and shivered, a coolness passing over them like the shadow of a cloud.

#

The King of Careful.

AFTER PICKING up their take-out order at the Chicken Shack in Detroit, Leroy caught his heel on the door step as he and his best friend were leaving. He pitched forward, the chicken flew for the first time in its life, Leroy landed on his face, and it wasn't pretty. He was treated at the hospital emergency room, after which his friend, who had a Polaroid instant camera, took pictures of Leroy's colorful and disfigured maw. The next morning, Leroy called Lester Buckholdtz, personal injury lawyer, who had Leroy come in to his office the same day. Within a matter of days, Attorney Buckholdtz filed a lawsuit against Chicken Shack. The Complaint alleged that there should've been a sign on the door warning about the step and that the step should've been painted yellow. Within a matter of weeks, Leroy's friend found himself in the attorney's office to give deposition testimony.

The court reporter administered an oath to Leroy's friend that he would tell the truth. The attorney explained that a deposition was part of the discovery process in a lawsuit so that they could understand what happened on the day of the accident. He ran through several *pro forma* statements and foundational questions to identify the names of the parties to the lawsuit, the attorneys, and Leroy's friend. The attorney asked questions about his background, such as how long he'd known Leroy, and his education. The court reporter typed every word that was said:

Attorney Buckholdtz: How far did you go in school?

Witness: About five blocks.

Attorney Buckholdtz: No, I mean, did you finish school?

Witness: I dropped out in tenth grade.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Okay, let's get to the day of the accident. You were with Leroy at Chicken Shack that afternoon when he fell?

Witness: Uh-huh.

Attorney Buckholdtz: That's a yes? You have to answer yes or no for the court reporter to write your answer.

Witness: Yes. We love Chicken Shack. It's been there forever.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Since 1956, the owner says. Mr. Sobeck. Do you remember that afternoon very well?

Witness: Yes. I even remember the music they had playing. Elvis Presley.

Attorney Buckholdtz: You and Leroy bought some chicken?

Leroy's friend testified in detail about the chicken they'd bought and what happened after they paid for it. He explained that Leroy had been in front of him on their way out, and how he'd seen everything. He described how Leroy tripped at the step and fell face-first.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Was Leroy being careful when he was leaving the restaurant?

MS. FLUGEL (attorney for defendant Chicken Shack): Objection. You're asking the witness for an opinion.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Objection noted. If sustained, the question and answer will be stricken from the record.

Attorney Buckholdtz (to the witness): Go ahead and answer the question.

Witness: Uh, what was the question?

Attorney Buckholdtz: Was Leroy being careful when he was leaving Chicken Shack.

Witness: Oh yes. Leroy was being very careful.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Okay. How do you know that Leroy was being very careful?

Witness: Because he was drunk. Leroy's always careful when he's drunk. When he's drunk, he's the King of Careful.

Attorney Buckholdtz: Counsel, can we go off the record?

No further questioning. Deposition concluded at 1:50 p.m.

Buckholdtz dropped the lawsuit the very next day.

#

Justice rides a sloe horse.

IOLA APEL (pronounced “eye-OH-lah a-PELL”) had taken too long with her favorite beverage. She left one of her watering holes, Channel Number 5, running late. Her little Pinto took her to the rear parking lot at Sluggers, the dive bar on her way home, the place she always stopped at for last call. She looked at her watch. The numbers were blurry. Was that 2 a.m.?

Sluggers’ back door was locked, so Iola pounded on it, waited, and pounded louder. She pounded a few more times as hard as she could and was getting really upset when the door swung outward and smashed into her face, cutting her off in the middle of a string of choice expletives creatively combined. She staggered back, hand to her mouth, bleeding profusely. Probing tenderly with her finger tips, she could not locate her two upper front teeth. Only then did the throbbing become intense.

Iola had never felt such pain. Her mouth was so swollen, all she could eat for a week were liquids through a straw. She lost weight, but it wasn’t worth the misery. Two false teeth later, she sat in the office of Lester Buckholdtz, counselor and attorney at law. He filled a brown leather chair as shiny as his hair.

The case of Iola Apel vs. Martin R. Palfrey, doing business as Sluggers, began ordinarily. Attorney Buckholdtz filed the cause of action in the 36th District Court, Detroit, Michigan for damages of less than \$10,000. The complaint alleged, *inter alia*, that Mr. Palfrey, owner and operator of Sluggers, tending bar that night, violated the duty of due care owed an invitee to the premises when he opened the rear door with excessive force and without warning, knowing that an invitee, to wit the Plaintiff Iola Apel, was outside of said door. Further, the complaint alleged, said door had no

window through which the parties could see each other, by which window, if it had existed, Plaintiff's injuries could easily have been avoided.

Defendant Palfrey was represented by a young attorney from The Livery Insurance Company, headquartered on the west side of Michigan in Grand Rapids. They denied most of the statements in the complaint and claimed affirmative defenses including that Plaintiff Iola Apel was responsible for her own injuries because, upon information and belief, prior to arrival at Sluggers, she had imbibed an unknown number of alcohol drinks which intoxicated her, and that she was verbally abusive and careless in her efforts to enter Sluggers. If she had been sober and calm, the insurance attorney posited, she could've moved out of the way when the door opened. Alcohol made her sluggish, pun intended. The defense further stated, somewhat gratuitously, that as a regular patron of Sluggers, the Plaintiff knew or should've known that Sluggers had already closed for the night.

