LOST IN TRANSMISSION

By

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A Thesis Submitted to The Honors College
In Partial Fulfillment of the Bachelors degree
With Honors in
Creative Writing

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STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

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_Last updated: Nov 15, 2009_
A Short Story Collection
By
Y. S. Eric K."
“Missing [person] are not necessarily lost.”

—The Missing Person Report from Emergency Response International
Warning Signs

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Warning Signs
And such was the end for storytellers of the land of K——. Be wary of what a talented tongue can do for the mind that houses it.

The poor storyteller was led off by the royal guards to be summarily executed. The little tongue wagged at him, “Farewell, farewell,” knowing full well that the man could make no reply.

“He was my former master,” the tongue spluttered out before the Royal Court. “You may have heard of him, by the name of G—— of K——. He was an avid storyteller and remains one still. But the thoughts in that head of his—so rash and ambitious! He’s a danger to himself and others! Silence him forever, I beg of Your Majesties, lest he work some narrative upon your minds to dissuade you from action.”

“Heavens!” gasped the Queen, for it was the only word for the horror of the thing.

“We must be rid of the very root of it!” the King declared. Without a word, paper and pen were brought, as well as a page to make an account of the charges. The delineations shortly concluded and the verdict read guilty.

The storyteller hung his head, unable to offer a proper rebuttal.

So he ushered his heavy feet to the palace, hoping to raise his spirits with whatever entertainment might be had there; if it was truly fantastical, it might ease the pain of all that he’d now forsaken. When the storyteller peered through the crowd, he was half-surprised to learn the culprit was his own tongue, socializing with the well-to-do lords and ladies of the Court, as well as the King and Queen. G—— was truly peerless among storytellers after all—and here was the proof, dancing about alive and well among others, just waiting to be reclaimed.
He tried to call out for his lost appendage, but his effort proved futile. Mouth agape, he feared offending others with his disfigurement. Apart, he had learned his folly and was determined to set things right again. He felt that he had no other choice but to try and dart forward, capture the pink writhing scrap of flesh, and escape with it in hand. But just when he scooped up the ‘curiosity,’ it let out a terrifying shriek, yelling, “Help! Help! I have been seized! It is the end!”

The guards rushed forward, apprehending the storyteller and forcing him to unhand the tongue. The King demanded an explanation for the man’s rudeness, but the storyteller could provide none that proved decipherable.

Ultimately, it was the tongue that intervened on his behalf, “If I may speak, I believe I know this one.” The King scratched his grey beard for a moment, before asking the tongue to continue with its explanation.

All of this happened unbeknownst to the storyteller, who had gone elsewhere to gather wood for the fire. Along the way he had acquired some gauze from a kind peddler, which he had stuffed his mouth to staunch the bleeding.

It was nearly nightfall when he returned home. He had just begun to pile the wood he’d gathered, when he noticed the crucial thing was missing. He scoured the house up and down, long and hard, but could find no trace of it. He ran outside, shaking a passerby or two to get their attention. He proceeded to gesture—like so, and like so—in an effort to make his plight known; but it seemed that none of the inhabitants of K—— could understand what the man meant by this. They had all grown accustomed to such eloquence in their daily conversations that these spasmodic motions seemed like gibberish.
Despairingly, the storyteller sat down at the town square: incommunicado.

Soon two well-to-do gentlemen passed by, paying him no mind. They were too rapt in conversation about a most peculiar miracle occurring at the palace. They both agreed that nothing like it had existed till that day—outside of a flight of fancy.

The tongue rose up by the hearth, for it was a gifted tongue. It considered itself set apart from the typical rabble found in K——, even though some of the finest tongues in the world resided there. Yet now it hopped about, fretting like anything subjected to mortal peril might.

“He means to burn me! He means to have me burned! And all I have ever done is aid him towards his own ends!”

The movements of the fretting tongue now grew so extreme that it began to cough and hack on the thick cloud of ash it had stirred up.

“I must flee to save myself! I’ll not waste another minute with such a selfish man who would throw away something as precious as I! I would throw him away if I had the chance!” And with that, the little tongue hopped away from the hearth and to the threshold. It was sure to call out both ways before proceeding down the thoroughfare, so as to avoid being stomped underfoot.

The little tongue happened upon a pushcart of goods that seemed to be headed to market. “Fortune must be smiling upon me today,” the little tongue swore, for it knew that the traders dealt with customers hailing from all lands. Surely the little tongue would find someone there who would be worthier of its talents than its former owner.
Only when it heard the blare of trumpets did the tongue discover that it was sorely mistaken about its destination. The pushcart it had taken refuge in was quickly turned over to the royal courtiers, who proceeded to wheel it into the throne room.

The tongue cried out as the cart was tipped forward, “Stop! For heaven! I will be crushed!” Instantly the entire assembly fell hushed.

The little pink mass hopped its way towards the feet of its Sovereigns, showing them proper respect in conjunction with their titles. The tongue bowed as low as it could manage, fearing that its unexpected admission to Court might have caused the Sovereigns’ tongues to swoon in their mouths.

Yet the tongue’s fears were soon relieved as the whole assembly erupted with inquiries: How did such an organ gain the ability to speak on its own? Where did it come from? And how did it happen to arrive here? These questions the tongue delighted in answering, which in turn, caused the Court to delight all the more in its arrival.

Yet the more he pondered the sad thing, lying there next to the hearth, the more he seemed to regret the deed that had been done. But it couldn’t be undone. He simply had to carry on, as any protagonist might.

He decided to burn it, straightaway, while his heart was still behind the deed. But he did not have much firewood around his home. So, after taking leave of the organ as if it were some dead friend, he set off to gather the necessary kindling.

In the village of K——, a man named G—— once resided.

G——was very gifted in speech; and though everyone in the village of K—— was also very gifted in this regard, he was the most
gifted of them all. Every morning, afternoon, and night he’d be found telling stories, telling them even when there wasn’t anyone around to listen.

He’d tell stories when there was work to be done. He’d weave in cliffhangers to leave his listeners breathless with every word. Workers preferred to fill their heads with G—’s latest escapades, rather than filling their hands with hard labor. He invited the schoolchildren to ask questions and so taught himself to have an eye for detail.

Yet G—— soon realized that his very identity was rooted in these stories. His audience recalled the fantastical characters that G—— invented, but very little of G—— himself. The storyteller, who could remedy any plot conundrum, any tragic flaw, and tie it all together with a satisfying resolution, wasn’t sure how to fix this very real problem. Would the tales spun by his tongue really be all that remained of him after his passing? Was man nothing but his art? The thought made G—— pause and continued to trouble him.

G—— wanted to remove the thing that pestered him; so he settled on a course of action to end the matter once and for all. He raised a sharpened piece of flint before his face, with a hack-one, hack-two, it was done. The tongue was severed from the man.

He’d succeeded in removing the instrument that had once spun castles out of air, battles with each breath, and happy endings for each life. He tried to console himself with the fact that he could still listen to tales told by others, though they’d be far inferior to his own.

Still, G—— never knew that silence could feel so real, as real as his castles, his battles, and his endings, which would never be spoken of again.
Life Line

“Hello. This is Tray Morogove. I’m not available right now, but please leave a message and I’ll try to get back to you as soon as I can.”

#

Voicemail—May 4th, 2000:

6:30 PM:

“Tray Morogove. This is Susan. The one from cubicle A7? I’m two diagonal from yours. We talked at the last office party back in March. I’m not sure if you remember though. So…I was just calling to let you know that we’ve been assigned the Tulgrove case together. I’ve already received the files and I take it that you’ve got them too? Would it be possible for us to meet this weekend? I’d like to see how far you’ve gotten and if our numbers are matching up. You can reach me at 524-0061. I hope to hear back from you at your earliest convenience.”

#

Voicemail—May 15th, 2000:

2:24 PM:

“Skyline Timeshares is now offering discounts on getaways to Puerto Rico, Belize, Cozumel, the Bahamas, Hawaii, and over fifty other destinations. We were listed as the number one leading provider last year in terms of customer satisfaction and no one can beat our selection of amazing locations at affordable rates. Whether you wish to spend a quiet weekend away on a secluded beach or enjoy a two week vacation from the hustle and bustle of daily life, we’ve got a package for you! But these great deals are going fast. Hurry now before they’re gone and call us at 1-800-GET-AWAY. That’s 1-800-GET-AWAY! Don’t let your chance at paradise slip away!”
Voicemail—May 17th, 2000:

9:54 PM:

“What the fuck, man? When did you get back in town? I’m taking you out for drinks tonight. That is—unless you’re passing up a free beer. Joking. You should loosen up more, man. I’ve seen your pop more than I’ve seen you—and that was ages ago. If you want in on the action—Ah—I’ve got to go. Anyway, I’ll catch you for drinks tonight.”

Voicemail—May 18th, 2000:

9:10 AM:

“This is Lisa from Dr. Philip Moyer’s office calling to confirm your appointment with us tomorrow. If for any reason you need to cancel or reschedule, please call the office at 524-1073.”

Voicemail—May 27th, 2000:

5:40 PM:

“Well, aren’t you full of surprises? Thank you for the flowers—and here I thought that all I’d ever get from you would be a good word or help predicting the next big corporate venture. This is—well, it’s very sweet, Tray. So…would you like to get dinner together sometime? Call me back. Or I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Voicemail—May 29th, 2000:

10:20 PM:
“Hey, buddy. Do you want to get drinks tonight? It’ll be fun. Me and the guys are headed over to Dick’s. No real plans—just going to grab some beer and then fuck shit up. You want to come? Give me a call. We’ll swing by and grab you. Later.”

Voicemail—May 30th, 2000:
11:43 AM:
“Fuck man. You missed an awesome night. Don’t you ever get out? Whatever. If you want to die a shut-in, go ahead. Your loss. You’re the one missing out on fucking all of the girls from Apple to Fremont Street—and enjoying every second of it. You big pussy. What the hell happened to you?”

Voicemail—June 2nd, 2000:
6:02 PM:
“Hey, sweetie. I haven’t heard from you in a while. You must be busy with work. I’ll try again later.”
10:10 PM:
“It’s ten o’clock. I don’t see how any decent employer can keep you there this late…But I wanted to tell you that we’re planning a birthday party for your father on the tenth. It would mean so much if you could attend. Please call me back when you do get home.”

Voicemail—June 3rd, 2000:
7:20 PM:
“Hey, this is Susan. You must still be working late again… I just wanted to let you know that I got your message—I’d love to go with you! It’s your father’s eighty-second, right? I’ll try to be ready by nine. Just give me a call before you head over. See you Saturday!”

#

Voicemail—June 10th, 2000:

8:15 PM:

“We were all delighted to see you at the party, especially your father. He still loves you, you know. He just—he just has a different way of showing it now… You can’t expect so much of him. You know that. He was smiling on the inside to have you there. We both appreciate that you found the time to come. I was very glad to meet this Susan you’ve been telling me about and to hear that things are going better at the office. We’d love to have both of you for Christmas. There’s the guest bedroom, so no need for you to stay at a hotel. I know it’s early, but please consider it. We’d love to see you.”

#

Voicemail—June 13th, 2000:

5:17 PM:

“Tray Morogove—how long has it been? I heard that you could use some extra help with the Ritford-Ferrison accounts. No easy sucker when it comes to that one, eh? Look, I’m sure that you can handle it and I know that you’ve already got a helper; but before you get all mad, I’m not trying to edge in on your turf. It’s just business and a few extra hands can’t hurt. It’ll be over before you know it.”

#

Voicemail—June 14th, 2000:
6:19 PM:

“Hey, I’ll make this short. I know that you’ve been busy with work and everything lately, but I just feel…that I haven’t seen you that often. Even at the office, it’s just been in and out. You’re always going over papers, making phone calls, or meeting with someone. No time even for chit chat. How can you…? I know that you love your job, but what about taking some time off? Even for just one day. I’m sure that they’d give it to you. Keeping this up this work habit—it can’t be good. It isn’t healthy. Relaxing isn’t the same as balancing books, Tray. Would you please call me back? I’d like to have dinner with you again—this time, my treat.”

7:49 PM:

“I’m taking your father to the doctor tomorrow. He’s had that welt on his back since last Tuesday. I still don’t have the faintest idea where he got it from. You know that I can’t just ask him about it. But I don’t want to leave it to chance. Just pray that it goes well for your father. I’ll let you know what the doctors say.”

#

Voicemail—June 15th, 2000:

9:10 PM:

“Don’t feed me fucking lies if you’re not going to show. The boys are sick of this shit and I’m getting sick of it too, comprende? You’ve really changed, man—into a real—”

9:27 PM:

“Thanks for getting back to me. This weekend’s good then? I mean, if you don’t want to go out, you could come over to my place. We can order in and watch a movie or something. I like to eat-in sometimes, you know. So, are you more of a horror guy or comedy?”

10:01 PM:
“Thanks. Ten o’clock works great. I’ll see you Saturday. Call me when you’re on your way over.”

10:49 PM:

“Fuck. Haven’t seen you in weeks—and now I find out that you’re seeing some girl? You sly son of a—well, you’ve gone and kissed your good times goodbye.”

#

Voicemail—July 6th, 2000:

12:22 PM:

“Hello, Mr. Morogove. I’m returning a call that you made earlier. We verified that you have access to his medical records. Considering his age and his general health, there is no need for alarm. We ran further tests and concluded that the lesion was benign. It is not uncommon for ulcers and other such things to develop with age and there is no reason to assume that all of them are cancerous. If you have any additional questions or concerns, feel free to call the office again.”

