

# Not Without a Bang

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## Before I knew.

Vincent Park was a good man. He had a fine life, for the most part.

This week has moved by with the end crawling closer and closer every second. Yet somehow, it's as if all of us forgot. It is now just three houses away. I can feel it in my skin.

I record this on the tree stump in the garden by the pool, entombed in the deadly luxury of a doomed town. The world beyond is now a fantasy, and I can't help but imagine the sensation that brings to the man whose home I've stayed in the past week. I know all I want about him now, and more, and all that Vincent asked of me. Still, I feel as though it's not enough. He's not unlike his prison of a home, its false walls and claustrophobic halls and spiraling staircase, and the unblinking skylight above. All a perplexing snare.

Apparently, so is his murderous book.

I can hear him even as I write this, laughing, shouting, weeping, roaming through the neighborhood on all fours like an animal.

Even with all this surrounding me, I can't conceive what Vincent faced. He had a daughter, a hundred thousand dollar car, and one of those homes that didn't look possible. An infinity pool on the balcony, and a beautiful view of the orange groves where they found his corpse.

Vincent Park had a fine life, so why did he fall head first?

## An introduction.

I had just finished my divorce settlement. The pages were sitting in front of me on the desk, stacked neatly. The firm my (ex) wife went to still used pen and paper; whether to alleviate the ache or bolster it, I couldn't say. The inkwell shaft was still between my fingers, but my name had already been signed. There was an invoice lain to one side, discreetly, but singularly, constantly reminding me of its presence and the many zeroes at its bottom corner. Needless to say, I had other things on my mind.

When I fell out of my stupor, no lawyers remained. They had come into a sherbet-cloud afternoon (at least it looked that way from inside my apartment), and sucked out all its pallor. The sky was black when I discovered the note Paul had sent me. There was a path of moonlight pointing directly over the choppy waters of my neighbor's pool. I didn't consider at that time how that bright silver bridge might have been an omen of a messenger angel, reckoning oncoming catastrophe.

I can't help but think of it that way now.

I only spent a few moments on the note he sent. Truth be told, I nearly forgot about it after a glance. My attention was caught in limbo between the TV, a pint of Ben & Jerry's, and the thought of my father's old rifle under the bed. I drowned myself in emails detailing jobs: fleeting dreams of chasing the same story the local hounds were barking over. The subject escapes my memory, but this is California after all, so the Evergreen Fires are a safe bet.

After a night of sinking and wallowing and gorging, a fifth of Jack helped me eject my sorrow and flush it away. After that forceful return to reality, I reread Paul's message. It was no less underwhelming than the first time I'd seen it. It said: *"Hey pal, still sorry about scrapping the Neuratek piece—scorpion politics. The guys upstairs thought it could*

*end up being more trouble than it's worth. And with no ex-employee to validate the crackpots... Can't run with no legs, know what I mean? Credit where it's due, though, 'Subject Zero;' now that name's a catch. Where do you come up with this stuff? Anyway, for now it's going on the shelf. No hard feelings, you understand."*

(Of course, he had to dig it in. Not intentionally, but this twisted it into my guts. I understood, and he knew that. But I didn't like it, and he knew that, as well. But I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll come around to all of this in time.) Paul's note continues;

*"Good news, though: I got a new line for you. Seeing gold threads for the pulling. Check the docs, let me know what you want to do. I can have a team ready by Friday."*

And as extravagant as that may sound, I couldn't help but feel the letters were tarnished by Paul's sheer overuse of that phrase. He once had me run down a "golden thread" that ended with a cockfight in a basement in Koreatown. Another (it wasn't my piece, but I heard from a trustworthy source) started with a hanging corpse in a quarry, but turned out to be that hype-killer we call an accident. And a third I recall almost ended in litigation after he'd implicated a string of mail-order bakeries as part of a fenta-prox drug ring.

Paul had this knack for overselling nothingness, gilding expectations over no substance at all. It got so bad that our squad of guerrilla vodographers began calling him "Mos," an acronym that stood for 'Midas of shit.'

So, for reasons that should be apparent, I was at the very least disengaged. I accepted, although I have no idea what I said in reply—only that my fingers crawled over the keys, desperate for the first distraction they could find. I forgot the papers beside me, to the point that they gave me paper cuts on my left elbow, and mindlessly I marked all their corners in red. I was elsewhere, and I wonder if my subconscious took control of my hands in that moment, and if they

were simply following instinct. What else they could have done. I didn't look over the subject, or the research, or even the gossip articles that had stoked the flames that forged Paul's golden thread. I only saw the smiling, hairy face of the man in the feature (not even its title). His arms crossed heroically, his confidence seeming to make my screen even brighter, such that he was hard for me to bear. I gave him little consideration beyond that, though his smile would remain bored into my brain at least until I was in line at the airport. I left unpacked and unprepared. Later, when I realized my mistake, I refused to turn back. A primordial drive gripped me: I feared that the places I had left, which stood centuries before I ever existed, were somehow already gone—destroyed by the rapture of an unforgiving god.

As I've said, I had other things on my mind. I was elsewhere. I simply had not given the whole endeavor much thought.

I should have.

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## Clint.

I dropped into my seat, business class thanks to an eternity of credit from having paid transit workers' salaries' worth of tickets over the years. The chairs are wider and more comfortable than coach; not quite as nice as first class but the only real difference between the two is that one is a statement. I stretched into the leg room, and only then did I realize how exhausted I felt. When a stewardess came with her hovering trays of delicacies, I snatched two miniature bottles of water and drenched them down, careless of how she looked at me. All semblance of humanity being already ruined, I and asked her for a drink to calm my nerves.

I was sat by the window, and though I knew my neighbor, who wasn't seated when I got there, would eventually return (his personal items were haphazardly tossed over the seat: a pair of wraparound headphones, a camera case, and a dripping ham and cheese sandwich) I hoped against all possibility he would remain wherever he was until we touched down in SFO. It was not so farfetched, this being a forty-minute flight.

But as the plane began to taxi I knew my anxieties were soon to be answered. I could hear him lumbering closer and closer behind me. His deep, lung-shuddering voice when he disingenuously said, "Sorry 'bout that." I could feel the roll of his extra weight with each motion, smell his breath from a distance, and even thought I could picture him: greasy brown locks, unshaven, sunken eyes. I was unsurprised when he sat down.

We made the typical quiet pleasantries neighbors make in these situations, but as he positioned himself I could see that his gaze was intent on the corridor in front of us, and held a begrudging glint. He tossed his seat buckle over his lap so that it appeared hooked, and inhaled a bite before wedging his gooey meal into a pack. I could feel that he was eyeing me, but I was sure not to give any sign that I had an ounce of attention for him. Still, he seemed dead-set, and I knew it was coming by the way he cleared his throat and gripped the nearer armrest, though I wasn't sure what. He leaned toward me to stealthily share in his drama. "Had to go back into coach to piss. Some lady was dumping up the b-class shitters already. You believe that?"

I didn't budge, yet. I think he sensed my discomfort. I didn't believe he was the type to mind, but he turned a bit in his seat. Then, as if to salvage the already tenuous relationship of strangers, he observed, "Glass of scotch before takeoff? Classy," and puffed on an electronic cigarette.

I almost thought to share my drink with him (in his armrest was an

indent with an empty glass, ice cubes melting, and I could have poured him some). I sipped, and was inhaling and working up the strength within to be polite and say anything in return.

But then the stall before us opened, and a squat brunette woman in her mid-fifties emerged, and I could see the omen in the way that his head craned out into the aisle. My chin sunk automatically into my chest.

“Hey, lady,” he said as she passed us, “next time, empty out before you get in the air-tight metal tube, m-kay?”

All the passengers surrounding us breathed, aghast, except the one that chuckled. His inflection was a fling of pure condescension—the woman was never meant to reply, although she tried. He shooed her away and sipped at the last of whatever was in his glass, taking a melted cube to chew on when nothing else came. She was beginning to formulate a few words when a stewardess pushed through and asked that she be seated, and he was lucky that she was in coach as otherwise her arguments might have been more readily heard.

I could feel his grin burning through my neck, but I think I made quite clear that I was horrified in the moment—at least, I hope I did. I had turned entirely away from him, toward the window to watch grey asphalt and concrete and blinking lights pass outside.

It kept my attention until long after takeoff, when I watched the sunset blinking through the windows on the opposite side of the cabin. Panels were beginning to shudder, and overhead lamps click on, and in-flight magazines drawn from the sleeves aback seats. I saw one folded open and flipped through, and noticed a familiar image. It was the same smiling beard that had only just faded from my memory while in the TSA line. I endeavored to find the same face in my copy.

The pages spread open directly to the article. The whole magazine was bent and mangled like an ancient tome. It seem that section had been thumbed through many times and the exact pages I sought were



stuck together such that I had to pull them apart. There he was: proud, long-haired and broad-formed. Endearing in the least, and heroic if one let imaginations run. My first assumptions were somewhere between country singer, evangelist, and business tycoon.

Scanning the title, I realized his profession, and that my thumb had covered the superimposed image of his book. *'This Author Needs to be in Your Life!'* read the heading.

My crass neighbor commented in a grumble, "Bet they wish they could take that one back."

Though I didn't want to engage him, I couldn't help but. I was curious, and impatiently so. I nudged and asked, "Why's that?"

"You haven't heard of this guy?" he seemed surprised. When I confirmed it, he took on the bloodthirsty grin of a man with a story to tell. He peered about, even sunk into his seat, furtive, as if anyone else on the flight would give a damn. He whispered, gesturing to the man in the magazine, "This dude writes a book, it sells in the millions—bam, suicides skyrocket. Pretty soon, police put it together: 'hey, these people all got copies of this same book.' They think something like a hundred thousand kicked off because of him in the last couple years." He began to settle into his seat, as if this was a thorough plot.

"So," I prodded, "what did they do?" His brow wrinkled, so I expounded: "The police—what did they do?"

He shrugged, shaking both our seats. "What can you do?" he asked, and his attention folded into the device in his hands. "It's a free country. People wanna read a book, they read a book. You wanna shove a shotgun in your mouth, be my guest."

I made a sound that could have been taken as agreement, although it wasn't. Though I meant to detach, I slipped. "Have you read it?"

"Thumbed through," answered the big man in a gaping yawn, which continued long enough that I wondered if he'd actually give an

answer with some substance.

Hence I added, “And?”

His lips smacked and scrunched and ejected a high-pitched, disillusioned grunt. “It wasn’t a *total* slog, but,” he began, and thought a while. “The way it was written—it read like a joke. But that’s just my uneducated opinion. I ain’t blowing my brains out over it, that’s for sure.”

While mulling over what he’d revealed to me, I forgot to ever give the article its due. In fairness, it seemed biased toward the author—and I thought, between the photo and the vaguely sensationalist depiction of the man, I still had an overall neutral outlook, and I was afraid that twelve paragraphs of non-stop praise might tip those scales. I shelved it back into the seat in front of me and forgot about it, and pulled out my laptop. Found some video interviews, and downloaded two different copies of the book.