The lawsuit proceeded through discovery. Deposition testimony was taken from the parties about the events of the night. In an effort to resolve the matter short of going to trial, the case was mediated, which resulted in a recommended award to Plaintiff Apel in the amount of \$2,500 plus her dental expenses. Attorney Buckholdtz accepted the mediation award, but the attorney for Sluggers did not. Attorney Buckholdtz said half-heartedly to him, "I think you're making a mistake." The Sluggers attorney said in return, also half-heartedly, "I don't have authority from my client to offer that much."

Trial preparation came easily, for both attorneys wanted to spend the minimum amount of time on the case. Spurred by that overriding motivation, they stipulated to admit the dentist's records at trial instead of calling in the dentist to testify.

Additionally, at Attorney Buckholdtz's suggestion, instead of trial by jury, which would've resulted in considerable time for *voir dire* and seating of jurors, the attorneys agreed to a bench trial in which the judge would decide both the law and the facts. It was mostly a question of damages, of how much fair compensation should be.

Defendant Palfrey, the bar owner, didn't want to testify at trial. He had closed Sluggers the day he gave his deposition testimony, and he had no desire to miss another day's revenue. The last thing he wanted was to see any more of Iola Apel and, besides, that's why he had insurance. Given Mr. Palfrey's reluctance to testify at trial, Attorney Buckholdtz graciously and generously allowed that his deposition testimony would be admitted into evidence in lieu of him testifying at the trial.

And so it happened that Ms. Apel was the only witness at the trial. She wore her least old clothes and, notwithstanding a bad case of nerves, answered all the questions to the best of her ability as Attorney Buckholdtz had told her. In direct examination from Attorney Buckholdtz, she relived the events of the fateful night and described her pain and suffering in the days that followed. Her testimony didn't take long at all. Direct testimony ended when she professed gratitude to her dentist for the fine restoration. The judge took note.

The young insurance attorney cross-examined Ms. Iola Apel. She cautiously, but politely, responded to his questions, leading questions though they were, establishing that she was a regular customer ("I've known Marty for years"), that it was after closing time when she arrived that night ("it could've been"), and that she'd been drinking at another bar ("Channel Number Five, sloe gin fizz, I love those"). However, she denied

that she was drunk (“I only had one”), and she professed ignorance about the high alcohol content of sloe gin (“I don’t know, I can hold my liquor”).

“You were cursing at Marty, weren’t you?” the defense attorney challenged Ms. Apel. Attorney Buckholdtz objected that the question was irrelevant, but the Court denied him and directed the witness to answer the question, please. “I might have said something,” Ms. Apel conceded. “I have no further questions,” said the attorney for Sluggers, ending cross-examination. Attorney Buckholdtz had no redirect, foreclosing any re-cross examination by the defense attorney.

Throughout Ms. Apel’s testimony, the judge had been flipping through Mr. Palfrey’s deposition testimony, and the Court had a few questions of its own. Most memorable was this: “Ms. Apel, do you know why Sloe Gin is called ‘Sloe Gin’?”

“Because it takes longer to hit you?”

The judge smiled gently. “No, not because it’s ‘slow,’ s-l-o-w. It’s spelled s-l-o-e. It’s called ‘sloe’ because juice from the berries of the sloe bush is what gives the gin its purple-red color.”

“I never knew that,” testified Ms. Apel, confused. She was sure ‘slow’ was spelled s-l-o-w, and how could a bush be slow?

“How impertinent,” thought the attorneys. But not wanting to hurt their cases, the lawyers clenched their teeth.

The judge continued, “this Court has had occasion to enjoy a variety of gin beverages. My understanding is that the alcohol content of sloe gin is actually lower than that of other gins. I could be mistaken, but no matter. That distinction will not be a factor in the Court’s judgment.”

The attorneys gave brief closing statements and rested their cases.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” said the judge. “Your cases were ably and expeditiously presented, for which this Court is grateful. The Court has harnessed all the pertinent facts and is prepared to rule.” Everyone stiffened and sat straight up.

“The Court has received stipulated dental records of Dr. Fager and has heard testimony from the Plaintiff. The Court has read the deposition testimony of Marty R ” - the judge looked at the cover page of the deposition - “Martin R. Palfrey. On the question of liability, the Court finds in favor of Plaintiff. This unfortunate accident was completely avoidable, not only by having a door with a window, but more importantly if the bar owner had opened the door slowly.

“On the question of damages, the Court assesses the amount of \$7,500 for pain and suffering, plus Plaintiff’s out-of-pocket dental expenses. That is the Court’s judgment.” It was three times the amount of the mediation award that the insurance company had rejected.

“Counsel,” the Court addressed Attorney Buckholdtz, “you will prepare the Judgment?”

Attorney Buckholdtz reared up to his feet. “Of course, your honor!” Iola Apel stood up because Attorney Buckholdtz had stood up. She hadn’t heard anything after the judge said “\$7,500.” Her mouth was open, her new teeth sparkling in the verdict.

