

## Nora

I rested my head against the kitchen island, the tile floor wasn't as cold as I'd expected. Our cat scurried around the corner and past my sock covered feet, followed soon after by the misses of the house.

She saw me and started laughing. She leaned down to me. Her brown hair had largely escaped her ponytail, and spilled over her face, obscuring her beautiful eyes leaving only her perfect smile, which bore teeth as laughs escaped her slightly opened mouth.

My eyes did for a moment stray to the tops of her breasts, and like a schoolboy I looked down her slightly buttoned blouse.

My view was obscured as her face grew near. Her laughing lips met mine. I gently took them between my own, repeatedly. My hand reached out for her cheek, ear, neck, hair or anything of hers that it could. Many of the kisses were so potent that my eyes squeezed shut, but I struggled to keep them open as much as I could. She was about to leave for work and would be sorely missed for those hours. I tried to get as much of her as I could in the remaining minutes. She was kind enough to oblige.

When there was truly no more time to spare Nora managed to pull away from me, from the far too great distance of two inches she announced that she really must go. I nodded. She kissed my forehead and stood upright. As she buttoned her blouse the rest of the way I stood. My lips headed for her neck, where she delicately grazed before pecking twice and moving to her lips for the goodbye kiss. They weren't denied.

Again we retreated to the safe distance of two inches from each other.

“Have a good day at work, Nora.”

“I will. I love you, Peter.”

“I love you.”

I kissed her forehead and followed her to the doorway and watched her until the car had been piloted out of sight.

The front door latched shut and a sonic wave rippled through the house, knocking me on my ass. I returned to my feet and ran on them to the bedroom. I retrieved a pair of jeans and my father's pocket watch. After getting one leg into the jeans I could hear the whoosh of another sonic wave. I

pressed the watch between my palms, allowing my jeans to fall around my ankle. The wave rippled through my cheeks, tussled my hair and whooshed as it went by, but the watch shielded me. I hurried and slid those pants on.

The walls creaked and strained as the floor began to pull the ceiling closer to itself. I jumped to the closet and grabbed the belt Nora gave me for my most recent birthday and a pair of washable markers. I clinched the pocket watch and braced against the third wave. I uncapped the red marker and put a dot on each of the four walls, as high as I could reach.

After the fourth mark, I ducked. Red vines lashed out forming a tilted red diamond with a plus sign in it. This room's ceiling couldn't descend below that point. I repeated the process in each room and hallway. I was washed over by four more waves before the job was done. I nodded and spoke to no one.

“Nora does much for me, she makes me stronger, well fed and bold. So the least I could do is go down and close this rift before she gets home.”

I threw on a shirt and headed downstairs. After a few minutes the staircase began to spiral. The steps grew steeper. Then angled. Then I couldn't find my footing as the stairs had become a slide. At a high rate of speed I plummeted through clouds and a blue sky. I was deposited on a beach. A clean breeze tumbled over the nearby body of water and caused the leaves of the nearby trees to clack against one another. The clacking drew my attention.

My confused eyes strained to interpret those trees. They looked like dark gray clouds clinging to tree trunks. Closer inspection did little good. I extended my right hand and jabbed at the palm three times until the flesh there reddened. My eyes closed, then opened. I was standing on the red spot in my palm. I marveled at the towering fingers around me, each twice to three times my height. I curled up into a ball and was flung.

I landed on a hard surface, but there was give. I rolled to a stop and unfolded. My hands quickly answered questions. The leaf was sculpted concrete. The veins and the edges all had exquisite detail. I crawled to the back edge to see the stem connecting the leaf to the branch. The branch looked pretty normal, save for the rebar jutting out between the gray leaves and the more proper branches. Having had my fill of the tree I dashed to the furthest point on the leaf.

I looked to the full-sized me and I put my hands up in the air. A brief disorienting moment and I found myself looking at a small brown tuft of smoke wafting away from the tip of the concrete leaf where I'd been a moment prior. I started taking large, lumbering, normal sized person steps down the

path leading me into the forest.

No underbrush, but leaves jutted jaggedly, dangerously from the ground. I had no intent to stray. Snails with long tails trailing their considerable feet moved as more typical snails do. A rustling din came from my right. I watched as those snail tails wound tight and sprung the snails. A half dozen of them bounded across the trail. A flying 'v' of bats with the heads of howler monkeys pulled maneuvers between trees, fleeing the source of the sound. I pulled out the blue marker and uncapped it.

My eyes swept back and forth, looking for the beast. I slowly continued down the path, brandishing the marker. Ready to strike. The need didn't arise. After half an hour the sounds were gone, anxiety passed, the marker was capped and tucked away.

The path wound through the concrete topped woods. Over the two hour trek many specimens of some variety of bird, I assumed they were birds, sang. It was quite beautiful as it mixed with the clatter of leaves. Sometimes a strong gust would resonate the rebar and the forests tune would swell, giving me pause. I wished Nora could hear it. Her ear was more sophisticated than mine. She'd be able to describe it in a way that I'd be able to hear it, to see it.

With her communicative shortcomings Nora's wandering head latched tightly onto music. She always had a melodic mind. When she was 13 she'd gotten to see the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra perform during a band field trip that summer. Through cadence and the finest onomatopoeia known to man, Nora has sat me beside her. I've attended that performance over a dozen times. It was there at the Pick-Staiger Concert Hall that I was introduced to so many beautiful songs. The first time I heard those songs outside of her story I immediately recognized them.

As I neared the forest's edge I wondered if I'd be able to bring Nora here with my less crafty mind. This place was far more vivid than I could paint in my own mind. My thoughts of Nora were pushed back as I cleared the forest. There were still trees, but they were scattered across the grass and brush laden foothills.

A clutch of brush surrounded the bases of three large cables tethering the globe to the sky. The blades of grass, I learned, were green on the side facing the forest and blue facing the mountains beyond the hills. Even from this distance I could see the cobalt veins of one peak and oxidized iron arteries of the other. The reds and blues sharply contrasted the light gray of the rest of the mountains.

Nestled between me and the mountains amidst the cherubic foothills resided a town built in the mountain's blood. I continued on my path. To my right I could see Nora sitting at her desk in her

small office. She was reading some book which had the village I was heading to on its cover. I would have strolled over and asked her what she knew of where I was going, but I try not to bother her at work. I watched her read for as long as I could see her.

As her office became small behind me I started looking around. The animals were too small or too far to be discerned, save for one. A springbok sprang along toward the hills. My eyes tried to chase the lively creature but my eye's weren't nearly as agile and they tripped over and skinned their knees on a lever by the side of the path. They took a moment to get up and clean themselves off. The springbok had given them the slip. Then my evaded eyes led me to that switch.

During that walk, which would've been brief, I was halted. A yellow, thread thin beam cut diagonally through the air before me. I followed it to its nearest end, the one not in the sky but instead near my feet. There I found a smooshed Jupiter, a palm sized rock with a beaming eye. I couldn't tell if it had moons, but I figured not. I plucked a green blue grass blade from the nearby turf. It felt rather waxy. I cautiously cut the thread of light with my blade. The thread was broken, no longer connected to the sky above. The grass responded to the beam with antipathy and cynicism, opposed to the expected reaction of disintegration.

I placed the grass back where I found it. It re-rooted with a shrug. I pulled my father's watch from my pocket. The beam appeared to be celebrating its renewed length. The celebration was short lived as my father's timepiece was shoved into it. Tiny yellow polygons silently tinked off of the watch and scattered. Most fragments fell to my feet and there accumulated like fresh snow. Apparently it was just cold enough, as these flakes of light weren't melting. A pair of flakes landed on my scalp. My scalp was warm enough to melt them.

For a moment I was a pioneer trying to aim a good flintlock at the head of a buffalo, but before I pulled the trigger, the experience receded.

For a moment I was watching a mosquito land on the dark skin of a guide in the southern Serengeti. The guide found himself frustrated by the expansive knowledge of African languages possessed by the frail northern European professor he was charged with leading. She was insipid in each of those languages and it was abundantly clear he couldn't bitch about her in her presence as he'd grown accustomed to with the rich tourists. He sighed as the experience fled.

For a moment I was just me. That moment lingered. I withdrew the watch from the beam and replaced it with my head.

For a long moment I was elsewhere. It looked like Chicago. I was six footfalls behind a pair of sharply dressed men. I was following them, matching their pace. The two men were chatting. I wasn't getting any of the words they were sharing. Their tone was calm and familiar. They neared an intersection. A fountain became visible, obscured previously by a metal and glass tower.

One of the men's attention was captured by something at the fountain's edge. Rather than trying to pry free his own attention he instead led the other man's attention to similar ensnarement. A nudge and a point was all it took.

The two were drawn to a presumably Hindu man by the fountain who noticed their approach shortly before their arrival. Following briskly behind notice was friendly, happy recognition. The men assumed the form of an equilateral triangle. Equal spacing, each of their shoulders pointed to the midpoint between the other two.

The one to my left was my father, to my right was my uncle. When I attempted to get my father's attention I discovered I had no voice, then no hand, then no form at all. As Plato had once posited without the restrictions of a mortal coil my senses were not bound to the five. I had all of them each limited by whim instead of rods, cones, optic nerves or brain.

I momentarily flexed my new senses. I examined a hair on my father's head. I observed cracks, texture and color. I swooped down the follicle, then back out to a more familiar level of zoom. For a moment I expanded my peripheral vision until it engulfed the world. I wasn't ready to see it all, so again I retreated to the cozier zoom.

During my extrasensory exploration the three men had each taken two steps back, enlarging the triangle. My father spoke.

“Four.”

Each of their smiles widened. Hands were open and dangling next to hips. The three then spoke in concert.

“Three.”

“Two.”

“One.”

My father and the man I didn't know brought their left feet to their right knees. My uncle did the same but with lefts and rights reversed. Their hands went to the highly raised shoes. One palm on the heel the other near the toe. They all pulled. My father removed his shoe first and held it high. Then the unknown. Then my uncle.

The stranger chuckled and put his shoe back on. He looked to my dad, “Well, Remora, I see you're still wearing shoes a half size too big so you can dominate at this.”

I eyeballed, sans eyes, the stranger. He looked a year younger than my uncle. Two years younger than my father. His jacket and pants were clearly far more valuable than those of my dad and his brother. His dress shirt was cheap. His tie, belt and shoes all looked very old. All three men wore matching cufflinks. In my hyper aware, formless state I found I could see this man's driver's license in his wallet in his back pocket.

The name was Jean Marco Rorsche. Height 5'9”, weight listed at 330 lbs. He didn't look obese in the picture. He didn't look obese standing before me. When my attention returned to them I realized they'd started walking off together. They'd moved beyond pleasantries and small talk to purposeful silence. They entered a building, were waived through security, climbed three floors of stairs and entered a room.

My father pulled out his wallet, unfolded it and declared, “I'm a government agent and we need the room.”

With little pause the room cleared. My uncle shut and locked the door to the bland city government zoning maps office which the trio had commandeered. Blinds were closed. The room was examined in detail. When they felt certain that the room was theirs my uncle pulled out some kind of gadget. He put it down on the nearest desk and clicked the device's only button. A red light turned on, after a pair of seconds came and went the light turned white. My uncle spoke.