We were already falling into the glowing nightscape of San Francisco when I thought of one more question. But I found my neighbor snoring, his headphones blaring loud metal music. When we landed, I left without waking him. I tried not to touch him at all as I slipped by.

## When I began to learn.

On my way through the airport, I picked up a copy at a BookNook dispenser. A shiny black cover, slim title—not more than three hundred pages—glossy black with grey wavering lettering that read ‘*Whimper.*’ Being the last in stock, it dropped out with a hollow *thud*. I took it, half-expecting the hair on my arm to raise, but nothing. It was just a book, and an unassuming one at that. Its cover reflected back a wobbly version of my face.

Making my way out the front lobby, I only had time to glance at the information on the jacket. I admit, my interest was piqued. It noted degrees from multiple California universities, notable programming expertise, connections to environmental activists, and two missing years believed to have been spent in a South-American prison.

“David?” A man held a glowing panel with my name on it. He must have had a photo of me as well. In my paranoid state, I mistook him for an agent of some kind—and he was, an agent of delivery. A taxi steward, of course I felt foolish when I realized. I hadn’t even noticed the endless rows of white pods I had been walking next to. I’d seen them advertised by a company called CapCell before. Micro-scale smart hotels, glowing coffins shaped like pills. They seemed to have appeared all at once one day, as these things do.

White light blared suddenly upon me. A billboard for Neuratek showcased their flagship product, the Mindlink, an unassuming black headband. The tagline read “illuminate life.” The price tag was just shy of \$20,000. I saw an elderly man in a automated hospital bed wearing one as I exited the sliding doors.

It was raining out when I dropped into my auto-chariot, but so lightly that it couldn’t be heard from inside. I think because of the utter silence I was hypnotized and forgot entirely what I was charging ever

closer to. It couldn't be seen across the bridge anyhow, and the sky was dark and so invisible even as we closed in. It was only when we were past the Oakland Bridge and had crested up onto one of those many climbing hills that I realized how unsettlingly empty the sky was: there were no stars before me. I knew they were there, somewhere beyond the screen of smoke. But as it was, I couldn't find them. I saw only black. Though I was in no immediate danger, something deep in my gut told me to scream.

We stopped in the first lot where the orange glow could be observed, and cinder could be smelled coming over the rise. A short woman with straight swoops of black hair and a face made for its smile welcomed me, and I felt a heat of kinship from her even though we had only met once before in passing, years prior.

Her handshake was trained and perfect, three shakes, matching mine completely—everything about her seemed to fit this way, like a Swiss-army woman. Even her name seemed to fit her oddly well. “Shandra Visai. I’m your A.P.” The assistant producer, her Swiss-army traits explained. “I’m glad you’re here, David. I understand you’ve had an interest in the—” she seemed squeamish to say it, and coughed falsely to assert this; “the involved party.”

I misunderstood. “The smogglers, you mean? We did a piece on them while I was still at the Enquirer. They were being arrested regularly for bringing aid to the people on the other side, back when it was still unevacuated. If you’re worried about them for some reason, you shouldn’t be. They’re great at this.”

She was kind to me. She smiled and listened, and enlightened me when I was finished, “That is comforting to hear, I have to say. But I was actually talking about the man who requested the report.” She must have seen my confusion, as she asked, “Didn’t Paul tell you? He got a message from an old client who asked for you by name. One of the alleged victims; a Mr. Vincent Park.”

I was stricken. This particular name was never far from my mind. "Do you have a copy of it?" I'm sure my voice sounded very suddenly desperate.

"It's on the message he sent you," she informed as she scrolled to the shared email, and showed me. "Here."

*Hello Paul,*

*Long time. I'd like to ask a favor of you. I want your company to prepare a story, to be released at your leisure. The subject is a John Gerald Werther. I'm certain you've heard the name. He authored the book 'Whimper.' I want you to interview him. I'd like it to be an entirely fair, truthful exposé.*

*I know, it's been done before. I've seen the features. But I don't believe that one of them even comes close to scratching the surface. I'm not necessarily saying that they were being untruthful, I just doubt they knew the whole truth.*

*I have set aside an account with two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars budgeted for preparations. Another seven hundred and fifty available the moment the story goes public. I know he doesn't work directly for the Enquirer anymore, but I'd like to recommend that David Swimmer take the lead. He handled Celeste's case as well as anyone could have. I trust he'll do the same again this time.*

*However, I have one stipulation for him: that he will not read the book before the interview is finished. I understand the type of constraint this must immediately place upon the process, but that is the way it must be.*

*I thank you, for any action you may choose to take with this request, and for your actions in the past.*

*- Vincent Park, PsycheSystems Inc.*

“Are you okay? Your face is...” but Shandra stopped, allowing it a moment to soften.

“I met Vincent Park during a case,” I said. “A decade ago. Not my most memorable, unfortunately. Not to anyone but myself. One of his daughters was kidnapped while she was out. The ransomers had connections to a Russian software firm in direct competition with his. She was killed during negotiations, they think it was an accident. But I wasn’t able to prove anything...”

Attempting my own epitaph, “He was a good man,” fell from my mouth. It felt disingenuous, even if true, as I didn’t honestly know him.

“Then we’re doing this for the right reasons,” said Shandra.

But I was still somewhat shocked. “Vincent’s dead?”

She nodded and frowned in that way that shoulders just a pinch of any burden. Then we heard a diesel roar and the clanking of treads coming in. Meanwhile, a third automatic taxi pulled up behind us.

It stopped, swayed with its passenger’s exit. Before I could even see him, I knew exactly who it was. He stepped into the glare of the headlights and let out a plume from his e-cigarette.

“Thanks for the wake-up call,” said Clint.

## Into the fire.

By the time spotlights came over the black hills, our autocabs were already edging out of the dirt side-stop and onto the lonely freeway. I could hardly blame them—we could feel the heat from where we stood.

Our luggage was all in one big pile so that it could be loaded in moments. In the dark, it looked like the spent remains of a bonfire, but the smugglers' lamps revealed leather textures and floral prints. Treads cracked rocks open and shook the ground. Thick hulls blocked the skyline.

They dropped out, two from the first low hauler, and started tossing our equipment in. Sr. Pastor, my contact, emerged from the hatch of the second, alone. I could sense something on his mind by his face. I hoped it would come loose after I shook his hand and thanked him for agreeing to bring us across. But he answered with "Never took anyone the other way, but for you, David..." and when he trailed off, I knew it would be up to us to draw out whatever was on his mind. I wiped the sweat from my brow and hoped not to pass out before I could.

A hardshell case fell into their insulated luggage cabin, snapping a latch in two, and Clint shouted, "Yo, Nacho, chill out on the bags. This is a Nikon Omega right here. You know how much that's worth? Probably more than your life, bro."

One of the smugglers apologized, while the other began railing in Nahuatl-Spanglish. Both Sr. Pastor and I started over to break them up, but Cliff must have seen this, as he stepped away and began repeating in a placated tone, "English or I'm just gonna assume you're saying 'sorry.'"

Without taking the pleasure of meeting Clint himself, Sr. Pastor

eyed him and told me, "We'll have you ready in a few. Just have to cycle the filters and spray on a new coat." He returned to his long, squat, tank of a tractor, which bellowed out a dirty backdraft.

Clint dragged again and again at his electric cigarette, pulsating its nervous blue light. He offered it up to each of us but we both rejected. Its battery died soon, anyhow, leaving him to suffer an anxious fit.

Noticing my computer bag sliding off the pile, I snatched it up to take with us instead—in the off chance that the second truck was lost. I hustled back with it, but in my haste, the book I bought at the airport fell out of the bag's back sleeve. Clint picked it up and looked at it, then chuckled. "Just couldn't help it, could you?"

"Don't tell me," Shandra soughed, "You already read it, didn't you?"

"Haven't even opened it."

She seemed surprised. "Oh, good. Well, I'd better take it anyway though, just in case." She did, and while looking it over, said, "I actually haven't gotten around to it, either. At least one of us should go in prepared."

"Be careful," said Clint sarcastically.

"It's just a book."

"Yeah, a killer book," he went on.

"Not according to the courts. The author was acquitted, and the D.A. even had to apologize."

"Just 'cause he apologized doesn't mean he *had* to," argued Clint.

"*She* had to apologize because *she* wouldn't have apologized if *she* didn't have to. That was part of his defamation countersuit."

"Speculating," said Clint.

"Regardless, she did, and they found him not guilty."

"And do you agree with their decision?" I found myself asking.

Shandra nodded and frowned a little. She hadn't considered it this heavily before, but enough to arrive quickly at, "Yeah, I do. After all,



what is there for him to be guilty of, really? He wrote a book. He didn't hurt anyone, didn't touch anyone. He didn't force anyone to--"

Someone came over and took a bag and she stopped herself from saying it. I said it.

"To commit suicide?"

"Yes."

"But, tens, if not hundreds of thousands of people. That's significant enough to warrant some suspicion, wouldn't you say?"

"Absolutely, which is why they tried him. But ultimately, even if his work incites people to violence or, in this case, self-harm, if that wasn't his intention, if people just misconstrued it, that's not really his fault. Is it?"

"I don't know," I muttered, I was thinking.

"I'm surprised to hear this from you of all people, David," she said.

I asked her, "Do you think there's any point in being here?"

"Of course," she replied. "He may not be guilty, but the guy's interesting, from what I gather on the net. Then you factor in the note from Mr. Park. There's definitely a story here. At least, Paul thinks so. That's all that really matters."

Clint continued packing until the very last second. He snickered, and I nodded to him as he looked like he had something to say.

"You got a better reason?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "Eighty grand. Fuck Paul."

A steel panel slammed shut, and from the fresh shadows, Sr. Pastor called, "We're ready. Get in."

The three of us began piling into the back of his vessel, but when he saw this, he turned around.

"No, someone's going to have to go in the other car. Three people only in each."

Shandra was already in, and I felt it best that I went with Sr. Pastor as well. We all looked to Clint, and this appeared implied.

“What, so I gotta ride with the help?” asked Clint.

Sr. Pastor seemed glad to spurn him. “Yes—unless you would like to drive.”

With an annoyed exhale Clint dropped off the vessel’s treads. He went over to the other vehicle and climbed up.

We loaded into ours, and when I took the mounted handles in hand and slid into the middle carriage seat, I felt a sense of belonging, as if it had been tailored for me. It was the exact same place I sat the last time I had ridden with them, and I didn’t feel it then, but as the heavy hatch door sealed out the last noisy lights and sounds of the city, a calm washed over that turned my arms and legs to lead.

While I sank into the foam cushion, I could feel Sr. Pastor situate himself in front of us, his posture tight as a piston ready to spring. To my right, Shandra peered about, taking it in. It took her some time to realize that we were sitting in an average sedan that had been rendered unrecognizable with countless layers of aerogel insulation sealed with a polymer shell. The cabin was tight, every bit of it walled in with perforated guards. We had to crane our necks to sit comfortably. Electrical and mechanical components were left bare, unhoused, and supplemental fans had been soldered on. Repair equipment jingled like wind chimes. A flexible hull blocked out the outside world, save for two slim windows with thick glass, which I knew well would fog over by our steamy sweat very soon. Piloting was done via computer using cameras and sensors planted throughout, and required a great deal of focus, as each machine was made of two segments: the cabin where we sat, and the tractor up front that took on the brute force of the flames.

