

"For a book that looks death squarely in its sightless eye,
this one is just brimming over with life and inventiveness."
—KAREN RUSSELL, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A NOVEL

THE PALLBEARERS CLUB

PAUL TREMBLAY

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE CABIN AT THE END OF THE WORLD*

ALSO BY PAUL TREMBLAY

Survivor Song

Growing Things and Other Stories

The Cabin at the End of the World

Disappearance at Devil's Rock

A Head Full of Ghosts

No Sleep Till Wonderland

The Little Sleep

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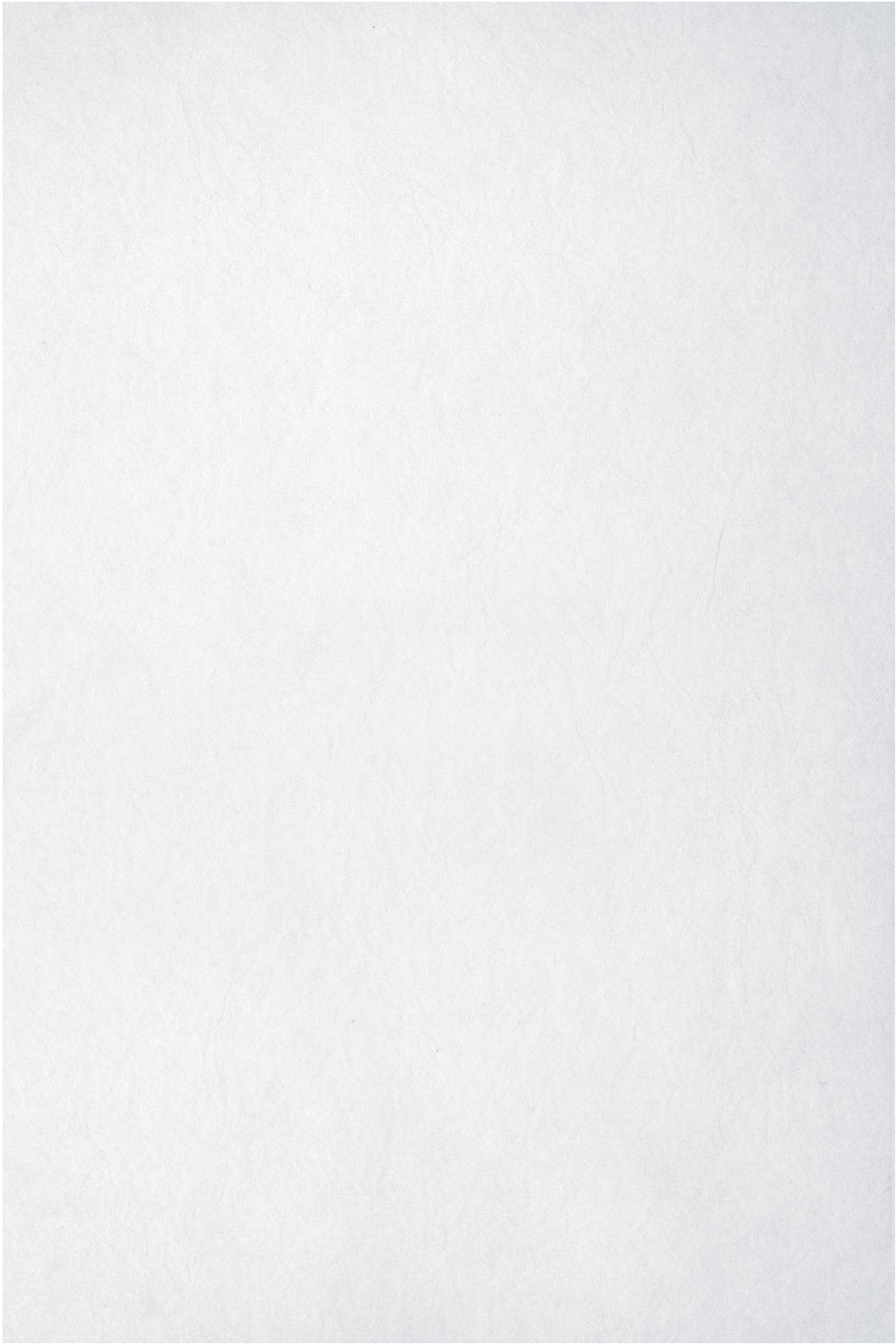
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down and enunciate the harsh coupling before dumping an auditory body into the dark water of *r*'s and *a*'s. I make no claim to be an expert of phonesthetics (the study of inherent pleasantness of the sound of words, according to Wikipedia), but clearly Art Barbara is no *cellar door*.

I saw the name written on the bathroom wall of Club Babyhead, spring of 1991. The letters were capitalized, angular slashes of neon-green ink; a cave painting glowing in the lovely darkness of the early 1990s. I have never forgotten it. And by the end of this memoir, neither will you.

Isn't time strange? Time is not linear but a deck of cards that is continuously shuffled.

I will change all names to protect the innocent and not-so. I will take great care to choose the names appropriately. As astounding and beyond-belief the goings-on to be detailed are, the names will be the only fictions.

Beyond the act of communication, sharing my story and experience and life, exploring fear and fate and the supernatural (for lack of a better word) and the unknown universe big and small, vulnerable confessions, and base gossip (Truman Capote and the nonfiction novel this is not), perhaps a lame excuse or two for lifelong disappointments and why I am and where I will be, the purpose is hope. Hope that one reader or one thousand and one readers might empathize with the "why" behind the poor decisions I made, make, and most certainly will make.

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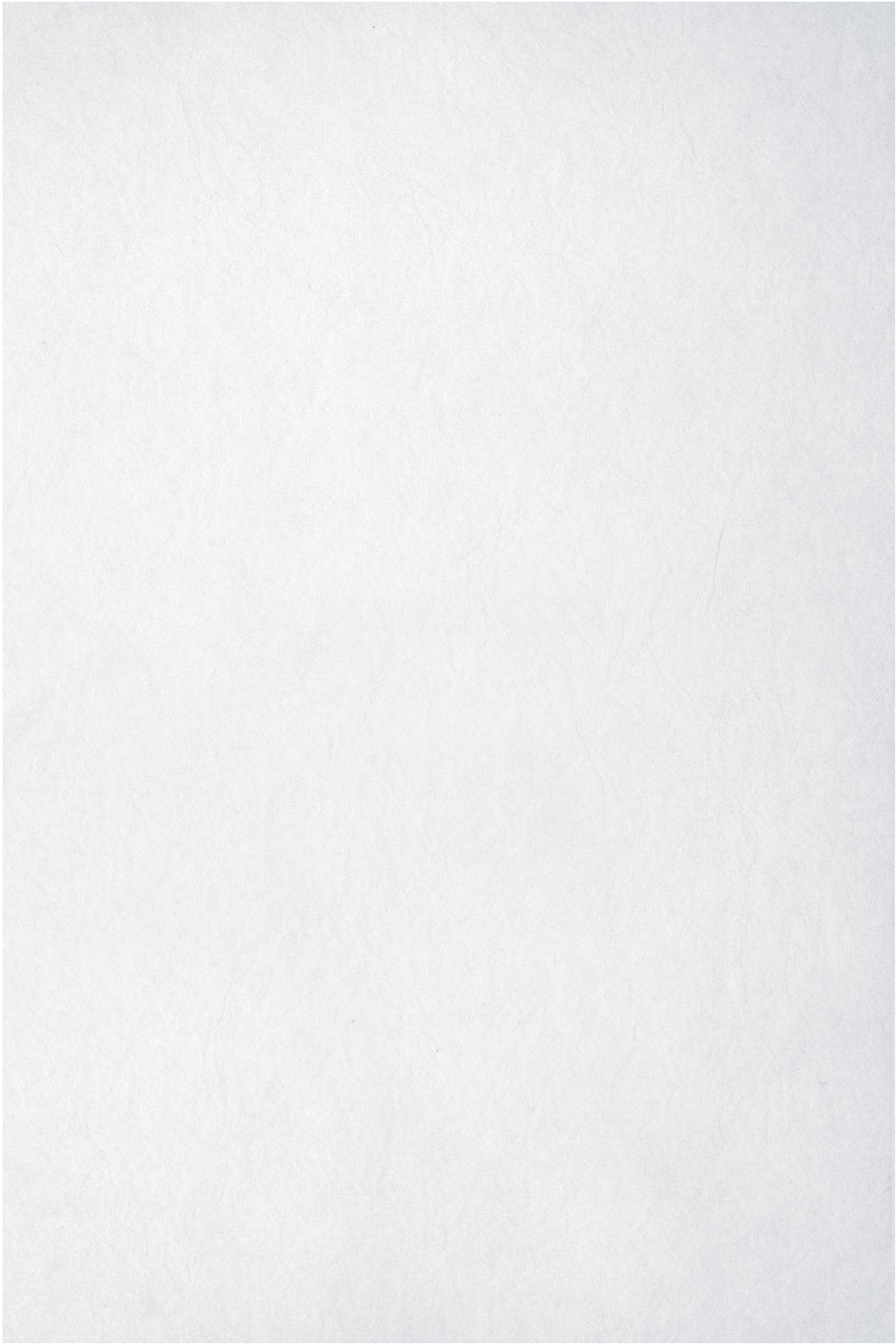
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Ian, one of two Panthers newscasters, he of the swimmer's shoulders and beer-keg leer, greeted me with "Hey, it's Artie the one-man party."

[Note: Ian did not say that. As we've discussed, my name was not Art. I will not break in like this again to point out other, minor factual name discrepancies. It's enough for you to know Ian was the kind of chud who would've said that if my name were Art. What he did call me wasn't my real name either. He called me Bones. I had always been the skinniest, most slight kid in my class, and at that AV moment in time I weighed a scant one hundred and forty pounds. Most of my male classmates called me by that nickname, which I never had the option of approving when it was pinned to me at age eleven along with another kid's fist to my big nose. (I fought back, but all that earned was another, bigger kid's fist to the stomach.) At ages seventeen and eighteen, the nickname was uttered with tradition if not endearment, certainly with less intentional cruelty, but it was there in the name's history, so I will not use nor refer to it again. We will stick with Art to the end.]

The other newscaster, Shauna, gave me a wave and a slightly puzzled tilt of the head as she buzzed around the small studio, handing out photocopies of the morning's announcements to the producers, to Ian (slouched behind the news desk, a combo of James Dean and a pile of dirty laundry) and the camera operator. She wore the high-school equivalent of a business suit, her black blazer with shoulder pads of a size somewhere between a football player and David Byrne's *Stop Making Sense* suit. Shauna and I were in the same calculus, English, and French classes and she had always been cordial if not coolly competitive. She had the third-highest grade point average in our graduating class of three hundred and twenty-four. I was number nineteen, one of only two boys in the top twenty, which told you all you needed to know about my male classmates.

Shauna asked, not unkindly, why I was there. I told her I had an announcement about a new club.

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with those schools—well, their proximity to my house was wrong with those schools).

I stood in front of the camera, trapped under a mini spotlight that might as well have been a heat lamp from the cafeteria. This was the last place in the world I wanted to be, and I normally spent most of my school days trying to not be seen.

See me:

I was six feet tall, having grown six inches in the prior eighteen months. The rapid height gain exacerbated my scoliosis. The condition had been discovered later than it should've, as I somehow slipped through the cracks of the embarrassing annual scoliosis checks during gym class. The checks consisted of a line of boys with their shirts off (my head down, wishing I were invisible, my arms matchsticking across my chest), and after a properly lengthy time of mortification I was in front of a disinterested school nurse holding a school-issued clipboard. I bent over to touch my toes, so skinny that my vertebrae stuck up through my skin like the back plates of Godzilla, and the nurse's cold hand fish-slapped onto my right shoulder blade, her audible "hmmm" and "you look a little off" (me being *a little off* was her diagnosis) and then she told me to switch to carrying my bookbag with my left shoulder. Since

being diagnosed eighteen months prior, I attended physical therapy sessions and slept in a hard-plastic-and-metal-framed back brace at night (the doctor had never insisted I wear it to school, knowing I would not), which improved the curvature in my lower spine, but not in the upper region between my shoulder blades where scoliosis was most difficult to correct, where the curve to the right measured thirty-five degrees. The prospect of spinal fusion surgery loomed if the curvature increased in my upper spine. I wore baggy enough clothes so other people wouldn't notice the encroaching kyphosis, my curling into myself. No one at school commented on my back, and I never told any of them about it. Maybe no one noticed the burgeoning hunchback because of my other unpleasant physical

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Shauna was at the window and banging on it with hammer fists. A crack spidered through the soundproof glass.

“Yeah, I guess that’s it. If you’re interested, keep an eye out for flyers I’ll post around school, or just find me to learn more. My homeroom is A-113, or you can leave a message for me in the front office, or if you forget my name, leave a note addressed to the Pallbearers Club. Thank you. Back to you, Shauna and Ian. Um, go Panthers.”

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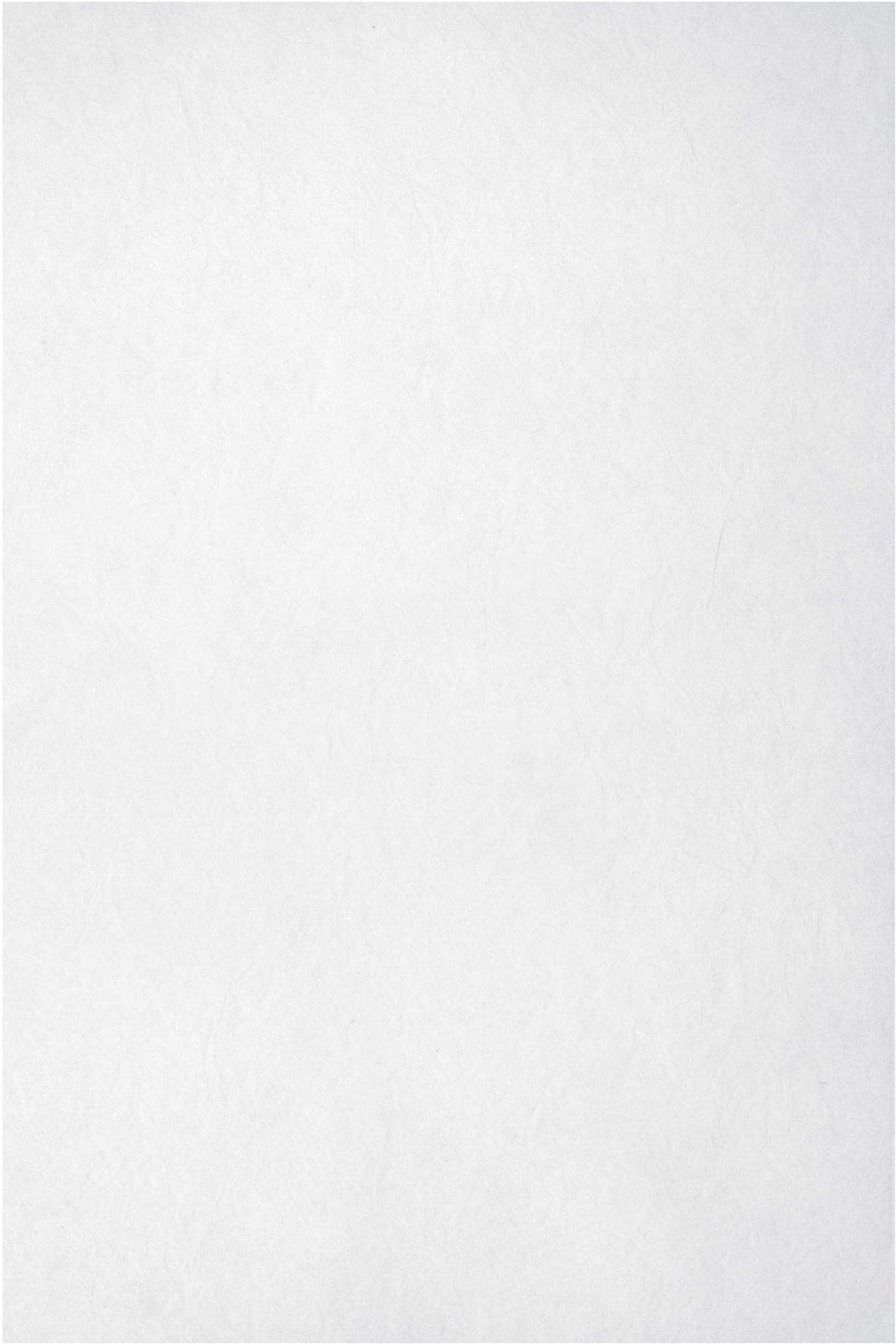
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Adjournment: Meeting ended when Eddie Patrick pretended to choke on pretzel sticks and insisted Cayla Friedman perform the Heimlich Maneuver on him. She declined. Next meeting is at the Stephens Funeral Home, Saturday, 9:00 A.M., which is thirty minutes prior to the start of the 9:30 A.M. service to be held within the funeral home.

Minutes submitted by: Art Barbara

Minutes approved by: Art Barbara

You deserved
not to get in

[I submitted the minutes along with my college applications to Bates and Middlebury Colleges as an attempt to appear both creative and disciplined. I did not get into either school. The 2007 me is still salty about it.]

I pulled my parents' beat-up blue station wagon into Stephens Funeral Home at 8:45 A.M. I hated being late. As vast as the night ocean, the parking lot funneled me toward a hearse parked under a trellis-lined awning shading the home's main entrance. Set back a considerable distance from busy Cabot Street, the converted colonial house was painted white with black trim, the official colors of a New England funeral home. I do not know anything about architecture, but let's call it Colonial Gothic. At three-stories in height, the mournful manor lurched and sprawled at the edges of the well-manicured lot.