“Alright, Mako, stand steady.”

Jean did so.

Uncle Kurt then placed his hands on the middle of Jean's chest. Kurt then leaned, assuming what nearly appeared to be a 45-45-90 triangle. If Jean was having to lean to accommodate the angular weight of my uncle it was imperceptible. My father joined in leaning heavily against Jean's chest. Finally all present could detect Jean's slight lean forward to counter the weight against his chest.

“Two degrees from you versus forty degrees from both of us. So you weigh about 800 pounds now?” My father queried.

“I had our friend at the zoo weigh me last week. Seven hundred and eighty eight pounds.”

“Wow,” responded my father, “would you take off your shirts?”

Jean did so. Kurt had located a sturdy wooden chair during the brief exchange and looked prepared to swing. Jean's upper body was exposed, revealing a very typical looking male twenty

something torso. It was certainly not the gelatinous, nebulous, expansive torso you'd expect to see on a man weighing nearly 800 lbs. Jean looked to Kurt and nodded.

With a grunt and no flinch the chair collided with Jean's chest. Some cracks formed in the chair. Kurt grimaced a little. He examined his hands and the chair. Kurt nodded to Jean who stretched his arm out before him. Kurt pulled the chair back and with a huge overhand swing he brought the chair down on the arm.

The chair fractured into a few parts in a decidedly unspectacular fashion. Three substantial planks, formerly legs, donked against the tile floor. I again regretted my onomatopoeic shortcomings as compared with my Nora.

My father had sat another wooden chair nearby and with a sweeping motion gestured toward it. Jean kicked off his shoe, unrolled his sock. He rested that bare foot on the chair, shifted his significant weight onto that foot, which plummeted through the middle of the chair and destroyed one of its legs. Sawdust and splinters shot out in a momentary 'poof.'

My father drew a hypodermic needle from an inner jacket pocket. He examined Jean's chest, which wasn't at all red, nor any indication that a wooden chair had hit him. He gripped Jean's elbow and pushed the needle into his arm. There was much resistance but the tip got to where it was going. The plunger pulled back, blood filled the plastic chamber and the needle retreated.

"Alright, Mako, feel free to get dressed. It really is honorable what you're doing." My father took out a fat, beige envelope and handed it to the man he called Mako as soon as Mako returned his clothes to their prior positions.

"You know I would do this for principal alone."

"Well, you get money on top of that."

The men filed out and the experience retreated.

My head was no longer in the yellow beam. Reunited with my physical form I found myself no longer able to push my peripheral vision, nor zoom. I squatted and contemplated the Jupiter rock. I pondered its origin and why a yellow beam poured from the red eye. I shrugged and pocketed the stone in the watchless pocket. I scooped up the yellow polygons and transported them to the nook where the watch did reside.

I remembered the quest at hand and reached the lever after the expiration of a quartet of minutes. With little thought or hesitation I gripped and pulled what seemed like an out of place

railroad switch. Ripples began to cascade along the path toward the city of vibrant mountain blood. I stepped forward and the ripples embraced my feet and carried me fleetly to the city's edge. What would have taken likely eight hours to walk took only twenty minutes aboard the ripple.

The speed would've been a fearful one had it not been such a pleasant rush. The two men waiting for me at the city's edge would have likewise induced a fearful state had there been another expression on their faces other than boredom.

In addition to bored expressions both men were adorned in platemail and what appeared to be Under Armor sweat wicking athletic shirts, appropriately being worn beneath armor. Both looked to be wearing blue jeans under their metallic leggings, but few clues supporting that theory peaked through from where I could see. They were wearing matching silver knock-offs of Nike Shox tucked under three cascading steel sea shells contoured to each of their feet.

The nearest man sported a stately mustache and fair skin, save for the sunburned nose, forehead and eartops. He leaned on a tall spear with hand grips protruding as though it were a sickle. On one of those handles the spear bore his moderate weight like a restaurant hand rail supports an unctuous, hungry youth avoiding any floor more than a foot from the wall as he suspects, perhaps rightly so, that the floor at any moment may give way to the dark depth's of eternity. The cruelty of such a child can be seen in their lack of concern for their family who stand more than a bound away from the safety of that handrail.

Cruelty and childhood are both seen in this spear-supported man's bowl hair cut. Little was seen in his tired eyes.

The next man was seated on a Barcalounger withered by several years exposure to the area's mild elements. It was lodged in recline mode, not by elements but by use. This man's thinness was obscured by armor, but visible in his face and fingers. He appeared to be a Native American. His hair differed greatly from the other man, evoking not childhood but instead the slightly spiked, frosted tips of so many of those men whose dating habits are chronicled by People magazine. His eyes mirrored his hair; sharp. They pierced me, likely seeing my bed-wetting problems and fondness for my mother's modified servings of Hamburger Helper meals.

My eyes darted down before he could see much more. In his lap, resided a pair of criss-crossing katanas. They appeared to be every bit as sharp as the man's gaze, but less daunting or interesting to me. My eyes decided it was time to head into town. Only after my eyes' minds were made up was I spoken to, it was the bowl haired fellow..

“Speak.”

I tripped over the word and looked to the other guy, who looked confused as he stared at the bowl cut fella.

“Alright,” I uttered, then waited to see the result.

Bowl cut looked pleased, frost spike then chimed in and directed his question to bowl cut, “What was that to prove?”

Bowl cut responded, “Were he a beast that could assume the form of man, he wouldn't speak its tongue. Why master the tongue of your food?”

“Do you not moo to the cows you eat?”

“I suppose I do, but I scarcely imagine that they comprehend my moo nor that I've mastered their tongue.”

“Fair enough, but do you feel confident that this test is sufficiently capable of weeding out the metamorphosing man-eating menace?”

“Were it a grave threat, no, but I've never heard of such a thing happening.”

Frost spike seemed satisfied by bowl cuts rationale, and for the first time he addressed me, “What's your business here?”

“This realm clawed its way into my home and it's raising a bit of a ruckus. I'm trying to fix that before my wife gets home from work.”

Neither man looked unsympathetic. They nodded, emoting that they, too, have been through such. With that I was granted entry into their berg. Before moving along I queried, “Where are you two from?”

To which frost spike replied, “He was born here. I was born in Detroit.” I nodded and pushed forward.

Beyond the modest wooden shack of the watchmen was a gate. The gate was nearly thirty feet tall, and resembled the entrance of an Asian shrine. Right angles and ornamentation. Intricate patterns were carved into the entire surface of the wood, various molten metals had been poured into the grooves of those patterns and allowed to there cool and harden. On that surface dragons, knights and fire trucks were engaged in perpetual combat. I also recognized the slight contrast between two colors on the wood's surface. There were a few red ink dots matching those produced by my own marker.

After passing through the gate I climbed a half dozen nearly imperceptible steps carved into the

slight incline. Other than the shack of the watchmen all of the town's buildings were made of shiny red and blue blocks. There were just over 80 buildings in the town, which was called Springdale. Its name wasn't nearly interesting enough of a name for the place. Seventy families populated Springdale. One to two adults per household. Zero to five children. One to nineteen pets in each house. I didn't meet all the adults, children, pets or household interiors, but I did meet a a good many.

The adults I did meet shared a wry, cynical sense of humor, which tended to overshadow their other traits. Their ethnicities seemed more diverse than back home. In addition to the four races originally 'discovered' by François Bernier; the mongoloid, the negroid, the caucasoid and the australoid. Above and beyond Bernier's, and those later discovered, as I don't believe the Hispanics are properly swept into any of those categories and I wasn't certain what group Middle Eastern folk would belong to, or Mediterraneans in general. Regardless, beyond those that I could think of from back home, here there were two more represented. The easiest way to explain it would likely offend some. Much in the way that Asians are sometimes referred to as yellow people, and Native Americans have been called red men, these two novel groups could be called green people for one and the really yellow people for the other.

Though I felt awkward broaching the subject, I discovered that most folk in Springdale were perfectly cozy talking about race. Apparently race was a non-subject among the locals. Those that immigrated hadn't thought about it in a long time. Instead of stereotypes the people discussed aesthetics and textures.

Of and by the green people:

“Some of them have just gorgeous, electric green eyes.”

“Mandy has a terrific yellow fringe on the edge of her blue eyes.”

“I wish my hair could be all one color, like yours.”

“This brown streak came in when I hit my second growth spurt,” said the man pointing to a thumb width tuft of brown hair that contrasted sharply with his pale blond hair and his peppering of red.

“His hair has a great bounce to it.”

I made note that green folks often had more pets and those pets were typically smaller. The green women were about the same height as the green men. They typically had very sharp faces, even when fairly overweight. If I was to concoct a stereotype to foist upon the greens it would be a shared

affection for mechanical pencils.

Of and by the yellow people:

“Their hair only gets lighter as they age.”

“My hair is very thin.”

“Oh, yes, these curls are natural.”

“I love watching the breeze ripple through her hair, reminds me of a storm from when I was a kid. There were rolling hills for grazing. The green grass had yellowed. The sheep weren't eating well enough and were growing ill. My parents were fretting. I was sitting with the sheep late one afternoon. The worry of the sheep was far less taxing than that of my family. While I sat there, eight years old, a strong wind hit. It brushed the hair away from my face. It caressed my cheeks. It petted the sheep. It enlivened the whole world. Everything moved. Trees swayed and leaned. The weathervane craned its neck. But the yellow grass covered hills blazed, bristled and breathed. That wind animated the static world and carried a wealthy, lordly and giving rain cloud. I remember that wind as the beginning of my family's happily ever after. When I see the wind ripple through Rachel's hair it reminds me that our happily ever after is still going strong.” Clearly Rachel was slightly embarrassed but she still tugged her Iowan bear tightly.

He later told me that when the next rain storm comes he was to propose to her. I told him that I hope the rain comes soon.

“They all have blue eyes, but not the same blue.”

“We seem blessedly resistant to wrinkles. I'm 78.” Upon closer inspection, I found she had no more than three discernible wrinkles.

My general impression was the yellow-yellows tended to be tall and slight. From the conversations I had, it seemed they married a bit older. Their faces were a bit round. Lips fairly thin. Were I to be forced to bind their kind to a generalization, I'd comment on their tendency to have one meal entirely comprised of cotton. I'd be lying, but if forced that would be the best I could come up with.

Race wasn't the only topic I covered religion, politics and geography with equal aplomb. It did finally occur to me that my conversational exploration wasn't clearly propelling me to my goal. I could imagine Nora's frustration with the rippling booms knocking pictures off of walls, her distress at seeing

leaping snails that'd crossed over, or worse: the beasts from the forest trail could maul her. With such thoughts crowding my head, curiosity graciously gave them the floor, returning to its seat, asking if there was anything it could do to help.

“Your father called me that.”

I was sitting at a long table with a festive centerpiece. Art adorned the walls, most seemed anatomical and fairly surreal. Were there medical textbooks featuring the more realistic cartoon characters, and had their creator been bored and possessed of too great skill and artistry to be confined to making renders, the result would likely resemble these works. The unique works told me I was in the largest shiny red, blue building in town. The mayor's house.