Also with mouth agape, the attorney for Martin R. Palfrey, d.b.a. Sluggers, seemed attached to his seat at a loss to understand why the damages were three times the mediation recommendation. It was registering with him that he’d been hosed, hosed without knowing that the water was running, registering the same dazed way as

when you see the first blood from a cut before you feel pain from the cut. Registering the way a horse's whole field of vision comes into view only after the race is over and the blinders come off.

"Your Honor, if it please the Court, Counsel for Defendant," the insurance attorney said, referring to himself in the third person and reining in his incredulity, "Counsel for Defendant would like to inquire, respectfully inquire, did the Court read the entirety of Defendant's deposition testimony during trial, during Counsel's *short* cross-examination of Plaintiff?"

"This Court is a speed-reader, Counsel. This Court has an eidetic memory," said the judge, pronouncing it 'eye-DEET-ick' and not exactly answering the question. "We are still on the record, Counsel."

The attorneys and His Honor duly and ceremoniously thanked one another. The judge recessed to his chamber in plenty of time for lunch. The out-of-town insurance lawyer, frowning, trotted out of the courtroom.

"What does that word mean, about the judge's memory?" Iola Apel asked her attorney.

"It's 'eye-DEHT-ick,' not 'eye-DEET-ick,'" said Attorney Buckholdtz. "Today it meant 'flipping through the pages.' Some other day, we might not be so lucky."

Attorney Buckholdtz hitched up his pants, cinched his brief case, and checked his watch. The entire trial had taken less than an hour. It was a quick case yet unexpectedly sloe.

#

Your (m)ass is bangin'.

Inspired by the Human League, "Empire State Human."

THONG WOMAN sashayed down the sidewalk on Cass Avenue in Detroit, bearer of the largest human hind parts you'll ever see. As remarkable as their size was their nakedness. Their only clothing was a pink swatch that narrowed to a thin strip and disappeared down the gorge between her quavering gluteals. She was BIG. She was, in fact, too big for anyone else to fit into this story, anyone except a god.

She was born in London of pious parents, a giant father and a diabetic mother, and she weighed almost an even stone. They named her Chastity. From the start, they taught her to love herself as God loved her, and that being big was a good thing.

Her parents emigrated to Detroit, Michigan, U.S. of A. She grew, her confidence keeping pace. When she started school, her first encounter with fat shaming did not weigh her down. Efforts to stigmatize her had the opposite effect. She overachieved academically, her achievements corresponding to her growth on the height and weight charts. She ate not impulsively but intentionally for expansion, her mass burgeoning with the utility and solidity of a sumo wrestler.

Going through puberty, she embraced her bulk and wanted her peers to, too. Most of them did not. In those days, thin was in. Bulimic and anorexic models wasted away into emaciation. No one could imagine a day when self-loving women with big butts would have hit songs and their own television shows, celebrities not in spite of their fulsome bodies but because of them. No one except Chastity.

She fended off the adolescent cruelties with indifference and love. "Whatever floats your bloat," she responded. "God bless you." She empathized with outcasts,

whom she befriended and loved. She became twice the girl that she used to be; still her body was too small for her aspirations. She wanted to be more than human size.

In the exhilarating freedom and intellectual stimulation of college, she grew into her own. She turned weight can into an art, a discipline, artist and art as one. The more of her there was, the more art to shape. She had grown impossible to ignore, and she felt swell about it.

It was then, during her studies at Wayne State University, that she became Thong Woman. Curious about thongs and always one to do her research, she found the names and phone numbers of companies that made intimate apparel. With a few phone calls, she requested their mail-order catalogues. The catalogues arrived; she educated herself. She classified thongs into six types: the Rio and the lower-cut Tanga, leaving a little covered, thongs you might see in a swimsuit competition. The Thong, the T-Back, the V-String and the G-String, progressively daring underwear, the string flossing the butt crack with only two strings around the hips and a tiny twat cloth in front. The only thing more daring would be to go commando.

She placed an order for a Tanga, and a few weeks later she received a thick, plain envelope. Upon opening it and sliding out the product, her first impression was, what is *that*? It didn't look like anything to be worn. It looked like a bundle of strings to tie up a package, and that's what it was. She wasn't sure how to put it on, but she was guided by a metal butterfly in front to anchor all of the strings. The strings were far too short to encompass her girth, so she added extension strings that she square-knotted to the strings that came with it. She committed to wearing it, not to a swimsuit

competition, not to the beach, but in a small public appearance, a short but significant walk on Cass Avenue, small steps for a woman but a giant leap for womankind.

On Cass, television Channel 4 was filming a feel-good story about an unemployed man reunited with his lost dog when the cameraman spotted Chastity. Beneath her billowing pink blouse, he saw more than he thought was possible. His entire body turned, and his camera turned with it. The resulting footage made WDIV-TV 4's nightly news and generated a lot more buzz than the man finds dog story. The station was labeled her "the Ass on Cass" and "Thong Woman." They set her walk to music, the Commodores' "Brick House." Her TV4 exposure made her a local celebrity.

Not long after, she finished her undergraduate work and undertook a post-graduate study of ancient Egyptian theology. She learned that our nature is to strive to be more than what we are. We are driven by appetite, she learned, an appetite for the divine powered by faith. We desire to be as God! She felt called by Pharaoh. For Pharaoh as God, she would be a House of God.

And so it was ordained. With faith and concentration, her size increased. She grew larger than a house. Enconced inside of her holy, giant body, she felt born again of that body. She concentrated on Pharaoh. *I'll go to Egypt to be / a pyramid*, she vowed.