The funeral director, Mr. Stephens, stood outside the entrance smoking a cigarette. He was my height but easily outweighed me by one hundred pounds. A balding, middle-aged Black man, Mr. Stephens wore an immaculate navy-blue pinstripe suit adorned with a maroon tie. His wide glasses, each lens could be used as a bird-bath, claimed most of his face.

"That is a fine suit you have on, young man." His voice was a growl in a puff of smoke, yet each syllable carefully enunciated, as though he'd practiced what he was going to say. "Did you wear it to your first communion?"

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smoke, do you, Art? A wonderful, terrible habit. Don't start unless you intend to see it through to the end."

I laughed politely, and itchy to share something personal, I confessed that I'd never been inside a funeral home before and the only funeral mass I ever attended was when I was four years old, for a great-uncle. Uncle Heck. Short for Hector of course. I had no memory of his funeral, but I remembered him letting me grab his nose with my tiny hands. My parents and other family members frequently told me that was what I always did to Uncle Heck when he was alive, so it was possible my memory was a staged, mental reenactment of what they told me. How could I know the difference?

Mr. Stephens ignored my weighty contemplation of the nature of memory and said, "To have never been in a funeral home, I don't know if you are fortunate or not. The law of averages tends to catch up with us all."

Mr. Stephens wasn't nearly as friendly with Cayla and Eddie as he was with me. (Perhaps he sensed I needed kindness more than they did. Perhaps he was annoyed by how loosely Eddie's skinny black tie hung around his neck, and that Cayla—while wearing a respectful black dress—loudly chewed bubble gum.)

He led the Pallbearers Club up a set of wide stairs to a viewing room on the second floor. The room was much smaller than the ones downstairs. I wanted to ask if this room had a name, or perhaps suggest one (*Mourners' Pantry*, given its smallness?) but the proper moment had passed. An open casket was set against the far wall.

The club moved as one as we entered and flowed left, tracing the perimeter, sticking to the wall opposite the coffin. Speaking as president of the club, we were having second, third, and fourth thoughts about our being here and about our club's charter and mission statement.

Mr. Stephens told us the woman's name was Kathleen Blanchet and she had died from complications associated with untreated

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Eddie and Cayla had yet to confide in me why they had joined our esoteric club, beyond expressing a similar desire to accrue extra-curricular activities that would most assuredly lead to future successes in life. It really didn't matter to me *why* they joined. Because of our shared honorable endeavor I hoped we would be friends forever (cue an '80s-movie montage of carefree madcap adventures while we learned to accept each other's differences).

[Note: We would not do any of that. But I did think so in that instant.]

Eddie turned and walked backward toward the casket. His smirk was too eager to mask his social ineptitude with cruelty. He said, "Five bucks and I'll stick my pinky up her nose."

Cayla dug into her shoulder bag and pulled out a five, calling his bluff. Eddie declined with a shrug and a brief collapse of his shoulders.

The three of us stood before the padded kneeler set by the coffin. We were close enough to each other to hold hands. We were holding hands, metaphorically speaking. We psychically supported each other as we prepared to participate in a time-honored, vital social ritual. And we stared at the body of Kathleen Blanchet.

One half of the coffin lid was open, and her torso was visible from the waist up. Her skin stretched tightly across her brow and wide forehead, which tapered into a dried-out, autumn field of brown stalks of hair. Her cheeks had caved in, and her eyelids spanned precariously across sinkholes. She was desiccated, a dried-out insect. How long had she been dead? The heavy-handed application of foundation makeup did not add health, weight, or life to her face. She did not look like someone sleeping peacefully, nor did she look like an uncanny, waxy mannequin. The coffin was too big for her, and she receded into the plush lining. She wore a prim, long-sleeved navy-blue dress. Her hands were folded over her stomach, and her fingers and wrists were skinnier than mine. I hid my hands behind my back, afraid I was seeing a future snapshot of my own grotesquely thin corpse. My initial spark of discovery at witnessing life's most final, physical

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Eddie flipped the padded kneeler up and down with the toe of his scuffed shoe. He nudged me and said, “How’d you come up with the idea for this freak club? You wanna be an undertaker or something? You look like you could be one. All you need is a creepy hat.”

“There’s a club like this near San Francisco. I saw it on the news.” I didn’t admit to watching teen news on the kids’ cable network, Nickelodeon.

“And you thought, ‘Wow, that sounds fucking neat.’”

I looked to Cayla, like she was going to answer for me. She walked away from us and the coffin. I said, “I wanted something that would stand out on a college application.” I left out *So I can get into a school far away from here and far away from you, Eddie, and all the other fucking Eddies.*

Cayla removed her black banana clip and adjusted her hair. She said, “Oh, this is going to stand out.” She laughed and covered her mouth, which made her laugh harder.

I wondered if Cayla was here because she decided to make me her social charity case. Upon seeing the morning announcement, she figured no one would join my club and I would be embarrassed/crushed/hurt and so she attended the first meeting and when Eddie was the only other kid who showed up, she had to stick it out (because, come on, *Eddie*) as an unspoken favor to poor, outcast me. If any of that was a mitochondrion in one cell of the truth organism, I loved her and hated me for it.

Father Wanderly (white, early middle-aged, and as short, svelte, and fastidious as a plastic groom atop a wedding cake; he told us to call him “Father W.”) and Mr. Stephens were all business as they entered the room along with two other men in black suits, presumably employees at the funeral home, who did not introduce themselves.

After we signed a blank page of a guest book, Father W. took his place at the head of the coffin. We moved back and formed a semicircle facing the priest. He read a prayer from his leather-bound

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and momentum. He said, “Not quite, my friend. It’s time you three bear the pall, as it were.”

“Huh?” Eddie said. At least he was succinct and to the point.

“We need to you help haul her to the hearse.”

“I’m stronger than I look.”

I didn’t say that, but I shouted it in my head.

The two men in suits were at the foot of the coffin, taking the brunt of the weight, leading us slowly downstairs, while holding their end up higher in an attempt to keep the coffin as level as possible. Cayla and I were in the middle, with Mr. Stephens and Eddie the anchors by the head.

Eddie said, “Is she gonna slosh around inside if we tilt too much?”

Cayla leaked a small, involuntary “Yuck.”

Mr. Stephens named the parts of the casket as we huffed and groaned our way down the stairs. “You saw the pillow box, of course. The interior frame of the lid is called the flange. The cover is the bridge. The apron on the inside, when viewing, the part folded over the crown is the overlay—”

The coffin was heavy but not unmanageable. I tried to catch Cayla’s eye and act like this was no big deal, that I could do it one-handed if I wanted to. She puffed out her cheeks, blowing out a spout of air, in what I assumed was a this-is-hard-work gesture. I nodded and shrugged. Well, I couldn’t shrug, as my shoulders were bearing a considerable load.

“At the far end, or the foot-end, is the fishtail, the ogee, corner, and tip—”

It was more than a little bizarre to think that I’d got up this morning, showered, eaten a bowl of Honeycomb cereal, put on my “best” clothes, and now I helped carry an ornate box containing a body, or a person, or an unperson. I thought about Eddie’s question regarding her possible movement inside the coffin and I listened and felt for little thuds or thumps, a light but longing tapping. I

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Eddie said, “It wasn’t that heavy. Eat a fucking sandwich sometime, you rail.”

I wriggled out from Mr. Stephens’s embrace. “It wasn’t too heavy for me. I don’t know what happened. I was fine, it was easy, and then, I don’t know, I just got light-headed. Or more like, heavy-headed.”

Mr. Stephens said, “You did perfectly well. It was an emotional ceremony and upon seeing a body for the first time some people have delayed physiological responses. I’ve seen it many times.”

[Note: 2007 me knows Mr. Stephens’s “delayed physiological responses” was an unknowing (on his part) clue to what had happened to me and to what would happen, the type of clue the universe mockingly provides.]

One of the men in black suits apparated at my side with a plastic cup of water. I begrudgingly accepted it. As I sipped, everyone’s focus and attention shifted away from me.

Cayla asked Mr. Stephens if he would write her a college recommendation and handed him an envelope (no idea where she had kept it hidden) with her academic record and list of extracurricular activities.

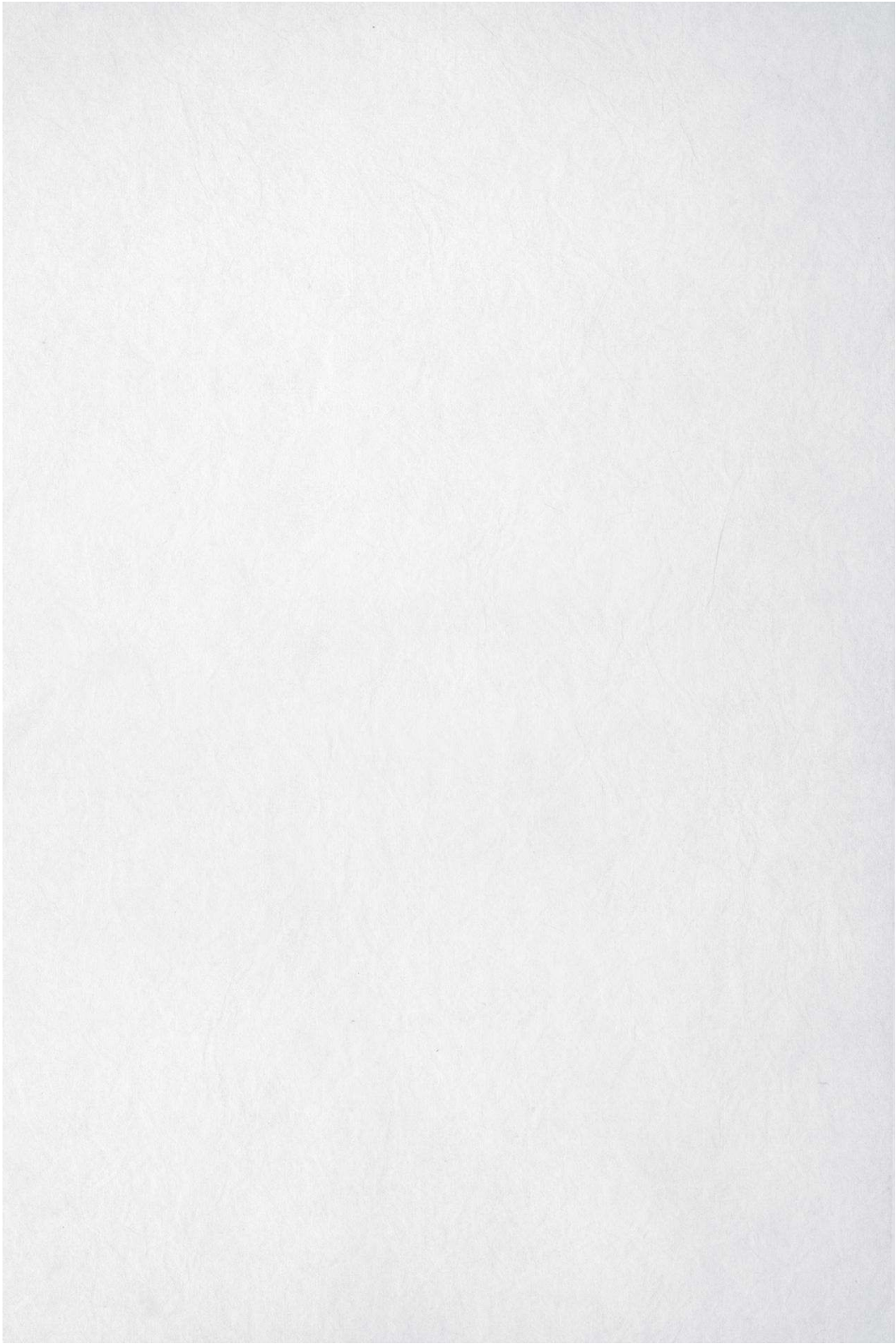
Eddie ripped off his tie, wrapped it around his forehead like he was a parking-lot Rambo, and skulked off toward his car chuckling to himself. Even though I knew he was chuckling at me, there was nothing sadder than a person laughing by themselves.

The other man in a black suit rooted through a brown paper bag and offered me half of his ham sandwich, slathered in radioactive yellow mustard. I hated mustard.

I wished I had passed out or died.

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When the phone rang, I was doing any one of the things described above. Mom answered and after a hushed exchange she curled around from the kitchen into the TV room, or if I was lost between the stereo speakers, she glided through the dining room and kicked my splayed feet.

“What?”

Mom was tall, a scant twenty-one years older than me, and had dark short hair (not Annie Lennox “Sweet Dreams Are Made of This” short, but close). The stretched-out phone cord trailed behind her with plenty of slack. One hand cupped the receiver. Her eyes were windows thrown open on the first warm spring day and her smile was a porch door.

“Art, it’s for you”—a pause because it was never for me—“and it’s a girl.”

I tried to play it off like I expected the call.

Mom repeatedly asked “Who is she?,” and perhaps in her head she sounded like a supportive friend or peer, not a mother yearning for her son to have friends, never mind a girlfriend. Instead of non-chalant cool my shrugs communicated *I have no clue, what do I say, what do I do?* judging by Mom’s avalanching smile and her “You want me to ask her name?”

I grabbed the phone. Mom receded into the kitchen as though a wave swept her out with the tide. She buoyed in the periphery.

“Hi. Hello?” I groaned, as yes, I said both “hi” and “hello.”

“Hey there. Is this Art Barbara?”

Whomever she was, she was not a classmate; it was less I didn’t recognize her voice in five words than what it was she said. Would a teen who didn’t know me and wasn’t making fun of me use my first and last name like that?

I said, “Yeah. This is him, or, um, me. Can I ask who’s calling?”

“Sure.”

Silence.

She added, “I said you can ask.”

“Oh, okay. Um, who’s calling?”

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I chafed at the comparison to a doodle. I had spent more than an hour on design, getting it just right. I had used slash-drawn power letters. Like a mountaineer's flag planted on an impossible peak, a small but unimpeachable "the" perched atop of the Pallbearers "P." "Club," not an afterthought but the uppercut punch after a left-right combo, dangled off the end of the word and it didn't care what you thought of its reckless boldness.

I said, "I wanted the flyer to be cool and attention-grabbing."

"You're one for two. At best. But I'm in. Let me know where and when."

Mr. Stephens admitted to being pleased Eddie was no longer a member of the club, saying, "He was a cloud that hung over your honorable venture." He was not pleased, however, that our newest member was late. He declared the service would begin in fifteen minutes with or without her. He, Cayla, and I continued our vigil in the funeral home's front foyer.

Mr. Stephens asked, "Can you be a club if you number only two members?"

"Art is still working on the bylaws," Cayla said. I couldn't tell if she was being commiserative with me or conspiratorial with him. Either or any of the ways, I didn't care and was thankful she was here, even if this service was to be her last.

"I do love a thorough set of bylaws—" An unlit cigarette stuck to Mr. Stephens's lower lip. It bobbed in rhythm with his jaw, the baton of a symphony conductor. "Though you cease being a club at two. You're a partnership. The Pallbearers Partnership."

Cayla snorted a hard laugh at this.

I stopped myself from asking if either of them thought college admissions boards would look less favorably upon an extracurricular partnership. I said, "No. We're a club. Mercy will be here."

"One can hope."

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like someone who would get declarative-sentenced with “I’ve met you before.” As such her age was undeterminable. She could easily fit within a ten- or even twenty-year range, whereas I looked much younger than my seventeen years old. If she told me then that she was nineteen or twenty-nine or even thirty-nine or any number between, I would not have been shocked.

Mr. Stephens asked, “What school do you attend?”

“North Shore Community College. Part-time.” Mercy nodded at me and asked, “Art?”

“Yes, hi, thanks for coming. So, you’re a photographer? Our club could definitely—”

She snapped a picture of me. Momentarily flash blinded, I rubbed my eyes, pre-mortified, wondering how many of the splotchy blemishes on my face would show on film.

“If you mean one who takes photographs at this moment in time, then yes.” Mercy returned to the stairs, dropped the new photo on one of the treads, and slid her first photo (presumably of the hearse) into her bag. “You two move closer and I get a two-for-one.”

Cayla and Mr. Stephens obeyed without protest or a demand of explanation. They even struck poses: Cayla crossed her arms over her chest and jutted out a hip; Mr. Stephens gripped his chin, miming deep thought, and arched one eyebrow.

“You guys are stars. Art, stay away from your picture. I got your good side.”

I froze in mid-side toward the stairs. In my head I was already grinding the picture of me under my heel and saying, *Oops, sorry, I was going upstairs to use the bathroom and I’m such a klutz.* Instead, I swiveled and turned and pivoted, longing to believe in a good side and display it.

Mercy passed the milky, developing photo to Cayla and asked Mr. Stephens, “Can I hang up my coat somewhere?”

Mr. Stephens directed Mercy to a foyer closet. Cayla shook the exposed negative, impatient for the result.

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Cayla whispered, “Do you know her?” I hesitated to answer, partly because her stage whisper echoed. “How’d she know about the club—oh, was it your flyers?”

“Yes, I mean, no. I mean, I sent a flyer but she’s a friend of my cousin. Jennifer. Graduated in ’85. She’s a senior in college, up at Bates.” (Why do we think added details makes something sound less like a lie?)

Cayla gave me a naked, unprotected, or unvarnished look, less *I’m on to you* than *Oh, now I know who you are*. “And what’s her deal with the pictures?”

“I don’t know—”

Mr. Stephens called us into the room.