“Herring,” he had said before I was paying attention. I don't really remember going to his house. It made sense though.

Herring again spoke, “The salad has arrived.”

Two white men came out carrying long white platters. I was more than a little confused after it was placed before me, then I was impressed. A ridge ran down the middle of my plate with divots reminiscent of ash trays. In each cigarette notch rested a fork. Each fork came preloaded. The tines skewered three diced pieces of lettuce, folded every inch and a half. Salad dressing was drizzled over each forkload evenly in a zigzag swath running the length of the platter. That dressing served as a familial bond, allowing shreds of carrot, bean-sprouts and some third thing to cling dearly to their lettuce parents for these final moments of festively prepared vegetable life. Just south of the vegetable families on every other fork resided a mean, old crusty crouton.

The croutons, despite their dire situation, distanced themselves from their crisper more moist neighbors. The croutons had a harder lot in life, a far longer procession leading to the same end as the lettuce families. When they were grains of wheat, so long ago, they were about the same age as the carrot children are now. In all actuality the carrot children were older than the lettuce parents, it truly was a strange, fresh family. Regardless, when the wheat grains were carrot age they were cut down, bundled, torn apart, ground up mixed with water, yeast and who knows what else. It was then they were placed in a hot chamber and baked, seasoned by their agony. It wasn't the fluffy, short carefree life of bread awaiting them, no. While bread they were chopped up, separated and toasted. From there they were deposited in an airtight jar and locked in a cupboard.

When the croutons were begrudgingly united with the vegetable families they couldn't help but be jealous. The jealousy, though not constructive, was well placed. Each of those vegetables was to

have a shorter life, but they lived to the hilt. They lived free until the day they died. All of the croutons overcame their jealousy and bile and slid to the cowering families as I elevated each fork in turn to my mouth. Their last moments were not alone. Save for one lone crouton.

I don't know if it was my unsteady hand or a particularly indignant spirit, but one crouton made a break for it. It leapt from the side of the fork plummeted to the ridge in the middle of the plate, deflected off that ridge, bounded across the surface and ramped up the lip of the plate and toward my lap. I couldn't find it. As I began my search I was cut off as Herring spoke again.

“I need Mako's blood. You know of whom I speak.”

I did. I didn't know how Herring could know, nor where I could find Mako. Herring finally had enough of my attention to be scanned as vigorously as I'd scanned the salad. He was wearing a sharp suit that appeared to be made of a fabric closely akin to silk. It was free of stains despite the blue under his fingernails and woven into his fingerprints. His face was free of any hyper-cutaneous hair save for those expelled from the top of his head in healthy light brown stocks and inch long sideburns protruding right prior to his ears. Those sideburns were precisely symmetrical. As were his eyes, eyebrows, mouth, nose, ears and chin. The perfection was ruined by a shallow ridge running across his forehead as it ran from his left to his right.

Herring's forever smile opened subtly, exposing a narrow strip where his top teeth protruded from his gums. Herring's eyes were more skillfully scanning me than mine were he. His irises were rimmed with pale yellow halos. As his irises approached his pupils, the yellow gave way to hazel, giving way to brown, giving way to black holes. Herring apparently finished his scanning before I did; he accosted me with words.

“I can get you to Mako, or close any ways. I would do it myself but I have pressing matters to tend to here.”

His grab bag of politician hand movements distracted my eyes, supplementing his punctuation marks. With my eyes occupied my ears feasted. Herring spoke with a Minnesotan accent as he rambled about his duties, artwork, the coming main course, the indie music scene, and the latest adoptee of Angelina Jolie.

The main course arrived.

It was indescribable.

“Well, I'll send you off as soon as you're ready. Then I'll close up that basement portal. I know it reads like extortion but it needed to be done. It should be fairly easy. Mako is fond of your father.

Make sure you tell him you're Remora's son, that will be the name he remembers.”

He stood and gestured for me to follow. I did. As he lead me deeper into his home, the food bearers pushed in our chairs and began wiping off the table, my side more thoroughly. The other rooms we walked through were bounded by deep, rich mahogany or cherry walls illuminated by dark orange flames slumped drunkenly atop alcohol soaked rags in small, open top glass cages scattered through the rooms. In two such cages the occupants had expired from sobriety. These dark glass tombs sat atop a common shelf with a variety of ambiguous, unilluminated objects. Even in the rooms with lively, fiery drunkards, despite a great many glimpses seen by flickering light, little was truly identified. My eyes took in, but there wasn't enough for me to notice anything after my brain tried to ingest the information. I was hustled along into the basement. The path to down below was revealed by runner lights of the variety found in dark airplanes or nicer movie theaters. Once we arrived at the bottom of the stairs there was a large barren room with three doors and a medium sized safe in the middle. It was open. Herring gestured with a sweeping arm and an open hand which read 'climb into the safe!'

I scrunched my face and did as the limb suggested. I contorted and managed to fit, not entirely uncomfortably, into that small metal chamber. Herring carefully shut the door and latched it shut. The small room was very neutral. Not warm nor cool. Perfect dark. Quiet. I could hear my breathing. After some time I grew concerned as I could see static in my vision. The air had grown both humid and thin. My lungs began to grow frustrated. I heard a wheeze from them and I knocked on the door. No response. My anxiety grew. My breathing hastened even though my head knew that such breathing could exacerbate the situation.

A line formed, light and air poured in. Eight fingers entered that line, four pulled one way, the others pulled the other. As light flooded my chamber I could see I was in a cardboard box. What had been forward was now up. A distressed old black man stared down at me. He offered me his hand and a question.

“How long you been in there?”

I took the extended hand and was pulled with ease to my feet, “Probably not long.”

I stood straight and looked around. There were modest sized houses and I was standing on a small street. A sign not far away informed me that the street was going by the name N. Whipple St. That sign stood above where the somewhat small Whipple met up with the slightly larger Addison if I'm to believe everything the green sign tells me.

I looked down and found the cardboard box was gone. The kindly man was wandering off having lost interest. I walked to the busier, mainer Addison. Not far to my right was a Target. It seemed as sensible of a place as any to start. I moseyed on in and sauntered about. I saw a man who looked pretty much identical to Mako from all those years ago. I followed slowly, I tried to figure out what to say.

Mako was a very cautious man. He carried a hand basket laden with snack food, a bottle of multivitamins, some Suave shampoo, a couple of DVDs I couldn't make out. As he arrived in the towel aisle he appeared to tense up. His lumbering gait fell away leaving a more typical, uppity business man walk. That walk wasn't befitting Mako as his countenance was that of a down on his luck karate instructor who'd recently lost the woman that had directed his style and it was still far too early for him to seek another woman to replace her. As though his class in past years has dwindled to only a few of his less adept students. He currently donned a mustache of the variety most typically worn ironically. Surprisingly light brown hair spilled from his head and appeared naturally feathered and wavy. His shirt was plain and green, the very same shirt that could be found in that store for \$8.94. His jeans could be found near the shirt for \$18.88. Socks were clustered in packs of 8 for \$9.99. His feet kept my attention as they were clad only in those socks.

The business man walk was still easy to match, but as he arrived at a major aisle the business man walk tore off its shirt, revealing itself to be a purposeful-man's sprint. Three steps into its short life in the open the sprint was halted as Mako ran into a shopping cart which had the audacity to be pushed in his path following a hasty, ill scouted 90 degree turn. Much to everyone's shock, other than Mako's, the shopping cart's life ended the same moment as Mako's sprint. The cart was distorted, contorted and ejected following the imaginary arrow pointing to where Mako was headed. Mako's forward winging leg had punted the cart just high enough to clear two racks of junior girls' clothes before getting caught on the top of an inanimate rack of uninhabited training bras, which promptly toppled into the desk for the fitting room gatekeepers. Fortunately that post was abandoned by its captain, a recent high school dropout who'd just minutes prior merged with a girl one year her senior (who shared her love for nearly all MTV reality programs from the past decade and was supposed to be looking in the back for a Nintendo Wii she felt confident she wouldn't find) forming a pair of chatty girls.

Their chatting was momentarily paused. Once the pair absorbed enough information it resumed

at a breakneck pace, but in an altogether new direction. The woman who'd pushed the cart to its death had not mentally arrived at any route to proceed down. Confusion and Anger were locked in a bloody battle. The woman was blessed with a very strong Anger avatar, but Confusion came in better armed than usual. In this particular David versus Goliath confrontation both of them came in hungry, both were conniving and resourceful; both came out swinging for the fences, unmindful of their own wellbeing. Anger felled Confusion, as it typically does. As Anger moved to wrest control from Marisa, or whatever her name might have been, by sitting upon the throne where the nervous system would diligently follow its every command Anger discovered it had been mortally wounded.

Shortly after Anger embraced its fate the most common regent, the cowardly Empress Status Quo peered her head out from behind the royal chair. Anger collapsed and the Empress resumed her command. The bishops of the nervous system did as she commanded.

The maybe-Marisa went to the front and obtained a healthy, empty shopping cart. Like a consumerist vulture she swooped back to the carcass of the dead cart and she plucked the former contents of her earlier beast of burden from the Junior Miss section. Her eyes didn't head near Mako with any more frequency than they headed to me or the pair of chatting girls.

Mako had remained sessile throughout Marisa's actions and didn't associate himself with any action verbs until she was checking out. At that point he turned to me, wagging a finger, "You've caused me to create a scene, so I have little keeping me from doing to you what I did to that cart! Why are you following me?"

The man seemed wholly unable to menace, but his intent to menace coupled with that collision from minutes ago amounted to a fearful moment. It faded fast. Mako's face was devoid of malice, absent any sign of harmful capacity.

I volunteered answers free from coercion.

"I'm Remora's son and I need some of your blood."

The kind scowl turned to a smile.

"Little Man-O-War!"

Before our conversation really got going an amicable red shirted fellow approached us. He was sporting the 'oh dear' look on his 30 something, cleanly shaved face. It was only the third time that the 'oh dear' look had been worn. I felt it likely that the expression would appear with growing frequency over the course of the coming years, before ultimately becoming his default expression; the one that he'd be wearing when it was his time to die. His tension was alleviated, with a waving of Mako's hand,

his friendly manner, the passing of a business card and a sentence.

“So sorry about all this, just call this number.”

With that, 'Manager Mike with us for 4 years' took his leave. Mako gestured to the checkout area, the furthest flung cashier from maybe-Marisa who was nearly done with her transaction. I noted that Mako's socks were now worn through, though they looked completely new on the top. This attention to his feet got my eyes far enough down to see subtle Mako sized footprints in the tile behind him. The footprinted tiles were decorated with a spidering of small cracks.

Mako noticed my wandering eyes, “My socks tore when I stopped abruptly. Normally I can walk delicately.”

We proceeded to checkout, which went uneventfully.

As we stepped outside Mako handed me his two plastic bags and pulled out a package of socks. He pierced the plastic with two fingers, pinched and pulled out a pair of socks. By nimble balancing he donned the new socks and threw away the old ones.

We walked down Addison a ways before hanging a left down Newton.