#

Voicemail—July 30th, 2000:

12:45 PM:

“Your father is doing so much better. The incision has healed up nicely and I haven’t noticed anything similar come back. He’s even felt up to sitting out on the porch, though I told him it’d be best if he stayed inside. He’s still out there now. I just popped inside for a moment. I had to get a batch of cookies out for the church bake sale. It’s been fairly quiet here since the Hendersons moved out. It’s given your father and I more time to try some of the exercises the specialist recommended. I bought some clay and—you remember how good he was with his
hands? He hasn’t lost his touch. He even seems to recall some of the old movies I’ve played for him. He mentioned your name yesterday—You really should see how much progress he’s making. I’m so proud of him. …Tray, I think he really misses you.”

2:02 PM:

“…vote for a man that represents ideals. John L. Gregnor has promised to work hard for your support. He will protect small businesses in an ever-growing economy, promote an increase in educational resources for our schools, and enforce conscientious spending in terms of our state’s needs. Vote for a man that has principles—a man who is determined to serve you and better our community.”

Voicemail—August 4th, 2000:

5:10 PM:

“Congrats on closing those AAT accounts. Do I smell a promotion on the way? Well, there’s no real time to celebrate. We need to get started on the next line of business. I’ll shoot you and Susan an e-mail. In the meantime, let’s start going over the books.”

Voicemail—August 12th, 2000:

1:03 AM:

“Hey. I just wanted to let you know that I had a great time tonight. Thanks for—well, everything. Well, I’ll talk to you later. I hope to see you soon. …Tray? Ah, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

Voicemail—August 14th, 2000:
12:34 PM:

“Tray, your father’s getting worse. The doctor has recommended a new medication, which he says has had better results in studies. I’m picking up his first dosage today. I hope that it’ll help him… I can’t—they still say there’s only so much you can do—that sometimes things can’t be helped. But I still go through the photo albums everyday hoping… at least on the days when he’s up for it… Would you consider dropping by this weekend? You’re more than welcome to bring Susan.”

#

Voicemail—August 18th, 2000:

1:11 PM:

“…ALP’s mission is to assist in the risks of everyday life, promote recovery, and assure our clients that nothing unexpected bars them from realizing their dreams. We provide quality life insurance at a low price. By simply paying twelve cents a day, you can prevent your loved ones from suffering the economic burden of unpaid medical bills or the cost of an expensive funeral. Even though we stand as one of the top providers in the insurance industry, we never forget that people like you are at our very core. Please don’t hesitate to call ALP. We promise to cater to your needs and the needs of your family when it matters most.”

#

Voicemail—September 4th, 2000:

8:56 AM:
“Oh god, Tray—it’s your father! He…he’s in the hospital. We just got here. The paramedics took him in for evaluation. Please hurry! I need you here. He needs you here. Where are you?”

9:01 AM:

“Where are you? The doctors—they say he had a stroke. He’s not himself—I don’t know if I can—Yes? No, he doesn’t. He was only taking what I listed. Tray—? Tray, he can’t even talk! He—with the doctors, he repeats the motions they tell him to do. Thank god for that—but if he had—He was fine an hour ago, just sitting in his chair like always and now—…He still looks so pale. He wouldn’t respond at all to anything I did or said. Thank god he’s not—that he can still move and understand and—but we need you here! I need you here!”

11:25 AM:

“You said you were coming an hour ago. We’re in Room 236A. Please hurry. You are on your—ah … …Yes, I understand. …No. Thank you—I’m sorry—Tray. Please come as soon as you can.”

1:25 PM:

“Your father’s asleep now. I hope you get here soon.”

#

Voicemail—September 5th, 2000:

12:12 PM:

“Did something happen last night? I thought you were having fun when you came over to help me with that…thing. Then you just left. We’re still good, right? Please call me back. Maybe we can grab coffee or talk this over. I hope you’re not upset. I love you.”

6:17 PM:
“I’ve tried calling five times. Are you okay? Look…I didn’t mean for you to take it that way. Can’t we just rewind—if I upset you? I don’t know…what did I do? I’m sure that we can work things out…if we just talk. If you’re there, well—I should be home for the rest of the night.”

7:05 PM:

“Tray, call me back.”

7:17 PM:

“Call me.”

8:02 PM:

“Please call me back.”

#

Voicemail—September 6th, 2000:

7:10 PM:

“Honey, thank you for your help through this. I know how you feel about your father, but—really—I just think that he’d be more comfortable at home. I know that you worry—that you think a nurse would be able to care for him better, but I don’t mind doing it—really! He’s happier here and so am I. Our house is already enormous—it would be wasted on just me. He manages to get around—and I’m never really out of earshot. We’ll just have to be more careful in the future if—but I just checked on him. He’s napping. I’ll let you know if his condition changes.”

7:40 PM:

“Will you please talk to me? Please, we can sort this out over the phone, Tray. Not through e-mail. Bye.”
9:13 PM:

“Look, just tell me what I did. Most guys, I mean, would have had a good time. Why won’t you even speak to me? I don’t understand why you overreacted. There was no reason to.”


Voicemail—September 7th, 2000:

2:13 PM:

“…of House Democrats. Are you aware that Congressman Bill Hillman voted against incentives endorsed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce? If he is elected, Americans will likely face the largest tax cut in history. Call Sessions at 788-526-4041 to ask why he voted to raise taxes on middle class families.”

8:40 PM:

“Tray. I’m sorry, all right? Fine. There’s more to what we have than just…I think it would be better if we worked things out in person, rather than playing phone tag or trying e-mail. Let me know if you want to meet.”


Voicemail—September 9th, 2000:

5:30 PM:

“Hey, Tray…I was going over the numbers on the Ritford-Ferrison accounts again and they’re still not adding up right. You made a couple of mistakes, buddy—actually, more than a couple. I think that we need to talk ASAP.”

6:10 PM:
“Talk about some slip-ups. Are you okay? You’re missing some stuff that that little Miss Suzie got right off the bat. Are you just pulling my leg, or do you want to get shown up by a newbie?”

7:40 PM:

“Tray, did you know that the figures you sent us were off? I just got done talking with Jack and well…this isn’t like you. We need to meet. Even if it’s not about, well…I know that even you will find the time to conference if it’s strictly about work. Won’t you?”

#

Voicemail—September 11th, 2000:

9:18 PM:

“I’m glad that we met yesterday. But you seemed different. We didn’t talk like we used to. You didn’t even crack a smile. Not once. I hope that we could still be—well, I guess that’s up to you. Look, I didn’t call just to attack you, even if you think that’s all I’m doing. I called because of how your work’s been lately. The figures are off. But you know that, don’t you? …Are you sabotaging yourself, Tray? Why would you—I mean, with everything you’ve done for the company…I guess that I’ll just talk to you later then. Or see you at work. Maybe. If you change your mind and actually want to talk, you know my number. I’m sure that you haven’t forgotten it.”

#

Voicemail—September 16th, 2000:

5:01 PM:
“In light of recent conduct in the workplace, your status within the company is now under committee. You will be notified when a consensus is reached. If additional information is required, we will contact you.”

Voicemail—September 30th, 2000:
12:10 PM:
“I heard from a friend that you were going out of town. Are you really leaving? It’s just another family visit, right? If it is, why didn’t you tell me? …I guess that I’ll see you when you get back, Tray.”

4:20 PM:
“We appreciate your services at GANCOR, but regret to inform you that we will no longer be requiring your services. The time, dedication, and exceptional commitment you have invested in our company will never be forgotten. You will always be considered a part of the GANCOR family.”

Voicemail—October 2nd, 2000:
8:59 AM:
“You could have at least told me that you were leaving, you jerk! Nothing! …Still nothing? If you still don’t want to talk, fine. I can take a hint—I’m better off now, believe it or not! Good luck with—whatever! I don’t want to hear from you ever again.”

1:01 PM:
“… … …”

8:17 PM:
“… …Chck.”

9:59 PM:

“… …Tray, you know… … I… … I guess you’re really gone then.”

#

Voicemail—November 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2000:

6:16 PM:

“Would you be able to join us for Thanksgiving, dear? I know that you must have a lot on your plate already and I don’t want to be a bother. Your father’s getting on well enough. We should all be thankful that we still have him. Please come…if you can.”

#

Voicemail—November 21\textsuperscript{st}, 2000:

12:20 PM:

“I haven’t heard back from you yet, Tray. May we expect you? I was planning to make the cornbread you like. I hope that you’re able to join us. Please call the house. It’ll only take a moment. Work can’t be so hectic that you can’t even call your own mother.”

#

Voicemail—November 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2000:

8:20 PM:

“I haven’t heard back from you. Are you all right? How long can you be at that office for? Please call me.”

9:01 PM:

“Where’s my rent? You’ve been overdue for the past two months. Someone told me that you were out of work. That’s too bad, but it’s still no excuse. I need that money. Did you go on
vacation? Look, I’ve got to collect. Get it to me somehow. Let me know when you send it, or I’ll keep dropping by.”

#

Voicemail—November 23rd, 2000:

10:20 AM:

“I’m sorry, dear, about your job. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. I’m sure that you’ll find another employer that’s far better than the last one. Times can be hard, but you’re not the only one in this situation, I’m sure. Please call me. I want to make sure that you’re really all right.”

6:23 PM:

“Look, I’m sorry. But if you can’t pay, you’re out of here. I don’t make exceptions. That’s just the way it is. I left the final notice under your door two weeks ago. Now get out.”

#

Voicemail—November 24th, 2000:

4:45 PM:

“I’m sorry that you missed having Thanksgiving with us. Your father and I got along fine, but it would’ve been better if you’d been able to come. But we always have the Christmas holidays to look forward to though. Your father and I would be glad to come to visit you there this year instead. I’m sure that he’d be up to it with some coaxing. I’d try to get someone to drive us. Please consider it.”

#

Voicemail—November 26th, 2000:

8:35 AM:
“I need you to vacate the premises immediately. You have received ample warning. Further lack of compliance will merit police intervention. I understand that times are hard, but if you can’t pay the rent, I’ve found someone else who can.”

#

“We’re sorry. The number you are trying to reach has been disconnected or is not in service at this time. If you’d like to make another call, please hang up and try again.”
Transcription

Paradox
Suzie has six apples and Johnny only has one. Johnny wants Suzie’s apples. He scares her away by yelling and hitting her. He steps forward to claim his prize. She runs away ashamed and feeling naked.

#

Suzie has five apples and Johnny only has one. Johnny wants Suzie’s apples. He talks her out of one of them. He gets the rest after having a conversation with her father. Johnny and Suzie are married. Johnny enjoys the apple tree and the babies in the backyard. Suzie learns how to make apple pie from an old lady who’s losing herself. The recipe changes every time and often comes out too sweet.

#

Suzie has four apples and Johnny only has one. Their stomachs talk of apples. But the people talk of the money no one has. The homeless talk of the money. The hungry talk of the money. The sick talk of the money—if they can; and the talk of the worthless paper makes some so sick, they go to their graves talking about it. Some still talk of it while walking off bridges. Some talk of domestic target practice—the neighbors are left to judge accuracy, and then there’ll be talk of that too. And amid all of this talking, there’s Suzie and Johnny—and their apples. They save up their pennies and apple seeds and good nights—they do the math; and those good nights grow strong hands and feet to bring in more pennies. They still talk of the money and of their midnight neighbors, who do them the favor of picking the fruit growing in their lot. There’s little talk of apples from an empty tree.

#

Suzie has three apples and Johnny only has one. When Johnny asks for an apple, Suzie retorts that he has no business taking one from a lady. She says that men have already taken
enough from women as it is and that he’s a horrible person for assuming that she’d have given him one if he just asked. Johnny doesn’t say anything. He leaves. Suzie rallies up the other women and they form a picket line. Suzie’s demonstration is meant to last until the President hears them. Unfortunately, the police hear them first.

#

Suzie has two apples and Johnny only has one. Johnny lives far away from Suzie, so his one apple will have to last. He doesn’t have a backup like Suzie does. The two of them have been dating for fourteen months now. Suzie kisses the cold flat picture of Johnny on the screen, and the various slices of him wave back at different rates. Suzie says “I love you” to the shish kebab-ed man, eating up the static as well as the words. It’s their goodnight. The lid comes down with the white fruit. She touches it. MacBook is a misnomer.

#

Suzie has one “apple” and Johnny only has one. They depend on their “apples.” They are happy enough. They do not crave what the other has. They do not even crave the other. They are told how to remain happy. They know that “yes” means “yes” and “no” means “no.” They do not speak of death. There is no such thing as love. “Meaning” for most things is “???” for it is not simple. Simple is good. Suzie and Johnny are told what they need to know. They are happy. They never hear why they shouldn’t be.

#

Someone asks a question.