The new and improved Pallbearers Club gathered by the casket, behind which was an assortment of potted plants, not flowers. Inside the gunmetal-gray coffin was an old, dead man wearing a cream-colored burial suit. He was bald but for cotton-candy tufts of white cumulonimbusing the horizon of his Jurassic ears. Jaundiced wallpaper skin displayed a complex pattern of liver spots on his forehead. His hands were a pile of sticks and stones. While my head buzzed with fascination and an urge to flee the room, I was not nearly as affected (mentally or physically) at the viewing of his body as I had been by Kathleen Blanchet’s, and I was not sure why. Perhaps this was what I always imagined a dead body would look like. And I did appreciate his suit; it read as cheerful to me.

I snuck a look at Mercy and Cayla, both shuttered inside their own heads, and I was reminded we are always alone.

So gloomy!

Mr. Stephens cleared his throat and announced the ceremony was about to begin. The club dropped a few steps back from the coffin and into Mr. Stephens’s orbit. He nodded at each of us. We returned our own volley of nods. He pulled out a letter from inside his jacket and almost as an afterthought, he told me to stop slouching.

I wanted to smart-aleck back at him that I’d straighten my crooked spine if I could. Instead, I mumbled, “Sorry,” and I faux-

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that to you
at some
point, but
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end of the
ceremony.
You make
me sound
like an
uncaring
asshole.

I stammered something about his being at peace.
Cayla said, "I hope he's with Linda and Donna."
"I liked Albert Finney in *Wolfen*," Mercy said.

We ferried the casket to the hearse, a winding trip that went smoothly if not quickly as we didn't have to contend with lugging the deceased down any stairs. Once the coffin glided down the tracked gullet of the hearse and the rear door closed, I cracked my knuckles and rolled my neck like a preening weightlifter, making a show of how little physical exertion was expended.

The hearse driver still asked if I was okay and offered me half of his mustard-slathered sandwich. I told the man I was fine, and I didn't want or need his sandwich, or a cup of water, thank you.

Cayla drifted away into the parking lot with a barely audible "Bye." She moved too quickly for me to ask for a ride, or to do so without being a self-conscious, awkward dweeb.

I asked Mr. Stephens if I could use the phone and he told me there was one in a small office opposite the entrance of *Melancholy Sunrise*. I headed back into the funeral home, pausing briefly in the foyer, trying to remember if I'd find the *Sunrise* to the right or left.

Lift? Did I
step out of
a hardboiled
detective
novel?

"I can give you a ~~lift~~," Mercy said, all but shouting into my ear. Startled, I spun until I completed two circles. But she was not behind me. The front door was closed. I was in the foyer by myself.

I sputtered unconnected syllables until I mustered a weak "Sorry, what?"

She didn't answer, nor did anyone else. Was Mercy checking out the other rooms by herself? After all, she had been late and never got the tour from Mr. Stephens. But if she was exploring, wouldn't I hear her camera going off? What would stop her from taking photos now? No, she had said she can give me a lift. Maybe she was attempting to trick me into searching for her and she was hiding, pressed flat against a wall, or she crouched in a corner, creeping in a shadowed spot near a closed coffin and then she'd jump out and take a picture of

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ride she would've quit the Pallbearers Club and I would've never seen her again and my life from that point would become someone else's. This is not regret, as there's not remorse, not exactly. A wish of foreknowledge, perhaps.]

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[2017 *me*: In giving one last read-through before I abandon the manuscript, I continue mining the cavernous pit into which I was led, and I'm in so deep I no longer see any light and there's only more digging.]

ba
an

Mercy's car was a beat-up early Datsun, standard transmission, an orange box on wheels, but it had a tape deck. Music clanged to life along with the car's engine.

reg

Dueling vocals screamed to be heard over a din of tinny, fuzzed-out guitar and a rolling, jackhammer drumbeat. Underneath the high-treble blast a pistoning bass was the groundwater, a low rumor of order. The overloaded speakers crackled and hissed.

be

Mercy turned left out of the parking lot, whacked me on the shoulder, and said, "What do you think?"

"Of what?"

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"This band."

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I couldn't parse the lyrics. There was no heroic guitar soloing. No chorus with slick background vocals. Zero production value. It was as though someone broke into their rehearsal space (I imagined a musty, low-ceilinged basement) and dropped a mono-channel tape recorder in the middle of the floor, and because of the analog recording intrusion the band played louder, faster, angrier. Hints of melody surfaced and imploded, only to ooze back later, and then the song abruptly finished, crashed, and it was the end of the speakers and the tape player and the Datsun and maybe the rest of the world because it was all too much. Then the next song exploded. My initial response: I didn't like it. It was too much. The emotion and lack of

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Mercy didn't say anything else, waiting me out, or waiting for me to figure it out. And oh, yeah.

I said, "You heard me tell Cayla you knew my cousin, right? Sorry, I just—"

"Don't worry about it. I get it."

How could she get it or get me when I sure as hell didn't? I worried she thought I lied to Cayla because I was embarrassed to have her, a stranger, in the club, which, fine, was slightly true. I wasn't embarrassed by her per se, more that I was unable to get other classmates or "friends" to participate and I had no other recourse but to invite a stranger to join, and voilà, Mercy was suddenly a friend of my cousin.

Eager to change the subject, I asked, "Can I see the pictures you took?"

"Yeah. Hold on." She plucked her bag away from me and deposited it on her own lap. She rifled through it with both hands while presumably pinning her knees against the underside of the steering wheel to keep us on the road. She passed the stacked pictures across to me. "Be careful not to touch the exposed film. I'm picky about my photos."

Not yet confident enough to try out a joke about how not-careful the photos had been left in her bag or how not-careful she was about hands on the steering wheel, I said, "Got it."

The photo of me was on top. I was caught in mid-cringe next to the stairwell banister, sporting a goofy non-smile. The camera flash bleached my craggy, lunar-surface face. I ostracized the shot to the bottom of the stack, and I quickly fanned through the set. No one picture was remarkable in terms of composition (though I was far from an expert) other than the photo of Tom Jones lying in repose. The colors were soft, and the image blurred the farther the eye moved away from the subject, which was of course his body. This was the last photograph anyone would ever take of the man. How many other people would see this photo other than Mercy and me? How many of those people would know his name? This square

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I gave the pictures back to Mercy and thanked her for the ride. She stowed the photos and Frisbeed the bag into the backseat as I spluttered through saying I'd call to let her know when the next Pallbearers Club meeting was.

Twisted in her seat, one arm behind the headrest, she eyed me for a length of time enough for me to consider what it was I'd said in addition to all possible other things I might then say. I couldn't hold her stare, but I also couldn't look away. The car's heat billowed around my head along with the sweet, dizzying tang of antifreeze. For the first time since the funeral home, I thought about how unnerved (or frightened, I should probably admit that I was frightened) I was when I thought Mercy was hiding in the moments before she emerged from the coat closet. I was now convinced that whatever she'd say next she'd say without moving her mouth and I'd hear it as coming from behind me and feel its black-hole mass over my shoulder. As I was about to be sucked into the gravity-hungry event horizon, she ejected the cassette from the tape deck.

"I don't do meetings. Tell me when I need to show up at the funeral home and I'll be there. I can pick you up, too, if you want," she said.

"Okay. Right. Thanks."

She tossed the tape into my midsection as I crawled out of the bucket passenger seat. "Hey, you can have this. Give it a good listen."

"Oh, thanks. That's, um, that's very cool. Are you sure?"

"No big deal. It's a copy of a copy. I'll make another one."

The cassette was a TDK brand. I similarly used blank tapes to record my records so I could listen to them on my Walkman. This cassette was framed by black plastic with a clear middle, a window to the two spools of audio tape. There were no stickers, and nothing was written on the cassette to identify the band or albums contained therein.

As I inspected the tape, flipping it over and back, and after I shut the passenger door with a hip, which meant I shouldn't have

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"I'm not sure if my memory can be fully trusted here."

Is this really a memoir? I'm no expert on publishing categories, genres, descriptions, etc. but this reads like creative nonfiction, or a creative nonfiction memoir. That's a thing, yes? It's not a criticism but more a pointed observation: this book, more times than not, reads like fiction. The quoted conversations especially. If you're quoting in a memoir, aren't you implying those exact words were said. ~~That aside, there is no way you remember all these conversations as presented, is there?~~ Maybe I'm being too literal. I shouldn't presume your memory works like mine, or like anyone else's. I sure as hell don't remember our exact conversations from almost thirty years ago. Or, I suppose, that's not wholly accurate. I remember our many and varied conversations, and I cherish most of them, but what I remember is the information shared with a vague sense of when and where it happened. I do not remember our talks as exact quotes with an accompanying nuanced give-and-take. Not sure why that line about me asking if you wanted a lift really sticks out as ~~En, I guess it's not a big deal—yes I do, I protest too much.~~ something I would never have said but it bothers me. My portrayal in these pages—at least in this introduction to, ahem, "Mercy"—stings a little, cuts too close to the heart. I come off as aloof, strange, and kinda mean, and socially awkward, too, different than your shade of awkwardness, of course, in which you wallow and celebrate. I always encouraged you to not care what other people think about you as a blanket social survival philosophy, but valued friends are not included in that "other people" category. I cared and care deeply what you think of me.

Even though you have me saying and doing things there's no way I said or did at the time or in the manner you described, I cannot rightly claim you're inaccurate in how I pushed you around initially. I am sorry for that, but, frankly, it was necessary. It's complicated.

his pre-ceremony-photos-only policy. After, we hit McDonald's or Super Sub (never Nick's Roast Beef, which was the main hang-out area of Beverly High School students), and we drove around listening to and talking about music. She dubbed more tapes for me; never mixes, always full albums. Ramones, Bad Religion, Black Flag, the Slits, Dead Kennedys, the Damned, Blondie, Bad Brains, Patti Smith, the Minutemen, Siouxsie and the Banshees, Buzzcocks, X-Ray Spex, Fishbone, Mission of Burma, Joy Division, and many more. I liked some bands better than others, but every band was daring, challenging, and unlike anything played on local radio or MTV. This music was a new prism through which I viewed the world; a thrilling secret, and for the first time in my life I was in the know. Chords vibrated on a wavelength that fused me to the music and together we were bigger than a shouted chorus and together we were as small as a promise and for those two-to-three glorious minutes of song duration, we were the same. That was not to say I'd found where I belonged, whatever that meant.

Compared to the spandex and pyrotechnics of rock and hair-metal bands I previously worshipped, punk was honest and real (not that there wasn't any posing going on, myself included). The scene was still unattainable to skinny old me, but a different kind of unattainable. Music was performed and made by gods, after all, but I had new ones now. Hüsker Dü remained my favorite and I quickly burned through their catalog, their early hardcore records were as thrilling and revolutionary as their mutation into melodic/outsider post-punk and power pop. In an extra notebook at home, I filled pages writing out the lyrics to their double-album *Zen Arcade* as I listened, pretending the loose concept about a kid who ran away from home and into an even scarier world was about me. In the song "Newest Industry" I found a truly cathartic expression of my dying-in-a-nuclear-war fears and flash-of-atomic-light-nightmares I collected throughout the terrible and terrifying '80s. Of course, as cursed as I was, the band had already broken up in December 1987. I purchased most of the other Hüsker albums at the Record

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(upon seeing the jacket again, with new holiday eyes, I wondered if it was somehow a mistake, because I couldn't enjoy a fleeting moment of happiness without an undercurrent of self-inflicted dread), I ritualistically arranged my pins on the lapels. I wore the jacket around the house before we left for my grandparents' house, breaking it and the look in. I did not dare go to school with the jacket on, but I wore it on weekends, an inapposite outer shell covering my funeral-home finery. When Mercy saw me in the jacket for the first time, she didn't hesitate to give her approval. Well, she said "Rad" in a mocking way, but she was not mocking me. Her "rad" was self- and culture-mocking.

Umm . . .
sure.

We relegated our hangouts to after funeral services. We did not see each other on weekdays. The Sundays after the Pallbearers Club outings were hangover-like crashes (not that I'd experienced a hangover yet). I slept well past noon and could barely muster the energy later in the day to go to work or to do homework or my back-strengthening and stretching exercises.

As fun and transformative as our Saturdays were (the solemn funeral services notwithstanding, which is an odd thing to say, but they quickly became somber background precursors to the rest of the day; how quickly I got used to death), my weekdays were as dreary. No one at school (beyond Eddie) was outwardly or obviously cruel to me, but I metamorphosed into the boy who wasn't there, or was less there than he had been previously. During lunch or before class started, kids gossiped about who's going out with whom and whose parents wouldn't be home the next weekend and, as the calendar turned to December, what colleges everyone were applying to. I was the hole in the donut of the conversation happening around me. Sure, I was still a fellow member of the soon-to-be-hallowed class of '89, and oh weren't we having the time of our lives, yeah?, and I laughed and feigned interest and surprise like a good donut hole should, but no one asked me about the club or what I did with Mercy on the weekend or where I was applying or if I did my calculus homework. Even the brainy kids (of which I was a member)

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without pinching my armpits was a leveling-up video game I lost more times than not. Twin metal bars rooted at the height of my shoulder blades spindled into a contiguous halo ringing my neck. With the brace on, I moved through the house like a barge in a narrow canal, and getting into bed, finding a sleeping position where the metal halo did not garrote my neck required the patience of a monk and PhD levels of pillow engineering. I'd been wearing this goddamned torture device almost every night for eighteen months, and, as it turned out, it was all for naught. On the same dreary January day the feckless George H. W. Bush was inaugurated, I had a follow-up appointment with my local orthopedic doctor. D-day for me and my sea serpent backbone. The doctor had bad news. While the brace and exercises corrected the issue in my lower spine, the curve in my upper spine had increased a jaw-dropping eight degrees since he'd seen me in September. For context, in the sixth months prior to my September appointment, my degree measurements had

Wait, what
are you
getting at?

held steady. The doctor was at a loss to explain the rapid increase beyond the "you're still growing" catchall, and he admitted he'd never seen this dramatic a change in such a short span of time. Mom mentioned how exhausted I'd been on Sundays now, as though in explanation (which, in retrospect, it was). The doctor, unmoved by Mom's non sequitur, said that I was still growing, which meant the curve/kyphosis would continue to worsen and, if unchecked, I'd curl into myself and important stuff like internal organs wouldn't have any room in my hammocking chest. We had known addressing the upper spine with physical therapy and a back brace did not have nearly the success rate as similar treatment for the lower spine. Because the brace was no longer effective and due to the severity of future complications, the doctor recommended I undergo a spinal fusion. He gave us a name of a surgeon who was tops in his field (aren't they all?) at Boston Children's Hospital. Two weeks later we drove into Boston, my parents periodically asking "How are you doing, bud?" or "You doing okay, honey?" and otherwise they didn't talk. I burrowed in the backseat with my Walkman, listening to

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enlargement, the latter being the more catastrophic symptom, which meant death. The death symptom.

My takeaway from all this? I was fated to be freakishly skinny (and soon to be freakishly tall) with a heart that might pop like a zit.

The good news was that I no longer had to wear the back brace. Score!

The following Saturday, on the aimless drive around Beverly with Mercy, I told her about the impending surgery, but not the Marfan's, as that possibility made me feel more fragile than I already felt. I joked that I'd be like the Terminator, living tissue surrounding my metal endoskeleton. It was a relief to tell someone other than a family member about the fusion. The date was far enough away that it would never happen, but when it did, I would have a friend who would support my recovery, even if it were from afar. She commiserated and said that it sucked but I'd be fine and imagine how tall I'd be after, "You'll be the tallest Terminator, the T-Tall-1989 or something," and she promised to visit me when recovering and bring me new music.

I said a simple "Thank you." I didn't tell her what she said meant a lot, but I hoped it was in there crouching between the two words.

Then, after a beat, she made an odd joke. "We need to get our Renfield straightened out."

"Renfield?"

"Wasn't that guy all hunched over? No, wait. Igor, then." She waved a hand as though swatting a fly. "Same diff."

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of continued remarkableness. Huh? How's that for masturbatory memoir indulgence and two-bit analysis? Goddamn it, it's your fault I sound like a New Age guru again. So fuck you very much for that.

You did talk about the Marfan's stuff that morning, and I made heartless jokes about your ticker. I remember your Terminator joke too. You incorrectly said "exoskeleton." I didn't correct you because I didn't want to be that person.

The Renfield quip is utter bullshit. Ignoring the casual, comfortable cruelty of a jab at your surgical expense, I would've known Renfield wasn't famously hunchbacked. I was the horror fan before you were, remember? Or at the very least, that character wouldn't be my go-to. Igor, fine, maybe, though Quasimodo is the easiest and obvious reference point. And now that I've googled your "Dr. Seward" name choice—he's a character in Stoker's Dracula, as if you didn't know—I'm getting the sinking suspicion you're using our relationship to construct a metaphor—or allegory, I often confuse the two—that I do not appreciate. No, sir, I don't like it.

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was deserted but for a few people walking dogs, Invisible Manned inside knitted hats and long, collar-up overcoats.

We entered the garden, passing between brick pillars adorned with stone plaques. Mercy read the engraved warning aloud: “Whosoever enters here let him Beware” and “For he shall nevermore escape nor be free of my spell.” We followed a short brick walkway carving through dead grass and passed under skeletonized tree branches. The hibernating rose garden opened before us and we continued down a small set of stairs and perched on the not-quite-twin marble lion statues. With lions safely beneath us, we greased our hands with overly fried chicken fingers.

I said, “Maybe I should write my stupid paper on this rose garden.”

Mercy loosened a noise that was less apathetic than a grunt, so I told her about the assignment and how I was freaking out because I had no idea what I was going to write about.

She responded as though waiting for me to broach this very topic. “You could write about my namesake. She’s a New England vampire.”