“Well, Man-O-War, I don't know how you can get my blood. I'm frightfully dense now. I'm still thin and of average height, but my weight, I've lost track of it. Your father had introduced me to a man in the fold at the zoo. Just over a year ago I maxed out the scale. That scale goes up to eight tons. They were going to have an empty semi weighed, then I'd climb aboard, they'd reweigh it. But apparently the Operation is working exactly at budget. So, no weighing. I'm still on salary.”

This was the first I'd heard of the Operation, but my curiosity for it took a back seat to solving my obstacle. Herring needed the blood. Mako's flesh was apparently impenetrable. I busied my mind with the problem but arrived at Mako's house before arriving at any reasonable solution.

“Don't worry kid, we'll figure something out. Come on in.”

Mako gingerly withdrew keys and with slight, delicate movements the lock tumblers tumbled and toggled. The door allowed entry. The door was a substantial slab of steel, which swung slowly. As soon as the door was open a crack, Mako's hand moved from the knob to the door's side. Making me wonder about the anatomy of doors. Did the side of a door have a name? I puzzled until the door was entirely open. The house's interior was exposed, entirely Spartan save for an adorable aberration. The deviation from desolation was a pink clad little girl with curly blond locks.

“Daddy!”

The little girl nimbly leapt onto her father's arm and adeptly scaled her father until she was

perched on his shoulder. A sweep of the room only turns up a coffee table, three various sized futon cushions and a television. CNN.

Mako's eyes lit up, "What do you need the blood for?"

"I don't exactly know."

"May I ask who's looking for it?"

"Sure, he is the mayor of Springdale. My dad called him Herring."

With that the lights in Mako's eyes went away. A stew was being made in his mind. A water filled cauldron had already been placed atop a fire when I started following him at Target. But now he knew what to toss in. Memories, worries and warning. Though I could smell the stew, I couldn't get an accurate read on those ingredients but it smelled of menace. Mako began to pace, without a hint of pain as his daughter clutched his scalp to steady her position.

With a sigh Mako stretched his arm out and pointed it down forming a 45 degree angle, he spoke, "Monkey." The little girl scooted over to the shoulder's edge then slid down the arm to the palm down hand. From there she dropped to the floor and faced her father.

"Yes, pa?"

"Statue."

"Yes pa!"

Her smile grew so large that her eyes squeezed shut. Sparks and smoke began to shoot up from the middle of her head, reminiscent of volcano fireworks. The sparks looked much the same as the static flakes in my pocket. A long 'phhhhhhh' seemed to ripple through the air from behind her closed eyelids. The smoke grew rich, thick and furtive. It obscured the transient sparks, then the golden tresses, the shut eyes, the impish grin, then it spilled all the way to the ground. The smoke halted its advance, content with the gained ground, it turned blue, smooth and silky. It was clear that it was no longer smoke, but a curtain. The curtain fell straight through the floor leaving no trace of itself, but it did grant a clear view of both the formerly obstructed Mako and a two foot tall, iron, painted Kachina doll.

Mako lifted the statue, carried it to another room. Upon returning to the living room, he looked resolute, "The best way of getting my blood to Herring is by me going to Herring. How did you get here?"

"I was shoved into a safe then I found myself in cardboard box not far from here."

Mako grimaced, "Where was the safe?"

“Herring's basement. In a nearly empty room that just had the person sized safe.”

Mako nodded, “We have a bit of a walk.”

We walked from the house on Newton back to Addison; east to California; south to Elston; southeast to North Ave.; east to Throop. We didn't talk about my dad or his daughter's mother. We enthusiastically talked about my wife and his daughter. I spoke of my strange basement which was prone to succumbing to fantasy on a seemingly daily basis. Mako retorted that his basement had been filled with concrete and rebar, “I fear I'd fall right through without it. I call ahead to places I plan going to, making sure I won't fall through their floors either.”

He explained that he couldn't wear shoes anymore as they gave way after an hour, even less if they had fancy cushions. The replacement costs weren't justifiable and really there was almost no benefit to be gained from them. By carefully walking each pair of socks could be worn for a day. He mourned his losses: motorized transport, use of bridges and his ability to swim.

He told me about the time he stepped on a fragile piece of sidewalk and fell through up to his hip. He'd wondered how far he would've sunk had he not spread his weight wide across the surface of the world.

He smiled when I spoke of my concern that the Earth might give way beneath me, or turn to lava. He told me to leave such concerns to him, and that if the ground was to become lava that I'd see it coming.

“But how?”

“The watch you always carry. You're being looked out for.”

My hand went to my pocket, my fingers pushed aside the flakes and pressed against the metal watch. I shook my head, thinking of all of those hours of my life that I senselessly fretted about the ground beneath my feet. With my mind freed from such it hopped to the next sensible place and dragged my mouth along with it.

“If you weigh more than eight tons and you can lift your own arms, you must be incredibly strong.”

“Thor's a bit jealous.”

It wasn't until substantially later that I found out that Mako was speaking literally.

Conversation carried us over seven miles. On the northeast corner of the intersection of North and Throop there was a sizable parking lot. Mako lead me to a small booth. He opened the unlocked door. We entered and immediately descended a spiral staircase. At the base of the stairs was a plain

room. Harsh fluorescent lights buzzed and shot out streams of photons bouncing off of well kept, bare white walls and the identical twin to Herring's safe. Its maw hung open.

“Alright, Man-O-War, I'll be right behind you.”

I balled up into that safe. Mako delicately closed the door. This time the dark vacuum was devoid of any fear. With no fear the brief time in the dark did not stretch out to any illusory length. Sideways became up. Daylight invaded, then flooded the box. Herring stood above me, “Welcome back.”

The box fell away, leaving no trace, leaving me balled up on slightly damp grass. I stood as Herring walked into his house. I followed.

“I trust you were successful. You did bring the blood?”

“It will be here shortly.”

Herring looked alarmed, he withdrew a red marker from his freshly pressed slacks. He drew four small dots on the door frame. My hand shot into my left pocket and verified that two markers still resided there. A plain cardboard box appeared where I arrived. It burst open from within. Mako just stretched out, then stood. He saw Herring over my shoulder.

“Man-O-War, get out of my way!” He began to charge at us, at the house. I didn't duck, dodge or otherwise scoot as I knew what would happen. As Mako's foot crossed the threshold the red dots blinked and swelled into tight cables. These radiant red lines zigzagged across that open doorway like stitches holding a large wound closed where a large piece of glass had been removed from a thigh.

Mako's charge was concluded absent the sort of chaos that followed at Target. He took a moment to scan the room before moving away from the red. Herring had fled to deeper within the house. I mindlessly laid pursuit. I arrived at the room where Herring's flight ceased, he was holding a purple marker and was putting his foot down.

Mako entered through the wall to my left. The wall offered him as much resistance as the thickest fog bank in history would offer me. Then the floor held him up as a cloud would hold Wily E. Coyote up after he rocket skated over a cliff's edge, which is to say not at all. The entire floor put up no fight, it let go. It let go of the walls. Chunks of floor let go of each other. They fell with Mako and I. Herring did not.

The floor was replaced by a vague purple shimmer. The soles of Herring's shoes shined purple and found the shimmer to be firm ground. As my eyes looked up my feet were reaching down. They sent signals that overrode my eyes. They informed me that I was falling into water.

After full submersion I took a look around. The room was quite bare, save for the eight feet of water. No doors. A school of koi swam about, keeping safe distance from Mako and I. A large tube ran from high on the wall to the room's middle, then down to the floor. The tube injected oxygen bubbles to benefit the koi. It did Mako and I little good.

Mako had sunk to the floor. He hammered at the walls, stomped at the floor. Pieces were flaking off of the wall, but the erosion was slow. The impact of Mako's weighty limbs was greatly dampened by his hydrodynamic imperfections. The wall was game. Well crafted, thick and reinforced with steel rods. Mako appeared alarmed. I was running out of breath and Mako was, too. I swam to the surface and drew in a long breath. I dove down to Mako who demonstrated to me that he was unable to swim. I smiled and extracted my father's watch. I pressed it against the back of his neck. He looked at me quizzically, but then he got it.

The watch diminished the sonic waves coursing through my home, so too did Mako's mass diminish. The diminution proved sufficient to allow Mako to swim for the first time in decades. We surfaced triumphantly, yet awkwardly at the surface. A small amount of trial and error was required before we exited the water. There was a two foot gap between the top of the water and the wall hole made by Mako. Ultimately, me holding the watch to Mako's ankle while he did a pull up did the trick. With him on solid ground and the watch put away, all I had to do was clutch his hand for him to raise me out and sit me beside him.

“Truce!” Mako called out. I still was entirely in the dark as to what the tussle concerned, but I could see that the conflict had taken a toll on Herring's pretty house.

Herring approached with the town's pair of guards. The reflections in their blades were like looking at photo negatives of whatever was being mirrored. Herring followed the steps behind them, a syringe in one hand and an uncapped black marker in the other. “Truce isn't yours to call. There's only one way to your blood anymore!”

“You're wrong! The kid has something, toss me the syringe and be done with this.” Herring pushed through his Mayoral Guard and walked right up to Mako. His affect was flat and illegible. He capped the black marker and returned it to his pocket. He extracted an alcohol wipe, tore it open.

Mako turned to me, “If you could use the watch on me again.”

I was lost. Mako owed Herring blood? Herring was willing to kill to satisfy this? But it was clearly necessary. So I again pressed my father's watch to Mako's neck. Herring rubbed Mako's elbow pit with the wipe until the wipe was spent, then flicked it away. He steadied the arm with a firm grip

and very cautiously invaded that unmoving arm with a long, thin needle. As the plunger was pulled back millions of cells and millilitres of plasma escaped their typically abnormally weighty prison. The red refugees filled all the space provided for them.

When the plunger could pull back no further, these refugees did not suffer from cultural diaspora, they didn't tax the economy of their new area. Best I could tell, they had no culture nor economy to speak of, nor anything inherently interesting about the blood to warrant the wanton destruction of a floor and a wall, threats of death or sending me on the mission to start with. The needle receded, then pointed vertically.

Herring and Mako were smiling. Herring's non-syringe holding hand tousled the hair on the back of Mako's head. With a laugh he kissed Mako's forehead. In a grandiose display Herring moved over to his crowd with hands and syringe raised over his head. He spoke and was met with cheering. I deposited the watch and looked to Mako, who was still beaming. Mako took it upon himself to answer the questions that had begun to fill my head.

“Long ago I was entrusted with some blood. I have a rare blood type. Very rare. The Operation located me and promised to keep me taken care of. I don't much understand what the Operation is but they said if they put that blood in me. I'd start making it instead of my own. They told me it was from a Biblical creature mentioned in the book of Job: Behemoth. They said the blood was needed, absolutely necessary, for many purposes. I pledged myself to the Operation and for years they drew my blood and did lord knows what with it. The last time they came to draw, the needle broke. They tried poking and prodding me with all manner of things. I weighed over a ton, they'd been running a great many tests on me, but I saw their manner change when change when the needles broke. They seemed frustrated, but I watched as they filled with anxiety then despair. I saw small black dots in large white eyes, they'd dart my way, then retreat into the fog of whispers. From behind the ramparts of bureaucracy Herring emerged. He was the same man that was there when I took the fall and signed up with your dad and the Operation. Herring was the most purposeful of the people up there. The whisper fog cleared and Herring was headed my way with that same dedicated, blank look that he had when he walked over with that needle minutes ago. I was, and am, Sikh. I am a pacifist. In Herring's eyes I saw a very non-pacific intent.