What is an “ap-uhl”?
The Little Fall Guy

For the past four months, six days, and eleven hours, Rachel had been seeing a strange creature. He was a little round man, about two feet in height, wearing glasses and a suit, but behaving unusually. She’d seen him for the first time nestled among her get well cards and photos and balloons from her friends, her mom, and the staff at the gym. She thought it more than odd to find a strange man in her hospital room at the foot of her bed. She didn’t even wait to see if he’d budge, before she yelled in her loudest fourteen-year-old voice “Get out!” It startled her mother into wakefulness, in the way that it would startle any parent whose child might have just caught a glimpse of the boogeyman or some other unnamable horror. But it didn’t displace the freakishly little man, who cupped a hand to one ear. He seemed to encourage her to shout louder, as if that would do the trick. Well, it certainly raised a lot more shouting and pointing on Rachel’s part and silent panic on her mother’s part, who by now seemed to be considering the possibility that she’d injured her head more than the doctors had let on. In the commotion that ensued, Rachel couldn’t remember the precise moment that he left, but he’d gone by the time the monitor’s beep kept time with the rise and fall of white-coated voices—like a metronome, lulling her to sleep.

This was how most of their interactions went, not just the first one. She’d see the little man rubbing his spectacles and inspecting the gymnastic medals her mother had brought in. He’d even tried to put one on once. Though when Rachel told her mother, she made one of those faces—the ones where the nose sharpened to a point and read of maternal concern. Of course it wasn’t the little man that was to blame. There was no little man in her mother’s account of things, not unless he’d disguised himself as a “breeze” that could send a sixteen ounce medal clattering to the floor. After Rachel was released and encouraged to rest at home between
sessions of physical therapy, the antics continued. She kept a running tally of his destruction of a garage sale vase, a bowl, and her math homework under the aliases of “the cat,” “clumsiness,” and “the trash can”—though Rachel had a hand in the last one and was glad to see a C- go where it belonged.

There were certain things that Rachel didn’t care for that this apparition did. She was no longer amused by him at all when she was well enough to visit the scene of the accident. He’d often make ridiculous faces behind the backs of her friends and coaches—like he did with the well-wishers during her hospital stay. Although now rather than the leer bringing her some comfort, the wet lips pickled back like torn flesh. She couldn’t help but cringe, and then got angry and stormed out when others asked about it. There was no point in telling them. They wouldn’t understand. That’s why she found the man’s appearances so unsettling now compared to before, as well as downright irritating. He’d always been unsettling, but less so in the muted yellow of warm day, than during midnight visits, where she’d wake to see only his dark eyes glistening like lobster stalks, probing through her window curtain. It was enough to make her scream and send any nearby object smashing to the wall.

No one ever saw him though. Nighttime or daytime. Not even once. They began to call her reactions fits. Episodes. Then doctor visits were prescribed in addition to the physical therapy. The doctors dismissed “the little man” as a post-traumatic symptom of her fall from the bars in the heat of a competition last October. All during the doctors’ brilliant discussions of the “cause,” the “symptom”—as they termed it—had straightened himself up, brushed off his suit, and was now charading about, impersonating their habits. She was always the sole witness to the troll’s free range of the room.
His appearances persisted through physical therapy and rehabilitation though, but Rachel now wouldn’t breathe a word about seeing him. What would be the point of it? She reasoned something along these lines, especially if it wouldn’t solve the problem and only set her back from her goals. So, she just forced herself to tolerate his hunched over form in the corner, mocking the instructor’s physical movements that Rachel had been told to imitate to strengthen her legs. She tolerated his presence during gym visits, where his nastiness only seemed more prominent among the otherwise glowing company of friends and instructors. And if a plate “broke” or she saw a thin, scrawny hand leaving a moist impression on the table at dinnertime, she became the first to blame it on “clumsiness” before stuffing her mouth with even more food. As for her own room, she soon felt safest closing her eyes and keeping them shut until the nightmarish sensation of falling or her alarm woke her up. So, of course, it was no surprise that the little man was still around when Rachel was finally strong enough to take up the sport that she loved once again.

“Rachel, we’re going to have you start out on beam. Take it nice and slow, all right?” Her coach, a nice guy named Nick, came over and went to give her a customary pat on the back, but his hand stopped short at the thought that she might shatter at a touch. Rachel didn’t consider herself to be a piece of fine china. If anything, coming back from an injury like that would make her stronger, not weaker, than she was before.

“I can handle beam.” Rachel walked over to the large rectangular shape mounted on black supports. She placed her hands on top of the worn surface, pushed hard, and swung her legs up and over. She righted herself on the center of the beam and came eye to eye with two yellow ones glinting out from behind dime-sized spectacles. She tried to prevent the color from going out of her face. She must have thought something along the lines of ‘Not you again.’ A
heavy sigh nearby told her that Nick was closely watching her on her first day back. What normally would have been met with repulsion and fear was now met with something else. Rachel wanted to show that she had something to prove, especially to this coach in particular. He hadn’t been there on the day of the accident—he hadn’t seen how badly she’d messed up. Rachel had seen how bad it was when her mom told her, her friends, and the doctors. With so many different views on it and different expressions speaking the words to her, she knew that it had been bad.

‘Get out of my way’ was the attitude seeping out of Rachel, not fear. She let her legs drop on either side of the beam, straddling it and taking the pressure off of her now slightly-aching arms. She swung her chest forward, so that the leotard and beam kissed; then her feet swung into position, found their footing, and see-sawed their momentum back to her torso, which lifted the rest of her up and into a standing position. The little executive beamed a quiet grin, pressed a single pudgy, dirty little finger to his mouth and took one, two, three hops backward along the flat surface. The hilarity of it was lost in translation when it reached Rachel.

“Rachel,” Nick said tentatively, “Remember, this is just warm-up.”

Rachel saw how the reflection on the munchkin’s little glasses seemed to wink at her, to egg her on. She wasn’t about to take that. Raising her arms out on either side, she hopped forward, alternating feet, so that only one was in contact with the beam at any given time. One, two, three—she landed on her right foot, extended her left leg behind her, held it in a graceful arabesque, and beamed triumphantly. Then she looked down at the little man to gloat in her superior gymnastic skills. But he wasn’t there. Of course he wasn’t there.
She tried to take her mind off of him, pivoted on one foot, and came back to her starting position; even by her own standards, that was a very good full pirouette. Nick even murmured a compliment—and he wasn’t one to give those out a dime a dozen.

Her confidence building, Rachel realigned herself at the end of the beam. She went for a back walkover, making sure that her hand holds were strong before she eased her entire weight down into them, letting her spine magically invert; her core stayed tight while right-side up became upside down and then became right-side up again. She half-expected him to have his chin resting on the end of the beam, eyes binocular-ed in on her for no particular reason that’d she’d want to name. But there was no sign of the little man. Rachel was glad.

She prepared herself for a double back handspring, but Nick caught her early. The noticeable tightness in key muscles of her lower half betrayed her preparation for the stunt.

“I said go easy today. Look, I know that you want to push yourself, but not yet. It’s just the first day. You’ll have plenty of time for stuff like that later.”

She dismounted and walked up to him, her nose only reaching the bottommost star on the gym’s logo plastered to his t-shirt.

“I know my limits, all right? I’ll be careful.” If she didn’t tell herself to walk away, she’d be seeing a therapist for anger management once a week still. She stepped off and headed in the direction of the red, purple, and blue—not to mention spongy and sweat-soaked—location otherwise known as the space used for floor. Other people might think she was crazy for feeling nostalgic about such a place, but they were really the crazy ones. Testing the tension in the mats with a hop or two, she attempted a handspring front, but that didn’t quite agree with her; or at least the series of twinges up her neck and spine made it quite clear that her body protested the workout. She’d always viewed pain as something to push through; but her hospital visit must
have made her unaccustomed to hiding it—and so it leaked out in plain sight, like cheap mascara. Like her cringe that day—a thing she considered to be almost as ugly as a scab, a broken leg, or a munchkin that resembled a toadstool in a suit.

Nick must have followed her; and her face leaked out surprise as she found him there, handing an ice pack packaged in paper towels to her. “You better call it a day. You’ll be up for stuff like that later.”

“Yeah,” Rachel muttered. Yeah right was the response she wanted to utter instead. She walked past the front reception desk, holding the indistinguishable mass of paper towels shamefully against the back of her neck, not saying a word. If she didn’t let her hallucination fluster her, of course it had to be her body that was the culprit now. And in front of Nick—she hoped that he didn’t think she was pathetic; but she especially hoped that he wouldn’t suggest to her mom that she still needed more time off.

She went over to her cubby, jostled through her things and shoved them where they needed to go, picked up her blue mesh backpack, texted her mom to come and get her, and then headed for the vending machines. They were nestled within what was considered a ‘hall of honor’ for the gym.

It was funny how a craving for food could be satisfied in the same place where admiration for all gymnastic participants was demanded; one would assume that such a room should have had attention in and of itself. But Rachel had never noticed and never complained. She’d always gotten satisfaction in this room before, both as a competitor and as a teenager guiltlessly indulging in the occasional Milky Way.

But today they just so happened to be out of Milky Ways. Perhaps the vendor had started to think that no one here enjoyed that delicious treat, if Rachel hadn’t been around to secretly
enjoy them. She really could use one right now. A movement up above, on the trophy shelf, caught her attention; it was the little man—again. He’d somehow shrunken, or at least made his squat, pudgy form compact enough to squeeze between the wall and the trophies set on the shelf before it. His glasses seemed to sparkle and twinkle in the dim, yellowish light. He darted here and there between the various spectrum of golds and bronzes, peering out at her through the hollow openings in the years, where the zeros so allowed: 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005. The years just so happened to coincide with those of the meets she’d competed in; more specifically, the ones in which she’d helped the team place. And here that smug, squat-faced little man was rubbing his filthy face against those symbols of her stellar accomplishments. Her face became as creamy as his as the fear of him knocking them down suddenly spun and stuck its landing in her brain.

“Get down from there!” she screamed up at him. “Get down right now, or I swear that I’m going to—!” Rachel didn’t even know quite what she was going to do, but she’d do something at least. She made a grab at the high oak shelves. It was too high. Even Roy, who was one of the tallest coaches, needed a step stool to reach it. Rachel didn’t have the faintest clue how the little man had managed to secure himself in such a high place, even though it was an ideal location to taunt her from.

But at that moment, she got a text message back from her mom. It said that she was here and Rachel knew that she had to go outside and get in the car. Shaking a fist at the little man, she warned him, “You’re just lucky this time.” He wiggled his hands on either side of his face and blew a snobbish raspberry at her; but Rachel just turned and exited, all the while trying to ignore the strange looks the receptionists at the desk gave her as she passed out through the open doors and into the awaiting minivan.
All the way home, Rachel hoped that the trophies had survived in one piece. She didn’t want to think of their broken bits strewn across the floor anymore than she wanted to think of Nick placing a concerned phone call to her mother. She had her own concerns that were nobody else’s.

#

That night Rachel dreamed of bleachers lined with clusters of people—moms, dads, and siblings that had been dragged along for moral support. Other figures moved around her, sticklike in form, mere blurs of color, convoluting here, spinning there, in sync with the indistinct rhythm of floor music from somewhere off to the left. She looked down and saw herself dressed in similar hues, splotches of watercolor aligned with one another to give off the vague impression of a leotard.

Two long poles stood before her, differing in height, suspended in midair, supported by nothing. They seemed perfectly poised nonetheless. It took her a moment to recognize them for what they were. Uneven bars.

She felt her body pivot on its heels, her arms automatically rising up on either side, as she turned to face the judges. Only they could grant her permission to begin her routine. While her body swiveled, Rachel couldn’t help but wonder why she was having this particular dream again.

A white rectangle projected itself outward towards her, expanding to fill a three dimensional space. Three figures sat, equally spaced apart, on the other side of what now possibly resembled a table. The judges— their faces—Rachel knew that she recognized them; their familiarity was the thing that made the whole experience so frightening. Nick sat on the left, staring at her and holding a pen— his eyes like two blades in a cutting block. Rachel’s mother sat on the far right. Her wispy hair was done up nicely, but her face was anxious,
perhaps even on the brink of tears. And in the center, the dead center, sat the business-clad
midget with the flashing eyes and glasses—wearing the most devious of smirks. He gave a small
little nod in Rachel’s direction, but said nothing. His forehead only crinkled and his lips parted
and kneaded one another like bread. She returned the salute by lowering her arms and soon
found her feet pivoting themselves back in the direction of the uneven bars.

She couldn’t stop herself.
She couldn’t stop.

She threw a sidelong glance back at the devilish little monster, catching a snippet of what
her mother had leaned over to whisper in his ear: “Do you think that she’ll—”

She felt her body hurling upwards, her hands catching on the bar, her fingers wrapping
around it. She began to circle, entering into one of three rotations.

One.
She wouldn’t fall.

Two.
She wasn’t going to fail. History wouldn’t repeat itself.

Three.
She willed herself not to fall—not to think of falling. Her hands released their hold on
the first bar and she reached out for the second—except the bar wasn’t there.

Rachel arched backwards, trying to flip so that her feet would be the ones to take most of
the impact.

Wake up!

Wake up!

Wake up!
She found herself screaming the words out loud as her eyes opened to pitch blackness and the sound of her own heavy breathing; a silent button eye fastened on her from the closet.

Three and a half months later, Rachel was regularly attending practice at the gym every other day. She’d shown great improvement in beam, which had been her strongest event—second only to bars—before she’d been out of competition for a year. She was back on her game and felt that even experienced gymnasts would envy how quickly she’d reacquired old skills. Floor had been tricky for her to get down again and vault was even trickier. She’d only tried the latter twice in the past month and, afterwards, both she and Nick agreed that it was probably best if she laid off of it for a while. That sort of twisting in midair—supplied by artificial force—might put her through some rigors that her body wasn’t quite ready to handle yet, even if she wanted to consider herself up for the challenge.