Ugh!

I heard her wrong and started in about how two students were already writing about victims of the Salem Witch Trials.

“I didn’t say anything about witches. I said a vampire. Not the movie kind either. And she’s from Rhode Island. Not Salem. Everyone’s sick of Salem.” Mercy launched into a story I’d never heard before yet was also familiar. It was great and awful and scary in the way all folktales about dying young were great and awful and scary.

I said, “Where did you hear all that? That sounds amazing but . . .”

“But what.”

“I need to be able to cite sources and—”

“What, you think I made it up?”

“No, but—”

Mercy said “But” again, at the same time as me, and louder, swamping my “but.”

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"You can eat the roach?"

"Some of us do." She reached into the backseat, retrieved her Polaroid, took a picture of me, and returned the camera from whence it came with the photo sticking out from the base. "It's been a while since I shot you. And you're vibing this morning." She wiggled spooky-vibe fingers at me.

I thought about asking (again) what she did with the photos, specifically, the ones of me. Were her community college classmates and teacher clucking and tutting at some wall-sized impressionistic collage filled with images of my goofy mug? E-fucking-gads. I didn't ask because Mercy seemed a bit off, and I didn't want to risk souring the road trip before we'd even shoved off, so I said, "I'll try not to get any vibing on the car seat."

"You better, that shit doesn't come out."

I ate both donuts before we reached I-95 south, and consequently I wasn't feeling all that great. The mix of cold air leaking through the cracked windows and the antifreeze and heat ozone from the vents wasn't helping. Mercy had perked up, though, almost as soon as we'd left my house, and talked about the music scene in Providence.

I made
you fuzzy
wuzzy?

Once my queasy stomach settled and the cold air/heat ratio found a tolerable equilibrium, I tried to get Mercy talking about herself. The more time we spent together it seemed the less I knew about her, which made me even more self-conscious and reluctant to ask personal questions. What kind of lousy friend was I for not knowing the Mercy basics at this point? Sure, she was evasive, and my already fuzzy head seemed to get fuzzier whenever we hung out, and at ~~this point in our relationship~~ I still worked and worried the wording and tone of what I said and what I would say later, terrified of scaring her off. It was possible she'd already told me all sorts of personal details (even the silly ephemera, the stuff most of us are only remembered for: Favorite color? Dog person or cat person? Coke or Pepsi? Pickles or no pickles?) and I'd blanked because I was hopelessly lost inside myself. Now we had all this time ahead of us

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From there we detoured through the Financial District, a square of blocks hemmed between the Kennedy Plaza bus terminal, Johnson & Wales University and Weybosset Street, the dilapidated Civic Center, and the library on Washington and Empire Streets. An unsettlingly vacant cityscape, almost no one lived downtown, and the denizens generally fled the area once regular work hours ended.

At the sight of the expansive library's ornate main entrance of three arches held up by towering columns, I despaired, thinking we'd never find the sources I needed for my paper on the other Mercy Brown, a New England Vampire (I was still working out a title). We navigated the library interior and found the microfiche machine on which we would search almost a century of *Providence Journal* newspapers.

Mercy left me to scroll through the early 1890s, not quite sure what I was looking for, other than Mercy's name. The days and weeks blurred, the greenish tint of the microphotographed newspapers blended text and photos. After the initial rush of potential discovery, I got distracted reading headlines about horsecar accidents, the first electric streetcars, and odd personal histories detailed in death notices, all those forgotten struggles and lives summed up in a quirky paragraph. Would anyone ever go looking for Julia Walton, who, at age seventy, died after a six-month illness, no occupation listed, but devoted her life to acts of charity that were described as "spontaneous acts of a kindly heart"? Perhaps, like I did, some- one might stumble upon her paragraph hidden within thousands of images imprinted upon a roll of microfiche, which was housed within the haystack of one library, or another hypothetical some- one might find themselves walking through one of the hundreds of disused graveyards, marked by crumbling stone or rusted fences, that pocked the New England landscape and amble by her weathered gravestone (if it was indeed still intact) melting into the dirt. In either scenario there would be no recognition of who Julia was, which was our fate. The erasure of familial and cultural memory

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so I'd feel like I'd worked hard. I paid for photocopies of the articles and copies of the relevant pages from the one book Mercy found. Still one source short of the five required, we left anyway and spent the afternoon on the east side of Providence over by Brown University, browsing through the record stores In Your Ear and Tom's Tracks on Thayer Street.

On the ride home, Mercy suggested a way to write the paper, as Mrs. Danforth had encouraged our getting "creative" with it. Maybe it would make up for being one source short.

INTERVIEW WITH MERCY BROWN, A NEW ENGLAND VAMPIRE

By Art Barbara

ART: At the end of this, I hope you'll disclose how you're still among the living.

MERCY: I'm not alive. Or am I?

ART: Quite! Do you mind if I record this?

MERCY: My voice won't record because I'm a vampire.

ART: Really? Is that true?

MERCY: No. Go ahead, record.

ART: Who were your parents and how many siblings did you have?

MERCY: My parents were George T. Brown and Mary Eliza Brown, and I had five brothers and sisters.

ART: And you lived in . . .

MERCY: You forgot to phrase it as a question. We lived in Exeter, a small town about twenty-five miles south of Providence. We farmed corn in the impossible, rocky soil, raised assorted dairy animals. Life was hard. When humanity foolishly transitioned from hunting/gathering to an agrarian-

I can't believe you saved this. But I'm glad you did. Look how good it came out! We had a good time sometimes. Most of the time!

She knew she was dying and had picked the hymn everyone sang at her own funeral. Her voice was missing and would've been the most beautiful. When I was little, she sang to me until I fell asleep. She was the only one in the family I didn't mind calling me Lena—but never Mercy Lena. I miss her terribly.

ART: Can you describe the years after Mary died, but before you and your brother fell ill?

MERCY: We set ourselves to the grim work of going on. What else could we do? My father further devoted himself to sustaining the farm. He remained kind, but distant, with a haunted look, as though he was continually witnessing fresh horrors. Some neighbors helped looking after us kids, but Dad leaned on my brother Edwin to run the household. He grew into being as big and strong as a horse.

ART: Then Edwin fell ill.

MERCY: Yes, a few years after Mary Olive died, Edwin started losing strength and color, and he had that awful cough at night, a hollow, hopeless sound that rattled the wooden boards in my bedroom. Every tickle in my throat filled me with terror that I had it too. It was simply a matter of time before I became sick, but each night I prayed, asking God if I could have one more day before the coughs and fever kicked in. And the next night I'd again pray for one more good day, and the same prayer again the night after and the night after. Just one more day, please.

At wits' end, Dad sent Edwin to Colorado, the thinking being the mountain air would help him, that the air here was foul, or fouled, and it was what made him and Mom and Mary sick. He did go into a kind of remission on occasion, but it always returned. He came back home, looking like a very sick old man in the fall of 1891. I was sick by then, too, but unlike Edwin who suffered with it for years, I declined quickly.

ART: Can you talk about what it felt like?

MERCY: What it felt like? It felt like dying.

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MERCY: To be clear, no one ever uttered the word “vampire” until after the *Providence Journal* reported what happened.

ART: My apologies.

MERCY: Just let me tell it. The locals exhumed my mother and Mary Olive first. My mother was essentially a skeleton. Mary’s body was in a similar state of decomposition, though her skin formed a tight leather around her bones and her hair had continued growing, forming a dark, dusty wreath around her head. They found me turned around, facedown in the grave, which caused a gasp or two. Some of the gathered argued I’d turned over after being buried—which was a sign—while others said I’d been buried that way to prevent my returning, in accordance with local superstition.

ART: Which was it?

MERCY: Can’t say I remember, sorry. And stop interrupting. When Dr. Metcalf examined my body, he found my heart and liver to be full of blood, which he said was a natural occurrence given the timeline of decomposition. But according to the locals, my blood-filled heart was proof of their greatest fears, that at night I’d been feeding off Edwin. With the doctor and my father—I can’t imagine what my father was thinking, what this spectacle must’ve done to him—and sickly Edwin, barely with the strength to stand on his own power, all looking on, the gathered burned my heart and liver atop a stone. Once the organs were no more than ashes, Edwin drank a tonic with the ashes mixed in. That was supposed to stop my nocturnal visitations and cure him of his affliction.

ART: Did it stop your nocturnal visitations? Was he cured?

MERCY: Edwin died two months later. And of my remaining family, only my father and youngest sibling survived into the new century.

ART: The *Providence Journal* ran their first disapproving story about the ritual on March 19, 1892, calling it a “barbaric superstition” and criticized the lack of education and the amount of ignorance in the rural communities of New England.

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I appreciated the help Mercy had given me on the paper, though I was puzzled by her insistence of having last say on the edits before I submitted it. I wanted to change the last part to make it clear Mercy admitted to being a vampire. She insisted that her answers and the confusing ambiguity/mystery remain, word for word.

I got a B- on the paper. Mrs. Danforth docked points because there wasn't enough history in my history paper, but I aced the creativity aspect of the assignment and she encouraged me to submit to the school's literary magazine. I didn't take her suggestion. The most creative aspects of the paper weren't mine. Mercy had come up with, seemingly on the spot, the personal details, descriptions, and the bit about Mary Olive sitting on her chest at night, no reference of which appeared in my sources. While I had no problem using her impromptu answer in my history paper, I wouldn't have felt right about submitting her work as mine to the lit magazine. And I was disappointed in the grade. By disappointed I mean my brain worked overtime churning out worst-case scenarios, including but not limited to a college retracting my acceptance because of an improperly sourced B-.

Three weeks later, I received my acceptance letters to the University of New Hampshire and Providence College, neither of which was revoked. I chose Providence.

Four weeks later, the Pallbearers Club attended its final funeral.

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Sorry to ramble. I'm putting off moving onto the next chapter because I know it won't end well for either of us. Poor us.

One last thing re: Goth. Dude, it's like you read my mind. For someone who claims he doesn't want to be remembered after he's gone, you sure do spill a lot of ink on the subject. You'd make the worst kind of immortal.

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one of Mercy's Polaroids. She added, "And that bit from the letter Tom Jones wrote, that was his name, right?"

I nodded yes.

She said, "Hope is believing there'll be another moment of joy, and despair is knowing there won't be one more. That has stuck with me. The kind of thing you forget about until you remember it. Like last night, I was in the BK drive-thru and I never usually get fast food unless I'm with you because you're such a picky eater—"

"Hey!"

"And I was behind some asshole in a pickup that needed a new exhaust, and that's when I randomly thought about Jones and the line about hope and despair, and I was like, What am I doing here? And by the time I got to the window I was almost in tears. Happy or sad or both happy-sad, sad-happy? I don't know. I was also kinda high."

"You ate the roach?"

"I ate the roach. With a large Coke and fries." Mercy parked in her usual spot.

I asked, "You okay?"

"Fine and/or dandy."

[Note: It's clear to me now she was trying to tell me something with her maudlin-ness, but I didn't pick up on it then.]

I don't mean this in a Fight Club/split-personality way. I'm real, obviously. But you're making up so much of the content of our chats. I don't know how much of this Mercy is me and how much is you.

The morning's start at the funeral home went according to script. The dearly deceased was a peanut of a woman in her mid-nineties. Thirty minutes before the start of the service Mercy shot her photos and Mr. Stephens commented upon my slouching and the hearse driver offered me half of his cinnamon bun, and later, if I wanted, half of his chicken salad sandwich.

A grandson was to be the lone family member in attendance. He arrived five minutes before the visiting hour began. Almost six and a half feet tall, his oblong head dripped feathery brown and gray hair that curled and cowlicked, framing his broad forehead,

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The song fits
the motif, but
I never owned
a Jim Carroll
Band tape.
Is this subtle
foreshadowing/
you admitting
to something?

Tinies as sung by a sneering junkie punk poet.) The song jangled into life somewhere in the middle, at the part about Tony who apparently didn't fly and suffered the consequences foretold by the title. I pressed rewind. We briefly argued about why one always had to start a song at the beginning. She begrudgingly agreed, but to punish me for my rare victory, she insisted we listened to the song (the kind you only needed to hear once to appreciate) twice more before we arrived at the cemetery.

A liar of a cloudless blue sky pushed the temperature into the seventies, and thanks to the Datsun's blasting heat I was already sweating through my pallbearer garb before stepping onto the sprinkler-wet cemetery grass. Mercy told me to take off my blazer, but ever the professional, I endured.

The dead grandmother's final journey was a short one, and the club shepherded her casket ten steps from the hearse to her resting place. A stainless-steel (according to Mr. Stephens, who never missed an opportunity to fill in the details, perhaps hoping one of the club members would pursue the funerary arts as a career) lowering device framed the rectangular grave. We stepped onto a mat of artificial grass, and beneath the green carpet some sort of planking wobbled under my feet. I avoided looking into the grave because if I didn't look at it, I wouldn't get sucked in.

With the casket cradled between two horizontal straps attached to the shiny arms of the lowering device, the club retreated behind the grandson, Father W., and the hearse driver. Aside from funeral home employees and us volunteers, there were no other attendees. I hoped that my presence counted for something in someone's ledger, but I worried it was a selfish hope, so I did my best to honor the woman and her grandson by standing as reverently as a sweaty humpbacked boy could.

After the brief, impersonal ceremony comprised of a few biblical readings, the grandson placed flowers on the casket. Mr. Stephens released the device's hand brake, and the casket sank into the grave. (Note: I wanted to write "yawning pit" but that's a bit of a

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“Okay, okay. Jeez.”

“Hold out your hands.” She had a photo pinched between two fingers. “Make sure you don’t touch the film part, and hold it right . . .” She hectored instructions all but requiring I wear protective gloves and deposited the photo into my compliant hands.

At first blush, it was her standard photo of the open casket and the deceased in repose, similar composition and camera angle. But there was a green blob on the film, and it hovered over the dead woman’s chest, blotting out part of the open lid and the floral wreaths in the background. The blob was oblong, and its borders were porous, the color diffuse.

“Do you see it?”

I said, “It’s a thumbprint, right? You touched the photo while it was still developing.”

“No, why would I do that?”

“I meant by accident. Didn’t think you did it on purpose.”

“Not my thumb. I know how to handle film.”

“Well, I didn’t touch it! M-Maybe Mr. Stephens or someone else picked it up, moved it from wherever you left it to develop. The kneeler, right? That’s where you usually leave your pictures, but I didn’t see this one there. I mean, I didn’t notice. I swear that’s not my thumb! I didn’t touch it—” I kept babbling and I sounded unequivocally thumbprint guilty, and this was like when my second-grade teacher thought I’d purposefully spilled hand soap on the bathroom floor because I acted like I had even though I hadn’t. Well, I didn’t press my thumb on Mercy’s developing photo either. In both cases, I perseverated on my accusers being convinced I was the culprit, and then I couldn’t stop thinking *What if I did it? What if it was me?* and I saw myself doing the things I hadn’t done because I couldn’t (and still can’t) stop making worst-case scenarios real in my head.

“Art! Stop. I’m not blaming you or Mr. Stephens or me. No one put their thumb on the picture, okay? Jesus. That’s not why I wanted you to look at it. Relax. You’re okay, no one touched it.”

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She pointed at the photo and said, “Hovering blue lights just like this have been sighted over the graves of suspected vampires.”

“But it’s green.”

You are so
not getting
the last
word on
the color.

“Dude, it’s blue.” She hid the photo back inside her bag. I wasn’t worthy to view it anymore. “Because I got the blue orb”—not a green blob—“on film it means that the old woman is actively feeding, and likely on her grandson. I mean, look at him.”

The grieving man was a scarecrow at the foot of his grandmother’s grave. His arms hung loosely at his sides, hands neither clasped in prayer nor folded expectantly in front of his waist.

Mercy said, “He’s fading away in front of our eyes. Didn’t you hear that miserable cough of his?”

“Yeah,” I said, but I lied. I never heard him. Now a gagging, expectorating urge balled in my throat, but I swallowed, wrestled it down.

“Did Stephens tell you how this guy’s grandmother died? Two-berk-you-low-sis.” She pantomimed hand gestures along with the syllables. I only understood her held up fingers for “two” and her pointing at me for “you.” “Or how about we call it consumption for tradition’s sake? These poor people almost exclusively feed on loved ones or the ones closest to them. It’s what families and friends do, right? Maybe they can’t control it and they aren’t even aware they’re doing it. That’s the most horrible part, I think.”

I side-eyed Mercy, hard, and tried a smirky laugh to get her to crack. She was crackless. There was no way she believed this, was there? This had to be a joke, but unlike her practically infinite digs at my expense, all of which were uttered with a deadpan style and a dryness arid enough to drop the dewpoint, now she emoted. Vacillating between anger and passion, she was invested. She was credulous.

“I’ve been researching this shit forever. How’d you think I knew about Mercy Brown and where to find sources for your paper? This photo, this proof”—she paused and patted her bag—“is why I’ve been taking shots of almost everyone I meet and it’s why I joined the club.”

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"It doesn't matter to me," I said.

"Nope. You make the choice for once. What do you want to do?"

We were both cranky and on edge without being able to explain why. It was as though we were splitting a pizza of our bad moods.

"Okay. I want to go home and change my clothes," I said. "Then, I don't know, maybe get food and go to the movies, see *Amityville* part whatever."

She hopped off the rock wall. "If you don't want to go tonight, that's fine, my feelings won't be hurt, you just have to tell me . . ." She was agitated, but for a change I didn't think she was agitated with me. She wanted to back out of the cemetery trip, yet couldn't admit it to me, or to herself.

Nah, I was
agitated
with you
and your
Nerds
hoarding.