Sr. Pastor flipped a last few switches and button on the radio at his dash, then announced, “All ready here. Vamos.” We felt the vibrations of a huge weight in motion, heard the whine of treads. Then our cabin lurched on. Buttons flickered, pipes hummed and vents steamed, and

we could hear the wheels beginning to turn. For much of the rest of the ride, the radio was silent. Sr. Pastor and his men didn't so much need to speak anyhow—only to follow the depressions in ash like tracks in black snow.

It's strange to see a California freeway without a single vehicle on it. Doubly so to see people living there. Encampments lined both sides of the lane, makeshift tents pushed up against the dividers, and scraggly people with long hair and beards wearing parkas, passing pots and cigarettes and stories. They watched our big tanks tread along, clearing the streets as we came. They smiled more than I would have expected.

They dwindled and disappeared before we took the first hilltop. Only scraps littered the same areas, indicating their retreat. I couldn't see the fire itself, though the front window had begun to look like a furnace door. Sr. Pastor radioed to "Take point," though the two vehicles would switch places often to regulate heat.

Shandra's leg was shaking beside me. It was some time before she noticed it and stopped herself.

"Sorry," she said. "I know this might sound strange, all things considered, but, I'm excited. I never got to go on one of these adventurous-type jobs. All the girls did, but... I was gonna travel, but then I got pregnant, and then when Nora came, we just, it just never happened. But now it can." She was near giddy, searching out slatted windows for a bloom of orange light. "It's finally my turn," she said, nearly a whisper. But in her twinkling eyes, I saw her realize the context of her words. Shandra added, with much earnestness, "That is, not to make light of your business, Mister Pastor."

He let out one utilitarian laugh and said, "Not a problem. But you picked a heck of a place for a vacation." We weren't yet near the fires, but sparks reveled through the curtains of smoke, striking upward into the night like inverse rain. Charred oaks haunted the abyss—white

fingers on shiny black limbs grasping at the hulls, screeching until their fingers snapped off.

“So, how is it you two know one-another?” Shandra asked. “I mean, I understand you’ve worked together before, but... I wonder, how does one meet a California fire-smuggler these days?”

“Actually, we met on a boat, outside Vietnam,” I said.

Shandra let out a noise of confusion, and Pastor confirmed, seeming to remember it himself. “Yes, that’s right. I was your night-ferry onto the Sun Labs grounds. God, doesn’t that feel like a hundred years ago? Instead of, what was it, twelve?”

“Then, six years later—six years ago—was when you first brought me across the wall,” a name the smogglers used to refer to the fires spanning from the Mendocino Forest all the way north to Willamette.

“I don’t remember what story he was working on then, but you know what I do remember—you snored. I never heard anyone snore so loud in my life. It drowned out the engines. I was amazed you could even sleep.” Sr. Pastor was clearly angling for a laugh, which I gave him out of sheer necessity.

“Heat and light give me migraines, migraines make me fall asleep,” I said, but I didn’t think anyone heard me.

Shandra was too busy repeating something to herself. By the time I realized what she was muttering over and over (“David Swimmer, Sun Labs, David Swimmer, Sun Labs”), I was far too late to hope she wouldn’t recognize my name.

“That’s where I know you from—David Swimmer; *‘Sun Steel Carbon Employee Conversion’!*” She exhaled hard. “How gruesome, what they did to those people. That article, it was *the* archetype of ethical modern corporate espionage. Did you know, Berkeley Media offers a course called, *‘The Cost of the Paupercaust’?* It’s a full run-down of the Sun Steel case, and other acknowledgements of commercial-industrial genocide.”

“Never heard of that one,” announced Pastor from the front. Apparently, only I recognized the sarcasm in his voice.

Shandra explained, “Sun Steel—the East Asian materials company—they had factories in Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. They were implicated in the deaths of thousands of missing employees, but since nobody was able to substantiate it, the company continued to deny it, and the case never went anywhere. They opened more factories, hired more workers—almost all of them short contracts with zero labor benefits. Meanwhile, over six-thousand millworkers were confirmed to have disappeared in a span of about five years, with no trace of where any one of them went.”

“You don’t say,” breathed Sr. Pastor.

“Yeah,” continued Shandra, “Until David here got a raw sample, and got the attention of the District Attorney’s office in New York. They had contractors rip into an office building built with beams from Sun Steel, tested them and found they were super high in carbon—more than ten times the standard. They also found trace chemicals that don’t usually go into commercial steel, things like calcium and salt.” She nudged me. “I remember, a proof of yours showed that at least a hundred individuals must’ve passed through the mill—recently—to taint the sample to that extent. Even worse, it came with footage. A man dozes off while standing next to a vacuum furnace, and—well, maybe I shouldn’t say. Not too long after; *‘Sun Steel Board Settles – Life for All.’*”

“Verga, and I thought you talked too much,” he called back.

Finally, Shandra understood. “Oh...”

I had no words to offer. The story was from a past so disconnected and yet at the same time such a part of me that any thought into that era of my life was like scratching with a phantom limb. Sr. Pastor didn’t reply for some time. Finally, it seemed he felt the need. There was a whiff of distaste, though I don’t think he meant it when he asked, “So,

David, do all your stories start with a body count?"

I told him, "Only the ones that sell."

Twenty minutes later, we passed the rim of the inferno. Either side of the freeway hurt to look at. I thank Sr. Pastor and his trusted operators for their shepherding us through that living hell. Then as our guides, it was no longer a fire, but a sight to behold. A tube of blinding white comets leaping up, flames as tall as castles on a black earth. There is no proper way to describe it except to suggest that a bomb had just gone off left the land ruined and scorched. But the fact is it went off more than a decade ago.

Over the radio a voice said, "Veó a final."

"One down, one to go," said Sr. Pastor. I recall sweat dripping out from the nook of my clavicle, streaming from my hip, groin, leg, to toe. Squishing in my sock. Fire burned white in the camera feeds, splashing the hull, licking the roof overhead.

Static crackled over the radio. The microphone on the other end seemed to brush against cloth, and we could hear the aftermath of a short scuffle. His voice crackling, Clint wondered, "Hey, are we sure this guy hasn't offed himself already? Maybe we should turn back around. It's only gettin' worse from here."

Shandra and I looked to one-another, but I was sufficiently swallowed into my seat and gave no notion that I would be moving. She reached over Sr. Pastor's shoulder to take his mic and answer.

"I've been doing a lot of research into this type of thing—it's a phenomenon called mass psychogenic disorder; most people call it mass hysteria. Essentially, a group of individuals latch on to an event or object that becomes the center of their shared psychoses. One of the older known instances is the dance hysteria in the middle ages—where people danced themselves to death. A paper I read said that it's often seen when 'established societal values coincide with, or collide against, novel societal value sets.'"

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything,” responded Clint.

Shandra had leaned forward to put the mic back, but took it up once more.

“Okay, here’s an example,” she said; “a man in Texas read this book, and died pretty soon after. His death was ruled an accident, but because his son had been diagnosed with leukemia—and the family was buried in medical bills they couldn’t pay—and because his life insurance covered all of that, it’s believed he was convinced by this book to trade his own life for his son’s. There’s also the woman in Sri Lanka, who had been forced into marriage with a man she knew was abusive, and opted instead to drown herself in the Kelani River.”

“What is the point of this?” asked Clint.

“The point is, that it’s not so much that the book kills people, but that the idea that it does gets perpetuated, and vulnerable people fall victim to the craze. They learn about this global phenomenon and apply it to themselves.”

“A death algorithm,” I breathed without thinking.

Shandra lit up and repeated over the radio: “Yes, exactly—like an algorithm of death. That’s the thought.”

Clint noted, “That still doesn’t answer my question.” I could see Shandra sputtering out.

I beckoned the microphone from her and she gave it. “What she’s saying is, this Werther guy, however nuts he may or may not be, he probably didn’t intend for his book to become what it has. People just saw what they wanted to see in it. But considering that he’s the author, with his perspective, it’s unlikely that it affects him in the same way. You see?”

I could hear Clint pondering, scratching his patchwork facial hair with the mic. In his silence, I handed Shandra back the microphone, and she shrugged and mouthed a ‘Thank you’ for my conciseness.

Finally, Clint broke in again. “Well, I guess we won’t know for

certain until we get there. But if it turns out we dragged ass all this way for nothing, I'm looting his house at the very least."

Shandra slotted the mic back and resituated herself, narrating her own thoughts. "I'm sure he's fine. He's a millionaire—that's gotta account for something."

"Money burns, too," I muttered under my breath.

"Besides, it's not like he's the only one still living out here, right? I mean, is it *eccentric* to stay in an active fire zone? Sure. But if my house cost twenty million dollars, I wouldn't want to leave it behind either."

Then, after a silence that felt taut and as ominous as the moment a hammer is raised overhead, Sr. Pastor asked, "You haven't spoken with him yet, have you?"

"No," I answered, anticipation gathering like the beads of sweat on my chin. "Have you?"

He nodded, but his head remained low. "I have," he said. Exhaust fans were blowing hard, but I craned my head low and kept still so as to hear his every word. "He was one of our regulars. Once a month we'd bring him supplies. Mostly food stuff. Twenty pounds each of pork, chicken, beef, and lamb. Whatever could fit in the rest of the cabin of eggs, bread and liquor. Fast food, and Chinese, too. We didn't mind—he paid so much, we'd be set on gasoline for the month. And he was easy; same order every time.

"Hardly ever saw the man himself, until the last run. Usually, a housekeeper of some kind would come get it. First it was the pretty girls and the manservants with shades on. Then an older woman. I'd seen her there before. But the last time," Sr. Pastor sat on this deeply. "The last time, he had to pick it up himself.

"You might not think there's anything off about him at first. Matter of fact, you might not think there's anything off about him at all—I know I didn't. But I won't set foot in that big, pretty house of his again. Not as long as he's in it, at least. Suppose I should have seen it. Nobody



sane stays here. There was something about that smile.

“Last time we were there, he asked us to do him a favor; run an errand for him. He wanted us to take a box to the covenant house down the street, over the hill. Said it was a message of some kind. Didn’t seem out of the ordinary to me. He even left us a box of bread, and one of tequila—said to give one to them, and keep the other, whichever we picked. We gave them the bread.

The place didn’t look like a church to me. But I guess it has been a while. The guys loaded the food up next to their big walled-off terrace—they said their people would take it the rest of the way—and I talked to the headmaster about the gift, and the message he sent. But when I told him who it’d come from, his face went white. I gave him the box, and he opened real slow, like he was worried it might go off. When he seen what was inside, he dropped it. I think he almost dropped to his knees, too.”

In the slow silence between Sr. Pastor’s words, the churn of machinery struck a deafening constant.

“It was a bird. A woodpecker, a whole nest of them. Half-grown, soot-black. Died from the smoke, I guess. Don’t know where he got it. Don’t know why he sent it, if they did him wrong some way or...