Nick didn’t think that she was ready for bars yet either, but Rachel disagreed.

If she was ever going to be ready for it—or know that she was ready for it—she had to start sometime. And with all of the progress she was making, could he really deny her the opportunity to get back up there?

“Nick.” She pointed in the direction of the uneven bars after finishing the daily warm-ups and conditioning and seven runs through her floor routine. She’d already dunked her hands in the chalk barrel, clapped them together, and stood by the smaller of the two bars. “Spot me?”

“Rachel, I really don’t think that you should. If you want to—look, give me a second, I’ll get the safety harness. That way we don’t take any chances.”

Rachel made a face as if she’d just stuffed her mouth full of lemon Warheads.
“Don’t give me that look—hey, it doesn’t hurt to be safe.” Her facial expression didn’t change, but luckily one of the crying tumblers did a tumblesault into a wall. This provided enough of a distraction to call Nick away. He now had to deal with a mother who was even more hysterical than the child in question. Nick said he’d go get an ice pack for the small bump on the kid’s forehead and disappeared. Rachel’s attention shifted back to the matter at hand that concerned her.

She was all chalked up and ready to go. She took a deep breath and, without hesitation, leaped up onto the lower bar. Her hands jerked as they made contact and her shoulders felt the dull, familiar ache of their old efforts in trying to connect a human body to a flimsy, cylindrical piece of wood. It was still a welcome sensation nonetheless. It was exhilarating—not just her return to the sport. That was good in and of itself. But what was even better was that she hadn’t lately been harassed by that vermin-sized man, though she had been subjected to nightmares. She hadn’t really been able to appreciate the real relief that came from not seeing him appear, a type of relief that she could not ever imagine but had to experience to understand. Like gymnastics, there are some skills, Rachel knew, that you only understood as a sensation—the spins, the lifts, the flips, the jumps—that just felt right; and you couldn’t imagine them. You had to feel them. She wanted to feel what the uneven bars were like again and there was only one real way to go about it; and no safety equipment to weigh her down.

Rachel oscillated her hips back and forth, until she finally had enough momentum to make one full revolution. She had to fight a bit harder for the second. Out of practice, it was a bit harder to keep the pace up than she expected, but it wasn’t unmanageable—and certainly not impossible. She told herself that Nick was being silly with all his hype about this. After all, if Rachel didn’t know her own body, then who could?
She finally worked up enough momentum to easily make four consecutive passes on the bar. What should stop her from daring to transition to the next one? One…two…three…go! Her hands unclipped the first bar and that brief second in midair felt so exhilarating, it might as well have been fifteen minutes. She picked up the minutest details—the children jumping into the foam pits, playing on the trampolines, doing squats over in the corner, balancing on the beam. She even noticed that Nick had returned to the ailing child with an ice pack and that he’d looked up just as she let go of the first bar. His face was one of silent awe at her magnificence; though she had a feeling he’d have quite the scolding in store for her later on. Her eyes came back to focus on the higher bar ahead of her, just within the grasp of her fingertips—.

And then he was there.

The fiendish little imp with his puny little glasses was perched atop the bar, freely dangling his feet. He wasn’t smirking at her this time, or grinning, or making a raspberry. He was straight out, full-blown laughing in her face, but his laughter was eerily silent; soundlessly vindictive. White teeth flashed like small finger bones and his mouth was too, too red and so open. Like a—

Her concentration broke and she fumbled to regain it. She reached out with all of her might, all of her energy, towards the slim bar that he was sitting on; she reached out for it as if her very life depended on it; and all the while his mouth kept opening and closing, an unending pit of muted humiliation for her.

Her fingers extended and grasped for any source of contact. She closed her eyes, praying and hoping that she wouldn’t be swallowed up by disaster again. She didn’t want to face catastrophe in the hushed stadium of her nightmare nor in the blackness of the midget’s open-mouthed laugh, should she fail to catch the—
“Do you think that she’ll wake up?” a maternal voice said as it placed a soft hand over Rachel’s and squeezed. It held onto it tightly, as if its grip could somehow pull her little girl out of the depths of a fifteenth month coma.

The doctor sighed, recognizing the question as one that this mother habitually asked. “It’s hard to tell at this stage, Mrs. Lorenz. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. She suffered quite a nasty fall, you see. Only time will tell. But we are doing everything we can.”

“But it happened last October.” The mother did not relent in her tight grip on Rachel’s hand.

“I’m afraid that there’s only so much we can do, but I assure you that we’re trying.” He let out a sigh. He’d explained this to her so many times, it’d become a routine. His words got him nowhere now, but he still tried to be cordial. “I take it that you’ll be up with her tonight? Would you like me to get you anything? Coffee perhaps?”

The mother gave a nod.

“Cream or sugar?”

A headshake. That indicated no.

The mother watched as the squat, little doctor waddled his way out of the room, a pair of small spectacles pinching his nose as he went to fill the orders but her hand never parted from her daughter’s.
The Departed

Before me I saw a tombstone. I heard a glow-worm, big as a house, say to me: ‘I will give you the light you need. Read the inscription. It is not from me this supreme order comes.’

— “7” from Lautréamont’s Maldoror

#

“BEAUTY—”

That’s what one of the old stones said that lined the lake. They were human figures fashioned out of marble, now wearing dirt and moss over their apparel, standing like grave morticians awaiting the Second Coming. For Rafe, there wasn’t really anything worth waiting for around this putrid lake in a dinky place named Shoshana Forest—if that even was its name, if the bright yellow road sign a mile away was to be believed, if anything still made sense here other than the smell of earth and a shovel in hand. His stay here—and his task—had been imposed upon him.

“There’s nothing beautiful about fuckin’ death.” Rafe said, dislodging a stone from the gray silt of the lake shore. It made a sickening sound of suction as it was removed, like the sound of dislocating the joints of a small animal. He lifted it up and held it in front of the statue that carried the inscription. “There’s nothing beautiful about rotting.” He violently brought the rock against those cold eyes, bashing and bashing, until he had sufficiently gouged them out with a dull chink, chink that echoed throughout the place. He only stopped when he felt that he was no longer looking at anything that resembled a human face.

WAS THAT NECESSARY?
Rafe ran his feet over the soft, upturned earth before the statue. The message seemed to stare back at him the same way that the marble figure had; both were shaded with ambiguous grey that was neither black nor white in this place.

“Yes. It was.”

He turned, his feet angrily whooshing through the grass as he threw the stone back into the waters. He heard the large plop it made after he sent it soaring back over his shoulder.

The grasses and trees seemed to whisper as a mist fell. Normally, this would herald rain, if the climate wasn’t so fixed. It had been more than forty-eight hours and the temperature hadn’t dropped or risen noticeably. It hadn’t gotten dark enough to be night, or bright enough to pass for midday.

Rafe made his way back to the cabin to wash away the smell of decay and fresh dirt on his hands. He could care less how the mist would thicken in several hours’ time, how the dew drops would fill up the large rough holes in the statue’s face, how they ultimately would well over and trickle down its battered cheeks—staining the surface blue, where it had once been a pale gray.

Rafe didn’t know what he felt anymore, or if he could feel anything definite like sadness, or pity, or even fear.

Those emotions had left. Maybe they’d started leaving him the moment he was first plunked down in this place. And although the region apparently had a name—Shoshana, Rafe preferred referring to it as his own personal, fucked-up limbo.

#

Rafe still remembered the first grey day—or night—when he found himself on an edge of an asphalt highway. He was at road marker one hundred and twenty two, right where a rough
gravel road intersected the asphalt one. There wasn’t any sound. Not of cars. Not of birds either. He had an old duffle bag on his shoulder, the type kids used in middle school. He remembered opening it up. He’d found two spare sets of clothing inside, along with his driver’s license, a bottle of water and a typescript note that said: FOLLOW THE SIDE ROAD. But there weren’t any clues as to how he got to this place—wherever it was.

After spending an indefinite amount of time near the road without seeing a single car pass by, he got up and did what the note said. The gravel road became a dirt road when the supply of gravel ran out. Cheapskate, he remembered thinking—among other things—while he kicked up the brown grime that already stuck to his sneakers due to the humidity. He tried to tell himself to count his blessings. At least he hasn’t been mugged or beaten, and then left in the middle of nowhere. Rafe wasn’t much of an optimist though. He just wanted answers.

He still didn’t have any by the time the road ended at a two story cottage nestled on a hill in the woods. He found the door unlocked, and cautiously went inside. It was empty. Not a soul in the house.

He plunked his duffle bag down by the front door and began looking around for a phone, since no one had answered his many “Hello?”’s that he’d sent throughout the building. When he got to the kitchen, he found another note there—written in the same font as the one in his duffle bag.

WELCOME HOME.

What the hell? He crumpled it up and threw it across the room. No sign of a phone anywhere. No convenient BlackBerry. No phone jacks even. He’d assumed that this had to be some kind of sick joke at the time, or a really whacked-out nightmare.
His stomach had begun to grumble and he went over to the cabinets and threw them open, figuring if someone went to all the trouble of setting this up, they wouldn’t mind if he got even by eating them out of house and home. The cabinets were lined with shelves of Campbell soup cans, instant mac and cheese, tuna, crackers, canned fruit and vegetables—and there, taped to the center shelf on a piece of paper, was another note.

HELP YOURSELF.

Don’t mind if I do, or something along those lines occurred to him as he’d grabbed a can of Spaghetti-O’s and an Easy Mac to eat. Back then, he’d cared enough to act decent in this place—as if he actually expected someone walk in on him; now, he just shut his eyes on the mess.

He’d grabbed his food and a Diet Pepsi from the well-stocked fridge and sat down, but didn’t have a fork and got back up to get one. When he returned to the table, he noticed that a napkin had appeared to the right of his plate. It hadn’t been there before. There was another snippet of typed texted attached to it.

ENJOY.

Shit! The appearance of the message had made him lose his appetite and his nerves. He refused to sit down and spent the next half hour scouring the entire house, but he didn’t come across anyone or anything. By the time he returned to the table, his food was cold—and a second note had been placed on top of the first, which read: WELCOME BACK.

Thankfully he was too hungry right now to be spooked again. Rafe gave the finger to the note and finally started digging in, but kept jerking his head up, watching for any signs of movement or a hidden camera. Someone was going to pay if they’d set him up as a contestant on Punked.
After eating, he made another sweep of the log cabin. He then went to lock the front and the back door of a house that wasn’t his, used the bathroom, and flopped down on the leather sofa in the main living room. No television, but at least there was electricity. It must have been built for those nature-y type people who try to get away from it all, he figured. He was just about to close his eyes, when a piece of paper fluttered down from above and smacked right into his face.

DO YOUR JOB. YOU MUST CARE FOR THE DEAD.

What the heck did that mean? He blinked at the one-dimensional message, as if by doing this it might suddenly make sense. It didn’t.

He crumpled it up like the other one and tossed it away—or at least he swore that he did. But the next minute, before he could even fully shut his eyes, a piece of paper had suctioned itself to his face, as if it was trying to maul him. He rose up, pulling and ripping at it, until it finally came loose. He caught his breath, still holding the piece of paper, which trembled as if it had a life of its own. It took him a second to start blaming the incident on the A/C that had just clicked on.

It was covered in irregular creases. Rafe couldn’t help but think that it was the same piece of paper he had crumpled up for landing on his face; but now its message was different. It read: GO OUTSIDE.

Rafe glanced at the back door. He decided to play along for now. Before heading out, he did three things. He unhappily slid on a long-sleeved shirt. He put on his angriest-looking face should there be pranksters outside with cameras. And he made sure to rip the note into teeny-tiny shreds.

Then he opened the door and stepped outside.
Only a shovel and a flashlight were there to greet him, propped up against the wall along with another message.

TURN THE SOIL IN THE GRAVES.

Graves? Rafe’s stomach did a double somersault. This was not only getting creepy, but sick. Where the fuck would graves be around here?

BY THE LAKESIDE.

Oh, wasn’t that lovely. They even thought of including an arrow to show him the right way to go— whoever or whatever was behind these notes. His brain still hadn’t gotten over the thought of having to do—well, that would entail digging up corpses, wouldn’t it? What would the point of that even be?

YOU MUST WORK WHILE YOU ARE HERE.

The note shifted to a bolded text. Ooh, it was trying to appear scary. Rafe knew that he’d only taken his eyes off of the sign for a moment. Then how did it—? He picked up the shovel, gripping the handle defensively rather than out of a desire to be complacent with the note’s request.

“Why would you—What do I get, huh? What do I get if I do this—this thing?” He couldn’t believe that he was actually talking to a piece of paper. But then again, there didn’t seem to be anyone else around to judge—or to hear. He stared more intensely at the note, as if willing it to change in front of him. Their staring contest lasted too long for an impatient and confused Rafe.

He threw his hands up and dropped the shovel with a loud clang, turning around in a circle, wanting to punch something. If this was just a stupid dream, he thought his subconscious had it out for him. Negotiating was the last thing he wanted to do—waking or sleeping.
YOU GET A WAY OUT.

He’s not sure why he agreed. At the time, he didn’t even know yet that he was stuck here. But he picked up his shovel—perhaps just for the sheer novelty of the fact that, since he’d already been sucked into an atypical conversation with a mere piece of paper, things didn’t seem like they could get much stranger. He looked back towards the house.