“He wanted to break me open like a piñata. I ran. I hid. The financial department walled off from Herring's acquisition department to protect me. I kept getting paid, your dad and uncle made sure of that and they got me a new identity.

“For years I've lived in fear of that man. Your family made a division of the Operation that covers for me. They keep me out of the public eye when I screw up. They've been my angels.”

By this point Mako was sitting Indian-style on the ground, his face looked skyward and he looked innocent. He looked as though he was now speaking to a larger audience than just me. He chuckled and continued.

“By way of that watch I suppose your father saved me again and with my obligation completed my life looks pretty safe now.”

I sat at Mako's side with only a cozy silence between us. I assumed the same position as he and I looked up through the midday sky. I tried to make sense of the stars peaking through. Herring was walking back our way with a big grin, which I found calming but Silence seemed unnerved, he stood up, dusted himself off and took his leave as words from Herring's mouth made their way to us.

“Well, Mako, I'm only slightly less relieved than you. Your work is done and you've nothing to fear henceforth.” Mako seemed satisfied at that, but I was curious.

“What did his blood do?”

Herring's uncontained smile seemed ready to spill from his face, his body language redirected to me, but attention stayed on his game of over twenty years.

“Well, young Man-O-War, his blood,” he indicated Mako, “the blood of Behemoth has done half the job. Mako is excused, but Man-O-War, for you to get what you want, you still have some road ahead of you.”

Herring turned to Mako.

“Mako, he might need you for this next bit. You'll want to scale the Iron Mountain, then fling Man-O to the top of the moon. There he'll fill this,” Herring withdrew a capped hypodermic needle, “with the blood of Shedd. He will undoubtedly consent, but between Man-O and that consent lies much adversity.”

He tossed me the medical implement. Herring nodded repeatedly while still gazing upwards. I absently squirreled the syringe away into a pocket, “Sounds like a thing to do.”

With that we shoved off. Herring walked with us to the town's edge and we found a path much like the one that took me from the concrete forest to the village. This path was similarly equipped with a throw lever. The path waited to propel us to the base of the reddened Iron Mountain Mountain. Earlier the mountains had looked a bit like a two-dimensional backdrop for a school play, but now breathing it all in, their scope came into focus. Both the blue veined and the red arteried mountain

were likely over sixty miles away. The foothills intensified as they neared the bases of the mountains, as a seemingly flat ocean shows its true tumult as it nears the shore. These hills were of a fairly uniform shade of rich green, garnished by an occasional splatter of trees or stippling of flowers.

The sky was devoid of any clouds. There might be birds in the air, but they just as easily could've been anything from this distance. As the wind raced over the hills at us, crashing into us, it cast us in a gallant light. Our heads tilted back, our eyes closed to slits and our hair was tousled. From the town's edge the mountains appeared to tangle their roots. They tapered off so slowly as they decreased away from one another that it seemed that the mountains enjoyed an oligopoly over the horizon. As I tried to perceive an end of the mountains or any details of the things before us in our path to the red mountain's crest. Herring gave us an imperceptible salute and moved to the lever.

Mako appeared familiar with the ways of the path. He planted his feet squarely. I followed suit. Herring nodded, threw the switch and turned to return to his damaged home.

Mako and I were off. The path didn't seem to strain any to propel my high weight travel companion. The easy going trip was breathtaking. The hills were supple and numerous. Despite the consistent green and lack of clouds, the sunlight fell sporadically in nearly appreciable shapes crawling nimbly over the hills' curved contours illuminating numerous creatures to varying degrees. Herd of wildebeests, springbok and kudu. A pair of Siberian white tigers. A pair of black panthers. A calico bear. A man carrying a long spear and walking in a ratcheting, automaton motion appeared to be clumsily stalking a monumental creature. The creature was enormous, epic and familiar. It appeared to be bigger than the skeletons of brontosaurus housed in museums. This creature was concealed beneath a fur coat that appeared much the same as the one worn by my first dog, Link, who was an Afghan. I wished Nora hadn't lost the digital camera. Without a camera I tried to burn the image in my head. I started to wonder about the man following the seemingly friendly skyscraper beast. I never did find anything out.

Mako uttered the only sentence for that leg of the journey, "I've missed this place."

We were deposited in a flat spot where the vegetation voted unanimously against covering. The grass nearby was hardy, but bashful. The mountain stretched up and side to side in blues, grays, flecks of white and meandering lines of red. Stairs had been meticulously carved into the mountain, though functional such care was taken with them that they seemed more art than anything. The stairs gracefully, elegantly wind out of sight. I stepped forward to study the engravings. The timid grass crept after me like a hastily advancing hairline. Upon closer inspection I recognized the engravings.

Each step was a random cropped reproduction of one of my mother's iconic abstract paintings. I began to quickly scale the mountain just to sift through the images. The grass ceased to follow once it reached the edge of the first step. Mako stayed a couple of steps behind me as we started our lengthy ascent. My eyes were trained on those steps as we climbed, the bombardment of imagery peeled a portion of my conscious mind aside. One half was quickly scaling stairs, running parallel was an earlier time in my life.

I was five, laying on my bed, under sheets. My father was sitting on a chair he had pulled up next to me. We were in my room, the only light was the wedge prying the door open from the hallway, spreading until hitting the wall. Two of my mother's paintings were partly lit, as was the space between them. As my father spoke I looked more at the paintings than at him. When I looked at him I could only see a silhouette, the tint of his hair, the shadowy insinuations of a moving mouth and a hint of his eyes that I could only see from the loving glow emanating therefrom. My heartbeat slowed and my eyelids playfully danced across my eyes, coming together before my pupils, then moving apart repeatedly. While not covered my eyes traced those arcane characters on my mom's paintings. They were monochrome in the anemic lighting, but the one I could see still contrasted the background enough to be made out.

My father paused his story and redirected his words to address the target of my attention, “Those are the letters from the alphabet of angels. Your great grandfather, your mothers grandfather was a Neophyte.”

My child face gently puckered and turned to him. He continued, “Some people think they can read the Bible better than others. That may be so, but a pretty common misreading involves the Neophytes. Under the flawed current translation it speaks of the Neophytes as angels that fled to Earth, coupled with women and bore a race of giants. Although all giants came from them, not all of the children were giants. More importantly to you there wasn't just one wave of Neophytes. Your great grandfather was one of a pair of fallen angels.

“His name was Baal and his fellow fallen was Eland. Their righteousness was fierce. They were overwhelmed by the cascading onset of war. They'd fought at God's side against the Devil and itched for such a cause forever after. With their feeble understanding of politics they joined the German war effort in 1913. They became known as Wilhelm Baal and Cyrus Eland. They fought well and parted after the war, walking amongst men. Wilhelm passed the alphabet and much of the angelic tongue to his son, Cort. Wilhelm's son passed on the alphabet and a bit of the tongue to your mother.

In these paintings your mother is giving you that alphabet, and someday, Peter, she'll start teaching you what she can of the tongue.”

The light wedge grew more obtuse and my mother's silhouette pitted the light and threw a shadow blanket over my father and I. As child me fell asleep, the simulcast overlay comfortably ended, leaving me scanning stairs and sweating. I noticed that Mako had fallen behind, without protest, or if he had I hadn't noticed. I lingered to widen my scope. I took in my surroundings. I looked down upon the hills crashing into the mountain's foot. A cloud cover had rolled in, a wispy cotton comforter, sagging from the hole ridden blue sky sheet above it. A muted sun shone through; the lesser stars were thoroughly concealed.

Similarly, the peak of the red mountain had skewered a cloud and was shrouded from view. The blue veined mountain was rendered vague by a subtle haze, it, too, impaled the same masochistic cloud. One of the numerous arterial iron deposits nestled against the matriarchal stairs slightly above my station. I ascended to their convergence. I studied the red streak with my eyes and hands. It had a bit of a glow. The deposit was half inset into the rocky surface, but it also bulged out in a tubular manner. My hands were met with warmth.

Mako caught up with me, “You better not get too far ahead, there are some bad beasts that reside on this mountain's upper half. I don't think they can do me much harm.”

For the rest of the trek up the hill we hung fairly tight, I wouldn't have made it otherwise. About an hour of climbing after Mako's words, our stairs crossed a path frequented by a baker's dozen of large mountain goats. I perceived them kindly, incorrectly. They were nervous creatures, deeply concerned with communal wellbeing. Though these goats had an herbivorous preference, they wouldn't kick a meat meal out of bed if it fell therein. I basically fell in. They were beautiful, as far as goats go. Shiny coats, very large eyes, resembling those of old people and the goats brayed in a soothing manner. My instinctual curiosity drew me to them, but my approach pulled their paranoia-trigger. They shot out at me. I futilely fell to my ass and pointed open hands at the goats. A climb wary Mako jumped between me and them. He proved to be a thoroughly adequate wall. It didn't take the goats long to halt their assault; contusions, concussions and a couple of instances of friendly-fire trampling proved a sufficient deterrent. Sessile order imposed itself over aggravated chaos. Once bested, the goats went about their braying. Their course was reversed and they headed out of sight. Mako didn't lecture me, he smiled once he saw I was alright. He stepped out of the craters where his feet ate through rock. He lent a hand to return me to an upright position.

An hour of calm, with Mako now in the lead. Our ascension had progressed rapidly. My enjoyment of the fresh air, the slivers of my mom's artwork, the steady rhythm of breaths and footfalls were ended much in the same way that a gunshot propelled bullet would curtail Nora's enjoyment of House were that bullet to ram through our television set.

No bang, but a scream. A feral beast had gone unnoticed as its coat matched the craggy gray of the mountain. The newest animal was spring loaded. It looked fake, spawned from a B-Movie costume director's budget-constrained mind. Round, dry outcropping orb-like eyes. Lighter fur where a brow line would be. A stubby snout. I don't remember much else because of blood. Spattered on my face. In slow trauma time I could see the beast's claws connected to Mako's chest by four red spittle tendrils hanging between. I followed the blood to its source and there found four angry chasms, one showing a glint of red stained white rib bone. The newly aerated chest flexed and strained and previously placid Mako, injured for the first time in decades, was momentarily disrobed of his humanity. Naked animal ox Mako gored blood drawing B-Movie beast with his fist. Mako's hand was buried in the chest of the monster and as that monster's movement diminished Mako's humanity returned. The inadequate costume maker failed to anticipate anguish, fear or hopelessness in the range of things the beast's face could emote. Mako's mercy controlled his next act. He lifted his beast bearing arm and with a sudden jerk the formerly malicious dying demon was jettisoned from the mountain.