#

Pride in Detroit.

COMPLICATIONS FROM Covid-19 killed him in 2020. Now that he's passed, he can kiss an angel every morning if he wants. Truth be told, though, the corona virus disease was one of the least complicated things in his life.

Fans and peers lauded and laureled him: Grand Ole Opry member, country music hall of fame lifetime achievement, best country performance, best gospel performance, male vocalist of the year, entertainer of the year, favorite country artist, favorite country album, best, best, best, award, award award. Fifty-two top ten hits over 21 years; in the course of his career, over 30 reached number one. There was a little bit of Hank in him, Hank Williams that is, but you wouldn't know it to look at him.

Arlington, Texas: he sang the national anthem before the final game of baseball's 2010 World Series. Before the final game of the 1980 World Series, he sang it in the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia. He sang it in Houston, Texas before football's Super Bowl VII in 1974. He sang it at Texas Rangers games; he was one of the team's owners. The words to the anthem never changed; how much has, really? Has any song been more spangled with stars and pride? Has the nation ever fully lived up to it?

What a welcome Detroit gave him; his first big show! It was late summer, 1966 at "The Old Red Barn," Olympia Stadium, on Grand River Avenue. Detroit's country music scene had never seen anyone like him. Olympia Stadium was home ice for the Detroit Red Wings, and you'd expect to see him at a hockey game about as much as you would at a country-western concert - that is, you wouldn't expect to see him at all, at either one. But there he was.

Olympia held 10,000 fans of “America’s music,” whatever that was supposed to look like. They’d heard him on the radio, “Just Between You and Me.” The rich baritone twinging with a hint of twang. They were hyped to see him sing live! His name was announced; the fans applauded; he walked on stage - *and the applause stopped*. The audience sat stunned. ““Friends,” he said, “I realize it's a little unique, me coming out here.”

And here, our fixation with pigmentation results in negative images, results in contrasts between expectation and reality that hurt to understand:

Home folks think I'm big in DEE-troit city.

From the letters that I write they think I'm fine

If only they could read between the lines.

Early on, his recording company, RCA, didn’t let him record “Green, Green Grass of Home.” They were afraid of the audience reaction if he were to sing about love with a blonde-haired woman.

Why don’t you look like you’re supposed to? Why don’t you sound the way you’re supposed to sound?

He was called colored, Negro, black, African-American, Black, and nigger - the last being the most taboo word in America. His response? “What we call it, that’s about the only thing that’s changed.”

"Friends, I realize it's a little unique, me coming out here – with a permanent suntan – to sing country and western to you.”

BIG applause! For the white-washing joke.

“But that’s the way it is. I ain’t got time to talk about pigmentation all night.”

Some fans denied that the voice could be his. Fifty-four years later, people with their heads stuck in the same sand denied Covid-19, even after it killed Charley Pride.

#

Boner 2 - Cindereally.

Inspired by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, "Cinderella,"
and by Robert Graves, "Down, Wanton, Down."

IT WAS a hard truth. The prince of the kingdom, like most men and especially men of power, believed that others found him as interesting as he found himself. On this subject, himself, he became quite eloquent. His dotting royal parents erected an edifice around him, their only child. They proclaimed that three lavish festivals would be held so that the prince might select for himself a bride. All the girls of the land were compelled to attend the prince's wanton balls. It would be a bonanza for any girl the prince chose, or so they all thought. They pined for the prince, preening and pruning themselves for his balls.

All except one girl. She lived in the bonedocks of the kingdom with her step-mother and two step-sisters. She worked too hard to fall for any fairytale illusions, and her step-sisters mocked, taunted and tormented her. She ended every day bone-tired. Because she slept by the hearth and because her usual retort was "really?", her step-sisters called her Cindereally.

The time for the prince's first festival arrived. A trombone announced the his entry; he wore a herringbone suit. There was an ostentatious feast, the main course featuring T-bone steaks. After the feast, the prince, on the arm of his Queen mother, descended the grand stairway to the ballroom. He exuded bonhomie.

Cindereally's step-mother and step-sisters went to the festival, but they left Cindereally behind. Unbeknownst to them, Cindereally had saved money for a magnificent dress so that she could go, too. Her step-mother and step-sisters couldn't imagine her being there, much less in a magnificent dress, so they didn't recognize her.

Her late arrival drew the prince's attention; he immediately rose and took her by the hand. When anyone else asked her to dance, the prince said, "she is MY dance partner."

She got tired and wanted to go home, but the prince wouldn't let go of her hand. He tried to tickle her funny boner, but he couldn't find the spot. Finally, she pulled away from him. "Who do you belong to?" he asked. "Really?" she replied. "I belong to myself." She ran and he followed her, but she ran so quickly that he could not catch her. She hid in a pigeon coop and eluded him.

The time for the second festival arrived and the trombone again announced the entry of the prince, dressed most debonairly. The feast ended with a toast of stiff bourbone. The prince, next to his father, the King and awash in paternalism, descended the grand stairway to the ballroom.

Cindereally's step-mother and step-sisters again left Cindereally behind; again Cindereally put on her magnificent dress and arrived late; again she got an immediate rise out of the prince, and he took her by the hand to the dance floor. When anyone else asked her to dance, the prince again said, "she is MY dance partner."