“Figure you won’t let me get lost then?”

NEVER.

He turned to head in the direction the arrow had indicated. Tree trunks were now labeled with “←” and “→” signs here and there. The paper fastened to them moved in the breeze without a sound.

#

The first body he had to “readjust” belonged to someone he assumed was a fat guy once upon a time. He remembered how the signs had led him to a particular statue of a Buddha-sized man that glowered at him from a television chair. The facial expression held the same loathing that a bug zapper feels towards a particularly large insect headed for the messy shock. By extension, Rafe was a very large bug with a very large shovel.

OUR FIRST CLIENT.

The note read, or at least it did when he found it folded neatly in the statue’s hand, underneath his quarter-pound, stone cigar.

Rafe took the shovel and pushed it into the damp soil. A thin layer of mist crept towards the shoreline from the lake. There wasn’t much light to go by, so when he’d made a small hole, he took the flashlight he’d brought and jammed it into the chubby statue’s hand, saying, “Be a doll and hold that.” Then he went back to digging.
It wasn’t until he heard a sickening squish, followed by a bubbling sloppy noise and an overwhelming stench, that he made a disgusting revelation. The body—as well as all of the other bodies buried here around the lake, he soon found out—weren’t buried in caskets. They’d been interred six feet under in the all-natural style.

Rafe coughed and gagged, puking off to the side before taking his shirt off and wrapping it around his mouth. He’d rather risk getting a cold than dealing with the overwhelming stinging odor of death in his nose. He threw a glare in the direction of the note that he’d found on the statue, as if this was its fault. It should have warned him about this. He expected a “Sorry,” or at least something along those lines. Instead, he got:

**DID YOU REALLY EXPECT A CORPSE TO SMELL LEMONY-FRESH? THEY’RE NOT MADE OUT OF PINE-SOL, YOU KNOW.**

At least it brought a smile to Rafe’s lips, before he felt the need to up-chuck again. Thankfully it was a dry retch this time. Wiping his hand across his slimy mouth, he slid away the diluted remnants of churned up dairy that lingered there. Then he gazed back at the hole where the festering body lay. He hesitated to pick up his shovel again.

**WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? IT’S NOT GOING TO GET ANY FRESHER.**

The note—the thing causing it, or speaking through it—had a point. He tied a second knot in the shirt, wrapped it more tightly around his face, and placed the shovel closer to the upper edge of the opening. He slowly lowered himself into the compartment, which was gushing with whatever parts of the man’s body had leaked out when he punctured it. He grabbed the corpse by the arms, or what he thought were the arms. It was hard to tell, since the skin shifted detachedly from the bones beneath. It was like moving a plastic bag full of jelly and gravy and chicken bones and praying that the thing would make it out in one piece, since you knew the bag
has already ruptured and was leaking. And leak it did. It left a nasty trail of black-gray gunk all over Rafe’s shoes and pants.

After much struggling, he finally got the corpse out of the hole and to the left of the grave. He didn’t realize that he’d been holding his breath the entire time till he got up and out again. Rafe satisfied himself with a few careful kicks to the body’s head, where the mess was more containable and less likely to gush out.

GOOD JOB.

That’s what the note read.

No exclamation mark? Seriously? After he had just put up with that kind of shit?

YOU’RE NOT DONE YET. PUT DOWN NEW SOIL.

“Yeah, yeah. Easy for you to say. You don’t have a nose.” Rafe murmured explicatives under his breath, layering them on thickly as he stabbed his shovel in and out of the ground. He hurled up the dull, sickly-looking grass to get at the new, sticky dirt beneath, tearing through the montaged layering of grays, browns, and clay reds beneath the surface. He heaped this into the hole and kicked the corpse back towards the edge of it, levering it along with his shovel if it happened to get stuck. Before he let it plunge in though, he looked towards the note, wanting to make sure he’d done it right so he wouldn’t have to lug the stinking thing out of there again.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

“Nothing,” Rafe said, enjoying himself as he kicked the corpse in. He began to shovel the earth back on top of the body until it was all filled in. Then he patted, kicked, and stomped on it, in an effort to make sure that the stench was trapped in there, good and tight.

He grabbed the flashlight from the fingers of the statue and gave the head a good congratulatory whack with it.
“Now you owe me.” Rafe lowered the t-shirt from around his mouth, turning and finding the note blank. Nothing was on it. And for a moment he felt jipped, cheated, ripped off, swindled. He was more surprised to see that the sheet was blank, for that now seemed stranger than anything he’d seen written on it that night. “What gives?”

At that moment though, a flickering light appeared near the recently upturned soil. Rafe watched as small lights rose into the air, like fireflies, but these were in shades of blue and green and yellow. They lingered there for a moment before migrating off in the direction of the lake, where they faded from sight among the mist.

Rafe finally shook his head. That was damn weird. He didn’t know how else to describe it and turned to look back at the note. The lights had distracted him for a moment, but it didn’t make him forget how pissed off he was.

“I thought we had a deal!”

The note was still blank.

He turned and angrily began to walk back in the direction of the cabin, “Look, you know what? I did that—and that was really messed up—on so many levels. I am getting my stuff and walking. I don’t have to put up with this kind of shit.”

Something white fluttered and looped past his shoulder, before coming to rest at his feet.

IT’LL TAKE MORE THAN ONE NIGHT OF WORK TO GET OUT. YOU’RE IN A PLACE CALLED SHOSHANA. AND YOU ARE HERE FOR A REASON.

Needless to say, Rafe wasn’t very happy with the response.

He went back to the empty house—which was still empty, he discovered, after he made two more sweeps of the premises. The silence was uncomfortable, though Rafe would claim that his heavy footsteps and door slams were out of anger, rather than uneasiness. He felt alone, or at
least as alone as one could feel if you didn’t believe that a piece of paper could jip you. He hit
the shower, gathered his things together, and headed back towards the road that same night.

#

He’d been walking for about three hours, more or less. At least, that’s what he assumed,
since he didn’t have a watch or a phone. A faint spot of light in the grayness, which he took to
be the moon, had only moved maybe about ten degrees overhead. At least he wasn’t being
harassed by notes while he was out here. He wasn’t being harassed by anything.

He’d followed the dirt road back to the gravel one, back to the asphalt one, where he
encountered the familiar road signs once again. He decided to go left along the main road.
He’d been walking ever since. There wasn’t much to see in the way of landmarks or vegetation.
It all looked the same to Rafe. There was a tree, another tree, three trees closely grouped
together. All were placed at invariable distances from the roadway. Further back, they simply
merged into the forest. He hadn’t passed another mile marker yet, which he thought was odd,
since he assumed he’d traveled more than a mile by now.

The dampness had increased as a grey mist began to thicken about the area and chill the
air. Rafe took out his other spare shirt and put it on, then swung his duffle bag back over his
shoulder. No more than ten minutes could’ve gone by when he first thought he saw a flickering
light up ahead that reminded him of a flashlight. He focused on it, quickening his pace when he
was sure that his eyes weren’t tricking him. He took large, lunging steps forward, his hand
feeling around in his duffle for the flashlight he’d been “given” at that house.

He found it, clicked it on, and began to wave it around to signal a response. He was sure
that his waving must have looked chaotic since he was running as fast as he could without
tripping and falling on his face. He began to click the flashlight on and off, on and off—and the light in the distance repeated the same signal, on and off, on and off, through the mist.

Yes! Finally! There was someone else out there! He propelled himself forward, gaining momentum and focusing on the blinking, distant light. Perhaps he’d been going a little too fast, since in the next second, he found himself hurtling forward, off-balance. He’d tripped, which sent him colliding with something hard. He must have shut his eyes for a second, as he only heard the flashlight clatter and roll off nearby.

When he opened them again, he found himself sprawled out near an all-too-familiar wall in the living room area of a certain two story log cabin that he knew he’d left over three hours ago. His face was sore on one side and his left leg felt bruised. The flashlight lay off near the wall. As he got up, he could see that his duffle bag was still near the front door.

“What the shit?” he asked himself, undoing a kink in his neck.

He saw a note waiting for him on the small table by the couch.

WELCOME BACK.

Winding up back here—to be greeted by the only one-dimensional company he had—was anything but a welcome outcome.

#

The next night, Rafe found himself in front of another statue. This one was of a woman from the boobs up, leaning her neck over towards the small head of a baby that was cradled against her chest.

“Cute kid,” Rafe said gruffly. He didn’t mean it at all. In fact, he didn’t even want to be here. But he didn’t have much of a choice. He didn’t even have anyone to communicate with,
except for these sheets of paper with their typed messages; that is, if you could even call that communication.

**CHIT-CHAT AND WORK.**

It didn’t even need to italicize the “AND.” The phrasing of it made it implicit.

Rafe’s shovel picked up the first load of dirt and moved it.

“So why am I doing this again?”

**BECAUSE YOU AGREED TO. A DEAL HAS BEEN MADE.**

“I get that. Though, honestly, you haven’t been upholding your end of the bargain.”

**YOU WILL HAVE A WAY OUT WHEN YOUR TASK IS DONE.**

“Sure, sure. Whatever. I don’t even know why I should take a piece of paper’s word for it. What’s the scariest thing you can do if I quit? Slander me?”

…**IT’S CALLED LIBEL.**

There was a soft murmur as Rafe dislodged more and more dirt, letting it tumble behind him.

“Why am I even digging? What’s so important about these graves?”

He looked up, now about a good seven inches into the earth. He knew he’d have to be careful the deeper he went. He didn’t want to risk stabbing a corpse and having a repeat of the same stench from last night.

The piece of paper was blank again when his eyes fell on it. Perhaps that meant it was thinking. He really didn’t know. He continued shoveling.

It was only after he felt something too solid to be dirt that he stopped digging and looked back up in the paper’s direction.

**THEY HAVE TO DO WITH YOU.**
“What?” He looked at the piece of paper, but he had a nagging suspicion that it wouldn’t change what was written on it, unless he gave it a moment of privacy. After another minute long staring contest that wasn’t going anywhere, he finally bent down and began sweeping the dirt off with his finger tips, to uncover the corpse without such a mess. He could already smell it, but at least it wasn’t as bad as a ruptured one.

“You better give me a decent explanation this time, or my hands will make a good paper shredder.”

His fingers touched the rubbery, mushy hide of skin beneath the soil. It was a woman from the looks of it. The shape of the body was also a dead giveaway to her gender, as the hips widened before receding again towards the knees. The earth refused to come off parts of her face, making it seem as though she’d broken out with an extreme case of freckles after her final moments. And in her arms, she held a tightly wrapped bundle of cloth. He didn’t even want to catch a glimpse of what was inside there. He was sure that it wasn’t a cute child anymore, even if all babies were said to have been at one point.

Rafe slipped his fingers behind the back of the corpse and moved his other arm under her leg, lifting the body up and setting it down near the edge of the grave. Perhaps he was being more merciful because she was—or had been—a woman. But more than likely, his “chivalric” treatment was only due to the smell. She was far less corrosive to the nose than the fat man’s corpse had been. That wasn’t to say that she was any spring daisy though. Rafe hoisted himself up out of the hole and daubed his face with one of his shirts.

YOU ENCOUNTERED THEM IN LIFE. IT’S ALL RIGHT IF YOU DON’T REMEMBER. DON’T PANIC. MOST DON’T EVEN REMEMBER THEIR NAMES WHEN THEY GET HERE. BUT YOU DID, AND THAT’S GOOD.
“I don’t see how there’s anything good about it. I still need a way out—of wherever this place is.”

He began searching for new dirt to pour back into the bottom of the pit and line it freshly.

THERE IS A WAY OUT.

“Do you mind telling me it then?”

He looked over at the paper again, and found that it had gone blank.

“That’s what I thought.”

He shoveled in silence for awhile.

“These people. How long have they been dead for?”

IT VARIES. SOME DAYS, SOME MONTHS. MOST, YEARS. THERE ARE HUNDREDS HERE, BUT ONLY A FEW THAT YOU KNOW ON A FIRST NAME BASIS.

“Hundreds? I don’t think that I’m that popular of a guy.”

WHO SAID THAT YOU NEED TO BE POPULAR TO RUN INTO PEOPLE EVERY DAY?

“I guess no one did.” Rafe looked down at the bottom of the pit and shook his head, “But I would kill to bump into some people now. But, you know, ones that still have a pulse.”

The paper had gone blank again. To Rafe, it seemed to have assumed the same shade of gray indifference as the fog and surrounding landscape.

He slid the shovel under the female corpse’s legs and lowered her back into the darkness, cradling her head before simply letting it go to impact the earth with a hollow thud.

“So what’s so important about all of these corpses again?” Rafe asked as he began pouring the first load of dirt back on top of the body. He looked over at the paper, scotch-taped to the statue’s tit. The nipple seemed to watch him like a third eye as he began the re-covering.
ONLY YOU CAN ANSWER THAT. THEY NEVER ENTERED—OR EXITED—MY LIFE.

Rafe’s eyes slanted towards the woman’s face as he emptied the third shovelful onto her. There must have been some type of reaction going on inside of her body before the dirt fell, for when it did, a liquid started to bubble her lips open. They parted enough to allow dirt to slip in past a grey tongue slimed with fungi. And out of that small dark hole rimmed with corroded teeth, a flicker was seen—yellow, blue, and green. They were the same lights he’d seen erupting around the grave of the dead man the night before. Only now, it was happening right before his eyes.