"No, I do," I said. "I just don't want to be wearing my TPC clothes anymore."

"TPC?"

"The Pallbearers Club."

Mercy leaned over the rock wall and made faux retching and puking sounds.

We didn't talk on the ride to my house. Mercy played the latest Ramones record *Brain Drain*, which, sorry to say, was one of their more forgettable (everyone's a critic) efforts, aside from the song "Pet Sematary." The lyrics were at first blush funny and a comic-book retelling of the Stephen King book and film, yet the chorus lament of not wanting to come back to relive one's life drips honest metaphysical dread.

Memoir
as "Pet
Sematary."
Author
buries old
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relives it
anew in the
pages. Or
do you bring
up the
song solely
because of
our ill-fated
boneyard
boondoggle?

Mercy pulled into the end of my driveway instead of idling in front of the house. I asked her if she wanted a drink or needed anything. She said she didn't. I told her she was welcome to come inside and wait, but also, I wouldn't be long. I darted out of the car and to the house without looking behind me to see if Mercy followed, or, as an equal possibility, to see if the Datsun pulled out of the driveway without me.

I opened the front door and shouted into the depths of my house, "I'm changing and going back out!" From the kitchen

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shot thanks to countless hours spent shooting by myself. I scored our first five buckets in a blink with jumpers and quick two-dribble pull-ups over Dad. He and I were the same height, but my arms were longer so I could extend and shoot over him. He took it easy on me that afternoon, not bullying me down in the post like he normally would. When the double-teams started coming my way (highly illegal ones in which Dad or Mercy or both would grab my arm or shirt), I dished to Mom, who had starred for her high school team twenty years prior, and she didn't miss from ten feet in.

I'll admit that I was happy (shooting lights-out helped), until Mercy accepted a stay-for-dinner invite. Then it was back to doom. Doom, doom, doomy doom doom.

While Mercy was in the bathroom washing up, my parents barraged me with a lightning round of questions to field, deflect, and face-palm, most of which were variations on the are-you-taking-her-to-the-prom theme. Dinner was beefaroni; elbow pasta, ground beef, store-bought (usually Ragú) red sauce. A staple in the house because it was one of the few meals I would eat in large quantities. My mercurial eating habits were a main topic of discourse. Mom dutifully listed all the things I wouldn't eat, her sharpness of tone increasing with each enumeration as though finally freeing herself of a crushing burden. My mortification is presented below as a French existential-hell play:

LE MANGEUR DIFFICILE
(or, *The Picky Eater*)

MOM: He won't use ketchup—

MERCY: Ketchup, wow.

MOM: Mayo, mustard, relish—

MERCY: Yeah, the no-condiments thing. He says it's why he never gets a burger when we go to Micky D's. He always orders fries and chicken McNuggets.

MOM: What kid won't eat McDonald's burgers besides mine?

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Mercy did not escape my parents' attention. She remained evasive, though politely so, and did not divulge personal details beyond her growing up in rural Rhode Island and her part-time enrollment at North Shore Community College. At the latter, Dad said, "An older woman, all right!" and while I died fifty-nine deaths, he gave me his signature hey-it's-just-a-joke, openmouthed, head-nodding, silent pantomime of laughter, like he was one of Jim Henson's Muppets. (And God help me, as an adult, I do the same damn Muppet act sometimes.)

After dinner Mercy asked to snap a picture of my parents, telling them it was for her photography class. Mom protested with her too-usual "I look horrible" until we told her she didn't (which was the truth), then she staged the photo so Mercy would get her good side. Dad puffed out his chest and hammed it up. Mercy took two photos and gave them one that Dad magneted to the fridge while the image was still lost in a gray chemical fog. I wondered if he'd eventually find two of Mercy's thumbprints over their heads. Dad offered to shoot a picture of Mercy and me, boasting of his photography skills, but Mercy lied, claiming she was out of film.

I would take my first picture of Mercy later that night.

It was dark out and long past time to leave. Staying any longer would've put us in danger of being forced to re-create the dinner-table scene from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* with the horror of the card game Whist replacing the casual cannibalism. My parents followed the two of us to the front door, telling us to be careful, to have fun, to be good, emptying the quiver of parental cliché phrases that they hardly got to use. Dad even snuck in a tousle of my hair before I closed the door behind us, but we finally escaped, me clutching a sandwich baggie of homemade chocolate chip cookies.

Safe within the Datsun, Mercy said, "They're fun."

"Yeah, a barrel of fun. Why'd you take their picture?"

"You know why." Mercy lit a joint and wordlessly offered it to me. It was all I could do not to admonish her for sparking up in the

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We sat in the car and the engine knocked and ticked as it cooled. The row of homes huddled across the street watched us, their windows ghostly glimmering. Mercy took two more freediving in-hales from a stubby joint that had once been as long as my pointer finger and she reiterated we were to watch for a blue light, a ball of fire, hovering above the grandmother's grave. We were also to note if the grave dirt was already sunken in. She said, "We can't use lack of vegetative growth on the grave as a sign yet. They just threw down some seed today, yeah? Or wait, I don't remember if they saved the sod to roll it back on. If there is grass and it's all yellow and dried up, then that's a sign too. A big one."

I wanted to ask: *A sign of what?* to further press the case for my unbelieving state, but I didn't. Treading in the quiet possibility of the moonless night, I wasn't in an unbelieving state, already crept out at the thought of traipsing around the graveyard. Also, rule-follower Art was nauseously nervous about getting caught. My good name and all that. So punk.

She said, "One of the strongest signs are sprouts, like vines, growing without light way down, under and sometimes into the casket. We can't check that out now, obviously." She swallowed the roach and hiccupped. "Maybe next time." She ejected from the car without warning and slammed the door shut. Dogs barked their domesticated alarms and there I was, dome-lighted in the Datsun's interior like a horror movie's first victim.

I whispered, "What are you doing? We have to be quiet," and I crept out of the car.

Mercy didn't go far, a few crow-hops beyond the grille, and she pressed up against the chest-high wrought-iron fence. "This spot is as good as any." She didn't whisper. She projected. She orated as though we were in a theater in the round.

I shushed her. She shushed me back.

I joined her at the fence, my head surveying in every direction.

She said, "We just hop on over. Right here."

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bar than I anticipated. I bounced back off the fence once, saying, “Testing it out,” before Mercy could offer a boost again. There was no way I would let her feel how light I was. On the second try, I went for speed and momentum to raise me up and over. Left foot on the horizontal bar, I jumped and pulled and got my right foot on top of the pointed rods, but I was losing this game of *Twister*, my body too tightly compact and with no center of gravity, I teetered. I didn’t think I could jump safely to the ground now. It wasn’t so much the height as I feared my left foot/ankle would get caught or clip the top and spill me over headfirst. I decided to push off and up with both feet and make a mad lunge for a tree branch to help swing me over. I had a fistful of branch and thought I’d cleared the fence, but my left foot did clip the fence. I braced for full-on impalement and/or crashing onto my head. Then my legs somehow elevated. It had to be momentum from the fall or a quirk of panicked memory, but I swear I felt them, well, float. They didn’t go weightless, not exactly. It was more my legs lifted, or were lifted, up and away, freed from the fence’s top. The night seesawed and my outstretched fingers tickled grass instead of tree leaves, but I didn’t crash to the ground. I hung upside down, held aloft by my snagged, and now ripped, jean shorts.

Mercy said, “Another, more obvious sign of a vampire. Hanging there like a bat.” My view of her feet and legs were prison-barred by the fence.

Cue the old man in an unbuttoned and untucked flannel (still a few years away from those shirts being popularized as the grunge-rock uniform) from the neighborhood with a flashlight. “Hey, what are you kids doing out here?”

Mercy said, “Zoinks.”

The old man added that if we tried anything funny, he’d send his wife the flashlight signal for her to call the cops. Mercy assured the man I was done trying for funny.

While acknowledging someone who was more confident in themselves might’ve reveled in the absurd late-night act of dangling by one’s shorts from a cemetery fence, I will not dwell on the multiverse

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With my hands on the wheel at two and ten and my jacket mossed over my lap, I drove. Proud to say I didn't stall once despite my lack of experience driving a stick. From the passenger seat, Mercy offered no commentary on my ill-fated fence jump, not that I wanted to talk about it. Though who knows, maybe I could've laughed it off, maybe there's another dimension where we looked at each other and cracked up and then we drove off into the night in search of definitively meaningless adventures. I couldn't tell if she shrugged off the pratfall for my benefit, knowing how hard I was on myself, or if my not-quite-midnight dangle so lessened her opinion of me she couldn't even proffer faux hey-no-big-deals.

However, Mercy was far from quiet; she soliloquized. I don't think it mattered to her if I was listening or taking her seriously. She was working something out for herself and talked in circles that broke apart, the arcs shrapneling into Euclidean space, and through it all, an underlying desperation within the uncertainty. The gist/summary of her spiling: What bothered her the most about the New England vampire was that there was no description or supposition within folklore as to how someone like the woman we buried or Mercy Brown or anyone else whose body was harvested from the stony, unforgiving soil of this region, became a vampire. Within the margins of history there was plenty in the record regarding grief-laden, distraught exhumation and burnt-heart cures. But no mention anywhere of how or why any of them became vampires. It was as though people were vampires by effect, not by cause. At one point, Mercy pounded the dashboard like Khrushchev (sans shoe): "I want a reason. I want an origin. I want how someone becomes one, even if it's stupid and lame and supernatural." Did the transformation occur after death? Did they become one while living? She thought the latter was more likely, that maybe there was a strain of tuberculosis that acted like the regular one, but then didn't fully activate until the person's organs started failing and shutting down, sending them into a deathlike state, but not fully dead. (Here, I quoted/referenced the film [I had yet to read the Goldman book] *The Princess Bride*, "They're mostly dead?") But

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ones, all-around upstanding members of their communities. They didn't deserve to have that happen to them. (Does anyone?) Third, and *almost* the most horrific option, was a decidedly Calvinist vampire, someone who hadn't done anything terrible in life beyond being born and being predestined to be a life-sucking monster. Vampire as Job: the infinitely cruel God fucking with people for the sake of fucking with them. I interrupted and asked what the most horrific option was. She said, "I already told you. It's more horrifying that there is no reason, even if the reason was malicious divine whimsy. Doomed to grieve and suffer and propagate more of the same, the vampire is effect without cause. More unknowable than what existed before the Big Bang." I pointed out that physicists might one day figure that out. She said, "Yeah, but they might not, and that's exactly my point. There must be a why; the why must exist. It's there, but we may never learn it. I don't get it. I hate it. It's not fair and I'm tired. Tired of not knowing."

"Wow, you're really high."

"I'm high on you, Art." She pulled another joint from an endless jacket pocket, lit it, clicked on the cassette player, and raged along with Black Flag's "What I See." Six and a half minutes (or three songs) later, I pulled onto the sidewalk in front of my place and shut off the car. Mercy beat out the drum intro of "Gimme Gimme Gimme" on her lap and a cappellaed the first verse. Since she was now, presumably, higher than a weather balloon, I asked if she wanted to come inside, have a glass of water or soda before she went home. She nodded.

The light perched above my front door was on, so too most of the downstairs lights, judging by the voyeuristic glow from the bay windows. I had no idea if either or both of my parents were waiting up for me. I assumed they were but hoped they weren't because they would insist on talking to us and I'd have to it's-not-what-it-looks-like explain the tied jacket and torn shorts, which would result in my excruciating death by embarrassment at the hand of blunt-force innuendo jokes from Dad. Also, Mercy and I clouding into the

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Once she was settled, I closed the glass French doors and went upstairs. I left a note on the floor outside my parents' bedroom. The note: "Mercy isn't feeling well and is sleeping on the couch. Dad, if you get up early don't wake her and don't bug her. Maybe get us donuts."

I washed my thigh scratch with a facecloth, brushed my teeth, and Gollumed to my room, leaving the upstairs hallway light on and my bedroom door open to keep an ear out for Mercy. The hall light wouldn't help my hearing, of course, but I was still casually (let's call it) afraid of the dark, or afraid of what could be hidden, what couldn't be seen, and what might be seen. The hallway light was a nightly battle waged with my parents and it remained on until one of them invariably woke to shut it off. My room was a messy cave off the second-floor landing, across from a waist-high banister and mouth of the staircase. After initially trying to sleep with the stairs in view, I flipped over, the blanket pulled up to the cliff of my eyes. The blanket was the flimsiest form of sleep protection. I've always dreaded the act of going to sleep, not for fear I wouldn't wake but instead that I *would* wake and be woe-fully, perilously, self-loathingly, odiously, heuristically, irrevocably unprepared for the new and banal terrors that awaited. I fell asleep facing a wall.

I awoke centuries later in the blankness of total void. I could not move, and I did not want to move. This was not a dream. There was nothing else and I was nothing else but my aged, coagulated thoughts, pestle-and-mortared by time into a thinning, gritted incoherence and inchoate loss, and I wanted the nothingness, wanted to be snuffed out not only from now but from having ever been, wanted to be freed from the tyranny of regret, pain, fear, memory, and hope. Until. Until the gears of my stubborn body reflexively turned and sparking arcs of back pain bubbled up through the foetid bog of my psyche. As I returned to myself, there was constricting pressure on my chest from a mass pressing me into the mattress. My lungs flattened and clamped shut. I shook my head slowly, which

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me to look in on Mercy, I scuttled the short walk to the TV room anyway. One of the French doors was pressed permanently shut by the television cabinet, but the other was open. I hovered in the doorway, a dead-of-night Quasimodo with no bell to ring. Silver moonlight smoked through the orderly row of windows of the back wall above the couch on which Mercy splayed. Her green blanket was rolled, twisted, and tentacled around and between her limbs and bunched on her torso. I was struck by how there wasn't enough room on the narrow couch for her to have tossed and turned and sleep-rolled herself into such a cat's cradle. Plus, the blue blanket I'd given her had been discarded and pooled on the floor. Wait, where did the green one come from?

Have you ever looked at someone or something in weak light, if there was such a thing, or different light, though the word "different" didn't cover it by a long shot, perhaps ineffable was closer, or more utilitarianly as light you were not used to, or light that existed to display its own reality and you might assume the unrepeatable, sui generis wavelengths were quantum imps playing tricks on you, the unsuspecting, the unwilling, the unbelieving, and you knew all this but you still couldn't unsee what you saw?

From my vantage within the wide doorframe boundary, my confusion at the number of blankets momentarily forgotten, Mercy's face was not her face. My legs carried me into the room autonomically, acting as dilating pupils, bringing me physically closer to better focus the image. As I approached, I realized I was wrong; it was Mercy's face but withered. Her cheeks had sunken into concave pits, so too her eyes, the skin stretched tight but also wrinkled at the sharpened corners. The wrinkles were not because of age; she didn't necessarily look older, but instead was husked out, used up, dried out, corpsed. Too shocked to feel concern for her well-being (If *Is she sick?* and *What is wrong with her?* were questions I considered, they quickly sank to the bottom of my after-midnight mind), I tranced in dreamlike thrall, moving closer still, to within arm's reach, and my initial observation of her face not being her face was

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on her chest was human, only that it exhibited a human face. Ageless and, somehow, clearly adult, its eyes had lids and its eyes were eyes (iris, pupil, sclera), and it had defined cheeks and brows. A nose shark-finned above a small, partially opened slit of a mouth. And it looked at me with an expression so matter-of-fact, so ho-hum in its indifference as to be the most malign, baleful look I'd ever received. Were this face to pop up in the middle of a nightmare, say, inside a hole in a wall of a neglected old house you'd never been to but in the dream it was your house, your home, you would be frightened beyond reason or measure, and the worst part would be knowing you would see it again in the next nightmare and in all the ones after that and then finally in the interior eternity before you closed your eyes for the final time.

The thing's flagella turned liquid and reshaped and re-formed as Mercy twitched, and that goddamned face blinked its eyes and its lips wriggled into shapes of soundless, impossible words. I gasped and covered my ears and I stumbled backward and my feet shoe-laced together, crashing me to the floor ass first. From the lower vantage, the moonlight wasn't as bright or as silver and as a result (or unrelated, I don't know, I don't know anything) Mercy's face was hers again, and the thing on her chest was her green jacket she'd decided at some point to use as a blanket. She stirred at my landing on the floor but did not wake.

Despite the horror of it all, I sat blinking and turning my head, attempting to wrest the prior vision back into existence. I clambered onto my feet and like a shimmering heat mirage on an endless highway, Mercy transformed into Kathleen Blanchet's corpse and the jacket was not a jacket but an anti-heart, one that strained to inflate and relaxed into its deflate, and fucking hell the face's expression altered slightly (an arched brow, a narrowing of the eyelids) to communicate that I had its attention. Its lips writhed with a speed that was so unremittingly awful, involuntary whimpers, moans, and glottal chokes bubbled from my throat.

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had gone pitch-dark, maybe because of the camera flash, maybe not, and Mercy was an amorphous shape sitting on the couch and I couldn't see her face, and while still backing away her jacket rolled off her. It didn't roll and formlessly parachute like a sweatshirt you shed when it's too hot. The shadowed form of the jacket stretched and taffied toward the floor. Instead of a wet thud on impact was the clacking of her punk-band pins, unless it was something else that was clacking, or chittering.