She got tired and wanted to go home, but just as before the prince wouldn't let go of her. He tried to be witty and failed. "Love is blonde," he said. "I mean blind. Wrong word, sorry."

Cindereally had no desire to get a grip on his dic-tion. "Love may be blind," she replied, "but love knows the difference between man and beast. Love requires delicacy from her squires."

"From squirrels?" asked the prince. "Like nuts? Oh certainly, I can arrange for that," he said confidently confusing acorns with the royal nuts.

Finally, Cindereally pulled free. “Whose house do you live in?” asked the prince. “Really?” she asked. “I live in my house.” She ran, and he ran, but she was so quick that he could not catch her. She climbed into a pear tree and hid.

The time came for the third and final festival; the trombone announced the prince’s entry. After a feast of squirrel stew and a dessert of bonbones, he descended the grand stairway into the ballroom alone in a cloud of his own pheromones.

Cindereally’s step-mother and -sisters watched as Cindereally, unrecognized in her magnificent dress, arrived late again. “She’s doing that on purpose, the little trull,” huffed the step-mother. The prince was longing for Cindereally. He took her by the hand and when anyone else asked her to dance, he repeated, “she is MY dance partner.”

She wanted to go home, but just as before the prince wouldn’t let go of her. He had boned up on history and wanted to impress her in the worst way, and he did. Unable to tolerate silence in a conversation, he filled the air by talking about himself: “I am taller than Napoleon Bonaparte!” “Really,” said Cindereally, running away.

This time the prince did not chase her, for he had set a trap, covering the grand stairway with pitch. One of her slippers got stuck in the pitch, and she ran away without it. The prince proclaimed that no one would be his wife except she whose foot fit the slipper. And so he set off with the slipper, and all the girls in the realm tried it on, praying to St. Boniface that it would fit them. But it fit not one of them.

The prince eventually came to the home of Cindereally and her step-sisters. The step-mother had Cindereally stay inside by the hearth while her step-sisters tried on the slipper. The first step-sister’s foot was too big, so she cut off a toe and forced her foot in.

“Do you take me for a fool?!” cried the prince. “You have hair of ebony, and the girl whose foot fits this slipper has aubone hair. You cannot be she.”

The second step-sister’s foot was also too big, so she cut off a piece of her heel and forced her foot in. The prince cried, “do you take me for a fool?! You have hair of ebony, and the girl whose foot fits this slipper has aubone hair. You cannot be she.”

The step-mother watched the blood stain her daughters’ stockings red. “Why didn’t you tell us that sooner?” she asked the prince.

“Blame the knife for the cutting, blame the cutting for the blood,” shrugged the prince. “Be gone with you, I command, or I will have the three of you cut to pieces!” The stepmother and her daughters fled and, as they ran, a woodpecker flew down and peckered out their eyes, punishment for their wickedness and falsehood.

Cindereally had snuck to the doorway of the house and watched it all. The prince recognized her in an instant, swelled up, raised his head and staunchly exclaimed, “You are my true bride!”

“No, your highness,” said Cindereally, “marriage to you would be intolerable bonedage. My dream is to study at the Sorbonne. I’m sorry.”

The prince looked puzzled and hurt. Unable to fill the breach between his longing for Cindereally and her rejection of him, he hung his head and shrunk within himself, deflated. “I’m sorry,” he said limply. But his sorrow was for himself.

Because he had proclaimed in public that only Cindereally would be his wife, and he could not live up to that proclamation, the prince died a childless bachelor. With no other direct heirs to the throne, succession became a murderous free-for-all, pitching citizens into shocked disbelief when they discovered that their would-be rulers cared

more for themselves than for the people and the *summum bonum*. Chaos and violence perforated the thin veneer of civilization, disrupting commerce and agriculture, begetting poverty, plague, and famine, all because of one man's vane bonedoggle.

#

The power of one.

ON JUNE 23, 1943, Moses Kiska and Joseph De Horatius, two of Detroit's many ghosts, linked arms at Mack and Chene where Mr. Kiska was murdered. Kiska, waiting for a bus, had been shot to death. Dr. De Horatius, on a house call, had been beaten to death. They walked through and beyond the year 1951, together a silent testimony to Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem." What happens to a dream deferred? The answer is as spontaneous as it is predictable, given flammable material and a source of ignition - *it explodes.*

* * * * *

From 1943 to 1963, Mr. Kiska and Dr. De Horatius walked 20 years to the day, walked into downtown Detroit's Cobo Arena on June 23, 1963. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and some 125,000 of his friends took to their feet on Woodward Avenue in The Detroit Walk to Freedom, commemorating the riots of 1943 and pressing for civil rights. By 1963 the civil rights movement had already been mostly planned and directed; King and its other leaders were its deep-rooted oak trees. Inside Cobo, King, inspired and passionate, took the audience to church, honing his vision, his dream of freedom, faith and equality for all, truths self-evident but unrealized. Two months later, King took a bigger audience to church in Washington, D.C.

Mr. Kiska and Dr. De Horatius left 1963 and kept walking to the summer of 1964 at Motown Records on West Grand Boulevard. There, Martha and the Vandellas struck musical gold with "Dancing in the Street," a song co-written by Marvin Gaye. In 1965 and 1966, other groups recorded it - the Kinks, the Mamas and the Papas, the Grateful Dead. Out of fear, some people conflated the lyrics of "Dancing in the Street" with the

civil rights movement, claimed that the song was a call to riot. Street demonstrations were, so to speak, dancing to a certain music. The music of despair and outrage.