Lights, the size of corn kernels, danced and leaked out from the open oral cavity and spilled out into the air of the larger, darkened pit of earth. Other lights struggled to detach themselves from the fabric bundle of a thing the woman had in her arms; they bashed and pulled against the tattered cloth, little specks so determined to go somewhere until they managed to free themselves at last.

Rafe felt as though he shouldn’t be watching—and he probably shouldn’t have been. He should have just continued burying the body. But the allure outweighed the revulsion—and both held him at a standstill when it came to proceeding.

At length, he saw the lights flicker up and swirl around the area above the grave. They thwarted his efforts to even snatch just one of them, as his hand simply passed through their transparency. Then they slowly slunk and flittered about for a few more moments before departing into the distance beyond the lake.

Rafe buried the body quickly and only took the time to lightly pat the earth down with his hands. He folded the paper and placed it in his pocket. He didn’t feel like asking it any more
questions that night. Needless to say, that was the first time he had the nightmares when he went to bed back in the cabin. And it was also the first time he awoke to find that someone—or something—had been courteous enough to wash all of the clothes he wasn’t wearing and to restock the pantry.

#

Rafe ran back along the dirt road, the gravel road, the asphalt road. He wanted to get somewhere—anywhere—that wasn’t this lousy cabin. He’d lost track of time and kept glancing around for any sign of a landmark or a mile posting or a light signal. Nothing.

He remembered watching a sign pass by that said: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING SHOSHANA FOREST. But he’d gone by it so fast, he didn’t know if he’d really seen it or if he just wanted to see it. When he glanced over his shoulder, there wasn’t any trace of there ever being one.

Yet now there was something different up ahead. It was a dimly lit building with a shady-looking exterior. It seemed like a place one would typically drive up to and leave as quickly as one came. But there wasn’t any sign of a parking lot. It was right there and not far from the road. Rafe saw no harm in going up to it, thinking he at least could try to see if anyone inside had a phone he could use.

He remembered trying the door and, with some jiggling, got it open. The room was dimly lit and looked like some kind of bar. Deer and elk heads stared down at him from the walls, as if they were challenging him to some unspoken contest. The booths were empty and dusty and the entire joint looked worn down. The dark brown oak used in the furnishings must have been comforting at one time or another. As his eyes were traveling over the dirty glasses
above the bar counter, he caught sight of some movement at the far end. A blonde woman stood up, wiping a glass with a grimy rag.

He couldn’t hide the little hop to his step as he rushed over, feeling the eeriness lift at the sight of another person. She looked up at him with her blue, mascara-lined eyes and bouncy blonde hair. She was wearing a tight black skirt and a red top that exposed her cleavage. She obviously hadn’t been feeling as strong a need to be around people as he had; or if she did feel this way, she was very good at hiding it.

“Ah—Hi. I’m Rafe. Do you have a phone I could borrow? I really, really need to make a call…”

“The lines are down,” she said in a hushed tone. Her eyes now seemed a little off-putting, because his over-eagerness was out of place or because it had just been a really long night for her. “I can let you use my cell, but aren’t you going to order something first?”

Drinking was the last thing on his mind.

“Just put me down for a—well, whatever you think is best here.”

Her eyebrows curled together like confused snakes, “Are you serious?” She looked at him, as if trying to determine if he was joking; and likewise, he did the same.

“Yeah. I guess I don’t really drink much. But tonight I could use one.”

She turned with a sigh and pulled another glass off the shelf and began filling it with something amber-colored and carbonated. He could smell the saccharine-like scent of it before she even set it down in front of him.

“Can I see some I.D. please?”

Rafe didn’t know if he should feel offended or complimented. How young did he look? Or did she just think that he was acting too young for his age? Or acting too weird? He was
twenty five for crying out loud. He just happened to be a twenty five year old who’d gone through some really strange stuff in the past forty eight hours.

He found his I.D. in the duffle bag and took it out. He examined his hands briefly, looking for any traces of dirt or fermented bodily fluids, before he handed the card over to the woman. She nodded and slid it back to him. He caught sight of her nametag. So she was a Susan then.

“What made you drop by? Obviously it wasn’t for the food, the entertainment, or the booze. This is normally after hours anyway.”

He raised the glass up to his lips and swallowed down the tartness of it, feigning a smile. “I was just hoping to use a phone.” At least he was being honest. He looked up at her. He only stopped staring when her hand finally went towards her purse. And then he started staring at that. Women kept cell phones in there, right?

He raised the glass up to take a second sip.

He watched as her manicured fingernails held onto the zipper and began to part the metallic, segmented lips, opening the large chasm used for storage.

He sputtered as the liquid caught in his mouth, chunky, and he spit it out, spraying the counter and looking at his glass. It was no longer a mixture of alcohol, which Rafe already thought was a pretty distasteful substance in and of itself. The glass now held a mass of congealed, gray-green slime.

He wanted to vomit.

He looked up at the bartender.

“You should know better than to come by after hours. Just who the hell do you think you are?” Her face was no longer beautiful, not that it had been particularly so before, but it was
now a work of mud and slime and clay. Her hair was stuccoed with the same mixture and her skin sagged this way and that like patchwork.

Rafe backed away from the counter, toppling the barstool over, speechless beyond words.

“You need to make an important call? By all means—my time’s not important.” Her shriveled up hand plunged into the bag. Those lights—those same lights, spinning and whirling about—erupted from it, forming the shape of an enormous mouth of greens, blues, and yellows, which headed straight towards Rafe to swallow him—

He started from the couch, his clothes plastered to his body. He looked around. The piece of paper lay near his feet, white and fresh and new, seeming to watch over him like a concerned parent might.

WHO’S SUZIE? YOU MENTIONED HER.

“I haven’t the foggiest.” He touched his forehead, got up and rinsed his mouth, and then lay back down again on the sofa. Had all of that shit just been a dream? It felt too real to be one but in this messed up place, just about anything seemed possible. His body ached as he tried to get comfortable again. He turned over and covered his face with his arm, but couldn’t remember getting back to sleep that night.

“You know you should really stop holding out on me. A guy could really use some answers.” Rafe muttered out loud. He didn’t even bother to open his eyes to see a response. Half of him doubted that the paper would be kind enough to give one.

#

The effort of digging through the wet, compact earth tore open the blisters that had formed from the work of the preceding days. Blood and liquid seeped out and all Rafe could do was wrap the shirt around the shovel handle as a kind of brace between his injured flesh and the
rough wood. He’d tried to blot out the face of that woman—that Susan. He didn’t want to remember. He didn’t want to let her haunt him like some bad ex-girlfriend or worse. He told himself that he had more important things to concern himself with right now. Scoop, plop, scoop, plop—the repetitive motion of moving earth didn’t deviate. The climate didn’t deviate. By now a lack of change was apparently natural. The stagnation led to frustration, which at least helped Rafe forget how scared he’d actually been.

He stopped digging and leaned on the shovel. He looked up, catching his breath.

WHY DID YOU STOP?

“I’m tired. This is backbreaking work—not that you’d know it. And you haven’t paid up.”

The two upper corners of the note seemed to lean downwards, as if it was frowning. It was resting nice and easy among some marble flowers adorning the top of the grave.

“Let me guess? Cat’s got your tongue?” The words spit out of his mouth, but the paper made no reply. It couldn’t. He knew that it would have to remain silent while he held his gaze upon it. It was at least one way in which Rafe could exert power in an environment that he otherwise felt so powerless in. He attributed the particularly bad attitude that had come over him to the strain on his body. When the cramping in his hands finally died down, he picked up the shovel again.

The break in his scrutinious examination of the note had been ample enough time for it to change its contents.

WHAT ARE YOU TIRED OF?

“You really want to know? Because we’d be here for hours.” By the seventh or eighth shovelful of dirt the circulation had increased to his hands, sending stinging pain from his
fingertips, up his arms, to his shoulders, and then back down to his aching back. “I’m tired of doing this. I’m tired of being here. And I’m tired of being alone—without having anyone for company besides you. That just about sums it up.”

YOU THINK THAT IT WOULD BE BETTER TO HAVE MORE COMPANY?

“Do you really think that you’d be the life of the party where I come from? You’d probably be used as a napkin.”

Rafe looked over at the paper to see if his comment had had any effect. Playing the nice guy had never been his forte, but maybe if he changed tactics to those of total meanness he’d finally get some answers. The sheet was a solid blank. Not a single thing printed upon it. Maybe had insulted it? Did a thing like that even have feelings? Could it? No, that’s ridiculous.

Shit.

A sour smell made Rafe’s nose crinkle up.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He’d kept digging, almost robotically, and hadn’t been paying attention to the depth. Now his nose was paying the consequences for it.

“Bloody asshole.” Rafe quickly took the shirt from the shovel handle and wrapped it around his face. It left his hands uncovered, but he figured that his nose needed the protection more. “Bet that you’re having a riot right now.”

He carefully hopped down into the hole and invaded the personal space of the emaciated body of a female teenager. He flopped one of skinny arms over her chest, and folded her knees to stomach to try and bundle her up in a transportable fashion to get this over with as quickly as possible. The only good thing was that she wasn’t as heavy as the earlier clients. The only bad thing, she smelled.
Rafe tried to dig his elbows into the dirt and shove his feet in, in order to at least partially set her down on the lip of the grave. He then could steady her with one hand while he climbed the rest of the way out. Unfortunately, the ground was solid—but not that solid—and he nearly tumbled backwards as one of his footholds gave way. He managed to prevent himself from toppling backwards, corpse and all, but the scare and exhaustion made him even more irritable. The sudden grab to hold both onto her and the earth had caused some of her bodily fluids—from an indented abdominal cavity—to leak onto his blistered hand. Now it stung even more than before and he angrily tossed the corpse up and out, so that only its legs were dangling down into the hole. It was like a perverted outtake of the death of the Wicked Witch of the West from the Wizard of Oz.

“Bitch.”

He hauled himself out of the pit, exposing his throbbing hands to the soil. The last thing he wanted to do was to pick up a shovel again. But it was either that or he’d have to leave it down in the pit, just to crawl in and out a second time to recover it. He took it up again and jammed it like a pickaxe into the wall of dirt to help with the ascent; and when he reached the top, he threw it in the direction of the stone marker, accidentally lopping off some of the curling vines. At first, his morals made him instinctively glance around, as if someone was about to yell at him. But no one did. Even the piece of paper was silent.

He felt foolish. It was obvious by now that no one was around punish him for whatever damage he did.

And that type of violence felt kind of good. Even Rafe had to admit that.
He went over to where his shovel lay and picked it back up, ignoring the smarting pain in his hand. He took a few more swings at it, aiming for the more delicate-looking details on the stone that he could destroy without causing excessive pain to his hands.

He felt a little calmer after he’d finished his rampage.

In fact, Rafe felt more satisfaction in gazing upon a mangled bed of stone flowers than he did when it came to digging six feet underground each day and then reversing the process.

YOU KNOW, IT WAS YOUR FAULT.

A small bottle of hand sanitizer stood in front of the note, its curled edges almost hand-like in offering it up as a gift.

“Yeah, yeah.” He took the bottle and squirted an ample heap into his palms before furiously rubbing them together. “And who’s the one who told me to do this job in the first place? Oh, that’s right. You did.”

ARE YOU DONE YET?

Rafe didn’t even know if the paper had an ounce of sympathy in it. Probably not though—not that Rafe wanted it anyway. He’d rather be rid of this entire situation. He refused to feel any sense of attachment to an inanimate object. It was already too much to believe that he was taking orders from it.

“Are you done being a drill sergeant?” Rafe clapped his hands together, the stinging still constant. He could keep up the banter and work at the same time, but the conversation quickly went one-way and died after the paper remained blank following a few more sarcastic upshots.

He silently sprinkled a new layer of dirt down in the hole. He picked up the skinny jigsaw of what had once been a girl. He plopped her back down again. Done, and done.
He leaned on his shovel, hoping the same glowing phenomena would occur again—that he could figure it out on his own if the note wasn’t so forthcoming in providing answers. He waited to see what he could make out.

This time the glowing didn’t seem to originate within the corpse, as he had first supposed it would. Judging from the way the body had positioned itself when he chucked her back in—she’d landed on her side with her knees still tucked up—the glow began underneath her. It came up from the ground before it entered the corpse.

Perhaps there was some sense to this madness of turning over the soil in the graves. But whatever it was, it still wasn’t clear to Rafe yet. New soil had something to do with it though.

IT’S RUDE TO STARE.

Rafe caught sight of the message out of the corner of his eye.

“Like I give a fuck.”

The light seemed to swell within this particularly shrunken corpse, before erupting in the same spectrum of colored dots and orbs that hung in the air before dispersing.

“Are you ever going to explain to me why I’m doing this?”

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KNOW?

“Yes!” His exasperation was impossible to ignore.

TAKE UP YOUR SHOVEL. THERE’S MORE WORK TO BE DONE TO GET YOUR ANSWER.

#

It was a second excavation, this time at a location closer to the cabin. The depth of the burial was much shallower—maybe just a foot, if that. There was no smell. There was no skin, or fur—if Rafe’s guess as to the creature’s identity was right. All that was left was bones.
DIG.
↓
That’s what the message said. It had been pasted on one of the pine trees. There was no marker. The size of the skeleton and the shape its skull indicated that it had been an animal. Rafe was guessing a cat, since he didn’t know of many dogs that could be that puny. Except maybe a Chihuahua.