As the crater chested creature plummeted it made no effort to do battle with gravity. It looked to where its fall began. It looked to us for as long as I could see it. I could not discern what happened to the beast as its fall intersected the slope. Mako didn't watch. He stared intently at a clutch of vegetation, a particularly impish little bush sporting purple flowerettes. It resisted the breeze with springy tension and vibrated instead of waving. I hadn't noticed the bush, nor the thousands of its ilk we'd already passed, not the hundreds still above us. Now I did. My lips anxiously jumped to the side and pressed firmly together. Mako was keeping his eyes away from the felled beast, the blood literally on his hand, nor the diagonal stripes of damage across his chest. Mako's breathing was being governed by his brain's front instead of stem. Each inhale and exhale was a decision, not an autonomic function. He turned away from the bush and went back to ascending.

“Tell me about you're mom, Man-O.”

I followed after him, but my mind hadn't started yet. Mako spoke again.

“I never really met her, I only saw her the once. Your father spoke so highly of her and I think

the current situation is related to her.”

Scaling went easier while I spoke of her origins, my father told me to be very careful to whom I reveal my secrets, but Mako was clearly entitled. He, himself, was a secret that I could only cautiously share in the future. I smiled, thinking back to vacations with my mother. She'd always let me pick where we'd go. We wound up in Colorado with high frequency. The first two times I wanted to go it was because of the dinosaur museums there, but I eventually fell in love with the Rockies. My mom told me I loved the mountains so much because I would likely on day be their king.

“Peter, there is a country of mountains in Europe where my mother is queen. I do wish you could meet her, but she is very busy and her kingdom is very far away. When she stops ruling it falls to me, and after me, to you.”

She caressed the back of my head, kissed the crown of my head. I looked up at her content gaze, “Will I be able to visit you when you rule?”

A powerful warmth rushed to my mother's face, filtered by the constraints of her flesh and muscle. That warmth flowed out, as a radiant, glowing smile.

“I'm afraid not, but I have insisted that I should not be given the throne for quite some time. And I'll make certain that no matter how busy I get I'll still visit you.”

My father walked up to her, hugged her from behind and kissed her neck. He pulled her tight and tried to get the best view he could of her smile, he spoke to me while my mother gently held me in her eyes.

“Peter there'll be a day when you find a princess of your own, but know that all women are beautiful, amazing creatures and the woman who falls in love with you is a princess even if she doesn't know it, even if she's been told otherwise. You're to treat her as royalty.”

My dad turned his head and pressed the side of his face against her partially exposed back, listening between her shoulder blades, then gently moving his cheek up to her neck.

“Princesses are blessing, never forget it and never let them think otherwise.”

I dusted the story off of the moment and turned to my hiking companion.

“My dad was right, Mako, Nora had no idea she was a princess when we met. I let her know before we were wed, but she was very reluctant to believe me. She knows now.”

Mako let a short breath out of his nose. I could tell he was smiling despite only seeing him from behind, it was in his steps and shoulders.

I daydreamed of my princess until we reached the summit. We looked up to the moon, the next

step in my journey. It looked like it was higher up than if you had three Sears Towers and stacked them up, even then you'd only be to the moon's bottom. I hadn't the slightest how big it was. I thought of how small big airplanes looked when they were that far away, the moon clearly dwarfed airplanes.

“Man-O.”

I looked down from the moon to an equally pale Mako. The warmth provided by tales of princesses and love had been outpaced by cooling from blood loss. He furrowed his brow, bit his lip, “Before I throw you. I want you to make me a promise.”

I nodded, my heart started sinking and beating more rapidly, I forgot to breath, “Of course, anything.”

“It might take me a long time to get home, Man-O. A very long time.” His eyes momentarily darted down to his chest then returned to me, “I need you to look after my princess, her mother had gone back to rule her Asian island nation shortly after she was born. Keep her safe and don't let a day go by where she isn't reminded that her mom and dad love her very much. Maybe you and Nora can take her to the Rockies.”

“Of course.”

“Keep my Samara safe.” The words were damp, shooting up from dark depths as air bubbles from the lungs of a screaming skin diver, his words were devoid of urgency, however. I couldn't tell if he'd given up on hope or not entertained despair, but there was no hint of fear in Mako. Just resolve. I nodded.

“I will.”

A smile crossed his lips without straying to his eyes, “Let's get you to the moon. Lay down.”

Without deliberation my back was on rock, my eyes pointed to my destination. Mako's hands firmly gripped my ankles and he smoothly lifted me from the ground with a swinging motion parallel to the ground. After four full rotations he had picked up the desired speed. I thought I saw him nod, but it might've just been the powerful instant. In that instant every muscle jerked or convulsed in Mako's body. His fingers left me. I looked down as I fell upward, to me it looked like Mako and the whole world was falling. The illusion was deepened by Mako, with that look in his face, those spread fingers, that gash in his chest.

It felt like the world was ending, that I was losing everything. The speed of flight was pressing on me from all sides, my hair flapped and rippled and I blacked out.

When I woke I felt no pain. I brushed a tear from my cheek, another from the corner of my eye. I had myself a look at my surroundings. For the first few careless thinking moments it seemed superbly unspectacular. The landscape was monochromatic, the air was empty; free of pollen, bugs, dust or sound. I could feel the moon rotating beneath me. If I sat still long enough, there was little doubt that I'd eventually slide off a grade too steep to hold me and likely fall to my death on the mountain below. The surface didn't hold the wonders I'd hoped for. In my youth I dreamed of beautiful beasts, muscle clad Clydesdale unicorns with silvery, barbed horns, majestic white lions and pale walled gleaming white castles. My quest made these notions seem more sensible.

Instead there was nothing. After giving it some time I found the emptiness nearly as calming as Nora. Then I thought of her terrible allergies and wished I could carry her away to this place. I don't need more than Nora to be happy. Had she been there with me, I'm certain that's what I would've been.

I stood and walked toward the highest point of the moon, my walk was aided by its rotation. I looked up and found I was above the blue sky sheet and very near the black space sheet. I was entranced by the glistening, radiant star holes and I did a 180 on my opinion of the place. I was moved by the beauty and felt joyous imagining Nora there with me. For a moment her hand was in mine and she walked by my side. Her head movements synchronized with mine. We alternated, my eyes drank of the stars until they'd had their fill, then they'd wander down to meet Nora's eyes, for a lingering moment our eyes would celebrate their starry, collective inebriation, before returning to the constellations so near above.

Nora returned to the more common world, without intention and without memory of being on this world. I felt content. I neared the moon's top and I saw what I originally thought I would, but on treads and wheels. My eyes swept back and forth, strafing and collecting information. My mind worked its nimble fingers to stitch the pictures together and it ran it against my memories to see if it could figure out what was being looked at.

Eventually the picture was complete: a large white city sat atop a platform on wheels and treads that worked at a constant pace to keep the city on top of the moon. My approach was quick, and I could see many points of entry. The platform was not high off the ground, but it was fairly thick, probably five feet. Many ladders nearly scraped the ground, leading me to believe the moon's surface was relatively uniform. Despite my rapid approach I took in a great deal of information about the rolling moontop city. The skyline was familiar, I couldn't quite place where I'd seen the White City before.

A guardrail appeared to run around the city's exterior. These rails were red, sensible. They would alert distracted townies not to fall off of and be run over by the city. The danger of being run over by this city was far more apparent than back in Chicago. I knew better than to even propose such a thing could happen there, as people would think me mad. The White City's persistent trundling never did become an actualized threat to me. I raised my foot onto the bottom step of one of the great many stairways into the city. It felt much the same as stepping off of the assisted walkways of airports. The transition confused my legs and the first few steps were awkward ones. My eyes climbed in a altitude to the point that they were even with the city's floor, at which point I felt as though I was waking up and my mind was yawning. The arrival of my feet at the very same altitude resulted in no waking or yawning in my feet. I hit the rolling city's ground rolling, so to speak.

With long confident strides I moved to the city's center. There were people that invoke police officer, adorned in outfits crying for authority but with a hint of disappointment that they don't get respect. The men wearing those outfits appeared oblivious to the outfits disappointment and were not perceptive enough to realize or notice any lack of respect. Other people shared the gloomy severeness of the uniforms. Some folk appeared casual, not fun nor imaginative, but casual. I nearly approached one of those casual people, until a more suitable person presented herself.

She looked like she could pass for Nora's sister. This woman was clad in an off white dress that I'd typically call a sun dress were I not on the moon. Her hair nearly matched Nora's brown, and it had a tendency of concealing this woman's left eye. A white rose bud was tucked behind her left ear. Her eyes possessed caged life, a dazzle behind milky glass. Wallflower blue irises casually sat between black and white, nonchalant and unobtrusive. Her walk was her strongest resemblance to Nora. Her feet were bridled mustangs, just begging to be let loose over rolling rolling plains so near. Each step whispered to me its desire to be a skip.

I approached her and was pleased to see no hint of apprehension. The steeds at her legs' ends calmed themselves.

“Could you direct me to Shedd?”

Her eyes did not leave mine, the life within rattled the bars momentarily, then began to dance. My eyes failed to study her mouth as she said, “Shouldn't be a problem. I was heading that very way.”

I was pleased which filled my words like cheese injected into a cheddarwurst, “Many thanks!”

This woman, Cara, diverged sharply form Nora in that she had no difficulty in conversing and

she was treacherous. She told me of strange allergies plaguing the White City. Then asked a delicate question about my interest in Shedd. Apparently nonsensical allergies had started being diagnosed two years prior to my arrival. The first was a young man's allergy to polo shirts. The doctor scarcely believed it. It was verified by all three allergists of the city, some skin docs. He likely would've been examined by still more doctors had three other cases not been discovered. The strangest case involved an allergy to ice. Then a dozen more cases. Of the new allergies only one popped up with any consistency: traveling at speeds in excess of 30mph. She let me stew on that momentarily, moving along far before the thoughts could become edible. I discarded the inedible thoughts for the time being. She asked about my wife after pointing to my wedding band. I tried to stay concise and sensible. I tried to convey what it is to have someone that makes all the clouds part after a life of partly rainy. I wasn't sure that Cara had seen clouds, real clouds, or just colossal woolen blankets stapled to the sky sheet above. I decided they were real enough to her.

She appeared to think it over, measuring my love for Nora to the love she had felt. Her segue to Shedd this time clicked as a potential sign that she may have loved Shedd in a way closest to my love for Nora. She wanted to know how I knew Shedd. I couldn't give much of an answer. Her mustangs betrayed a measure of disappointment. An ounce of play was spilled out and replaced with two ounces of determination. As one would think, our pace hastened. Cara asks for more about Nora, the woman I love.

My answer was a bit unrestrained and went a bit like this...

Nora's dull, glossy eyes and her clumsy, muffled tongue had effectively destroyed the possibility for her to be perceived to be the unfathomably brilliant woman she was throughout her life. She understood most anything that was said in her presence, even those things being said three conversations away. Even if the conversation ended moments after her entrance, a portion of her brain was hot on the trail and would follow the logic to its delta reconstructing the conversation much in the same way that a forensics specialist can recreate a crime scene.

Perhaps saying that her eyes and tongue were her undoing would be wrong. Many intelligent people could perceive her intelligence, but in the defense of their egos they'd quickly cord her off, relying on those two attributes of hers. She perceived the cording, but despite her brilliance, she cursed the tongue and the eyes for the distance between her and most folk. She was quite beautiful and her mind was filled with majestic spacious thoughts that could seldom fall from her mouth.