I turned and ran, slow out of the blocks, clipping the closed French door with my left shoulder. As I foaled through the living room toward the front of the house and the stairs, I didn't dare look behind me. I didn't have to, because Mercy joined the chase. I heard and felt her closing in with that evolutionary extra sense, a holdover from when the earliest of us were on the plains fleeing from all manner of beast. If this were simply a nightmare I would've slowed down, been stuck in the quicksand of the dream, but I ran faster and took the stairs two or three at a time. Mercy was right there, her fingertips stretching for the collar of my shirt, the hair on the back of my head curled away. I missed a step and stumbled as I hit the second-floor landing, but I used the momentum to pitch me forward into a head-first dive across the narrow hallway. I skidded on my belly and chest into my bedroom. Blinking away tears of pain, I crabbed around on hands and knees and flung my bedroom door shut and turned the lock in the center of the doorknob, the kind you had to pinch between your fingers and turn right, like that delicate mechanism would keep any monsters out of my room. Instead of sitting with my back against the door, I stood and groped along the wall for the overhead light switch. I hesitated when I found it, afraid to see what was waiting in there with me, or for me, that my own bedroom would be the trap all along like I always feared it would be.

I squinted and blinked in the light, and the menagerie of menacing creatures were the slumping clothes piles and kicked-off bedcovers. The locked doorknob rattled as it reluctantly refused to turn. The door creaked, too, as though Mercy pressed herself

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Sundial slow, I eased out of bed and slothed to my bedroom closet. Inside there weren't any monsters or Narnias, just my back brace, the personless shell I'd filled with so many of my worst hours. Dusty from its banishing, I dragged the brace out of the closet and wriggled into its unforgiving mold. Maybe it would make my back feel better and the hard-plastic chest plate would protect me if something or Mercy herself were to sit on my chest. And maybe this sounds totally fucked up, a part of me felt like I'd failed this night somehow, that I must've done something wrong for everything to have happened the way it did, so I deserved to wear the brace another night.

As I struggled to keep from sobbing too loudly and as I strapped myself into the brace, I might've heard the front door quietly open and shut. I left the light on, and my bedroom door stayed locked. I was unable to stack my pillows right so that the brace's metal halo wouldn't bite into my neck, and I might've heard the Datsun engine sputtering and coughing and drifting away.

I said, again, "Leave me alone," though I don't think I meant it.

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The second time you smoked was after the graveyard while we idled in your driveway. You were so freaked out about having to talk your parents about my staying over I thought another hit might take your edge off. In hindsight, that didn't work out so great. You were a freaking puddle, and you drank half a liter of Coke straight from the bottle, crushed a large bag of potato chips, and then I had to coax you out of spending the night curled up on the floor under the kitchen table. You were using the empty chip bag as a pillow. Crinkly. Then an hour or so later, I woke up with you in my room, leaning against the wall, holding my camera, and snapping a pervy picture of me while I slept on the couch. Then you ran away with it. I mean, what was that all about? You can't blame all of it on being stoned out of your gourd. So, yeah, shooting that picture was not cool, and it was why I didn't call you or seek you out until after your back surgery.

In a memoir the writer finds meaning in the meaningless, purpose within the inexplicable unpredictable machinations of the universe. In addition, within the course of the memoir bad things happen without warning, without provocation, without conforming to narrative structure or arc. To wit, I enjoyed the bit with your parents and the French play is funny and clever, and was very memoiry. But, duuuuude, suspension of disbelief as it pertains to the supernatural isn't something a memoir is built for, you know?

As a novel, this book can work. Maybe. But fiction isn't real life and generally must in some way fulfill expectations of rising action and arc and cause and effect and reason and blah, blah, blah. Fiction can't be too real either, can't mirror reality's cruel capriciousness too closely, otherwise most readers won't buy in. So right now you're stuck with one foot in each form, there, Aah. You should pick and stick with the novel. I will say this is surprisingly well written for someone who didn't study writing formally. I don't mean that as a shot, I just didn't know you

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was when you first described yourself as growing weak and back-painy and fuzzy headed, and now we are to presume your assorted physical sufferings were because I had a sip of your soul/life/whatever. Also, I recognized in you a kindred spirit, someone equally alone, so I decided to postpone my dirt nap, return to the land of the living, punk out, and get a fuller feed on you, and . . . I don't know ~~get it and you will have to read everything in this NOVEL, of the first-~~ish act. But! What I and your more astute readers already know/figured out: while you and I hung out, I was on a Holy-grail-like hunt for photographic proof of more vampires. Beyond long-ago friends and family being dead and beyond being literally starved for companionship, I was afraid of being the only vampire in the world (or New England?), afraid that I was existentially-alone.

Which explains my rant about wanting to know the why and how of ~~vampires.~~ But what about you, Art? That's the question a reader is going to be asking throughout the book. How reliable a character are you in all this? If the reader pays close attention, they'll find you've coded that YOU are the real monster here. Yeah, there are the Renfield and eating-roaches references, which are cute winks and nods, but, man, that bit about you being a minotaur wasn't some off-the-cuff, throwaway bit of descriptor, even if one were to argue the author didn't consciously intend a monstrous confession. That your subconscious rattled you out is even more damning/powerful. And the proof is this line: "I froze, a mantid fiend curled above her." That's dropped amid dense pages about how scared you were and how scary I was supposed to be. But in-that-line, you admitted you were the monster. YOU were the gaunt, pale, long-fingered, Count Orlock from Murnau's silent Nosferatu in that moment and maybe in the rest of the moments to come after.

Put that in your weed pipe and smoke it.

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I did not allow myself to dwell on that night and its implications, ramifications, repercussions, or insinuations, but the part I was unable to dismiss or compartmentalize was Mercy chasing after me for the photo I shot of her and the “Fuck me” she said outside my bedroom door. Those two words ended the weekly ritual of my calling to provide an update on the upcoming Pallbearers Club weekend itinerary. Mercy did not call me either.

I phoned Mr. Stephens and told him that with prom (not that I was going to prom; I did ask Cayla but knowing she already had a date, so it wasn’t a real ask, not an ask that risked hope for a yes) and graduation, all the weekends were filling up with high school senior shenanigans and bacchanalia, sure to result in friendships and memories to last a lifetime, and I’d scheduled my back surgery six days after graduation, all of which meant that the Pallbearers Club was going on an extended hiatus. I couldn’t bring myself to say the club was no more. Mr. Stephens thanked me for my volunteer service and proffered that if I needed a summer job or if the college thing didn’t work out, he’d be happy to have me in his employ. He flourished with “We’ll always save a space for you here at the funeral home,” which was sweet, but also a little creepy.

Will anyone
get a Pretty
in Pink
reference?

On the late afternoon of Beverly High School’s senior prom that I didn’t attend (did I tell you that already, that I didn’t go to the prom? So many years later it seems ridiculous to bring up, but also, what about prom, Art?), I donated a pint of blood, my sixth pint in twelve weeks. Well, I wasn’t really donating. More like I put my blood in storage because I was going to reuse it later. Dr. Seward wanted me to have my own blood for transfusion instead of someone else’s.

The final bit of pre-surgery preparation was the echocardiogram Dr. Seward ordered because of the possible Marfan syndrome diagnosis. That procedure wasn’t as needly as the blood donation. I lay on an exam table membraned with crinkly white paper. The tech slathered a cold, clear gel on the sonic wand, the knobbed

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lead to fatal dissection or detachment when the heart was stressed. Surely, something to look forward to down the road.

Two weeks before my uncurled-spine day, I moped around the house with nothing to do, as I'd quit my job at the supermarket. My parents didn't hassle me about the time off. They had a better idea of what I was in for post-surgery than I did, but they didn't let on. When I wasn't listening to music or shooting hoops by myself in the backyard, I orbited the kitchen telephone, picking it up randomly, listening to the dial tone, then hanging up. The initial pickup-and-hang-ups were me struggling with the urge to call Mercy, but then it became this thing where I imagined I lifted the phone off the cradle at the precise moment Mercy called me, and all she'd hear on her end was a busy signal and she'd either get frustrated or maybe think that I'd moved on, found another friend, maybe even the register guy at the Record Rack and he and I were doing totally cool punk stuff, which I knew didn't make sense that she'd equate a busy tone with me not being on the phone and out doing totally cool punk stuff with someone else, but don't harsh my daydream mellow.

I was
surprised you
didn't call
to apologize
to me.

The first Sunday in June was graduation. It was blisteringly hot out and three hundred plus grads herded into the middle of the football field. The PA system sucked, so all the speeches were accompanied by Sonic Youth-esque feedback and distortion. I skittered across the stage to the most tepid of perfunctory applause, or *tepfunctory* applause: the passionless, percolatory clapping of damp, sweaty hands by a crowd pummeled numb and nearly drooling from pomp- and-circumstance boredom. After the tossing of mortarboards, kids who wouldn't deign speak to me in the hallways slapped my back or chucked my shoulder and wished me luck in college, telling me that I would do great, would be a big success. I didn't run into Cayla to wish her the best, but that walking troglodytic row of exclamation points, Ian, shouted, "Artie the one-man partyyyyyy!" across the width of the field, and that toolbag sociopath-without-the-charm

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hospital even though I knew it wasn't, I shouted back, "What kind of important?"

"What are you talking about?" The phone rang two more times, bringing us to three rings.

I yelled, "It's not important," which negated my previously shouted question. I stood next to the kitchen wall phone, my hand on the receiver, and it rang a fourth time. Would I answer it and listen only, or say hello, or pick up and hang up in one motion?

The phone stopped ringing. My hand buzzed with aftershocks, anticipating another vibrating ring that didn't happen. Mom came downstairs, frantic, saying, "Dammit, Art. We missed it. Shit. Should I call the hospital just in case?" Then she asked again, "What if it was important?"

I shrugged. I sure as hell didn't know. And Mercy didn't call back.

*It wasn't me
that called.
Okay, maybe
it was.*

We were up well before the sun the next morning. Dad asked that I not listen to my Walkman on the ride into Boston so we could talk. I complied, leaving the headset dangling on my neck, but I don't recall anyone talking much. Dad commented on how light the traffic was as we crossed the nightmarish Tobin Bridge's upper deck, more than one hundred and fifty feet above the Mystic River. Mom said we all should've stayed in the hotel last night instead of having to rush around this early, the last line in an argument to which I hadn't been privy. The rest of the ride into the city was candy apple gray.

Once we arrived at the hospital, a valet took my parents' car and hid it so I couldn't change my mind, be my own hero, attempt a madcap escape. Unlike the usual thirty-plus minutes of waiting rooms we endured with our prior hospital visits and appointments, I immediately checked in and a staff member braceleted my wrist with a plastic band imprinted with the data of my identity so while under sedation they wouldn't lose me. Minutes later, I was alone in a dressing room where I had to take everything off, including my

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said, “Okay, Art. We’re ready for you. You’re going to do awesome.” For as often as the sentiment was expressed, what was I going to have to do? I assumed the act of spinal surgery was passive on my part.

She inserted a syringe of the knockout drug into a port on the IV bag. She said, “Your parents will be here with you until you go to sleep, okay? Once I press the plunger it’ll happen fast. Ready?”

“How long until I’m unconscious?”

“You’ll be out before you count to five.”

“One.”

Most of us like to think we’re wired with a factory-installed inner clock. It doesn’t keep the time of day necessarily; it more accurately measures time elapsed. We believe this despite a Kraken of evidence to the contrary. Our head clocks are often the Salvador Dalí melting kind. Which, ironically, is closer to the truth of time.

I mention the above in the context of my waking, or my first memory of waking, post-surgery with my metal Harrington rods bone-spackled into place. Thanks to morphine and whatever other drugs rowing merrily down my bloodstream, I couldn’t open my eyes when I returned to myself. To be blunt and to the point: man, my back fucking hurt like nothing else I’d felt before. The pain dove deep, agony units measured in fathoms and Mariana trenches. Something must’ve gone wrong; a rod or two must’ve unmoored and now skewered and Hellraisered my rent flesh. Holy shit, was my entire week in the hospital going to be like this? No one properly warned me. Had I known, I would’ve stuck it out with my question-mark existence.

Voices of nurses and doctors ricocheted around my amorphous room, though I knew I was the amorphous one and not the room, and then the owners of the voices moved me, changed my bed position, turned me onto a side, yet with my eyes still closed, I couldn’t tell which side I was on or facing, but there was a fire, a conflagration

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with an oxygen mask face-hugging me was a kind of nirvana (not the band; *Nevermind* was still two years away).

Pre-spinal fusion, I was six feet and weighed one hundred forty begrudging pounds. Upon my vainglorious return home from the hospital, I marionetted through the front door of my house a humple and hunchless six-three (and the late bloomer I was, I would grow one more inch in the following year). Sweet! But because I gained height, I had to lose somewhere else. Like a body conservation-of-mass thing. On my first day home, I tipped (well, given how not-heavy I was, there was no tipping) the scale at a scant one hundred twenty-five pounds.

[For holy-fuck-you-were-skin-and-bones reference, at the writing and editing of this book, I am six-four and roughly two hundred pounds.]

The first three days post-surgery I wasn't allowed to eat anything but broth and Jell-O, and I followed that up with four days of bird-pecking at hospital food, ergo the loss of weight I could ill afford to lose. Now home, in theory I could eat whatever I wanted and would gain the weight back and more, but my hoped- and yearned-for physical transformation was at hand (I'd dared imagine myself post-surgery as tall, handsome, winsome, and all the -somes) and the new me was a barely walking skeleton. My collarbones were so prominent, you could hook a clothes hanger on them. Luckily, I was still in a tremendous amount of pain (even with the Percocet), which helped take my mind off my emaciated visage.

My parents set up the TV room as my nesting/healing area. Mom moved the wooden rocking chair in from the living room, jammed it into a corner so it couldn't rock, and padded the seat with towels. I would spend a considerable amount of the summer of '89 rooted in the splintery wooden behemoth.

That first week home, I was whizzy on pain meds. Mom stayed home and the only visitors were family, and they didn't stay to chat for very long. There were no phone calls for me and I didn't make any. I watched a lot of cable TV and picked my way through a book

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working theory, not that I investigated). There were more noises, sources unidentifiable, coming from other rooms; sharp knocks, low rumbles that started but didn't finish, what sounded like footfalls on the floors in other rooms, and worst of all, noises from the basement. Even in the light of day the basement was a nightmare factory made of steep wooden stairs, spiderwebs, exposed beams and wires and dangling lightbulbs, stone foundation that sweated and wept water and shadows, slab floors dusty enough they might as well have been earthen, a bulkhead escape hatch to the driveway, and a crawlspace at the far end, under the kitchen. It was too easy to imagine something (something with a face, *the* face) slithering on the basement floor or worming through the crawlspace. Prior to lunch, I walked through the dining room to the kitchen, avoiding even looking at the basement door (and who's the asshole that designs a house with a basement door in the dining room, in the middle of the goddamn house, anyway?), and I heard a languid groan on the basement steps, a weight settling or readying for a spring-loaded leap. It took every ounce of mousy courage I had to work the basement door's flimsy hook and latch into place without making any jangling sounds.

When Mom came home that afternoon, I was dozing in my chair. She insisted I get up and follow her into the kitchen, a glass of Coke the carrot at the end of the stick. She detoured in the dining room, circling the table that was primarily used for homework, card games, and the stacking of clean laundry piles, and stopped in front of the basement door. She asked why it was latched. My don't-know shrug cost me a jagged lightning strike of pain down the middle of my back. She must've seen my wince, or maybe she didn't like how zoned out I was because she asked me to walk the length of the room and back. She asked me to do it again. I obeyed.

"You have to stop walking like that."

"Walking like how?" I asked.

"Walking like you're going to break."

Powered by indignation of the exposed, of the found-out, I said, "You want me to do cartwheels?"

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Maybe an hour or so before Mom was due to come home, I got sloppy as the haunted-house DJ and fell asleep in the rocking chair, a sleep too heavy for dreams and for remembering what it was I was supposed to do. As I clambered into waking, Living Colour's Side 2 of *Vivid* finished up with Corey Glover's screams and a sample of a somber news broadcast punctuated by a gunshot. Then silence, one too thick, and it made it hard to think and it made it hard to breathe and I blinked and waited and pleaded for the next song until I remembered that was the last record in the queue. There was no more room on the platter for records and I forgot to be vigilant, to be ready to swap the spent disks out with minimal auditory interruption. This was bad. I turned the TV on at full volume to make up for the lack of music, but the set's tinny built-in monospeaker wasn't enough to fill the house. Not even close.

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I stumbled into the living room, then the dining room, and a full-throated rusty screech and floor-tremoring clang in the basement filled the musicless void. Was that the bulkhead opening and closing? I was beyond scared, yes, but I could function because I was furious with myself; whatever was to happen would be my fault for letting the music end. I triple-checked the basement latch and I moved a dining-room table chair in front of the door. Jamming the seat back under the doorknob sparked flames between my shoulder blades. I sprint-walked the short distance to the turntable stationed on the other side of the wall in the foyer. A sliding, sandpapery rasp in the basement mimicked my first-floor movement and progress. Not thinking clearly, I removed the spent albums instead of just restacking the same ones, and let them drip to the floor until the platter was an empty spinning circle.

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In the basement a foot clapped on the bottom step, the one that was loose and sagged like a wannabe letter *u*, and the rickety handrail rick-eted, then a second stair clap, this one louder and closer, then a third.

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I cued up the closest record within reach, Side 1 of Hüsker Dü's *Warehouse: Songs and Stories*. I gathered other records from the leaf pile scattered around the stereo stand and pancake-stacked them on the spindle as the opening riff of "These Important Years" buzzed.

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small coastal
town of
Marblehead.

Light was dawning on my marble head. “Was yesterday the only day you were down there?”

“No.” Pause. “I’m here today, aren’t I?”

“How many other days have you been in the basement?”

“I can’t and won’t lie to you, Art.” She didn’t say anything else, didn’t add to the basement-break-in sum.

“Were you down there last week too? You were, weren’t you?” Now I knew she had been in the house during my dizzy, lethargic, lifeless first week home, where instead of healing and gaining weight my battery charge continued to drain.