“How what?”

He’d taken all of the bones he’d seen down there—some separate, some still wedged against others—out and laid them beside the tree. If some were still missing, he had no way of knowing.

NOW GO HOME.

Rafe instinctively grabbed some dirt and was about to put it in the hole, muttering, “You piece of shit,” when a soundless, kinetic fluttering of the paper drew his attention.

DON’T DO THAT. LEAVE IT ALONE. LEAVE THE SOIL UNTURNED.

Rafe patted off his sore, scabbed hands, dropping the dirt. He didn’t mind being let off the hook. He was glad that he didn’t have to do additional work. But why did a part of him have this nagging sense of guilt over leaving a body out in the open like that? Even if it was just an animal’s.

IF YOU WANT ANSWERS, KEEP ON WALKING.

Rafe felt like each step became heavier and heavier as he got closer to the cabin door. He stopped there for a moment—seeing the white bones standing out in a world of grey. He shut the door on them, and hopefully on any lasting impression they might have made.

#
Rafe had just been nodding off when he heard something scraping against the wooden wall of the house. The noise was very audible, and therefore very startling here—where he’d gotten used to the absence of any sound aside from that of his own voice. He half tumbled off the couch, taking striding steps forward, pressing his ear against the wall as the steady scraping continued. He wondered what type of thing might be making that kind of sound. It certainly wasn’t human. He awkwardly bent down, ear still suctioned to the wood, and noticed how the volume got louder the closer his ear came to the ground.

What the hell?

He gave a loud knock on the wall, then another; but all he got in response was the sound of the scraping increasing.

He looked back at the foot of the couch, the ideal location where the note liked to nestle itself.

YOU WANTED ANSWERS.

The paper seemed to be sprawled out in a semi-wavelike position, which Rafe took to be the posture of laidback indifference.

“This is raising more fucking questions than answers! Can’t you ever spell anything out in plain English?”

He looked back in the direction of the scratching sound. It was definitely getting louder.

NO SÉ QUE ESTOY HABLANDO ESPAÑOL EN VEZ DE INGLÉS.

“Very funny. Remind me to laugh after you explain what the hell is going on? Because whatever the hell that is—I’m sure—no, I’m positive, that you have something to do with it. So fess up.”

IF YOU WANT ANSWERS, JUST GO OUTSIDE.
Rafe went over and grabbed the paper, crunched it up, and buried it deep beneath the couch cushions.

“That’s how useful you are.”

He went back over to the front door, picking up the shovel from where he’d left it. It was the only makeshift weapon he had. He held his breath to listen. Yes, the scratching was still there. Something had to be causing it; and he wasn’t going to just sit inside and put up with it forever. It was damn annoying—the sound itself and the mystery of whatever was causing it.

He willed himself to throw the door open.

His field of vision was free from any source of movement that would cause the sound. He crept around the corner to get a better view of the wall and saw something narrow and skinny and white. As he got closer, he could make out that it was a rib bone. But it wasn’t just any rib bone. It was one of the rib bones that he had encountered earlier, when he removed the remains of that catlike creature.

He watched as the rib angled itself between the wall of the house and the ground. Then, with a downward will of its own, much stronger than that of gravity, it shallowly cut into the wall. That was what was producing the sound. But one bone wasn’t that scary. Rafe figured that he could just go up to it and swat it, bash it away with his shovel—possibly smash it to bits, like he’d done earlier to the grave marker. The problem would be solved then.

However, he noticed that the rib bone wasn’t to be alone for much longer.

Its fellows—vertebrae, toe bones, the pelvic girdle, tail bones, and a clattering skull—could be seen hopping their way over at various rates, all united in their terrible whiteness. Somehow smashing that many objects at once might prove a bit challenging. It would be much worse than one of those stupid Whack-a-Weasel games—and Rafe was never very good at those.
Yet he decided to give it a go anyway, since he didn’t have any better idea of how to proceed in this situation.

His shovel came down hard on top of the first bones that came within range: two unfortunate toe bones.

Whack! He hammered them into the ground.

They emerged shortly afterwards, popping out of the ground like worms or new incisors in a moist mouth; but by then, Rafe had turned his attention to smashing two ribs with the edge of his shovel. There was a crack as fraction lines appeared in the bones and one halved entirely, revealing a more yellow interior than the outside surface. But the bones didn’t seem deterred. They didn’t even seem to waste much time on their attacker, but simply hobbled closer to the house and began scratching away at the wall.

Rafe found the feline skull to be the most disturbing of the bunch and knocked it aside with his foot—in order to swing at the menagerie of skeletal parts that had now reached the wall; upon its return, it came back to bite him—literally—its jaws clattering for revenge and for him to get out of the way.

The bones he’d shoveled away from the house just kept coming back, every time he tried to enforce a set distance between them and the wall of the domicile. He was too lazy to try and pulverize them to dust and he had a feeling that doing so wouldn’t solve the problem. They’d just keep smacking themselves against the wall, leaving microscopic impacts over and over again—repeating the same behavior that seemed like it could go on forever.

Then how could he stop them?

And why the hell were they trying to attack the house? Why not him? Though he was grateful that they weren’t.
There was only one thing that had the answer.

He stubbornly ran back inside and found the crumpled piece of paper scotch-taped to the ceiling. The A/C made it wobble as the air went by, so its movement almost seemed like a large tongue blowing a raspberry at him.

I SEE YOU’VE MET OUR VISITORS. THOUGH I WOULDN’T RECOMMEND LETTING THEM IN.

“Again. No shit. Why don’t you tell me something useful? I don’t know, like, maybe how the hell I get this thing to stop?”

ALL YOU HAD TO DO WAS ASK.

The shovel Rafe had gripped in his hands was shaking due to his trembling arms. He still blamed this more on exhaustion, less on fear.

“Well, get on with it already!” He kept staring at the paper, trying to tune out the chorus of rhythmically-challenged scrape-scrape sounds upon the far wall. In his panic, he’d glued his eyes to the paper; and it took him more than a few minutes to remember that it was picky enough to never change unless he looked away.

He strode over to the wall that was under siege and gave it three heavy bangs with his hand, yelling shaddup, as it would make a difference. At least it was louder than the scrapes and, for a few seconds, overpowered the sound that they unceasingly continued to make.

YOU NEED FRESH DIRT.

“Why?” He gave the wall another hard pound.

TO TURN THE SOIL IN ITS GRAVE.
The scraping sound was fainter from here. Rafe was at the same pine tree he’d been at earlier. He held the crumpled piece of paper out in front of him, skeptically raising an eyebrow. “And you’re sure that this will work? Because if it doesn’t, you’ll make some nice confetti.”

MORE ACTION, LESS TALK.

Rafe picked up some fresh soil with his shovel and dropped it into the bottom of the shallow grave.

“Well?”

When he saw that the note wasn’t saying anything, he resumed watching.

As if on cue from his eye contact, the glow seeped up and out of the soil. It hovered for a moment like a mist near the ground, a shimmering silver vapor which seemed to be seeking something. When it didn’t find it, it rose up out of the shallow grave and Rafe took a good five steps back.

It swirled and spun along the terrain, twisting and looping, then halting stiffly like an animal might when it picked up the scent of its quarry. The silver mist darted off towards the bones, which were still at war with the side of the house. As it slid over them, they grew still and dropped to the ground, inert. The glow then seeped into the aged toe bones, the cracked ribs, and the ragged looking skull. The bones reacted to this and began to shrink in size.

Only after a few minutes did Rafe get up the nerve to actually get closer and confirm that the skeleton was literally losing its mass. As the bones, or what was left of them, continued to shrink in size, more and more of the strange lights appeared and seemed to take their place. Rafe thought that the remains must somehow be being converted into these lights, though he didn’t understand the exact means of how this process was able to occur.

Soon there wasn’t anything left of the deceased feline’s skeleton at all.
The only trace evidence left of its existence was the series of large scratches left in the wood when the house was being besieged.

The lights still hovered there for a moment longer, before they darted off in a group towards the lake water. Rafe found himself running after them, his hands snatching at something he knew was impossible to grab. He stopped abruptly at the shoreline—not wanting to get soaked to the bone and not knowing what lay out there beyond the fogbanks. The lights might not have been so uneasy to venture out there, but Rafe was.

He watched until there was no trace of them left at all.

He put his hand in his pocket, feeling something there that produced unusual crunch. It hadn’t been there before. He took out the source. It was the piece of paper. It came and went as it wished. He had to accept that.

NOW DO YOU SEE WHY THIS TASK IS IMPORTANT? IT RELEASES THEM.

YOU MUST DO IT UNTIL THERE IS NOTHING LEFT.

“And how long will that take?” Rafe said in an empty tone. He didn’t know how much longer he could put up with this. If it wasn’t the physical strain, it was the mental one.

The paper went blank for a moment.

Rafe began to ball it up again within his fist, scrunching the already crinkled paper again.

I WAS THINKING…

Rafe wondered if the ellipses meant that it was begging, or if it was just avoiding the question. Could a piece of paper really do either?

“And if I ever finish this task? What about our deal? What about that, huh?”

YOU WILL GET A WAY OUT, ONCE THE WORK IS COMPLETE.

“How? Just tell me how!”
The paper went blank again. Rafe kicked a few round pebbles near the shoreline into the still water.

YOU JUST HAVE TO TRUST ME.

“You sure as hell could do a lot more to earn my trust. You are this close from being trashed by moi.”

YOU WILL KEEP THE AGREEMENT.

It wasn’t the best timing for something to try and boss Rafe around, when he was so stressed out. Rafe assumed that the note would learn this lesson after he’d dropped it into those tranquil lake waters.

Rafe watched as the paper seemed to float on the surface for a second, before the water began to be absorbed, turning the parchment from a light grey to an even darker shade. The black ink smeared and spread out, the words themselves becoming water-like. ‘AGREEMENT’ was the last term to lose its distinction. Its adjacent E’s seemed to peer back, un-amused until the very end, when they blurred over like dead eyes.

Rafe turned around to head back to the cabin, wondering if now would be an ideal time to make another escape attempt. He crammed his belongings into the duffle bag. He didn’t want to think about what he’d just done. He didn’t want go back to look the edge of the lake and see—he told himself there wasn’t any real reason to. If he did, he was weak. That piece of paper had it coming to him—it—whatever it was. He took everything out of the duffle, went through it again, only to shove it right back in. He wished that he could shove his guilt away that easily.

So when Rafe found his eyes tugged back onto that grey rectangle, he wanted to slap himself.

I TAKE IT THAT YOU’RE WILLING TO HANG ME OUT TO DRY. 😊
Rafe had never seen a smiley face that menacing, and he knew that he probably never would again. With the soaking piece of paper in hand, he scrunched the facial image into indefinable obscurity.

Some company was better than none; and they had made a deal.

#

A knock on the door was a sound Rafe never expected to hear in a place like this. But there it was, brisk and hard. Clearly a knock. Rafe waited for a moment, listening as a rap-rapidity-rap-rap signaled another greeting. However, Rafe had locked all of the doors—so they weren’t as lucky to be let in like he’d been.

ARE YOU GOING TO GET THAT?

There was a second, visual confirmation that he wasn’t just hearing things, that he wasn’t going crazy. He didn’t need sass from a piece of paper. A piece of paper who seemed much recovered from being dropped into a lake.

He zipped to the front door and was just about to open it when he paused, remembering what had happened the preceding day. His eyes fell on a zip-lock baggy full of fresh dirt that he had placed by the front door, a precaution should another creepy fiasco happen to take place. He didn’t trust the note’s promise that it wouldn’t recur so long as he did as he was told, by taking care of the graves in the proper sequence.

What if this visitor at the door—this ‘person’—wasn’t even human? What if they were dead? What if it was just a decaying, or partially decaying, skeleton waiting for him there? What if the note had made a mistake—forgot about a body that needed him to do this thing for it; and as a result, the corpse had reanimated itself in segments? What if there was nothing but a hand there causing the rapping?
Still, it was worth the risk—or the heartbreak.

He slowly opened the door and a shuffling pacing was audible. It came to a stop when the door showed signs of movement. He opened it wider, but still couldn’t see anyone. Perhaps they were lying in wait? He opened it all the way and threw some of the contents of his zip-lock baggy every which way—hoping the soil’s properties—magical or ordinary—would ward off any possessed body parts, or at least just blind any would-be villain by getting into their eyes.

There wasn’t any scream or shout though. There wasn’t any sign of a human being.

The only thing lying out there on the porch was a pink duffle bag. The bag had a luggage tag on it that read ‘Susan,’ with an indecipherable address and phone number scrawled on it.

What the—? Rafe had no clue how this could have gotten there. He glanced left and right, walked around the house, and then ran back towards the asphalt roadway, before he came back, empty-handed and having given up.

He brought the bag inside and locked the door again, traipsing back to the living room.

HOW’D IT GO? ANYONE THERE?

“What do you think? Just leave me alone.” Rafe opened the pink duffle bag to check for a phone, though he doubted he’d find one there. He was right. The only thing inside was a pair of worn female tennis shoes. He zipped it back up and set the whole thing on the ground.