* * * * *

Mr. Kiska, Dr. De Horatius and many more who had joined them kept treading through the years. From Hitsville U.S.A. on West Grand, they marched into July of 1967 and the 12th Street riots. Detroit Tigers star outfielder Willie Horton, in uniform, appealed for peace, an appeal out of sync with the Tigers' owner, Walter Briggs, a flaming racist. For the ghosts of 1943, 1967 was *deja vu*: the riots escalated in a deadly dance of taunting, misinformation, hatred, violence, retaliation real and imagined, looting and destruction that overwhelmed Detroit police. On the third day, President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered 4,700 Army paratroopers and 8,000 National Guardsman into Detroit. The riots ended, their costs tallied in arrests, injuries, dollars, deaths and an exodus of people from Detroit that came to be known as the White Flight.

In that Detroit in that July of 1967, the self-named Dr. Blood was almost a teenager. He heard sirens shrieking through his neighborhood, not an unusual sound, as he made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. The sirens intensified. His mother not being home, he took his sandwich outside so he might see what was going down.

Outside was a chaos he never imagined, never could've imagined. Columns of smoke rose from buildings on fire, strangers ran in all directions, some smashing store windows and lugging televisions. Hypnotized, absently, he slowly eat his sandwich. He witnessed: turmoil meant destruction for some and opportunity for others, one neighborhood under God, totally divisible, with liberty and injustice for all.

It's easy, perhaps foolish, to stay calm when you're ignorant. Dr. Blood didn't flinch as airplane after airplane droned over and disgorged streams of tiny black figures under parachutes. He watched in wonder and awe. He had seen Chinese lanterns floating lazily, quietly up into the night, bright spots shrinking smaller and smaller as they drifted away. The paratroopers had that same noiseless dreamy feeling in reverse, like photographic negatives, dark spots silhouetted against the morning sky, drifting down to earth, larger and larger.

The dark figures under their parachutes fell closer and closer to Dr. Blood, still mesmerized. He could make out their helmets and guns. When one landed a couple of hundred feet from him, the speed and the rush and the clatter made him jump. A second one landed closer, faster and louder. The soldier's bulk and size dwarfed Dr. Blood. The soldier, disentangling from his parachute, looked without expression at Dr. Blood, who immediately ran for his life. When he got home, one of the columns of smoke was rising from his own house.

Two days after the military occupation of Detroit, the riot ended, but the contagions of unrest and violence spread to other cities. The spirits of a silenced army joined Dr. De Horatius and Mr. Kiska. Through the burgeoning desolation in Detroit, they kept walking, walking, walking to 1971.

* * * * *

In 1971, the year before Motown Records left Detroit, Marvin Gaye released "What's Going On," his musical plea for understanding, peace, cooperation, and employment. "What's the deal, what's happening, my man?" Gaye asked. The ghosts of Detroit had no answers.

In "Inner City Blues," Gaye lamented unfair distribution of wealth, inability to pay bills and taxes, inflation, young men dying in the Viet Nam war, bad breaks, setbacks, increasing crime and "trigger happy policing." *This ain't living*, he sang, *this ain't living*. Again the ghosts of Detroit had no answers, for it was no question. They passed through time to Detroit's Cass Corridor, 1980.

* * * * *

Thirteen years after the '67 riots, the Cass Corridor was home to as much despair as ever, but the music was quieter, the dancing in the streets had all but stopped, and the rage had flickered out. If you're down and out, afloat on a sea of futility, the only measure of victory is survival.

Victor the vagrant, Victor the bum, Victor the homeless, Victor and his three-legged dog Jesus, Victor clothed in the patina of poverty, Victor the hungry, Victor the friendless, Victor "a ragged coat upon a stick," Victor found or lost in a shroud of alcohol. Victor the victim. Victor dead and raptured. Victor free from time. Hail Victor!

* * * * *

On April Fool's Day 1984, the day before Marvin Gaye's birthday, his father, a retired minister, shot and killed him after an argument. Undeterred and resolute, he joined the spirits of Detroit trudging through the years. "Dancing in the Street" was resurrected, a hit by Van Halen in 1984 and by David Bowie and Mick Jagger in 1985. The music, sweet music, and the dance, swinging and swaying and more, carried forward through the decades to thousands and hundreds of thousands, filling cities, Chicago, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, PA, Baltimore and D.C., and can't

forget the Motor City, where it started, the music and the dance everywhere and in every time.

Moses Kiska and Joseph De Horatius and Martin Luther King, Jr. and all of the fallen, counted and uncounted, and Victor the vagrant and Marvin Gaye, all of them marched, simultaneously betrayed and inspired by the ideals of justice and equality. They marched those ideals clear into the twenty-first century to millions and hundreds of millions of people, dancing in the streets, yes, and more, demonstrating the power of faith and the power of one, the liberating power of one person to cast one vote.

What happens to a dream deferred, to millions of dreams deferred? They fill ballot boxes.

#

Epilogue. It's about time.