“But the way that man looked at me, like I was the enemy. Like I had been sent there knowing full well what I brought. That’s what scared me more than anything else. Made me hate myself. Couldn’t sleep a week.”

Sr. Pastor took a swig from the water dispenser that hung beside him, sprayed some on himself. He sighed and just when I thought he was finished, he added, “But I don’t know the man. Could be he’s got something against the church. Maybe he acts that way because he stayed in the smoke too long. Or maybe he stayed because of the way he is. I guess it don’t matter. I’ll bring Mr. Werther his meats. But I’d rather he never sees me himself.”

Sr. Pastor brought his head level with the monitors again, his rugged cheeks taking on a soft light. He kept mostly silent after this, speaking only in reply to the navigators.

I knew it would be strange—almost unheard of—for an animal to remain with its young in the face of certain destruction. Most would cut their losses and leave the children to their fate. I didn't mention this, though Shandra gave me a nervous look that said she figured this as well.

Suddenly, the rumbling mound before us exploded into blinding flames that roared against the windows. My eyes strained such that I could hardly watch, but neither could I bring myself to look away. Over the radio, Clint yelled, "My sandwich!" Sr. Pastor and his wingman took quickly to pulling knobs and levers, shouting in Nahuatl, slowly trading places with the second vehicle that had kept behind us for a few miles.

What still sticks in my mind of that journey is not the tunnel of flames we had to pass through, or the burnt husks of trees that looked like frozen rivers of magma, or the fireball that drove us on. It's the composure with which they handled this situation. No one screamed or cried and they hardly cursed. Sr. Pastor seemed unfazed. They treated it as a simple obstacle to overcome, and because of that, four gruesome deaths were circumvented with ease.

A grayish foam sprayed inside and out, smothering the inferno. Then followed black smoke, then white. Eventually it burned through such that we could see the tractor within. A blackened skeleton of steel and moving parts under melted rubber flesh.

I felt as though my head might split open. My hands shook. I could hardly control them, and so when I covered my eyes I could still see a wiggling outline of the windows, which might as well have shown us an image of the surface of the sun.

Shandra was breathing heavily. She grasped my arm hard. Our shared seat was wet and I could hear it dripping behind us. I think

she'd urinated on herself.

I strained to keep awake, though it felt as if my body was lurching instinctually toward unconsciousness, or perhaps it was my mind. I heard Sr. Pastor call back to us, "Well, there goes the eggs and pork. Looks like you just packed light, my friend." His shadow moved against the colorful dials and the blinding white windows.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up.

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## First impressions.

When I woke, the fire was gone. It had been replaced by layers of ash that could have easily been mistaken for mist.

I felt the increase in elevation crack inside my ears. It was a slow blend up rolling hills from burnt-out tents and shacks to chalked-over apartments and then the mansions, and finally into a neighborhood comprised entirely of homes so well-hidden in their huge gardens that for a moment I wondered if these precious things could not be touched by measly flames. But I was reminded of nature's disregard when I noticed one of those hedge mazes was stained black and melted like dripping oil.

Eventually it cleared enough that the grey skies above almost passed for blue. Compared to what came before, they were. Flakes of soot fell like blackened snow. Everything was soft-washed in it. Even the horizon was entirely greywashed and there was so little color to be found that we were drawn to wherever it was.

So the green ivy covering his entrance gate was nothing short of miraculous; the flowers of his gardens, though wilting, were

breathhtaking; and the neon lights welcoming us along the path excited our eyes (or at least, Shandra sounded impressed—my head still hurt too much for enchantment).

The entrance was so long that I was not at first aware we had arrived until our burnt-up vehicle's engine began to spin down. Surely, I thought, the thick walls and the stately structure that looked oddly political, and the spire that rose from the mist must all be separate buildings. I would spend much of the next six days in that spire, whose windows looked like scales from outside.

Sr. Pastor slunk into his seat and let out a heavy exhale. I could feel the weariness in the sweat running off his face. He unfastened his harness, looking up to the glass facade through foggy windshields. Lingering on its unforgiving edges. Then he spoke through the radio to tell his fellows to apply whatever fixes were necessary, as well as another coat of their homemade flame retardant oil. They would be leaving in five minutes or less.

Shandra leapt out, and I was about to follow when Sr. Pastor tilted toward me, and through a sooty cough, said my name. "David. You be careful. You and your people. You shouldn't stay here long. The wall, it grows and shrinks. It's different every hour. We'll be back to pick you up in six, seven days at the most. Any time before or after that—I'm not sure."

I nodded, shook his hand, and thanked him. It was perhaps the most earnest thanks I have ever given in my life, and looking back now I wish it had been even more so. Before the aluminum hatch slammed overtop the soft insulation again, Sr. Pastor shouted out a last time, drilling it into my mind: "See you in seven days!"

I sit on this gnarled, dead stump, still hoping he will come...

Three willow trees marked the garden and the path. The distance between them coupled with their sheer breadth only emphasized the expansive reach of his home, and its sparseness. White ash coated like

a sheet of ice, and the flowers were dulled by their impending death, and fungi rose around them like preemptive gravestones.

Shandra was already at the front door looking through the glass when Clint reached the first steps hauling all his gear behind. "And to think I was pissed you made me ride with the border-busters," he jested. "Thanks for saving all my shit," then he threw a hardshell case down on the concrete porch.

"I'm not seeing anybody in there," she said, cupping her hands over her eyes to peer into the dark. She pulled back and added, "I hope he has some clothes I can use. Almost all my stuff got torched."

"Let's ask him," said Clint, and pressed at the door, but Shandra slammed it closed before he could enter.

"We can't just go in uninvited!"

"We *are* invited," he argued, his voice bumping up a few octaves. "Hell, all we know, this is his way of showing us in."

I was concerned that something might have happened to our host already. I looked up to the brutal arches capped by the tower thrusting at a blood-orange sun. But then I realized that the lingering growling I had at first assumed belonged to the smugglers' engines hadn't fully retreated yet. Now and then it would flare up, then die down, then restart once more. Through two layers of windows I saw the dark silhouette of the third willow, its limbs entirely barren. We heard a sudden *crack* and I saw a bough break and felt it hit the ground.

In the side garden, beyond the ivy wall, I first saw him hanging from a tree. He wore black satin shorts and long hair, and a respirator mask that occluded most of his face. He was thin and shirtless and the charcoal air defined his muscles, which were less burly than depicted on those in-flight magazines, and much closer to emaciated. He had a harness belt around him, but its safety cords swung free. Perhaps it should have seemed unsettling to me then that anyone would choose to tend to their garden in this weather, but all in all, in that moment he

seemed to be a rather average man. Strange, but average. The garden was on the verge of overgrowth. Stalks and branches were piled up on this side of the fence and drooped down the short cliff into the yard of the abandoned neighboring home.

He stopped and the chainsaw dropped loosely and he caught it by its sling. As if he'd sensed us, his head perked up and he twisted to check the fence.

"There you are," he said with muffled cheer. He pulled up his face mask so that his smile became visible, not so much that we could see his eyes.

"Welcome," he called heartily, and his voice echoed through the neighborhood. "Go on in, I'll be with you shortly. I tried to wait but, couldn't help myself." He gestured with his tool toward the wicked tree. "Go ahead and pick out your rooms. There's only one guest bed, so you'll have to get creative. Oh and, please, take off your shoes before you come in. That's my one rule."

I thanked him and Clint asked, "Mind if I smoke?" and I nudged his side as the question seemed inappropriate.

But the man in the tree laughed and replied, "It's not in the rulebook!" Then he slid the mask over his face again and the chainsaw cut our first conversation short.

I was in disbelief that this could be the man we were here for. He had the same face and long, bushy beard as the man I had seen in articles and interviews, but from the few innocuous words we'd shared there was simply no fathoming the story that Sr. Pastor had told us, or the note that Vincent sent to Paul. I thought of the possibility that the whole thing was a ruse—that the author had colluded with all the rest in order to get us here, to draw an earnest piece out of me, perhaps to bolster his name or perhaps to clear it. I made a mental note to check if Vincent Park's suicide was even real.

I helped Clint bring his bags inside. Shandra marveled audibly at

the huge glass-and-concrete space, which was blank except for a black mark on the ceiling. It was just the same as any other overvalued mega-modern structure I had ever seen, and Clint and I both were less than impressed. “Is this a fireplace?” wondered Shandra at the huge cast-iron pan around which the foyer, kitchen, and living room were stretched. It was, evidenced by the layers of coals in its center, yet it was big enough to be a bathtub and had the shape of a gargantuan wok.

We found the guest room first as it was just off to the left down a short hall before a high window. I offered it up to Shandra and Clint. They argued over who should take it, with Clint claiming the large bed for his large frame, and Shandra for her sore back. Eventually, Clint relented, but gave her grief and rolled his eyes at me when she wasn’t looking. “Fine, but if I fall down the stairs and die in the night, I’m haunting you first.”

“What stairs?”

There were four levels, and it was easy to assume there were only two, and likewise to imagine that we were on the first when we were actually on the third. The house was simple but deceitful that way.

The main stairwell was at the end of the same hall, tucked beside the window past three doors. At first we all thought it was just a nook until Clint disappeared within.

Below we found a gym replete with weights and machines, some kind of large cylindrical tank with breathing apparati, a toilet and a shower. It seemed larger than it was thanks to a full-wall window on the far end. Leaves fell outside, though they were blurry to the point of unreality.

Clint’s bag sat beside a puffy yoga mat, but he wasn’t there. Shandra called his name and he called back, “Down here!”

“It keeps going?” she asked.

We followed his echo back to the stairs and around the corner,

toward the basement. Clint was trying in vain to search through the keyhole of a huge steel door with a label leading 'ARMORY.' For the second time in ten minutes I was left in disbelief, and it was this—not the trek through fire or the author himself—that lead me to wonder if I was actually in this world or just dreaming, maybe aboard the plane, hopefully at home in my bed, still married to my ex.

"Clint, I don't think you should," Shandra started, but he interrupted her.

"Relax, mom. It's locked."

She breathed easy, and muttered, "Okay. Good."

On our way back up the stairs I reasoned, "Alright, well, I guess we can both just stay in the gym, then," but Clint made a sound of hesitation.

"At your own risk," he said, and I looked back to him to gather his meaning. "I snore like an animal," he explained.

Again Shandra muttered. "You *are* an animal," I believe she said.

We took the same path up to the top floor via another adjoining hidden stairwell. I stopped to look at a simple painting of a crossing over a river. Its hand-etched frame read "*Foyle River Bridge.*"

I came up after Shandra just as she emitted another breath of awe. The third level was little more than a hallway with three doors, two of them closed, with an opening to the top of the spire at the opposite end. Shandra, however, was looking out the window that continued from the second floor to the ceiling, and the sight of the hazy city outside. Admittedly, between the boroughs of tall company buildings and suburbs and parks adorning rolling hills, and the huge machines atop them whose weird shapes looked like invading alien ships, it was quite a sight. It was easy to forget that the lights we saw flickering out there were probably flames.