He held his face in his hands, realizing once again just how doggone tired he was. He thought he could even hear footsteps. He could hear them as if they were in the same room as him. But that didn’t make any sense…

Thud. Then the drawn out shhhhh sound of something being dragged along the ground.

He opened his eyes, turning his head in the direction of the sound. He caught the last bit of movement—it was the duffle bag. Or rather, what was inside of the duffle bag, since he saw a shoe-like shape come down and drag the bag forward at a maggoty crawl. The thing was being propelled by internal locomotion of the unnatural kind. Great. Just great.

“Mind giving me an explanation this time?”

YOU REQUESTED COMPANY. THIS IS COMPANY.

Rafe did request company, just not this kind.

“A person! I wanted a person—not another—another thing!” He said, gesturing wildly, as if it somehow would make the duffle bag vanish. “How the heck did you think that this—this would make anything better?”

Silence on the part of the paper for the moment.

As Rafe turned his back on the duffle bag, he could hear the shoes inside begin their slow steady shuffling again.

‘ITS’ NAME IS SUSAN.

“I don’t care the heck what its name is! It’s not a Susan to me! It’s not the same as a person!”

Rafe made a mental note of another lesson learned in regard to this “gift-giver:” BE SPECIFIC IN TERMS OF REQUESTS. Needless to say the whole ‘trust’ situation got a bit sketchy in the next few days, because of this mutual understanding. The fight only subsided to toleration the next day, when both the note and Rafe concluded that females were always a source of trouble. Rafe was also allowed to deliver a light kick into the duffle bag with the paper’s consent—though it couldn’t have prevented him even if it had wanted to.
Rafe reacted oddly to the clatter that it made when kicked—which he thought sounded eerily similar to a person tumbling down stairs. Afterwards, he didn’t have an explanation for why his shoe felt dirtier than it had when corpse sludge and bile leaked on it. That night, Rafe found himself opening his own duffle bag with more care than usual, as he got set out clothes for the day ahead of the him—and the many that would come after that.
White Gaussian Noise $\xi$, or the Half-Diminished Seventh Chord Thereof
There once was a man who claimed to be bothered by nothing.

Everyone admired him.

He wasn’t bothered by theology, or where he’d wind up after the grave. He wasn’t bothered by rumors of thugs, bandits, or hooligans, for if they wanted his money, they’d get it without much of a struggle, and if they wanted his life, he wasn’t bothered by this for the same reason that he wasn’t bothered by theology. He wasn’t bothered by the beasts, but perhaps they knew better and left men alone who weren’t like the others. When the people at last grew tired of it, they left him alone as well.

They gave up bothering to learn the secret of the man’s strength.

No one knew that the man didn’t believe in anything enough to be scared of it.

There was no substance to him.

But the man was the subject of the story.

And a story about nothing can still be very bothersome.
**Time Lapse Photography**

Day 01; 04:03AM:

*Convallaria majalis*—I took great care in arranging these seeds today. They are so neat and orderly. Since I dressed them myself, how could they be otherwise? I will wait to plant the others at a later time, so that they will all burst into bloom in the desired sequence, so the color is just so...flawless. Their pips will grow, like little maggots in the hidden warmth—as long as the ravenous birds don’t get at the dears. I opted not to use mulch again today, or fertilizer. They are so artificial and don’t produce the same effect that I aim for. Nature provides the best source for all natural growth; and with the weather so allowing, it shouldn’t be long now. The soil wasn’t too compact, so it was easy to reach the necessary depth for ideal planting.

Day 03; 3:22PM:

The specimen is drooping today. It reminds me of a sad doily, or a soft wedding bell. I remember how soft it felt when I crushed it, how soft it felt to be crushing something soft and white and curved and fragrant. And the liquid that seeped out—its medicinal poison for what ails me. It’s a flower I’d never give to a woman, though it is a woman’s flower. They are also said to be made from woman’s tears. I have already seen enough of those shed. I intend to have a garden when I’m finished.

Day 04, 7:33AM:

She’d told me that she liked flowers. I’d gone home that day, pouring over my books and drawings, finding the ideal flower to compliment her features from those I’d already had in mind and those I hadn’t yet considered. She’d never know how long I spent sifting through those catalogs. She probably would have rather liked a present of another sort, a blingy necklace, a spa day, perfume diluted from cheap artificial substitutes—after all, that was the norm that these
women prized. She never quite saw things the way I did. She was most definitely a social butterfly, whereas I was a specimen of *Lotus corniculatus* behind a pane of glass in an old greenhouse; and perhaps I was always waiting for her to come inside and join me—until one day she actually did.

Day 07, 6:30PM:

When I first met her, I gave her acacia.

On our second meeting, I presented her with balsamine.

It was only apparent by our third meeting that I’d have to resort to the more cliché varieties, since she didn’t understand our special communication. On this occasion, I resorted to a rose. Simple enough.

I kept on this path, planting forget-me-nots on her doorstep along with geraniums—the latter being there simply because she told me that she enjoyed their pigmentation, or something of that sort. She was bright, but in a simple type of way. I was easily able to deduce what the arrangement of her hair might signal on any given day with the same accuracy I used on the shape of a bud in determining how close it was to unfurling. I enjoyed exploration into this unfamiliar territory. I also enjoyed collecting her kisses as any man might, though I suppose I was one of the select few that kept a written record of this. That record is now complete, I might add.

I won’t bore you with the details of the other specimens, though I find them quite intriguing myself. There is only one more of real significance that I have not spoken of yet. The last gift I presented her with was that of the trefoil. It was on the day she planned to leave. I considered it successful. At least she never left.

Day 07, 7:22PM:
The language of flowers seems lost, at least on the weak-minded. Here I am surrounded by lobelia, love lies bleeding, and rue—and no one gives a damn. It’s beyond frustrating to engage in one-way communication. I can reason with why a plant would die or flourish. I can document the life cycle of fauna better than any biographer would do with something in flesh—I mean, with veins full of blood, rather than chlorophyll. I consign myself to Ophelia’s eccentricity; take what meaning you’ll have from what I hand you and what you see.

Day 14, 11:41AM:

I still have her last message. “Catching a flight at six. Didn’t want to wake you. J—.” She’d gone to have her hair done, like she did every Saturday morning; except after this Saturday, she would be leaving the house and I wasn’t certain when she’d be back. “Visiting family,” she’d said to “calm me down.”

Now I’m a peaceful man. I loathe conflict and I’d rather shut myself up in my work or with my plants than be drawn into the heat of things; and a woman, well, you can’t keep most women the way that you can keep a plant. I realized this—and as you have seen, I came up with a solution for the best of both worlds. No longer any restless nights of dropped phone calls, unexpected disappearances, other male voices answering for her—claiming to be her “brother” or her “uncle,” assuring me that she’d “be back soon.” When I confronted her about it, she claimed that I was the one being irrational. Look at my textbooks, my scholarly repute, my gardens! Does it look like I’m irrational? Does it look like I’m incompetent? Does it look like I have no idea what I’m doing or that I can’t perform? She was as callous as frost that day—and I was afraid that she would leave, after our spat the night before; and I—I couldn’t stand idly by and watch her destroy all that I had worked for, all that I had invested in this endeavor—I would not stand to be treated like—
How did I do it, you ask? Well, I most certainly am not a barbarian. I believe in simplicity, so I took the—

—wait, why do you wish to know this information? It’s a very personal matter and irrelevant to you how I did it. It was done and we’re both very happy now.

See how she nurtures such signs of affection for me? This garden—our love message—is something that will bring the two of us so close together; we’re very much a part of it. Even now, I can see the roots trickle through her flesh to dress her as a green bride.

When it came to inquires as to where she’d went, I answered so as to be left alone, that she had been the one to leave. True, that sort of reply often doesn’t do any good for the one who cultivated it, but I was left alone well enough to visit her from time to time. She’d never leave, and I’d never leave her—anymore than could be avoided of course. And that’s essentially what marriage is, I thought, ringing a lily of the valley with my finger tip to mark my conclusion.

Day 72, 12:01PM:

Such color, such magnificence! And here, I thought women sought to imitate beauty—when just the opposite is true in this case! Her brow is perfected with magnolia, and where her hands once fell, moonflower has crept out. Acacia fills overtop where her head had once been, so beautiful—though she tried to come between Nature and myself; and so, she turned to find another lover that clearly wasn’t a botanist. Look how fair I have made her though? Do you not admire it? This work? Could anyone else have made her up like so? Planted the seeds that would grow with a passion that I could only give—unless another knew how to cultivate the
fresh balsam that sprung out of your chest? Don’t you appreciate it? Don’t you like it so very
much?

Day 90, 10:10AM:

Winter comes and she dies to me all over again. The colors become a sickly yellow, then
brown, then scatter and rot away. They’ll be nothing left as the weeks tick by, until the ground
thaws again and work can resume. It will just be mulch to start out with again. But even as
such, she remains beautiful, pristine, with bones stained the color of wood and waiting for nature
to rejuvenate her once again. Perhaps she will come back smelling sweeter, looking richer than
the first time—I’ve always been one to believe in second chances; and she has made such a
lovely gift of herself, it would be a shame to waste it.

Day 324; 9:32 AM

A scrap of pink elastic waist band is unearthed by a familiar hand, though its warm flesh
is now grooved here and there as if by irrigation ditches. He has nothing to say, but tosses away
something hard and white like riverbed rock the size of a midget’s eye. He is alone in the most
beautiful garden you have ever seen and there is stillness in the frame. It is a silence that is seen,
not heard. The camera feed goes bad for a moment, black and white dots falling like hail
through the grass—shushing you and killing off the beauty of that image. You make it go away
with a tap on the television screen; but even that solution requires noise. You fail to notice the
swollen stock of a finger bone, as anything but a fungus ejecting up out of the ground. This is a
gardener that you want to see. He seems to know what he’s doing. You wonder how he got
everything to grow so well. You consider when he watered it last, or what type of fertilizer he
must use. If you were to speak with him, you wonder if he would tell you his secret, or just keep
it to himself.
In Memoriam of the Former Mr. Joe Murphy

A certain Mr. Joe Murphy sat down at the small café on the corner of Elm and Parker, facing the author across from him. Mr. Joe Murphy was an average man, who worked an average shift—eight to five—every day at a convenience store. There was nothing particularly remarkable about him. His dark hair was cut in the usual style. His eyes were not set too far apart, or too close together. His hobbies included sports, working out, dating, and being handy at repairs.

“I’m glad that you could make it, Joe.”

The conversation began with the normal cordialities. But when the author clicked her pen open and plucked a sheet of paper out of her shoulder bag, the dialogue came to the main point.

“I assume you’re wondering why I brought you here, Joe. You’re just too polite to ask.”

She set the paper down on the table. She’d never been that talented at assembling boxed furniture at home, but the café’s withstood the many customers that came and went each day.

“Your life has been fairly bland up until this point, has it not? And bland doesn’t sell—it just doesn’t sell on today’s market. You need something fresh, something original. With an average life—no one’s going to read it.”

He was silent. But she knew that she’d made him an intelligent man.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, Joe. And don’t blame me—it’s the market, I tell you. If you’re not fresh—you’re out. I mean, I’m a reasonable person—I quite like you the way you are. And don’t give me that look like I’m being a sell-out—I’m not. I’d like to say that ‘this is going to hurt me a lot more than it hurts you,’ but that line’s way too cliché. It just wouldn’t cut it.”
That’s when he began mentioning things. She already knew what he might use in his defense, and had already taken this into account:

He said that he loved the woman he was dating—

—and that was fine, but she was a Mary Sue. He was supposed to love her.

He said that he’d be missed at work—that he didn’t want to relocate or be worse off than he was now.

She agreed that he was doing all right financially. She’d have offered to make fortune come his way, if she’d ever had much luck in writing success stories.

He listed all of the things that he currently had—and how he liked the way they were: a place to live, food, utilities, safety, a social net to fall back on, average looks.

And the author pointed out that he’d only had the chance to earn them because she’d written that part in.

It wasn’t until he brought up the free will bit that she felt bad in cutting him off—

—but she had to.

She had a deadline to meet. And as entertaining as it might be to sit down with a character to explain future changes, it would never be entertaining enough to exist in print.

And so here—the revised personage of Mr. Joe Murphy came to be. She clicked her pen tip closed and looked down at the scribbled-on sheet of paper. She took it off the table and slipped it into her shoulder bag.

“I’m glad that you could make it, Joey. I have a feeling people will love you even more now.”
She slid the chair back and stood up, looking down at the man. His eyes pinched the top of his nose, which was hidden beneath uncombed bangs. He also had circles underneath them from working the night shifts at a warehouse. His love life would have probably been better if he hadn’t gotten into narcotics at eighteen.

He asked if she wanted him to pay her bill. She said no.

He resented that. He was dead-dog tired from getting off at eight only to be stood up by some—well, she wanted to censor his language for him. But he didn’t know her to be the author. She didn’t trust him to handle that type of truth as well as the Average Joe.

“I already paid,” she lied. She’d written the bill off. She hoped that that didn’t make her immoral, and she hoped that changing Mr. Joe Murphy didn’t make her shallow.

And she really hoped the reader would be pleased now.

After all, she was writing the story for them—as much as for herself.

And didn’t that make the reader responsible for this killing?

She left the little café, shoulder bag heavy with the potential for a bestseller, hoping that the literary market would be pleased with her latest offering.