AND SO we reach a coda, the last dance, the tail. A coda is a singular thing, but there is a plural: "code," as in **Codell**, born at dawn after a long labor, my love song to Detroit.

To this I can attest: at five in the morning, in the silence, solitude and shadows, there is a mental fecundity in which words sprout before they take root. If not immediately tended to, they wither before anyone ever reads them.

Tending to them - by writing them down - gives birth to them, words born out of solitude into a cacophonous world. They bear life, not necessarily your life speaking through the words, but rather words speaking through you and apart from you. The words take on lives of their own, a particular type of exhilaration, the one requisite being imagination. They grow up to become characters in a world far different in place and time; in these fictions, the world is Detroit, 1980. Like the few people throughout life whom you love, the characters live within you and without you, more alive than the living, in an arrogance that only you share their lives. It doesn't matter if the characters are rank and ugly, for what parents don't love their misshapen children, and their children love them all the more in return? "The greatest thing you'll ever learn," sang Nat King Cole in "Nature Boy," "is to love and be loved in return."

Loved or unloved, Detroit's Cass Corridor, like all inner cities, was reputed to breed street crime, more visible but no more destructive than the hidden crime in rural communities and suburbs where crime is "out of sight, out of mind." In the city, the reverse is true; crime is in sight and therefore in mind. Thus rural folk and suburbanites denigrate cities as unsafe while the suburbs and beyond decay from within.

Codell, along with Victor, Michael Blumenthal, and other characters in these fictions lived in that place and time, Detroit 1980, and now romanticized in retrospection. Bohemia? Ethereal realms of personal fulfillment? Tee-shirts emblazoned with "Cass Corridor"? Please, no! Rather, they were born into challenging circumstances. Challenged, they exude audacity like steam, a vigor of possibility. The greater the challenge, the greater the audacity, even in the face of the impossible. If there were an underscore to these characters, one as good as any is dynamic uncertainty. If there were a theme to these fictions, one as good as any is a chimera: something hoped for but illusory. Hope is as necessary for life as imagination is for creativity.

An ending to these fictions, however, is not requisite. True to life, some of these fictions drop off precipitously or lead to an unknown future. Readers, like the characters, don't know what happens next. But if the fiction works, readers keep thinking and feeling after closing time. T. H. White, an idiosyncratic novelist described as a mash-up of "Evelyn Waugh, Laurel and Hardy, John Erskine and the Marquis de Sade," ended his 677 page tetralogy *The Once and Future King* with this sentence: "the cannons of [King

Arthur's] adversary were thundering in the tattered morning when the Majesty of England drew himself up to meet the future with a peaceful heart." White gives us not even a summary of what becomes of Queen Guenever, Lancelot, Mordred and other characters, an ending to be continued, disappointing as that may be to a reader who expects a *denouement*.

Like endings, neither is making a point or having a moral necessary for these fictions. If a reader does discern a point, a different reader may discern a different point or a different moral, two-faced ends of the same idea, both true and both false. Dr. Montarco in Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo's story "The Madness of Dr. Montarco" lamented that:

five people have already approached me to ask what I meant by writing the piece of fiction I just published, what I intended to say, and what bearing did it have. Idiots, idiots, and thrice idiots! They're worse than children who break dolls to find out what's inside. . . . They believe no one could write except to prove something, or defend or attack some proposition, or from an ulterior motive. One of these blockheads asked me the meaning of my story and by way of reply I asked *him*: 'Did it amuse you?'

Along with amusing myself while I write them, my intent in these fictions has been to entertain you, dear reader. Like Nikolai Gogol, I've tried to "present the face of life and not discuss life." If these tales come across as anything beyond piquancy, as nostalgic lamentation, celebration, castigation, that is secondary to provoking a smile or a question. Failing that, it suffices if these fictions serve as unblinking accounts - or perhaps blinking once or twice. On the surface, they account for the characters in Detroit, circa 1980. But perhaps they make you think of someone else, some other place, some other time. There are ambiguities. For example, *Codell loved women, more than they knew*. What do we make of the word "more"? Do we account for "more" quantitatively or qualitatively? More love, more women, or both?

Yet in a broad sense, ambiguity aside, fiction accounts for events past, present and future. "Man moves onward as a whole," Michel de Montaigne wrote, "towards his growth and towards his decay." Inevitably all cultures decay, annihilated or assimilated or absorbed or evolved or metamorphosed. The decay may be fast or slow, from within or from without, from other cultures or from climate. The globe heats up and cools down; droughts and ice come and go, taking civilizations with them. Intolerant cultures live until some other intolerant culture negates them as they negated earlier cultures. The weak and the bright burn first and fast, quickly relegated to the past. The past can devour us with bitterness or saccharine deception. Stained by imperfect memory or intentionally rewritten, the past becomes false. Ultimately, the past fades, erased by time, a book of blank pages and then no book at all.

We might mourn or exalt when a past decays, dried up and rubbed away like the skin of a molting snake. But what if the past won't die? What if "the past never passes / it simply amasses"? We tend the graves. It can be a paralysis for better or worse, a life that keeps on living after death or a life that keeps on dying.

When decay is violent, of, by and against the people, the results are the same no matter what you call it - riot, protest, looting, mob, rebellion, uprising, insurrection, war. If you crash and smash, if you grab, damage and destroy, if you tar and feather, everyone is diminished. Instead of productive people and safe places, we have reductive people and dangerous, desolate places.