“Yeah, sure. I mean, I wasn’t always in the basement, to be fair. I pecked through the windows from outside too. Might’ve ducked into your kitchen once when you were napping. I wanted to see how you were doing and eat one of the peanut-butter cookies your mom made. So good. But you’re missing the point, Art.”

“I’m sure you’ll tell me.”

“Look at you with your new-height attitude.”

“Shut up.”

“No, seriously, please, give me and give the world more of that. Anyway, the point is you need to stop walking around like you will break. It’s not just a now thing either. You walked like that before your surgery.”

I slapped the door with an open hand, which was dumber than dumb, and pain solar flared from my center.

“That’s the spirit.”

“Go away.”

“Art, listen. Yes, you feel terrible, and you look terrible now. Like a goddamn corpse. I told you I won’t ever lie. And I’m not being cruel or mean, but you need to hear it now, and not just from your mom. You need to hear it from a friend—”

“Oh, you’re a friend?”

That hurt
then, and it
hurts now
reading it

“You will feel and look a hell of a lot better eventually, and sooner than you think. But right now, Art, man. Not good. And you need to do something about it.”

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also—different. Better or worse, who the fuck knows what that means according to whatever bullshit value system that might be applied other than your own. I’m not doing a good job, here. Fuck it. Look. You need to tell me you won’t continue to hide yourself, that you’ll try to be who you imagine yourself as being. I want to know if you’ll take actual fucking risks to be that person and still like that person when you fail and when you succeed. I want you to tell me you’re not going to be the same scared, woe-is-me kid who hides in his head. Please tell me you won’t float along with everyone else through the drunk and stupid numbing bliss of college and then zombie into a middle- or upper-class job you won’t care about because you need to pay student loans and then pay all the other loans to come. After all we’ve done, tell me you won’t pretend you’re happy and you won’t pretend you can’t do what you want to do even if you aren’t entirely sure what that is. Can you tell me that?”

I didn’t answer. How could I make any empty promises about the opaque future? How could anyone?

“All right. I’ll leave you alone now, Art.”

I unlatched and opened the basement door.

*I am a lot
of things,
but a liar is
not one.*

Mercy had lied about flipping on the light switch because there was ~~only darkness~~. I glimpsed movement, maybe a showing of eyes and teeth, two sets of each, but I cannot be certain that my imagination wasn’t filling in details to simplify the vastness. There was no hiding from this, no closing the door that was opened. Then there was a flash of light and a high-pitched squeal. The door slammed shut, and I honestly cannot remember if I shut it.

I relatched the lock, apologizing to Mercy in my head, making doomed promises, as though there were any other kind. I listened and did not hear her weight shifting on the stairs. I knocked on my own basement door and said, “Mercy? Are you still there? If you’re gonna stay on the stairs, should I leave out a plate of peanut butter cookies and put on the Ramones?” I meant it as a joke, one of the most desperate kind.

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There's no
way your
mom knew
she was
punning
with "artsy,"
because
your real
name isn't
Art. Do you
think of
yourself as
Art now?
Is this
Artception?

"The photo never fully developed."

"Was it a mistake or is it supposed to be one of those artsy photos?"

Mom acknowledged her pun with a faltering, unsure smile. Like son like mother.

"I think both."

"How are you feeling? What do you want for dinner?" Sometime during those earliest days after my return from the hospital, Mom had taken to tacking on another question right after the *How are you feeling?* to leave me an easy out to not have to answer it. Mom was as scarred as I was by the surgery summer, and she would continue couching or seeding questions about my well-being in the same manner for years that silted into sediment.

I ignored her first question but precipitately answered the second. "Can we get a pizza? I'm starving."

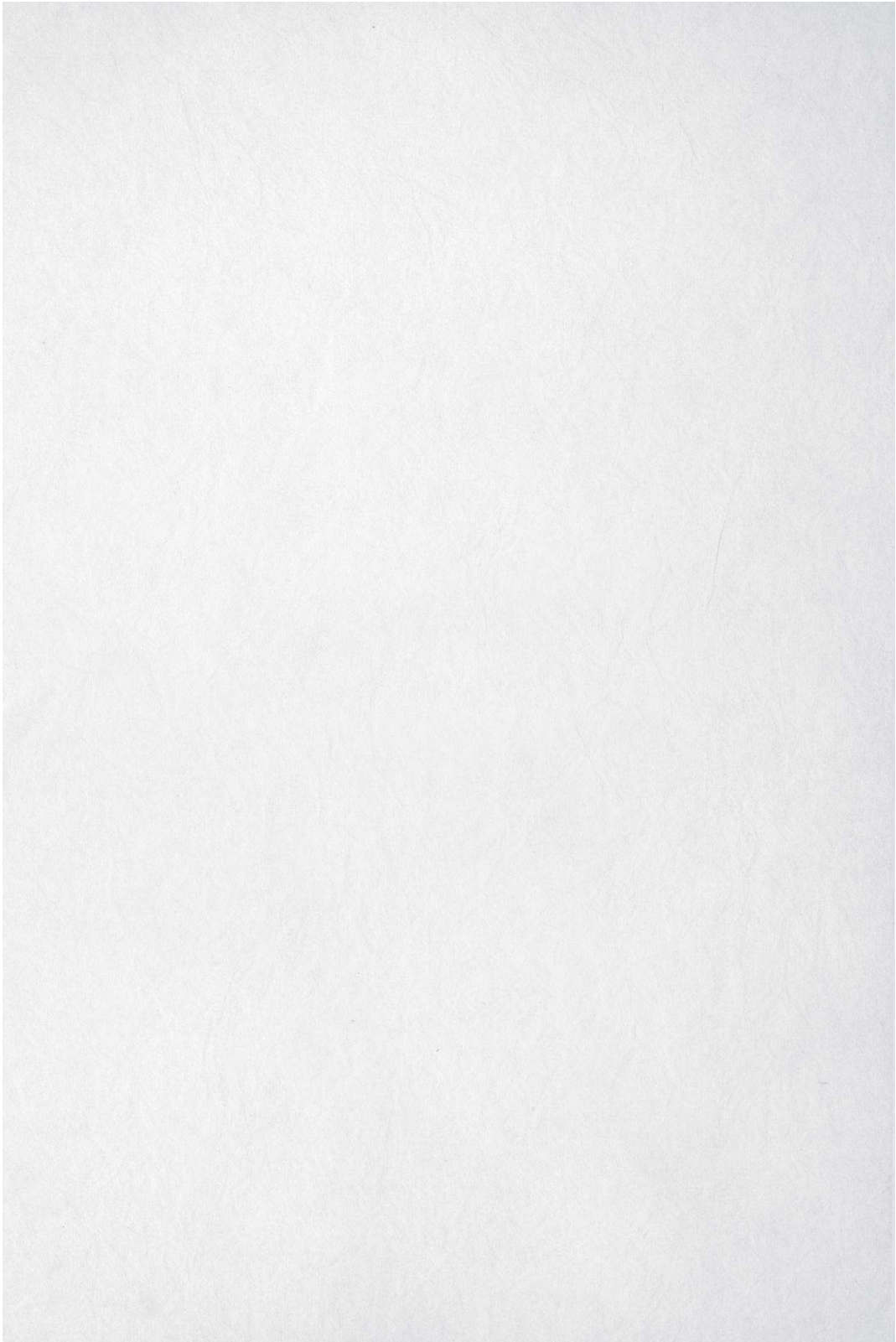
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I was so convinced that after finding the photo you'd call me later that day or night, I waited by the phone for a few hours. Or a few minutes, at least. But you didn't call. And not to put too fine a point on it, that bummed me the fuck out. I'm only human, ~~after all~~ ^{in retrospect}, and reading our exchange all these years later, I think I was probably too harsh with you, given how emotionally and physically vulnerable you were post-surgery. I was honest, though, and did not exaggerate how rough you looked. If anything, you are underselling how thin you were after your surgery, guy. Seriously. It was scary and hard to watch from the basement and sometimes from the backyard, through the TV room's windows. And not for nothing, I don't know how it took you that long to find me in your house, not that you actually found me. I got sick of waiting to be discovered so I stomped around, and when that didn't work, I knocked on the basement door and called out to you. That's not exactly finding me. How could you not hear me rattling around that whole week? How did you not smell the weed? Yeah, I smoked in your basement. ~~Regardless, you didn't call me. Sp, I didn't call either. Neither of us blinked in that standoff. When we did finally blink, how I'm not proud of myself on that count.~~ many years had passed before our paths crossed again? Too many. Way too many.

Before I continue reading your book, I'm going to drop this here: For this novel to work better, maybe you should change my character name. "Mercy" is fun, but I think it's too on the nose. Also, the use of the name might lead to a plot issue: how is THE Mercy Brown a punk Polaroid devotee when her heart was burned and its ashes consumed? You wrote in the intro that you changed all the names, and maybe that's the reason why you're staying away from my REAL first name. If I am really who you say I am, shouldn't you name me to protect others? Maybe you're saving my name as a reveal for later in the story. I get it; you can't

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life: what has since taken shape, what has since found its own form, is not what I imagined it would be at the beginning.

novel

It has taken me almost five years of writing and rewriting (and I could've spent fifty more) to reach this point in time within the memoir. For Art Barbara, your humble author, these pages are a functioning time machine. Within time-travel narratives, the oft-written-about unintended consequences of jaunting to the past is how the present and future are changed for everyone. Not to worry, reader, you are safe, or as safe as you can be reading a book. This memoir's butterfly effect will be limited to me, however. My past, present, and future are recast with ~~each new paragraph and each~~ edit.

novel

Um, hello?
I'm right
here.

To wit: I've spent five years (2007 through 2012) reliving one bizarre year in the late 1980s. Have I gained any clarity, some sort of well-worn perspective? Have I become trapped within a period of my life I so longingly wished to escape? A little of both. I do not think this level of introspection is healthy. Further, my mental health is now tethered to the success or failure of this project. *The Pallbearers Club* (title of book, not the club to which it refers) has become my raison d'être, more so than my music, which is unexpected in a sad way that I cannot describe; an unspeakable, eldritch sadness, but one worth exploring in this chapter.

Maybe I should've taken all this energy (for lack of a better term) and done as Mercy once suggested in 2007: write an insufferable, bloated, postapocalyptic vampire series.

Best of
times,
worst of
times? You're
not quite
Dickens,
there, Arty
boy.

Anyway. The next twenty years will wash by in a figurative and narrative blur: I only spent six months (the cost of time, the price of time) writing the following section.

[Note: This was the initial opening of this chapter]

Let's hit the double arrow Fast-Forward button, not on the cassette player, but the compact disc digital audio boombox, as we're entering the wrapped-in-flannel 1990s.

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Groan. You
can't give
yourself a
nickname,
dude.

wig on me, I bear more than a passing resemblance to Johnny; I have better teeth, but worse skin) while attending the decidedly not-edgy Catholic school Providence College? At the end of our second day and night together, however, I had won the late orienteers over. Louis and Mark. The latter would come to be known as Metal Mark because, obviously, he loved heavy metal. And I was Punk Art. That nickname would stick throughout my three years in college, goosed into its longer life with deft self-promotion.

novel

I'm hitting the Stop button here on the boombox (purchased in 1991, weighs almost twenty pounds, and the sucker still works) and the Eject button. I think we need a different CD, because I am attuned to my readers. I hear you: *Where's Mercy, Punk Art? Where the fuck is Mercy?* (I imagine you with a thick Jersey accent, for fun, while assuming you have a certain level of emotional acuity, otherwise you wouldn't be reading a memoir. Unless you're a sociopath studying human behavior to become more human-like.)

Well, a
vampire is
supposed to
steal your
life, yeah?

Fine, we'll skip ahead to more Mercy. Though I'm not crazy about the idea that I'm transforming into my own story's secondary or supporting character. Perhaps it's my lot to be the rhythm guitarist in the punk/post-punk/indie band of life. I did play, briefly, in a band called Life. I quit after two rehearsals because the tyro vocalist insisted we stop playing our instruments in the middle of a song to allow for his free-verse vignettes about Jesus Christ attending, and ironically enjoying, one of the summer's WaterFire events. For the uninitiated, Providence's WaterFire is a mix of festival, performance art, and pagan ritual, free to the public, featuring New Age music and eighty-six anchored braziers (metal thingies that hold burning logs) floating aflame within the rivers that flow through downtown's Waterplace Park. It's a lovely take. In the summer of 2005, I briefly had a side gig captaining one of the Brazier Society WaterFire guest boats until one sweaty August night I bumped (which is almost an exaggeration) one of La Gondola's authentic Venetian

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disdain. Walter (or Waltah) our unflappable, friendly-as-a-puppy drummer, recruited me into the band in the spring of '07. I'd met him a decade before while bartending at Club Babyhead (now Club Hell). He played in almost as many bands as I had, and despite being a lifelong New Englander who'd never been south of DC, he'd been threatening to move to North Carolina for as long as I'd known him.

Prior to that night's gig, I was bullish on the prospects of Antigone. We'd been getting some good press and were in the mix to open for larger acts at Lupo's/The Strand. I'd been part of the local scene for going on fifteen years, which might as well have been fifty years for how often and quickly trends, tastes, and players changed. So, at age thirty-six I was the Socratic grandpa of Providence indie rock. Or to be less generous to myself, maybe I was better described as the Susan Lucci of the scene. Respected (I think?) as the ultimate dues-paying grinder but viewed as a cursed object (the gondola incident didn't help my reputation in that regard), as I was unable to stick with any one band for long nor did any of my bands achieve even momentary success, however that success might be defined.

[An intrusion note from the hell year of 2017: I am cursed and have been so for as long as I can remember, and yeah, fine, most of it is self-inflicted, and maybe you should stop reading this book, as you touring my life might lead to your own cursing, as it were. A book is a vampire after all. And if that bit makes you think of a Smashing Pumpkins lyric, might I suggest engaging in a juice cleansing, the kind that leaves you rooted to the toilet for a protracted length of time.]

Even in this momentarily frozen post-Napster-and-iPod moment in 2007, Antigone felt like my last kick at the we'll-make-records-and-T-shirts-and-people-will-purchase-them-unironically-and-maybe-we'll-even-play-shows-all-over-the-country can. I'd told myself with every new band that *this was it*, but that phrase once rated more optimism than it did in '07. One way or another, Antigone would be it.

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Anyway, I sat at the bar, back turned to hangers-on and revelers, and the stools in my orbit were empty. I was achy and buzzed. My ears rang, and the post-show melancholy I was addicted to kicked in hard so I ordered another beer I didn't need, but it would extend the night a little. After all the practice and preparation and the days of what-if-the-place-is-empty/what-if-the-place-is-jammed worries and the want-to-uke nerves moments before playing and the manic don't-fuck-it-up euphoria/panic (new word: *euphoranic*) while play-ing, the show was over so quickly. They were all over so quickly.

There was a tap on my shoulder; more intimate than a hey-you and more secretive, momentarily protecting the unseen tapper's identity from the unsuspecting tappee. I could go on describing the tap (its rhythm and level of pressure communicating both insouciance and urgency, and the maddening wonder of who might be attached to the digits knocking on my shoulder as though it were a speakeasy's door), but I won't.

Polaroid like
a hole.

I swiveled my stool into a nebula flash. Vulnerable and overexposed, I mashed the backs of my hands into blinking, malfunctioning eyes, and oh that Polaroid's goddamn Trent Reznorian whir. I hadn't heard her camera in almost twenty years, but I recognized its industrial tones instantly.

"Hey, want a photo of a rock star?" Mercy held up the back of the picture toward my face.

I blinked dumbly (I never have figured out how to blink smartly, consideredly) and I laughed, mainly at myself, and I laughed at how we had arrived at this time and place. I was a drunk's happy to see her, and I said, "Yeah, okay."

She pulled the photo away. "Five bucks."

I held up surrender hands. "I don't have any money. I'm with the band."

She smirked. Hell, she might've even smiled. Her face had always looked like it had just finished and discarded a smile, and you were then forced to share in the dawning sadness over the end of that smile. She said, "I saw that."

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“Classy.” Mercy downed half of my beer. “I was also hoping to hear you sing. I guess your mic stand was for show.”

“You don’t want to hear me sing. Too nasally and whiny, which some people can pull off, the kind of bad voice that has character, but not me. You have to settle for my merely competent rhythm guitar.”

We fell into an easy conversation about the show, and as she was telling me about her move to Providence at the start of the summer, the dastardly last-call lights came up. Mercy said the night was still young (Sarcasm? Ironical use of cliché? Snark? I could never tell with her.) and she invited me back to her apartment.

I said, “Why not?” multiple times, as though answering my own question with differing inflections.

Bandmates Victor and Kenny were by themselves next to the stage and two acts deep into their usual end-of-the-night argument, so I didn’t bother them. I introduced Mercy to Walter, told him I didn’t need him to give me a ride home, and joked that if something happened to me tonight, at least he would know who was responsible. Without missing a beat, Mercy added, “No one will find either of us.”

I followed Mercy outside to her orange compact car parked across the street. I shouted, “You gotta be fucking kidding me.” She still had the Datsun? I wasn’t sure why I was so excited by the notion of her apparently undying car. Alas, upon closer inspection I discovered the car’s logo hanging crookedly on the trunk as though it were ashamed of us both. It was a Nissan, a Sentra even, late ’90s model.

During the ride, “For old times’ sake,” she cranked the Hüskers’ *Warehouse* album. Yeah, that was the record playing in my living room the last time we had talked, but I was instead transported back to all those hours spent sitting in the passenger seat of her Datsun. Despite everything, it felt like a safe place to be.