Although Nora was an astute observer of human interaction, when it came to conversations she was still that little girl that was watching other happy children jumping double Dutch jump ropes. She seldom possessed the courage to jump in and once there she just couldn't seem to get the timing right. If granted the opportunity Nora could perform a gymnastics floor routine that would shock the world, but the opportunity was never provided outside of her alone time.

She was as beautiful as most women. Her hair had frequently been described as mousy brown. Her nose was slightly upturned through a fluke of biology, by no means reflecting her personality. Nora wore outfits akin to those of Alice from the Wonderland story when she went to her job. She was tucked away in an office of an aged advertising man, Maury Carmine. Maury felt conflicted about his use of Nora. By this point in his life Maury had met people more exceptional than him in most respects. He once considered himself tall at 6'1", but he'd met a man in Kansas who measured 7'6". He once fancied himself a chess player, until he met a boy who consistently beat him in under twelve moves. He prided himself in being the best possible husband and father, but his former wife had found someone clearly more capable than he. He only felt he was smart enough, and clever enough, so meeting Nora wasn't much of a blow. He was patient. He didn't play double Dutch. Nora was able to show some of who she was in his verbal hopscotch.

Maury's clients became his friends. His coworkers became his family. Nora was his daughter, though she didn't know. She would've likely preferred him over her true parents if she had the choice. They'd done her no grievous wrong, save for steeping her in their apathy. Maury did care. Maury had a set cost of living and was preparing to exit the scene. He was ill equipped to rope in new clients and were it not for the majestic thoughts in Nora's head those clients would have been forced to fold or look elsewhere.

Maury would throw projects into Nora's office as they arrived then duck out. Nora was like a starving animal in that office, waiting for anything to come in. Once her feast concluded she would quietly exit her office and walk the pitch to Maury. Maury was always on the phone with one of his curmudgeons. Maury would see her, smile and tell whomever that he had to go and that he looked forward to talking to them again. Maury would flip through the pitch and he would become filled with joy. His head would shake in admiration. Nora would always watch the facial expression, but always feared the words that had greeted her in her youth, "Well, I guess that'll do."

But Maury never said such a thing to her. He'd look up at her with his vigorous eyes, the last bastion of his youth. He'd say a variant of what he'd been saying every pitch since two months after

she landed the job after she found her swing.

“You're too good for this musty old firm. Knowing I had anything to do with your ability to come up with stuff like this...” his head shook. He stood and he patted her on the shoulder. “Good work.”

The warmth that flies off of Maury was nearly enough to sustain her. Nora wasn't getting it anywhere else. She was getting slightly less than enough for a very long time. To dedicate much of her thoughts to the deficiency was to turn her spacious mind dark and dangerous. Nora was journeying that darkness when she saw me. In that moment I felt as though she was the only person who'd seen me.

At some point in my lifelong flight from unseen, likely unreal demons, I became an unseen likely real person. Of course I knew people saw me. They'd get out of my way when I'd run and holler. They'd sometimes cross the street when I felt certain that the asphalt was about to become lava. I'd walk with a spring, making certain I was only a bound away from a storefront or a street lamp. My anxiety would rise for the moments where the street lamp was the option. Who wants to be treed on a street lamp? A nice pharmacy or bar wouldn't be a bad place to be stuck.

Nora, though I didn't know her name, could see me. When she saw me I had no fear that my hands were about to run off without me, as I'd known they'd wanted to do for so long. I knew that the building nearest me wouldn't attack me, as there'd be a witness so there'd be consequences.

I was drawn across the street. I ignored the honking of horns and was richly rewarded on the other side. I can't imagine what I might have said at the point when I reached her, I can say with certainty that it wasn't about my hands, which made the first sentence she gave me so remarkable. It was so quiet.

“Your hands are yours and they aren't going anywhere.”

I believed her and what she said proved to be true. Never again did I worry about them acting against me. From then on they were my allies.

I stopped myself before I went on too long.

Cara nodded and changed the subject, explaining how far back the history of the White City stretched. Details were not arrived at. As I expected details to come forth, I was instead tasered.

Convulsions rippled from my right love handle throughout my back. I thrashed to the ground and traced the two thin cables from my side to a device in Cara's hand. She put it in her handbag and

removed a pair of latex gloves. With a snap snap her hands were shiny. She diligently fetched a small sealable plastic bag from her handbag. She discovered the needle, then my markers. She deposited the markers in the see through bag, then sealed it. She returned the needle to where she found it. Before she signaled for men to carry me off to torment, she leaned over me, “I lied about the speed allergy. Markers are the real killers.”

She shook the baggy and I never saw Cara again.

I was carried with ease by two serious men into a small room with a soft 60W bulb square in the middle of a barren ceiling. The undecorated walls and concrete floor were evenly coated with the same off-white as Cara's dress. I regained full use of my limbs and mind. A tug up on my shirt revealed a pair of scorch marks left by Cara's electric viper's fangs. The area was tender and my flesh made a bit of a fuss as my finger grazed the area near the bite.

A brief breath slid in between my teeth. As I stood the door flew open concurrent with a muted thud. I saw the foot that forced the abrupt opening and I felt the bite of another angry electric asp. This bite wasn't more than two inches from the last and my treacherous arms did not to prevent me from flopping face first on the concrete. I didn't blame them, as the ozone filled my nostrils, I was certain that the mundane lightning coursing through me left them little choice in the matter.

My left arm was pressed between my chest and the ground; my right knee rested atop my left leg. My bottom lip, in a bout of confusion, had opened, letting salty red flow between it and my gums, there diluting and working its way to the ground where it formed a small pinkish puddle the size of the perfect flipping coin: the Kennedy half dollar.

The steel toe of a boot swung like the driver club. The boot's white pocked ball was my side, between my pelvis and lowest rib on my right side. My inarticulate diaphragm expressed its outrage, speaking through my mouth. Whatever it said didn't sound much like a word. My limbs did nothing to ward off the trio of lashings I received from a fairly fresh switch that I had to assume was imported from the Earth below. All three strikes landed nearly at the same part of my exposed side; the same side that'd been kicked so recently. My eyes started welling up, tears started streaming. I tried to focus on my attacker, but he was a blurry silhouette. I let out a sob, I was crying, it wasn't just my body's anger, it was me. I'd wished that it wasn't.

A second man brought in a wooden chair. I was put in it the wrong way, my hands were drawn between the slats of the back, then handcuffed together. The tops of my knees were pressed against the

front edge of the seat. My toes pressed off the floor. My face was pressed firmly against the chair's back.

The first man spoke, "Now you'll keep yourself like that or you get the boots."

The second man let go of the back of my head and closed the door as he left. I strained my calves, pushing as hard as I could, driving angry kneecaps against the hard edge. I leaned with all of my weight in my face. He pulled the back of my shirt over my head and unleashed a flurry of lashings until I could hear him breathing. I was like a child. His fingertips traced along the crisscrossing red roadways that the switch had painted. My teeth clenched, and I nearly toppled as my head jolted back from the pain. I had to headbutt the chair to regain balance.

The harmful caress ended. The shirt was pulled down and on my raw skin the cotton felt like steel wool as the curtain was drawn on the man's act. When he spoke it was clear his back was to me.

"In a few hours the White City will arrive at the hole. Thirty-five feet deep, eight feet across, nearly frictionless walls and a cushioned bottom. We'll drop you in. The moon will rotate. Once it has gone more than 90 degrees you'll slide right out and plummet to the ground below. People are said to go mad with anticipation by the time the moon rotates 80 degrees. It'll look like the hole is flat, but it's so slick you can't get out. I'll leave you alone with that, but if you change positions, no alone time til the hole."

Again the door shut. The pain in my face and knees worsened, then faded to a general ache. My body was frustrated, but it knew that I knew. My mind started to drift, as it was no longer happy in its corporeal vessel. It charged across the hills as Cara's feet had wanted to and I found myself in a memory.

This recollection was left alone after it happened. Near the end of a line of abandoned memories. Really I only regularly visited memories from about a month after this one.

This memory itself seemed a bit startled to be looked at, then it seemed all too eager to share. I was twelve. I was shivering. I was knee deep in ice water, standing in a plastic garbage container in the middle of a hardwood floored living room. The television was on the Christian Broadcasting Channel. I was surrounded by newspaper. Newspaper covered the windows in a thin film, but far more surrounded me on the floor. Three blue ball-point pens worth of glyphs were drawn on the newspapers of the floor. I was crying. Every inch of skin that would be publicly covered by clothing had a switch road painted on it at some point or another. I tried to listen to the minister. I tried to

watch him. But I knew that God was who I was waiting for, not one of his guest lecturers.

Twelve year old me had been told twenty times a day for three months, that at the center of Hell the Devil was trapped in a lake of frozen tears. His own frozen tears. The Devil was crying as he'd loved God and was trapped as far from that love as possible. It was frozen as all warmth comes from God's love. Each time I was told this I had to echo it back. Less frequently, twelve year old me was told that my wrongs were not my own so God would come for me. I hadn't earned the Devil's torment, so He would snatch me up and I'd know love and warmth. The love and warmth my uncle said he couldn't provide. Beyond what my fool of a father, or my whore of a mother could ever provide.

I wept and was forced to awkwardly drink from my own tears. I'd stare intently at the crucifix on the wall, at the televangelists who did in fact lessen my suffering. I could see they were loved by God and I could see how great things would be for me once God came. I would pray, but I feared God couldn't hear me as I was as far from him as one could be. But this was the day where my father visited me. As he approached the newspaper's edge I cried out, "Stop!"

He smiled and my weeping halted. I elaborated, "If you step on the newspaper you'll break the markings, and he'll know someone was here."

He stepped onto the paper and my heart leapt then pounded ferociously. His footfalls did nothing to the newspaper, as though his feet weren't interacting with the floor. He closed the gap to me, he threw his arms around my head and shoulders and he pressed me against his chest. He was so warm! I started crying again, but these tears were very different. I pressed my face into his chest. I could feel his breaths and when he spoke, it shook me, "I love you Peter, let's get you out of here, dry you up and get you dressed."

I nodded. He helped me out of the trash container. I clumsily knocked it over, spilling water all over the floor. Before my shame could flow out as apologies, my father spoke, "Don't worry about that, Peter."

I calmed and watched as the water from my footprints made the blue glyphs and black newspaper text bleed. I looked to the spilled water. The newspaper was drenched, all symbols were destroyed. The water's edge advanced to the wall. My dad patted my head, "Towel off son."

I smiled and dashed to the bathroom. I fetched a towel and dried myself thoroughly. I started imagining where my father might take me. I wrapped the towel around me like a kilt and walked back to my father. But it was my uncle instead. Surprise drove me to do something for the first time since I'd been moved in: I screamed. I couldn't not. In his eyes, in his face, for the first time, I could see he

was a demon. He was incensed by my dryness, my disobedience, the mess. He ran to me and drove his fist into my lowest rib, breaking it. As I fell, his other fist clipped my jaw. His work boot kicked my knee, only because I fell strangely and that knee obstructed the boot's path to my face. He grabbed me by my hair and seethed.