As mutable as the past is through decay, the future, through wishful thinking, action and willful inaction, can be doomed by self-fulfilling prophecy that wrecks the present as well. Or instead, perhaps the prophecy saves the future? Either way, what choice have we but to foresee the future as best we can, conscious of our limited vision, and push passionately towards a thing desired?

In pushing forward, we defer to and take refuge in the present. We may mourn decay, but it's incumbent on us to accept decay as necessary for regrowth. To accept decay is a condition for cultivation, for any regrowth imaginable.

As Codell grows from inaction to action, so has and will Detroit, starting from ground levels, resettlement of neighborhoods that brings consternation for the losses of yesteryear and hope for the future years. Perhaps the combustion engine combusts. Perhaps land returns to agrarian uses. Detroit will regrow as it has always regrown: with pride, grit, and perseverance in the face of adversity. Detroit is not Detroit Doomed; it is Detroit Hopeful.

Detroit's hope is a hope I share. I hope that, in the fraction of time that has been my life, at least some of my ignorance and stupidity has been supplanted with wisdom. It's a slow lesson that we may call "life experience" and by which we cope with the senseless and illogical. We somehow carry on in a world of eternal evils and loss: murder, accidents, war, illness, infidelity, hypocrisy, cruelty, rape, inequity, poverty, slavery, malevolence, hunger, violence, barbarism, financial collapse, leaders turned despotic - the list is endless. Truth can be irrelevant. We learn to muddle through and balance, uncomfortably. We learn that anything more is short-lived and vanity. With each humbling lesson in life, it's well to restart not by living the past and the future at the same time as the present, but by forgetting the fears of the future, and the failures of the past, that have become lesions instead of lessons. I confess that I often failed.

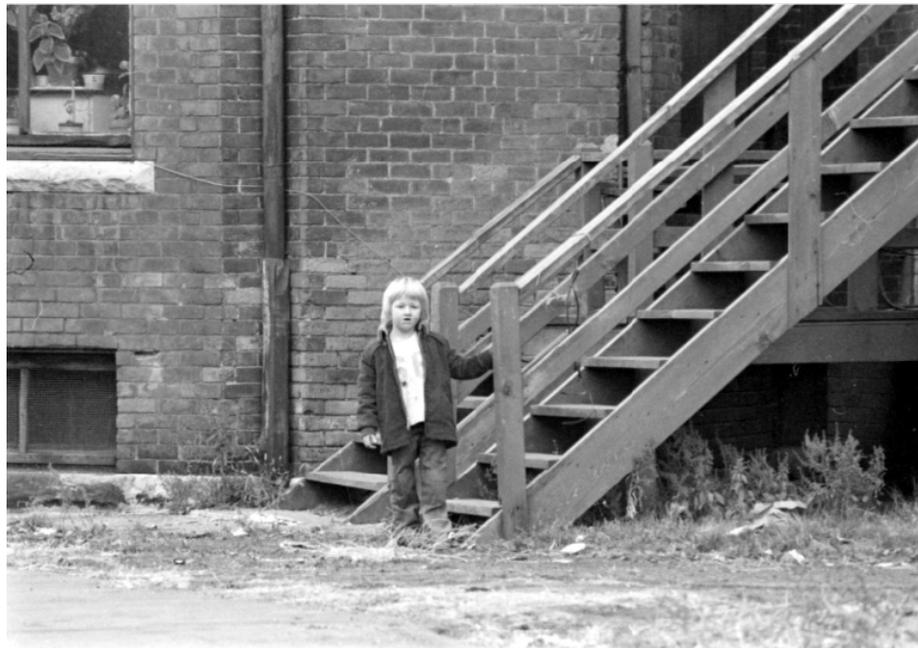
Eventually, if we reach old age, we become so good at forgetting that we forget there was ever a time when we did not forget. We take root in our private decay, deaf to the thunder of youth, cold to the heat of passion, clinging to our slipping memories and our failing intellect, balancing on our walkers, tottering and shrinking. My own decay, being thus far timely and not debilitating, has let me remember fondly such happiness and love in this blessed, lucky moment that has been my life. We are no more than specks in our own moments, together sparkling in a vibrant, pointillistic universe - but oh, what brilliant specks!

Codell Detroit Fiction

About the author.

K.G. Jones is a pseudonym. The progenitor essayist Michel de Montaigne asked in the year 1588, “is it reasonable that, being so private in my way of life, I should set out to make myself known to the public?” This author replies, no. Suffice it to say that the author lived in and near Detroit’s Cass Corridor from 1979 through 1981. Because these fictions are not only about Detroit, but the author’s experiences in Detroit, the author adapts these additional words of Montaigne: “no man ever came to a project [that is, his own experiences] with better knowledge than I have of this matter [his own

experiences], in regard to which I am the most learned man alive” (from Montaigne’s *Essays*, Book 3, Chapter 2 “On Repentance,” paragraph 6). It’s a statement of fact, not vanity. Like Montaigne, “I present a humble life, without distinction, but that is no matter.”



Cass Avenue, 1976. **This is not the author.**
Photograph courtesy of the Walter P. Reuther Library,
Wayne State University.

With few exceptions, I wrote the stories in 2001 during the lull of the Covid-19 pandemic and revised them in early 2026.

KGJ