Clint separated off to find the restroom. He passed the first door on the left, peered in, whistled and said "Found the nerd room." Then



he tried the second door on the left and found it locked. Cursed a little and jiggled the opposite handle. “Finally,” he said and entered, and we could hear him inside. “Holy shit! Guys, you should check this one out. After I’m done, of course.”

“Maybe wait a little while longer,” Shandra said and I gave her a snicker. Looking out the window hurt my head, so I gravitated toward the first doorway. She followed in behind.

Before we even entered, I knew it would be the room where I spent most of my down time. A massive six-foot Gustav Klimt painting, “*Death and Life*,” greeted us. A solemn, tempting skeleton juxtaposed the tower of humanity asleep on a bed of color, against a backdrop of greyish-blue. Beyond that were two rows, one to either side. I chose the right, the side of life. The shelves provided shade from the windows on the left.

I couldn’t help but let out a sigh of admiration for the study. It was exactly as a study should be: long and thin, intimate, warm, and lined with racks and racks of books. Though narrow, it opened up at the end, and its ceilings were so high that it was easily one of the largest rooms in the house, second only to the main hall. Along with the thousands on thousands of paper tomes, there were a number of tablet and holoware readers propped up on stands, and paintings framed by sections of shelves. It seemed to belong more readily in a museum than in someone’s house.

Despite the abundance of old paintings by famed artists—I assumed recreations—the first name I recognized was on a pedestal holding a ceramic vase. Sigrid Kähler, an earthen-colored urn with an infusion of deep pink hues. Behind this hung a work of her husband’s, L.A. Ring, titled “*At Breakfast*,” depicting Sigrid reading the newspaper at a table in morning light. On close inspection, I found an urn atop a cabinet in the painting that was the exact same one on the stand.

The art on the walls corresponded somewhat with their

surrounding genres, plunging further into mythology, mystery and horror as we neared the space in the back end of the room. There were a few fantastical paintings of gods and goddesses by one Guy Head, whose work the author later told me he had purchased simply for the artist's name. Next was the humorously characterized "*The Court of Foolishness*" by Gerard de Lairese. Then there was one by JMW Turner, a personal favorite of mine, entitled "*The fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last berth to be broken up, 1838.*"

I saw William Blake's "*Jerusalem*," though only the first and third chapters were on display, and a damaged, framed, ancient-looking copy of the Qur'an, whose frame's inscription said that it came from the Iraq National Library. I thought this couldn't be true, as it was destroyed when I was only a child, and that would make this one of the oldest surviving copies on Earth.

At the end of the hall, the shelves wrapped around and lowered into a den with a few chairs and a one-armed sofa like those found in a therapist's office. I passed another painting I knew, "*What Shall we Do For the Rent?*" which I thought must have been the final stop into the depths of wickedness. When I sat down on the couch and set my one surviving bag onto the chair beside it, I saw the true end in front of me: Francisco Goya's "*Saturn Devouring His Son.*" Its very presence unsettled me. It was overwhelming in size. The titan's crazed eyes seemed to pierce me, as they were directed at the head of the therapist's chair. This was certainly by design.

I stood in awe before the painting. It was unencumbered by any frame. No shelves, no books. The wall behind it was painted black and the rest of the room was tucked out of sight. It commanded attention. The only thing that could steal that away was a little empty stand on a small circular table at the wall. Nothing was on the stand, although I knew what it was meant for. But again, I thought there was no chance the author could possibly own it. After all, he was only a man.

I was pulled back into reality by Shandra's voice coming down the hall. "Hey, David, isn't your last name Swimmer?"

With that, any fear I had was dashed away and replaced, tenfold. I lingered a moment but came to join her about halfway down. She had walked the opposite side. "I mean, I guess there's probably plenty of Swimmers in the world, but I figured..." she trailed off.

I felt myself tense when she read my brother's name. "Llewellyn B. Swimmer." But when I saw the size of the frame, I knew it couldn't be his last painting. My shoulders loosed. I breathed again.

I looked at his name a little while before I actually even gleaned the image itself. It was carved lovingly into the frame, as all the others had been. "You know him?" asked Shandra.

"It's my brother's," I said.

"You think Werther knows?" she asked, and I shrugged.

Oil on canvas. It depicted a modern rural scene, a dairy cow with meaty knobs on its back, grazing in a yellow field beneath the clouds. Cables spindled from the hayloft of a red barn to a machine set atop a stone fence, which would have held a stack of drones that were out tending to their crops. A man swept leaves in the background before a horizon interrupted by giant, hazy structures not unlike those outside the window. I almost touched the canvas, until I realized what I was doing and restrained myself.

I thought then that many if not all of the items I had passed were possibly originals. This one certainly was. Few others would have heard of it, much less seen it, but I recalled watching Llew paint it, and paint over it twice.

"It's beautiful," said Shandra.

I exhaled in agreement. "Yeah, these were always my favorites. It's too bad they never sold well."

"Well, maybe you can have him commission one for me, after we're done here."

“That won’t be possible,” I told her, trying not to affirm the truth.

She looked to me with a wrinkle in her brow at first—I had offended her—but after considering it for a moment, she softened. “Oh, God, David. I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay,” I placated her. “How would you?”

We stood there for a minute, her with a friendly hand on my shoulder, and me, staring into a viewport of another time. After the requisite silence, Shandra hung her fingers on my back as if to guide me away. “Hey, check out what I found over here,” she said.

A few rows closer to the door we were surrounded with works of dystopian fiction. The shelves were full to the point of bursting, and overflowed onto the tables and sills. Here the two halves of the study were sectioned off by light from the tallest window, the only one with a curtain, drawn half-closed. There beneath it was a simple chair and a dark wooden desk with fine carving that didn’t really fit. It was slotted into the wall and pushed back like a cubby, all but flush, unassuming, serene. The light was still affecting me, however, so I didn’t do more than glance. There wasn’t much on it anyway.

But Shandra was still holding onto me. She nodded to a tiny frame mounted beneath the window. “See what that is?” she asked and answered before I had the chance: “Fahrenheit 451, signed by Ray-*fucking*-Bradbury! How cool is that?”

“Looks like it got torched.”

She inspected it closer, admitting, “Oh yeah, I hadn’t even noticed that. I wonder if it was in one of the libraries that that Next Light group tried to burn down.”

“What a waste that would’ve been,” boomed the man’s voice, surprising the both of us. We had heard the toilet flush and expected Clint, but this wasn’t him. It was J. G. Werther in from his yard work, a hand out to greet us both. He had donned a white t-shirt and a black robe and was filthy from neck to ankle, yet his hands were clean.

He shook mine first and then Shandra's. She said "Thank you so much, Mr. Werther, for allowing us into your home. It's, absolutely stunning. But I'm sure you get that all the time." She was nervous. Her voice wiggled and she kept her hands together to stop them from playing with her hair.

"Please, 'John' is fine," he said and that cheshire grin spread once more. "Well, you all settled? Got your rooms picked out?"

Shandra confirmed, thanked him again, and told him where she and Clint and I would each be staying. "If that's alright with you," she followed up.

"Absolutely. You chose well, David," he said, looking over the rows and columns. "People always seem to be drawn in here for some reason."

"It's cozy," Shandra noted.

And at the same time I said, "People like to learn."

He answered, "Both true. But mostly it's because I'm the one that draws them." He smiled and we laughed, myself out of politeness, though Shandra's was certainly more real.

"Hey, is this actually signed by Ray Bradbury?" Shandra couldn't help herself.

"I hope so, with what I paid for it. That makes you two for two."

"You mean, the Next Light burnings?"

"It would've been a shame for such a good bit of reading to go out that way. Not unfitting, though. Makes for a good setup, but I'm not sure what the punchline would be." After looking it over, he reached for the case. "Would you like to—"

"Oh, no, I couldn't."

"You could keep it if you want."

I saw a hope light up in Shandra's eyes, but she smothered it in an instant. "I would—thank you, Mr. Werther, but the Enquirer doesn't like us accepting gifts. Impartiality, and all."

He let go of the frame and it rocked against the wall. "Just 'John' is fine," he said again.

He started us toward the doorway, but I asked a question that would stop us in our tracks. "I couldn't help but notice, a few of these are authentic, aren't they?"

"You have a good eye," he said.

"Don't you think they belong in a museum?"

"Why, so some changemonger can come along and try to ruin them for everyone else? No, they're safer where they are than they would be out there among the inhabitants of the Earth."

"You aren't nervous about the Evergreens?" I asked.

He peered up above the windows, drawing our eyes there as well. We hadn't yet noticed the folded metal blinds. "Insulated drop-down security barriers, a twelve-inch magnetic hatch door. We installed the same chemical regulators the Library of Congress uses—for paper, that is. This room is like a time capsule. A bomb could wipe California off the face off the Earth, and Bradbury there wouldn't even notice."

"No fire for the firemen," I thought aloud.

He liked this, clearly, as with his next statement, he grinned wide enough that the sharp tips of his canines showed. "People are idiots," he said. "They burn the things they don't approve of, thinking that means they're gone. But people are drawn to the fire. It only makes them notice that much more." The bright white fog out the window reflected glaringly off of his sharp teeth and his sunglasses. Now, thinking back, I'm not sure that I ever saw the color of his eyes.

I was a little dumbfounded. I certainly didn't want to get into an argument before our first interview had even commenced. So I grasped for a question that I hoped would lead to more than one answer: what was meant to sit in the charging stand on the table at the back of the room? What I actually asked was, "I notice there isn't a computer in here. Where do you work?"

He gestured with a flick up, not quite to his head but beyond it, and answered, "In here." Then he brought his hands together and the loud *clap* resonated through the library. "So, who wants to get in the pool?"

Instantly Clint appeared at the doorway. He'd clearly been eavesdropping, but he couldn't hold back his excitement. "There's a pool?"

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## The war room.

This is what Werther called the upper level of the spire, where a black circular table sits under skylights. The sun drifts across throughout the day, like a hazy, blind eye searching. This is where we conducted most of our interviews. Clint set up his recording equipment there and that's where it remains.

"What do you think of the design?" Black steel rhomboids spiraled counter-clockwise, opposite of the spiral staircase, inset with windows rising to the top.

"I like it," answered Shandra. I don't think she was just saying that to be polite, although I guess I don't really know.

"It's supposed to resemble phoenix feathers. I'm thinking of having it redone," said Werther, looking up into it. Shandra and I looked to one-another but didn't mention how ridiculous this sounded, considering how difficult it was for us to get here.

After he'd gotten the recording equipment ready, Clint went to the sliding door to the balcony and marveled at the pool. "Is that a diving board?"

"Are you a child?" Shandra asked.

Werther snickered and said, "Everybody turns into a child when the pool comes into play." Clint double-timed his efforts.

I asked him, "Clint, don't you think we have more important things to focus on?"

"Maybe you guys do, but my job's done as soon as I hit that button."

"I admire your work ethic," Werther told me. "But are you sure you want to get started so soon? You all had quite an eventful journey, from what I understand. I thought you might like to rest?"