“What were you thinking, boy?”

“My father told me to!”

“Your mind is sick as it ever was! And you look nothing like my brother. I don't know who your ma fucked for you to turn out this ugly, but it was not my brother. And don't you dare call him your dad.”

For two minutes he clinched my scalp. He examined my face. He breathed heavily, heavier than his most enthusiastic switch painting days. He spat in the dip abutting my collar bone, “Don't move, I'll know if ya did.”

He walked out the front door and locked it behind him. My father entered the room from the kitchen, “Peter come here, now.”

I did and the spit did spill. My knee and rib exclaimed and they vied for my attention, which I didn't give. My father pointed to a nearby blue marker, “I put all the power the Operation will let me into this marker. Take it and scream as much as you can. The first chance you get, mark him with this. I wish I could help more.”

Then my dad walked out of sight, when I rounded the corner, he wasn't to be seen. I looked at the marker. And I screamed. It wasn't long until my uncle entered with alligator clamps and his spare car battery. He tossed the implements aside, kicked the door shut. He ran to me and his oily, callused hand engulfed my mouth. Pure madness swirled in his eyes. My thumb uncapped the marker and I slashed his forearm, leaving a blue eyebrow behind. He let go and looked at his arm. His chest started chuckling before I could hear the sound.

Police sirens. Bullhorns. Door kicked in. Handcuffs.

Then my uncle was never seen again.

Within a month I could access the trust in my name when I needed it. I evaded foster families and lived free. Out there I could feel God's love, my father's love, my mother's love.

And year's later, Nora's love.

The chair really wasn't that bad. The door opened. My handcuffs were removed. I smiled, my hand darted into my jeans and found a rock. I pulled it out and its yellow thread connected with my captor's soul. His hands dropped and I steadied my hand, keeping the beam trained on the man. I walked around him, took his keys, and out the door I went. I locked him in. If he was banging on the door I couldn't tell. I picked a direction and started walking. I put the Eye of Jupiter away. I went down some stairs and made my way to a lobby.

I could see outside. On the side opposite of the lobby were four security types, including the one that provided my chair, and two leashed dogs. A dog noticed me and shared that knowledge. Barking filled the lobby. I began dashing for the doors. The dogs were unleashed and proved to be way faster than me. When I calculated that they'd get to me before I could get to the doors, my hand again went to my pocket. Once filled with shards, I waited until the dogs were upon me, then I threw yellow crystals into their faces.

The dogs fell through mosaics of knowledge, experience and wisdom. They learned what it was to suffer, to feel joy, to be smart, to be free and to be eaten. They both calmed down and sifted through their new experiences instead of biting me. I pushed through the doors and started a long run for the town's middle. The security guys were not cardiovascularly gifted and I felt exquisite.

A pair of security cars began to follow, but I managed to get to a bus before they could get to me. There was no charge for the bus and it kindly went express to where I was heading. As I exited the expressionless bus driver wished me good luck.

I crossed the street and took in the wide open space. The black sky sheet reflected moonbeams back down on the city, making the White City glow. In this clearing, free from buildings the sky felt open and near. The white buildings radiated a glow so bright my eyes took some time to adjust. Clearly the park was where I was headed. In its middle protruded a manicured fabricated hill, covered in luxurious green grass. The millions of blades tingled and swayed, for a moment I was aware of them as individuals. Fortunately that subsided and they returned to a collective in my mind. A Caduceus-esque, double helix of paths ran from the park's entry gate, past floral arrangements, fountains and foliage before coming to a regal, Romanesque gazebo.

A single clap dutifully scurried down the hill to me, where it tried its best to communicate to me that I needed to climb. I passed through the gate.

I'd failed to notice the people until I began winding my way to my destination. Some tended the

gardens, others appeared to be bureaucrats and others were obviously security. Each of them became entirely still as I neared. The security officers shot looks to the top, no doubt looking for an order they understood as they didn't like the one they were following. Some eyes looked angrily at me. Some cried. Some averted from me as best they could. With the stillness of the people, the windless city would be entirely mute were it not for the lone sound of babbling fountains. They were marvels. Twelve fountains scattered up the hill's side, subtle channels connected them with trickling brooks.

I wanted to pause at each fountain, but purpose pulled me forward. I realized my hand was in my pocket, my fingers had curled around the needle. Each fountain featured an incredibly detailed sculpture of a sea creature expelling water in various ways. I think I favored the sea horse, but I had much on my mind. I reached the rocky summit. A man sat on a singular wooden chair, three women and four men stood to his left. He raised his hand and with a gesture, all left save for one man.

I ceased to be able to walk. My body was in the throes of a paralytic state. The seated man shifted, the wood creaked. I could see his eyes despite the brightness of my surrounding and the depths of the shade induced darkness he sat in. Looking into his eyes was much the same as being in the Ocean fairly deep and looking up at the Sun. I felt cold. I felt wet. His eyes scraped me as they drew across my flesh. He stood and stepped into the light. Tears invaded my eyes, knocking down the doors of my ducts. This man was Shedd and he appeared to be my uncle.

“No more than this is the moon, Peter.”

He nodded to the remaining attendant, who picked up the chair and moved it behind me. Shedd didn't just look like my uncle, as like isn't strong enough a word. He either was my uncle or he'd stolen his visage. Shedd continued.

“You'll want to be seated for this. I know both what you want and what you think you want. You'll be receiving both shortly.”

I voluntarily sat. The chair shrugged. I was still without voice.

“And it will soon be clear why you can do without it. You were seeking Shedd, and you found me, but remember, Shedd is an aquarium.”

With that I was again sent back to a never visited memory. Saturday morning cartoons were ending. Buttered up grilled cheese sandwiches sizzled on a pan, regularly flipping through the air. Every corner of the house could smell those sandwiches and would likely be jealous of me. The sandwiches were destined for me. As I finished the gooey delights, dad got home sporting his suit. My

father dropped his briefcase; he and my mother instinctively moved toward one another, through the passway connecting the living room to the hallway I could see their welcome kiss. Then my dad came to me, hugging my head against his chest.

“Sorry I was working Peter, but I'm free for the rest of the day. It's your day. We're going to the aquarium.”

The memory flickered past clothing choices, transportation, admission and pretty much all of my aquarium enjoyment before coming to a rest at something my mom wanted to do while we were there. She wanted to walk across the newly installed skywalk. She said we must as it practically had my birthday. I didn't see the appeal, but there was quite a bustle. Watching the memory as a spectator my mind focussed on the stroller being pushed by my father. I had a sister. But nearly twelve year old me paid that no nevermind. Very near the skywalk was a tank with a great many sea horses and starfish. My mother called out to me, “Come here Peter, we're going across now!”

I pressed my hand against the glass on the side opposite from one of the biggest starfish. They started walking, rolling in my sister's case, away from me.

“Peter!” My father called, his voice was playful, but I still felt inclined to follow. They were a couple dozen paces ahead of me. I couldn't lose track of them as a green birthday balloon bobbed above my sister, tied to her stroller. They'd gotten into the walkway. I could see my mother's hand gesturing to something outside. My father's profile came into view, as his less sharp eyes strained at whatever had been indicated. They reached the skywalk's midpoint as my foot finally fell upon its floor. Three paces in and the world's tether snapped.

The windows shattered outwards as support beams buckled. The overhead lighting ruptured, expelling glass down. The floor quaked and I almost toppled, but hands grabbed my sides.

“Mom!” I exclaimed.

The owner of the hands pivoted and tossed me back toward starfish and sea horses. I could see my thrower's face. Young me saw the face of a Hindu man. Adult me recognized the face of Mako. He was the last to step on to the walkway, a load it just could not bare. I slid, confused. The tile floor had been well waxed for the skywalk's debut. My eyes locked on those people in that elevated hallway. The people screamed. The beams moaned. The concrete roared and fell away. Rebar jutted. I couldn't notice the blood coming out of my thigh, liberated by the glass from the skywalk's deceased fluorescent lighting. Then a cloud of dust replaced all that I was was looking at. The dust cleared enough that I could see the green birthday balloon as it ventured up. I watched it as long as I

could. My dad had told me I wouldn't get lost as long as I could see it, that I would know where they were.

In a matter of minutes I lost track of it.

“You see Peter, descendent of Baal? Do you understand?”

I think I did. Shedd retrieved the needle from my pocket, “Peter you are blessed, unlike so many of your age you have not roped off fiction. You'll know worlds and do things that others do only in their dreams, or when they consume stories from books or movies. But unlike the mad you have a straight line to reality. You have Nora. Her love guides you to the world that most live in.

“I'm only slightly real, Peter, but I'll tell you I'm sorry for the things that the man who wore this face did to you. I'm sorry that a negligent contractor cost you your family, allowing you to fall into your uncles clutches. So I will help you. I suffer from a very extreme form of hemophilia and by giving you this blood, I'll be slain.”

With that he plunged the needle into his forearm and pulled the plunger back. Its chamber filled with blue.

“Now put out your hands and accept your prize. With it Herring will rehing the door between this world and your own. It won't be jarred open by the time the misses gets home.”

My hands opened in front of me and received the needle. I regained full used of myself. I exerted my control over my mouth asking, “How do I get back down from here?”

Shedd smiled, nodded and answered, “Prior to the setting of the moon, you'll exit the White City. When the ocean swallows the moon, as it does every day, you'll swim ashore. Now be kind to a dying man, if you'd let me return to my seat and enjoy the park until I fall asleep for the last time.”

I didn't hesitate to concede the seat. I peaked at the blue liquid serpent slithering from the small needle hole in Shedd's arm. Shedd let out a brief hum, drawing my eyes to his face and he spoke, “It'd be best if you didn't stay for this. The ocean will greet you soon, so be off.”

I again voluntarily acted in accordance with Shedd's wishes. A great many of the residents of the town had gathered in silence at the base of the hill, all looked up to the man in the chair. Some glanced at me, at the blue barrel.

I exited the city and didn't have to wait long before the moon hit the ocean with a splash. I observed as the city rolled away from me, as the waves caught me I I was curious how the city fares underwater.

I swam to the surface, but didn't reach it in time to see the city go under. With no trace of city nor moon I put the needle in my pocket and I enjoyed my swim ashore.

It wasn't long before I reached a trail where I could throw a switch and be propelled to Sprindale. Herring greeted me with fanfare, he explained he hoped to see me again. That I should bring my wife next time. He sent the blue blood off and when the heart of the mountains was restored I was free to go home.

“You haven't seen Mako again, have you?”

“I'll let him know you made it home safely.”

“Thank you.”

The mayor only had to throw a sheet over my head to send me back. After it engulfed me I asked how long it would take. He didn't answer. I heard a lock tumble, a door open. The sheet was pulled off of me and my heart leapt as Nora stood before me with a plastic baggy containing my markers. I kissed her twice and held her tight. I bathed in her love and warmth. I tried to give her as much as I received.

Shedd's speech helped me realize an imbalance in my relationship with Nora and a way I could give her more. She was my door to a world more stable and real than I could have without her, so that night I took her to a picnic in a park in a White City on the moon.