I thanked him for his concern, but assured that we would be ready as soon as possible. We only had a short time, after all. I wondered how he'd heard about the smuggler vehicle exploding, but didn't ask.

"If you insist," he said. "But let me at least open us a bottle of wine. I can't stand these things being so formal. Stuffy, for lack of a better word."

I extended a hand in a motion that said we were at his whim. Then he added, "I'll bring some bathing suits, too. I think I still have one of my sister's here that you can use," (to Shandra). "It may be a bit large on you, but it'll fit better than mine would."

"Thank you, but that's not really necessary. Although, I might need to borrow some extra clothes, if that's alright. All that excitement you mentioned came at the cost of all of my suitcases."

"Of course," he said, and retreated to the hall. Then he called out, "Go ahead and start any time, I'll be right there."

"Hey, what about the ash," yelled Clint. "The ash in the pool? Is it bad? Because I've got this sort of emphysema and--"

"It's fine," came Werther's voice from the other room. "Like anything, in moderation. Think of it like a charcoal bath. It relaxes the muscles, cleans out the skin."

"Clint, I don't think you should," I started, but he shut me down.



“Chill, dude. It’s not a big deal.”

Had I known of his condition, I would never have let him come here. At least, I don’t think I would have. I hope for the health of my own soul I’m not just writing that now to feel better about myself as a person. But the fact that I’ve considered it means at least a small part of me is.

Werther’s skinny shade appeared down the hall again. I asked, “If you’re ready?” but he held a finger up and retreated down the spiraling stairs. It was a long and uncomfortable, even embarrassing moment for me, hearing his feet plod on every step and knowing I had no control of the situation from the very start. Clint plugged in the last light, turned it perhaps a quarter of an inch, slapped his hands together and rubbed them and hit ‘record.’

“Done! Well, Mom, Dad, have fun at work. I’m gonna go get in the pool.” He touched Shandra’s shoulder and then mine as he said this, and rushed down the steps. We heard him thank Mr. Werther on his way past, then the huge glass door to the high back patio slid open, and he plodded down the steps and howled as he jumped into the water, causing a great splash.

The moment I could see Mr. Werther’s head again, I decided, I would launch into my first topic. He had given me no sense of urgency, so I would have to provide it myself. He had shown civility aplenty, but professionalism was utterly lacking and so I thought it best to suddenly inject some, to try to catch him off guard. So that’s what I did.

## Interview one.

*John Gerald Werther, author of the controversial novel 'Whimper,' returns up the spiral steps of his multi-million dollar mansion situated in the epicenter of the California Evergreen wildfires. He carries a pair of bathing suits, wine and three glasses, and certainty in every step. We have been asked to examine him and report our findings. These interviews concern the author himself, and not necessarily his work or its outcome. Our intent is to discern how the two are linked; whether the book's effect on the public has been intentional, or whether it is simply a happenstance of seemingly connected but unrelated instances.*

*This first session aims to establish a psychological profile of the man. To probe his opinion on basic matters, so the reader may form a more accurate image of him in their head.*

**Good afternoon, Mr. Werther. First off, I want to thank you for allowing us into your home. I have to say, it's rare that a subject under such scrutiny would bring us into their private space like this, let alone to stay for almost a full week. I hope our presence isn't an annoyance to you.**

Just 'John' is fine. Did I give off the impression that I was annoyed? I hope not, but I'll admit, I didn't realize this would be such an extended stay. But that's my fault entirely, and I've got only myself to blame for it. Complete honesty: I never actually read the email from your Editor-in-Chief, I just had my agent read it for me.

**I see. Since we're admitting things, I didn't read it either until after my plane landed.**

Well, aren't we a pair? We deserve each-other, then. *(Laughs)*

If I gave off some sense of displeasure at your being here, I am terribly sorry. But you should know it's directed inward, not at you. I suppose I should applaud you for being so astute, David. But that is

your role, after all.

*While he said this, he set the three wine glasses at our stations. He uncorked the bottle with just his thumb—I'm not quite sure how he did that—then swirled it some to let its contents breathe. He poured each glass three-quarters full without spilling a drop, directly in the center like the professionals do. But the wine itself was a generic brand, the type you can find for five dollars at your nearest grocer.*

*On his way around the table he laid a skimpy bathing suit over the back of the seat next to my producer. It looked like a ball of black yarn. Shandra's eyebrows shot up when she saw it, and I could tell she was abashed just at the thought of being seen in it. Her cheeks flushed.*

*Outside, our Vodographer hollered as he dove into the pool. While Werther took his seat, Shandra went to close the balcony door, so as not to pollute the recording with too much sound. She apologized for his enthusiasm.*

Can you blame him? Besides, what's a pool without someone to swim in it? Just a network of placid, boring water, getting no use from anyone. That's all it is.

**About the ash. You live extraordinarily close to these wildfires. Are you concerned about remaining in a neighborhood that's considered at risk?**

That's an interesting question. I hadn't thought about it much. I've sort of accepted the possibility—the reality of them, I guess.

**It's not something most people could handle.**

You might be surprised what you can get used to. There are still a few of us out here, and living this way has become the new normal. It can be lonely, but it can also be somewhat serene. The rules are different, but in a way, they're more the same than they've ever been. There's still an ecosystem—thriving when it can, surviving when it can't. The raccoons especially have made a comeback. I hear them every night, rummaging for every scrap they can find. They roam

around in little platoons. It's almost commendable.

**People and raccoons are very different animals.**

Are they? Intelligent, adaptable scroungers. Four fingers and a thumb. And we are just animals, after all. The most successful, most prolific animals on Earth. But animals all the same.

**You said you hadn't thought about it much. You mean to say you've never even considered the danger in staying here?**

It's an unusual perspective, I know. But I find it brings out the best in me. Maybe it's the countdown. I see the end staring me in the face out there, and it drives me to get something done. Though maybe that's simply because of the isolation.

**Don't you find it affecting your mental state, though? Not just the smoke itself, but the constant lingering anxiety?**

Oh, sure, sometimes, absolutely. I have my moments where, I just get lost in dread. But then it pushes me again. "Get to work," it says. It's pushed me further than I ever thought I'd be able to go. More times than I can count. It becomes... enthralling. You'll see what I mean.

*He drank his whole glass in a single gulp as if it were a shot of rum. His eyes lit up with an idea before it was down, and he began to refill his glass.*

No, I know what it is. It's the restriction. It's the knowledge that anything I don't finish while I'm here is gone forever. And sometimes the most brutal restrictions can lead to the most creative creations.

**I understand. Even in this great big house of yours, you've found a way to be a hermit—or maybe 'ascetic' is more accurate.**

If you have to put a label on it. Really, this whole area, it's become a town outside of time. It's like a microcosm of the limitations of life.

**You mean because it's finite?**

Exactly. But then you consider, there's limitless possibility in finity. That is, *within finiteness*. And so it's almost better than infinity. There's no boundary on infinity, which is a sort of boundary in itself. Even

endlessness has the restriction of not having an end. I wonder what a world like that will be like.

**A world like what?**

One where the widest rift between two people is utterly negated by the sheer size of the place itself.

**I'm not sure I follow.**

I'm not so sure, either. Forget it.

*Another glass down. He offered the bottle, recorked it.*

**About the title. It's clearly a reference to T. S. Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men.' But why leave it so open-ended?**

Now I'm the one who's confused.

**It's just that, any connection to your book notwithstanding, you only used one word from the poem. The very last word: 'Whimper.' Is that meant to suggest a sense of finality? Or maybe to hint that our society is at a tipping point? A call to action, if you will?**

Seems like you've thought about it more than I ever did. But that's your nature, isn't it? I don't have the patience for that, or the tact. You know, I read your Sun Steel article. Amazing work. Not just the way you described the intricacies of the steel industry so that a simpleton like myself could understand it, but the whole structure of it. There was this constant, underlying tension, you were always wondering "when is it going to happen? And what? When is the other shoe going to drop?" I can't fathom how much you've helped those people.

**Less than you might expect. From what I've gleaned of you, the impression I took from other interviews, I wasn't sure you would approve.**

Why? Do I seem like the type to take the side of ruthless corporate entities?

**Frankly, you seem like the type of person who is willing to make sacrifices in the name of progress, no matter what the cost.**

You might be right. But I know the difference between 'right' and

‘wrong.’ ‘Worthwhile’ and ‘not.’ And it seems to me the weight of a life has got to be heavier than the weight of an I-beam. But don’t get it twisted, I’m not so sure I’d side with mankind in general, either.

What I like is a person who knows their purpose and strives to meet it. I mean that in regard to your work.

### **Back to the title...**

To tell you the truth, it was never really meant to be a reference. More of a, suggestion. Not even that. A hint. I never liked Eliot, or poetry at all, for that matter. Most people only know the saying anyway, the last two lines. I could have named it ‘*Our Dried Voices*,’ or ‘*When we Whisper Together*,’ but then it wouldn’t have held such a unanimous gravity, would it? And if I’d hearken any more thoroughly, people might be tempted to draw comparisons between Eliot and myself. You know, he didn’t go to war; Eliot? He went to Oxford.

That’s not to negate whatever issues he might have had. We all have our ailments, vices, et cetera. But did he ever see a train pass at two-hundred miles an hour? Hear the sound of massive ordinance nuclear missiles detonating a hundred miles away? Forest fires and wild dogs and roaming gangs on motorcycle? The average modern human sees more danger on their walk to work than ever before.

‘The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started.’

### **‘And know the place for the first time.’**

*Werther smiled. I don’t think I caught him off guard, but he certainly pretended as if I had. I played along.*

I thought about naming it ‘*Not With a Bang*.’ But, knowing humanity, I figured the more immature readers would expect more fucking. Wouldn’t want to disappoint. That and, well, ‘the way the world ends;’ not such a laughing matter, is it?

**That depends on who you ask. Not to dwell too much further on Hollow Men, but is that what you really think of humanity? That we’re on our way out?**

Quite the opposite. We're on our way in.

### **Meaning?**

To an endless world. It started with writing, and was cemented by the internet: humanity will never cease. We're not going anywhere, even if we do.

**For the sake of argument, if it did end? What would you have to say about it? After all, it seems rather relevant to this 'finite microcosm' you choose to live in.**

*He uncorked the bottle, drank straight from it while he thought.*

Well, like I say, I don't think humanity is going anywhere, at least not its physical form. I certainly hope it isn't. But if it did, I would think we should at least go out the way the universe came in. With a bang. Show it who's really alive.

### **Is that part of the dispute? That the universe is alive or dead?**

What a silly question. Of course it's alive! It's moving around us at one point three million miles per hour, all the time. Stars birthing, dying, creating new planets, planets creating people. We're alive, aren't we? We are part of the universe, wouldn't you say?

Do you know the paradox of Zeno's Arrow? It's not really a paradox, more just a fact of physics. A pre-Newton attempt to grasp the innate truths of the real world. 'The flying arrow is motionless at any given instant of time but if multiple instants are considered it is in motion.' Something like that. Well we are not still. We can't be. Even while we sleep, our cells are hard at work. Even when we die, we're alive—we're all these little things dissipating, just taking a new form. Our neurons are filled with electrons, our thoughts are made up by them. If those are moved onto a new format, it doesn't mean they stop. The universe remains as alive as it ever was. And if we can more thoroughly connect to it—speak its language, figuratively, maybe even literally—it might arguably be even more alive than it ever was before.

**I take it you don't subscribe to the idea that the universe is**

## **slowly dying, or, for that matter, the world?**

The world may be dying, at least in its capacity as mankind's home. But we won't be the ones to kill it. Only the sun can have the final say on that. But matter can neither be created nor destroyed. Only converted. When you burn a log, is it gone? No, it turns into ash, plasma, heat. The universe may be the same. I say 'may be' because nobody can really be certain. Much as we can speculate, nobody's actually been to the beginning or the end yet. Now humanity most certainly could be dying. Or at the very least, struggling to leave. We'll have to find a new form, sooner or later. But we have some time before that becomes a serious conversation.

**You seem to feel strongly about this. Yet I notice you tend to avoid speaking in absolutes on the matter.**

I don't pretend to have all the answers. I'm just a stupid man, writing absurd books. Books people seem to love to burn.

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## **That first night.**

I was in in the guest room with Shandra, in a blue armchair, comfortable but unwelcomingly out-of-place. She had changed into the clothes that Werther fetched for her and was hanging up the rest in the little closet in the corner of the room. Last among these was the skimpy bathing suit, which she placed at the very back, but looked at twice.

"I think this is cashmere," she noted as she came out and closed the door, craning her neck and pulling the collar of the salmon pink sweater she had on, searching for a tag.



Her tablet displayed thumbnails from frames of our interview, as well as an audio timeline. The book sat beside it, splayed open on the bed, resting on its back. Shandra was nearly a quarter through already. I did my best not to feel tempted to look.

I concerned myself with an article on my phone. *Tech Trillionaire's Death Ruled Suicide*. It was certain: Vincent Park really was gone. No sign of a struggle, pills in his system, a thumbprint on the railing. He left no note, which left me to consider that his plea to Paul carried that much more severity, which made me wonder that much more. I felt my eyes wander to the book.

"What're you reading?" asked Shandra, and I shuffled the article away.

"Nothing," I said. "So, what do you think?"

"Of Werther? He's nice. Not what I expected, if I'm being honest. Not at all. Especially after that story Mr. Pastor told us. Do you think he was just messing with us?"

"It's possible. Although, it didn't seem like it. But he's always been a sort of humorous guy. When we were on the boats in Vietnam, he'd point out the crocodiles and I could tell he just wanted to see the look on my face. But every time, he'd smile. Once, he pointed one out and made like the boat was capsizing, just for fun. Another time we were on a, I guess you'd call it a stake-out. We did some fishing to pass the time. I fell asleep and woke up to this gigantic fish landing in my lap. We cooked it up for lunch and dinner, and I told our crew all about it when we got back to town. But one of the locals said that fish that big don't swim up the rivers. Apparently, I wasn't the first one he'd fooled. I should have known, by the way he was smiling then, too."

"Didn't seem like he was smiling today," Shandra concluded.

"No."

"But between that, and the way he looked when we got here, and the message from Paul, I sort of expected... Well, I don't know what I

expected, really. It sounds silly, now that I think of it, but I figured he'd be some sort of psycho. Like the rich villain straight out of a comic book. But I just don't see it."

"No," I said again, then quietly, "But maybe that's what he wants."

Her eyebrows raised as if to ask me what I'd said, but we were interrupted by Clint's sudden entry. "What's up? What're we talking about?"

"Nothing," said Shandra. "Just, Werther."

"You mean 'John?'" His voice deepened and he nudged her suggestively.

"Yeah. How about you, what do you think of him?"

"I love him. Especially his house."

"Why did I even ask? You just like his pool."

"Not just his pool. He's got all kinds of other cool shit around here, too. You see the arcade nook yet? Guy's got every Atari game there is."

Shandra had been fiddling with the sleeves of the sweater and was rolling them up her wrists when she found the tag dyed in into the inner-left sleeve. "'One-hundred percent cashmere,' I knew it. Hold that thought a second. I really feel like I shouldn't be wearing this." She ducked out of the room beside Clint, and shortly we could hear her speaking with Werther.

Clint sat on the edge of the bed. As he did, the mattress bowed into a V and the book and Shandra's tablet slipped toward him as if attracted to his mass.

"Hey, check it out," he said, and produced his own copy. It had a different cover than the one I'd picked up: grayish blue with playful lettering.

"I thought you didn't care for it?"

"I don't, but look." He slipped a finger beneath the front cover and the title page and forced it open. There beneath the title was the author's signature, a dynamic swirl scribbled in silver ink.

"You got an autograph?"

"Yeah," smiled Clint. "First and only signed copy, far as I've seen. Some fanboy'll pay a fortune for this shit!" He tossed it up a few inches and meant to catch it by its spine, but accidentally launched it forward a few feet, tumbling onto the floor. "Oops." He snatched it up and leaned onto Shandra's bed again.

"Here, I got something I wanna read you out of it, too."

"No, I can't," I told him.

"What? You said you wanted perspective or whatever, why not take it straight from the donkey's mouth?"

"It's 'horse's mouth' and, I can't do that. It was the only stipulation in the contract. I'm not going to break it."

"Oh, who gives a shit, Dave? You really think this Vincent guy's gonna care?" I continued protesting, but he pushed, "C'mon, just let me read you two lines."

I refuted him as sternly as I could again, and Clint sighed. "Fine, then, I'll just give you the gist. There's no rule against gists, is there?"

It was a flimsy excuse, but curiosity got the better of me. I said nothing, and Clint sought a page not far in.

"So humanity is stuck together on this great, big ark, like it or not. And the wormwood in the hull built out of societies lashed together like rotting planks and limping along with its broken rudder, saltwater leaking through all her holes—"

"I said no direct readings."

"Alright, alright. The point is, what he's getting at, is that humanity's sort of always been sinking, right? But even when a ship is sinking, it can stay afloat. As long as it moves. Or at least, it's easier if it's moving. And what's kept us moving for so long? Fear. See, right here, '...that is the fuel that keeps the torches lit, fires the bellows and at the same time, threatens to crack them open any time,'" (I held up my hand so he'd stop reading again) "essentially what he's saying is,

‘fear’s this ever-present tool, reminding everyone they better paddle for their fuckin lives.’”

“Fear of what?”

“I dunno. Fear of the unknown, maybe. Or, I think at some point he mentions war. Or maybe it’s death. It’s probably death.”

Shandra returned, her cheeks flushed again. She must have heard Clint as she began refuting him before she was even through the door. “I think you missed the point, Clint. What the character’s saying is that these sort of in-born, or sometimes societally-bred fears—you know, things like losing your job or going to prison—they push us forward, sure, but they also hold us back. I remember that part because she talks about the Ship of Theseus and compares it to a man whose brain is in a fully-robotic body, and a woman in a coma, living in a world projected entirely in her head.”

Clint had a slack look on his face like he didn’t understand her. I’m fairly certain he did. He back turned to me. “See, this is why I think you should’ve just come out with it. Cut the bullshit. Why didn’t you ask about the suicides right off the bat?”

“I want to get him acclimated to us, and the readers to him. I don’t want anybody to make any assumptions. If I were to do that, I’d be hand-holding them straight to conclusions. Besides, I didn’t want him to shut us out.”

“Guaranteed he’s expecting it. Don’t pussyfoot around too long, people hate that shit. You luring him into it, it stinks of ‘gotcha’ already.”

Shandra scoffed. “Never expected you of all people to look down on gotcha journalism.”

“Me? Hell no, man. ‘Gonzo,’ not ‘gotcha.’ I wouldn’t have even have told him it was an interview. Gets people in the interview headspace, gets their guard up. And I’d have drunk my drink, too.”

“I’m sure you would have.”

“Shit, if I was him, I’d have wanted you to ask first thing. Get it out of the way—I’d be stoked to have someone I could explain it to. After all, it’s not like he held the gun. Or, guns. Pills. Whatever. Maybe the rest of the world got the wrong impression.”

“Like you did?”

“Exactly. I mean, it’s like you guys said on the way here: maybe they just saw what they wanted to see.”

I was biting my thumbnail, one of few bad habits I had left. “I don’t know,” I thought aloud.

“And you never will if you don’t ask.”

“There are other issues I’d like him to weigh in on before we even get into that.”

“More important than what we came here for? Like what?”

I had something in mind: that little stand I saw in the study. The device that I knew it was meant for. But instead what I said was “Like those paintings he definitely shouldn’t have. I saw one of them, a year ago now, in the Museo del Prado. At least, I thought I did. It should have been the real one. So why is the real one here?”

Clint leaned back to rest on Shandra’s bed, and she rushed to snatch her tablet out from beneath his tumbling girth. He exhaled and said, “Easy. He’s rich. The rules are different for rich dudes. ‘First to reach the lifeboat are at the top of the ship,’ or something like that.” I would later learn that he was quoting Werther’s book.

Shandra let out a little moan of disagreement, but then her eyes sprang wide. She turned her tablet to show us: among small square icons was a familiar image. A salmon pink cashmere sweater, its price: €999. The one he had told her to keep.

## The next morning.

All night the house shook in its floorboards with a warble that seemed like it could only come from some monster of the underworld. I tossed and turned, unable to sleep at first, and curious of what was making the sound. When I went to the restroom in the middle of the night, I realized it emanated from three floors below: it was Clint, snoring in the gym. My curiosity sated, I could sleep.

I woke up to a shuffle in the hallway outside as if a dog had been loosed and its paws were scratching on the hardwood floors. The study was bright but monotone. Light from the windows was flat grey, and clouds seemed to press up against them (it took me a moment to remember it was white fog). Each window was its own lightbox pointed at me. Outside it was eerily sunless, and timeless as well.

The creature descended the stairs. I could swear it was walking on all four of its feet. But as I exited the study, I only caught a glimpse from behind: whirring machines, black plastic, hoses and skin.

I was just wiping the sleep from my eyes when I heard the front door close downstairs. I thought to descend the steps next to the study, but I could see that the door to Werther's room was open, and I'll admit I was more curious than alarmed. I knew it was him. I saw the emaciated creature running from the window. Running shirtless in the fog in a respirator mask. But at the time, I pretended not to know, and even made like I would knock as I sidled up next to his door.

I never did. My attention was caught before I could. There it was, just as I had figured it would be: the Neuratek headband. A mystical piece of technology capable of sending users into different worlds, into realms of unbound imagination, and into comas. Sitting on his bedside table. Treated like an ordinary cellphone. I was right, but that fact did little to comfort me. Neither did it answer any of my questions. Why was it there? How did it come to be in his possession in the first place?

His bed was primly made. His closet, what little I could see inside, was hung with comfortable-looking thobes and kimonos and rows of basketball shorts. On the floor were toe-shoes and the vacant space for a missing pair, the same type he wore every day.

I could only see the right side of the room. I didn't touch the door. I didn't see the wall opposite it, or the painting hung above the bed. I was too focused on that little plastic headband.

Out on the balcony, the world seemed blank. It was cold and muggy, dark and bright simultaneously. Lamps hung in the near and far, like not-so-remote stars in a grey outer space. The light was not as overbearing as it seemed from inside, but it was omnidirectional to the point of near-pain, to the point you might forget you were ever asleep or awake. Any trace of the raging fires had vanished. I knew they were still there. I looked for Werther's figure over the railing but couldn't find him. Voices and the sounds of motorcycle engines resonated between the structures and the streets. I was surprised at the evidence of lingerers, but it was just as Werther had said.

I went down to make coffee and found it already made. Another sound of rummaging, and I saw a hunched figure in the kitchen out of the corner of my eye. I came in slowly. The whole house had me on edge, and still does.

Clint was head-deep in the freezer. He seemed to be looking for something. I made some purposeful noise while grabbing a mug from the cupboard. "Shit," he whispered. I'd surprised him. "Thought you were Werther."

"Looking for something?"

"Uh, yeah. Bacon and eggs."

"We lost the pork on the way here."

"Guess toast'll have to do." He brought out breakfast items and set them on the counter, as if they had been the objects of his search all along. He had a coffee on the counter and a cigarette on the

windowsill, trailing smoke out the screen door slivered open.

"You sure you should be smoking?" I asked. "What with the..."

"Well if I already paid the price, I might as well get something out of it," he replied.

"Fair enough. But maybe, just while we're here—"

"Hey, the man said one rule." He held up a finger, then turned it down. When I looked to his socks, he wiggled his toes.

"I mean because of the smoke. It's bad enough outside already."

"Exactly, so I need a de-stress."

"I thought that's what the pool was for," I muttered, and he asked what I said so I switched. "Are you stressed? It doesn't show."

"Yeah, well," Clint trailed off, and I caught him looking to the freezer again. He started cracking eggs into a pan on the stove. "Six more days we're here. Any second we could be fried up til we pop like—like peeps in a microwave." He took a drag from his cigarette.

He surprised me with this bit of clarity, and it wouldn't be the last time. I wasn't sure at first what to say to be both reassuring enough to provide value, yet not so soft that he wouldn't listen or care. I clasped my hands around the rim of my mug, warming them like a hobo. "I know it seems like a lot at the moment," I said finally. "But it's nothing to worry about. If it gets any closer, we'll leave. I won't prioritize a story over our lives."

He scoffed a bit. "Well *that's* good to hear. But unfortunately, it's not something we can really run away from. And where would we go?"

"I'm not sure. But we'd figure it out. Instances like this, they seem nerve-racking before they're actually on you. They are. You get tense, anxious. That's normal. But when the time comes to take action, this sort of, calm starts to come over you. You go into survival mode, and when you do that, the world and its troubles, they just become an obstacle to get around. I've been close to death more than a few times. Trust me, we'll be alright."



Looking back now, I feel terrible for having said that. But how was I supposed to know?

Another scoff, another drag. His ashes fell into the eggs. “You think you’re close to death just cause you report on it? You ever actually *seen* a corpse, Dave?”

I’d seen plenty, but I didn’t have time to say this. I unclasped my hands but before I could speak, he continued: “I have. My dad. He left this world a la Chevy. Stank up the whole garage with the fumes. Yeah, they found him lain up in his favorite chair watching Nascar on full blast—drove the neighbors fuckin wild. Only noticed he was dead ‘cause of the smell. I was gonna take that chair, but he ruined that, too. Shit and piss and blood all over it. Asshole. Speaking of piss, that’s what I got as an inheritance. A bucket full of piss. And a house that smelled like piss, rat-infested hellhole in the center of North Dakota. That’s it. So pardon if I don’t put a whole shit-ton of weight into your experience with death. ‘Cause we all got stories, Dave.”

I was speechless, though my mouth had dropped open as if I had something to say. I thought of my brother, and said the only words I could draw up from my throat. “Jesus, Clint, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, well don’t be. I’d almost forgot about it. Just don’t expect me to take even a second off to have a wittle cwy, about anything. I’m here for the money. That’s it. After that, I’m out. One way or the other.”

“When did this happen?”

He peered up to the ceiling in consideration. “October?”

I was waiting for more, but he went back to his eggs. “October?” I asked. “Of last year?”

“Generally, when people name a month, they do mean the last time it came around.”

There was more I wanted to ask him—much more—and plenty I had to say. But we heard Shandra’s door open behind us. “I thought I heard you guys.”

“Eggs? There’s coffee.” The toaster reminded him: “and toast.” Clint prepared a plate for each of us and we sat at the marble island in the kitchen together.

“Hey, was one of you up at five in the morning?” she asked.

“Must have been Werther.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“He went running,” I said.

“In the rain?”

I was going to say that it wasn’t raining, but I checked the slim window behind me to find that it was. Wavelets rolled on the surface, coating with dusky layers and then washing them away. Black rain fell in the streets.

The front door slammed. Shandra dropped her mug and let out a yelp. The thing standing there was only human in the most unearthly way. Its bare chest stained grey, skin stretched over skeletal form. Dark shorts and dark shoes with hard toes like claws, and whirring machines with hoses that lead up to a helmeted face mask reminiscent of a Schutzstaffel soldier.

She began apologizing immediately, before he had even fully removed his mask, revealing a smile dripping with mischief. “I’m so sorry, I got coffee everywhere. I’ll pay for the mug.” He helped her gather up the pieces, sweeping them with his bare hands.

“No, no, don’t worry about it. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t trying to spook someone.”

Clint snickered, though I’m not sure what at.

Werther took a deep breath in and let it soar proudly from his teeth. “Good morning, all. We sleep well?”

Shandra and I gave the requisite affirmatives and thanks. Clint, a cheek still stuffed with food, said “Morning, Al. How’s Mommy?”

Werther cocked his head, seeming not to understand, but then he brushed his forehead and found his fingers covered in black ash. “Is

that a '*Jazz Singer*' reference? That's good!" Thinking about it now, I realize why Clint had laughed.

"Do you go out running every morning?" I asked. He answered that he did and I followed up with, "Well, why?"

"I don't have a treadmill," he said simply.

"Well, with the mask and the rain, and all the—" Shandra made a motion to sum up the rest of the gear he was removing, large Bowie knife included. "It's gotta be heavy."

He just shrugged. "You get used to it." Then he seemed to be stricken with inspiration. He rushed over to a closet beside the guest room, which was thin but looked deeper than even seemed possible. He disappeared inside. I could see racks full of canvases, some of them painted and some clear.

Shandra watched until he was gone and we began to hear him rummaging. Resituating herself in her chair, she spoke only loud enough for us to hear. "Gotta give him this much: the guy doesn't compromise."

"Neither does Mammy Nature," said Clint.

The rattling reached a fevered pitch. A few small boards and planks fell from the closet, but Werther, occluded by a huge notebook, kicked them back in, then the door closed. He had a rusted iron easel under one arm that he set up at the rim of the fire pit. He swung the notebook around to set it on the ledge, and turned to a blank page. He took one step back but immediately returned and turned the book on its longer side. He dug his fingers into the center. At first I thought he was attempting to force his way through. But then he spread himself across the white space in fluid motions, using his fingers and his fists and then his whole body to mark with ash.

We watched quietly. Clint had been snickering at first, but when Werther began spitting on his arms and wringing out his hair, he fell quiet as well. We looked to one-another with exactly the expression

I'm sure is on the reader's face now. But then Shandra and I both came over to get a good look at his work, and I couldn't help but be a little bit impressed.

In less than a minute the subject was clear and as crisp as if it had been made with store-bought charcoal. It was a building, a compound, perhaps a church of some sort. There was a light out front and a fence with barbed wire and two or three turrets, one of which was lost in shadow. A fire billowed out of the right side, shifting seamlessly from flames to black smoke.

By the point that it was detailed and properly vignetted, Werther had nearly run out of pigment. He stepped back to get a look at it and dust off his hands, accomplished.

"It's missing something," he thought aloud.

"Color?" asked Shandra half-jokingly.

"Maybe," he replied, though I'm not sure he actually agreed.

"Do you paint often?" I wondered.

"Not enough."

"Because I hadn't noticed any brushes or other supplies."

"No, I usually only work with my hands. Tools just get in the way. I prefer to go from finger to canvas, no disconnect." He went to the sink to clean himself off using the same towel that had soaked up the coffee, but only after drinking a few swigs straight from the pot.

Shandra and I stood looking at the black-and-white scene in front of us for a short while. One hand was folded under an elbow, while the other clasped at her neck, kneading her hair. She cleared her throat and said she would go take a shower, and as she climbed the stairs Clint said "I'm going next so don't lose the shower head."

As he passed, he gave the painting a glance and a grunt, that was all. "Well, I'll go check the vods and dump the extra drives. Be ready in twenty." Then he retreated up the spiral staircase.

Then we were alone. Only myself and Werther, and the running

water of the sink. The representation of fire between us. The evidence of it surrounding the house. And in this short time with only the two of us, he offered the first true insight into his mind.

He didn't turn to face me. He spoke quietly, yet his whisper was nearly louder than my speaking voice.

"You know, I've read your stuff, David. I like it. Have I told you that?"

"You have."

He hummed. "But have I said why?" He took my silence as an answer. "Because, it reflects reality. It's a product of work, and toil. Unlike most of the other nonsense you can read. Ai-generated drivel—you can always tell by the end of the first sentence. Everyone can, even when they can't explain it."

The sink shut off and we were locked in silence. He came over to stand beside me and look at his creation. For the first time I saw the green in his eyes. They were a deep and impenetrable forest—not just in color, but in the way that they always seemed to watch you even when they appeared devoid of life.

"You've got the name of a do-er, you know that? David *Swimmer*. It tells me about your ancestors. That they were do-ers too. Those were always going to be the ones that survived. The ones that changed things. The do-ers, the creators. They couldn't help it if they tried. They were born and bred for it. It was only a matter of time before they remade everything. They're the whole reason this country exists. It was in them, not just to take—although, they did plenty of that, don't think I don't know that, oh, they took plenty—but they gave, too. Gave to their children and their children's children, their friends. At least more than the suckling lowlives, the barnacles on the underside of creation. They gave their thoughts, their lives. And because of it, the rest were allowed to flourish. And now there's only a few of them left."

He slouched away, slank toward the bottom of the spiral staircase

and extended a hand to lean on the bannister. “But it doesn’t matter now. The finish line’s in sight.” These words echoed and petered away, but I haven’t forgotten them. With this short statement I had begun to understand him as he was: a man of indiscernible ideals. An agent of the very change he purported to know was soon to come. The nature of the world flowed through him easily, and he had no master, and was capable of enacting that change through sheer belief, and I imagined this was what enamored others with him. I was filled simultaneously with equal measures of awe and alarm—uncertainty.

A quarter of the way up the steps, he stopped. His head hung so that his hair occluded most of his face in shadow when he craned to look my way. “By the way, we’re having a party later this week. Very small, just a few locals stopping by. You’re welcome to stay, but no judgements if things get a bit... strange.” Then he smiled.