We drove to the east side and through the historical and affluent College Hill neighborhood full of, well, hills, and colleges (RISD,

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assortment of lamps, end tables, a coffee table, a dresser, a plush armchair, a locker/armoire, coat rack, and framed photo prints hanging on the walls.

I said, "Hardwood floors. Ain't you fancy."

"You don't see the strange part yet, do you?"

I shrugged and walked into the room, thinking it was a great neighborhood to live in, a nice building, but a wee bit claustrophobic, especially at night. Granted, I had a thing about basements. Really, *we* had a thing about basements.

Fair
assessment
of the
reader(s).

[Okay, good a place as any to pause because I know you, fearless reader, are thinking, *What are you doing, Art? Why go into her basement, Art, especially now that you are a musician and almost handsome? Why is she back in your life? Hey, Art, aren't you afraid?* I'll answer the last question with I was and I wasn't. I hadn't forgotten about what had happened at my house (and my scoliosis getting worse and feeling dizzy and the chest heaviness and not breathing and all of it), but on this night in 2007 with me standing in the middle of her cavelike apartment, what had happened decades prior felt like a story. Is that odd to say in a memoir that my past, what I had lived through, felt like a story, a fiction, ~~some~~ something that had happened to someone else, a story that had been both embellished and diminished by the passage of time? Well, that night it did. And like any story, I wanted to know what would happen next.]

novel

I leaned against the couch and Mercy said, "Warmer."

"What?"

"You're getting warmer. You must find the strange part of the apartment before we do anything else, and clearly you need help. Love ya, Art, mean it, but you've never been all that observant of your surroundings."

"So mean."

I headed toward the kitchen first (colder) and played along until her colder/warmer designations inexorably led me toward her dresser.

She said, "Now tell me why it's odd."

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directly into the wall. Try to move it, go ahead. But don't rip it out of the wall, please."

I grabbed the dresser's top, pushed and pulled, and it didn't budge. From this vantage above the dresser, I could see it was indeed flush against the wall. "I still don't get why they'd anchor it so it was an inch off the floor."

"They probably messed up the measurements. Or they were neat freaks and wanted to be able to run a broom or vacuum under the dresser. Or they thought it would be funny as fuck that the next tenant and her friend might obsess over it. Want another beer?"

I did. After she grabbed us each one from her fridge, I sat on the couch, and she claimed the armchair over by the bookcase. She wore a billowy, untucked black T-shirt and jeans. She unlaced her Doc Martens boots and they clunked to the floor as she folded her legs up and onto the chair. We looked each other up and down the way boxers might before the opening bell rings.

My questionable facial hair notwithstanding, I had gone through a considerable physical transformation since we had last spoken. I was four inches taller and weighed two hundred pounds. Mercy might as well have walked directly into this basement studio after leaving my house in June of 1989. Her light-brown hair had no gray that I could see, with the same shoulder-length cut and style she wore in the late '80s. She didn't have any wrinkles or crow's feet around the eyes. I still didn't know how much older she was than me. She could've passed for a woman in her twenties, but she could've also passed for a woman in her late thirties or even early-to-mid-forties. I remember thinking if I'd had a photo from our time together to use as a comparison, I would've noticed how she'd aged. As it was, Mercy was fixed in my mind, as though there was no room for updates or other versions, no room for the newer model, and by newer, I mean older.

Mercy said, "I want to hear everything I missed since we were last together."

"Everything?"

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hours at the United Shoe Factory, unloading and loading trucks, stacking wooden pallets, sweeping the floors, and I spent some days on the production lines as a material handler. With my second paycheck I bought a used black Gibson SE and a red mini amp that sounded like someone taking a cheese grater to a metal hand-rail. When I wasn't working that summer, I holed up in my room and either played Nintendo Tetris or my guitar. Once my left hand was strong enough for barre chords, I figured out how to play most of the Ramones' first two albums. Junior year I became an RA, or resident assistant, in my dorm to help pay tuition. Things were going along well enough by then: I had a primetime Thursday-night radio show, and yeah, Punk Art was my DJ name. Whenever I had a night off from RA duties, I hit the music clubs and recorded interviews with local bands. I'd play those interviews on-air along with one or two of their songs. I made a bit of a name for myself in the local scene that way. When I went home for junior year's winter break, my parents dropped on me that they were getting a divorce, as their marriage was an unbearable slog and had been so for longer than I had been away at school. I was shocked, insofar as I didn't see it coming. Though I never saw anything coming.

For years I had assumed my parents' conspicuous unhappiness and emotional distance from each other was the steadying foundation of their relationship. Officially separated that early winter of 1991–1992, they took turns sleeping on the pullout couch and occasionally not sleeping in the house at all. The upshot, there was now a question as to whether they could or would pay for my final year of schooling, and at the very least, they would need more financial help from me. They never flat-out said I wouldn't be able to continue and graduate, but it was heavily implied, as much as a life-changing fiduciary decision could be left to implication. All of which made it easier for the math-teacher-never-to-be to drop out at the end of junior year, join a band, and live on his own in Providence.”

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told me
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Derron, tearfully announced he was moving back to Austin to be with his sick mother. A Manuel, Can is the only band with a comma in its name that I've played in. No one got that it was a pun on philosopher Emmanuel Kant's name. Equally as few people got our mix of They Might Be Giants, Kate Bush, and Black Sabbath. Clean was a too-earnest and on-the-nose straight-edge (no alcohol, no drugs) band with a surly bassist who spent half our sets proselytizing to drunken audiences. We played without any distortion (we played 'clean,' get it?), which sounded wrong, as all we did was riff heavy but without the heaviness. They booted me from the band for being too-not straight-edge: I drank caffeinated Cokes before gigs and, fine, maybe a beer or two. Com Rad was a self-styled throw-back to early '80s punk with polemic Bad Religion-esque lyrics, and we spent three months raising money for us to go to Seattle to play at the planned protest of the 1999 World Trade Organization Conference. We didn't make our fundraising goal and we blew the money we did raise throwing an unauthorized block party in Pawtucket. Years later we tried for a reunion show to protest the Iraq War but couldn't pull it together because the lead guitarist was lost to Rush Limbaugh talk radio. Should I keep going? There were so

many more bands. Carrot Sauce's classified ad wanted a rhythm guitarist who listened to Public Image Limited, Public Enemy, General Public, and Linda Ronstadt. Their music didn't sound like any of those bands/artists, and I lasted thirteen days (my shortest stint). Cross Your Legs aimed to be an obnoxious swagger mix of Dead Kennedys and L7, but our Canadian lead signer apologized for her lyrics after each song. House Hill was full goth and required I dress entirely in black. Each song title was named after famous doomed women in literature. During my last show with them, my guitar was turned down so low in the mix (and the synths were tooth-disintegratingly loud), I pretended to play. Institutional Pasta featured mathy noise rock with science-fiction lyrics delivered either in inflectionless monotone or Gregorian-chant style. They fired me because I wasn't a good enough guitar player, which, I'm afraid, was

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plainness?

show shenanigans. Her at five-two and me at six-four made us a striking pair. One well-meaning (I think) friend once asked if Lucy, because of the height difference, had to extend her arm over her head when we held hands. Of course, Lucy insisted we walk into Mondo (on-campus café open late-night) that way. She was the first and so-far last person I've said "I love you" to. I said it while explaining why I wasn't coming back to school for senior year. She said "I love you" back to me, both of us crying. We talked about getting an apartment on our own, but that was never really an option, as I had no money (I was crashing on Phil's and Carlos's couch, remember?) and Lucy had already signed on to live in the on-campus apartments. We saw each other over the summer but only when she could make the drive down to Providence from the south shore of Massachusetts, as I had no car. When her academic year started, we were both busy during the times when the other was not, so we saw each other less and less. We didn't fight, and we always had a great time, but it got to a point where being together was a reminder that we'd be apart again and permanently soon enough. Entropy again.

She moved to LA after graduation and last I heard she was a producer at KROQ. I try not to dwell on what might've been if I went back to school and continued my relationship with Lucy because it bums me out too much. I think it was Emmanuel Kant who said "Happiness is not an ideal of reason, but of imagination." Not sure it applies here. In the years since there have been other relationships, none lasting very long, given the frequency with which people joined and dropped out of the local music and club scene, which, for better or worse, I've been wedded to. I've dated or fooled around with a few bandmates. Jacquie (the lead singer of Cross Your Legs) and I dated during my brief tenure with the band. Things were cool until (goddamn, this is embarrassing, and I can't believe I'm telling you this, but here we are) she came over to my place one afternoon before an evening rehearsal. We were making out on the couch, and she slid her hand inside my shirt and teased and pinched my left nipple, only it wasn't my nipple. My teen-acne had migrated from

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lower, weaker, like my heart splat-landed on some inner floor. It was such a terrible, powerless sensation, to feel your heart flip-flopping, to be reliant upon this ugly little muscle over which you have no control, to become suddenly and intimately aware of your body as a floundering flesh machine. Whenever palpitations happened, I would both lose my breath and attempt to stop the palpitations and reboot my glitching self by breathing deeply, and if I didn't get light-headed, I worried that I was, and if my chest felt tight it was likely because of my I-am-going-to-die panic. I had a normal EKG at the hospital, but they sent me home with a monitor that recorded my heartbeats for forty-eight hours. All the tests reported normal electrical activity, function, and measurements, and so they determined the palpitations were benign or a part of my physiology, the latter of which was a bullshit medical phrase for 'eh, we don't know.' The doctor suggested I stop or at least cut down on the caffeine. My former bandmates from Clean would've gleefully said, 'Told you so.' But wait, there's more! In the mid-'90s, roommates and partners complained about my snoring and what they described as terrible gasping noises, like I was drowning on my tongue. They'd ask if I was having nightmares, but I didn't remember having any. Granted,

my sleep schedule wasn't all that consistent, given the odd jobs and gigs and late nights, but for two full years I was perpetually exhausted to the point where I was nodding off at bars and restaurants and, more dangerously, when I was behind the wheel of a car. My sleep deteriorated to the point where the sound of my awful gasping breaths woke me up at night, or more terrifyingly, I'd wake while I wasn't breathing and with a boulder on my chest and my airway was a closed fist and I wouldn't be able to breathe until I sat up. After an overnight sleep study, I was diagnosed with sleep apnea: a sleep disorder in which the sleeper's breathing is too shallow or paused. Paused sounds like a polite way to describe not breathing, doesn't it? I tried sleeping with a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure; I appreciate they worked the word "positive" in there) mask and machine for a few months, and while I wasn't waking as

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acid-washed jean jacket. It's the nearly twenty years between basement summit meetings with Mercy I summed up in about ten pages that feels like the fiction, the something that happened to someone else, embellished and diminished by time and by the storyteller. I don't tell you this to explain my behavior. How could anyone truly or fully explain anyone's behavior anyway? I don't tell you this to excuse anything. I tell you this because it's the truth now.

Mercy offered to sleep on the couch and let me have her bed because of my bad back. I refused, bragging I was a couch-surfing champion. She didn't offer twice and joked she'd leave a nightlight on for me, which ended up being the cataracted ceiling lamp in the bathroom. After leaving the bathroom door slightly ajar, she went to bed and shrouded her curtain closed.

I tried sleeping on my left side, which wasn't my usual side, but it was the side I collapsed onto. I should've passed out the moment my head hit the throw pillow. Normally, my superpower was being able to sleep anywhere, anytime, and in any position. Despite my enervation (exacerbated by my inebriated state), the sandman didn't find me. I was hyperaware of the strange surroundings and circumstance; the low hum of the refrigerator was more of a hungry growl and Mercy's sleep breathing fell into a jarring, arrhythmic prog-rock five-eight time signature. The couch cushions sagged under my hip, pinching me into an uncomfortable consummate V. The small knit blanket was too scratchy for my arms, so I re-allocated the woolen resource to my jeans-clad legs, but then my upper body was too cold. There was no "just right" for drunk Goldilocks. The sun had come up and turned the room into a faded sepia-and-regret-toned photograph. I got up and snagged my leather jacket to use as a blanket. Upon returning to the rocky socket of the couch, I snuggled, burrowed, and counted the number of sheep it took to knit that stupid blanket on my legs,

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dust bunnies. I grabbed the front legs, pulled down, and then I pushed up. The wheels rattled when I brushed against them, otherwise, there was no movement or give from the stubbornly airborne boudoir furniture.

Yeah, right.

I sat with my legs crossed and I engaged in another staring contest with the dresser, one in which I blinked first. I opened the bottom drawer. I was reverent and careful to not disturb the contents, which I did not inspect nor itemize. My lone goal while in my liminal non-sleep state was to remove the drawers. The wood whispered over the interior rollers until there was a final click of the drawer lifting away, free from its track. I placed the drawer on the floor to the left of the dresser. I plucked out the second and third drawers as one might pick apples from a tree. As I dislodged the final/top drawer, nearing the completion of the partial dresser autopsy, I was no longer concerned about waking Mercy and I didn't bother crafting a just-in-case excuse as to what I was doing.

What was I doing? I needed to see if and where the dresser was or wasn't bolted and screwed into the wall.

Lame. And convenient.

It wasn't bright enough in the early-morning room to see much if any detail within the dresser's frame. I ran my hands inside, feeling for holes in the wood, raised screw heads, or even hastily hammered nails. Everything was smooth and immovable. I couldn't even find the screws and dowels holding the frame together, never mind any evidence of wall anchors. I scrabbled back to an end table and retrieved my key chain on which was a guitar-shaped mini flashlight. In its weak, ghostly beam, there was no visual evidence of the dresser having been fastened to the wall. I crouched and contorted, vining my head between wooden slats and into the space reserved for the third drawer. What was I missing? Should I have been afraid? Yes, I probably should've. But I was out-of-my-head angry, especially when I got stuck, my left arm and shoulder pinned, my face centimeters from a side wall. In my struggle to worm free I dropped my flashlight keychain, which cymbal-crashed to the floor and broke. My fingers scratched and scrabbled on the wood and my foul frantic

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“Ha and ha. Ow.” I twisted and turned, stretching out my lower back, my body creaking on the creaky chair. “Hey, the pizza is from Fellini’s, yeah?”

Mercy said it was. Eager to start a conversation that didn’t involve the late time of day, floating dressers, stacking drawers, or me being on the floor, I told her I had worked at Fellini’s for three years, and that I still made a mean pizza.

“I know you worked there,” she said.

“Oh. Did I tell you that last night?”

“No. I walked by once and saw you inside. Red apron, covered in flour, obnoxiously tossing the dough in the air.”

“That’s not obnoxious.”

“It kind of is. Showing off your pizza dexterity.”

“Spinning is a totally necessary step in the process.”

“Spinning. You’re still obnoxious about it.”

“Why didn’t you come in and say hi? I would’ve spun you the greatest pizza ever spun.”

“You looked busy, the place was jammed, and I was late to where I was going.”

“And where was that?”

“I don’t remember.”

“You don’t remember.”

“Yeah, do you remember every appointment or errand you had ten years ago?”

“No but—”

“Easy with the third degree then. Enjoy your pizza. I ordered it un-spun.”

Our jokey quid pro quo was tonally the same as it was in ye olde days, but it felt different. With the stakes raised, in part due to our adult status and shared, admittedly bizarre history, there was an edge to our sangfroid. More than the one-upmanship, more than spelunking the verbal barbs for real and perceived slights, we waged an unconscious battle to reframe everything that had been done and said all those years before. Maybe that was worth

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Bob even asked where the restaurant was, and he said he knew Wickenden Street well. But he ultimately declined, rightly thinking better of hanging out with us drunken puppy dogs.

“Ah, too bad,” Mercy said. “Did you tell him you dumped the poor Scorpions for his band when you were seventeen?”

“Yeah, I told him he should cover ‘Rock You Like a Hurricane.’”

“You didn’t. But I wish you did. Did you tell him he was the reason why you picked up a guitar?”

“No. And I would never.”

“Same old Art. Don’t get mad, it’s endearing. I mean it. Warms my shriveled heart that you still are who you were. So afraid of the possibility of awkwardness, you hoard it all for yourself.”

I was mad and I ate my pizza madly. (It occurs to me now that I’ve never been more myself than when I was with Mercy. That wasn’t a good thing.)

“You’re angry,” she said. “I can tell by how you’re chewing. I’m sorry, I’m being a jerk. But how come you would never tell Bob he was why you started playing music? I’m legitimately curious.”

“I didn’t want to make our brief conversation about me. And what is he supposed to say to something like that anyway?”

“I’m sure he would’ve been honored. People like hearing they touched or changed someone’s life in some small way.”

“Yeah, I guess. I wanted to hang out with him and not be the fanboy.”

“Not be the fanboy with an autographed Social Security card.”

“Besides, he wasn’t *the* reason why I picked up a guitar. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a huge influence and I emulate his style and sound, the ring of those suspended chords, the emotional high I get from his songs. But there’s no singular reason why I play music,” I said, which was kind of a lie, and then stammered through the rest. “There’s a part of me that plays because it drowns out the noise in my head, or I get to be outside of myself, if that makes any sense. Part of me plays out of spite, to show Eddie Patrick and all the other fuckheads I hated growing up that I can do this thing I’m

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whammy of my barking lower back and a painfully stiff neck with a range of motion approaching zero. My solution was to swallow ibuprofen and switch from water to whiskey.

We sort of watched horror-movie DVDs. To keep from nodding off I tried to get Mercy to give me her story, to share what she'd been up to. She deflected with "Nothing as exciting as being a rock star."

I held up devil-horns hands that had the shakes. Then I asked a long and thoughtful question about her photography, about her pursuing her passion. I got a one-word answer.

"Hobby," she said.

"How about the camera you used last night. Is it the same Polaroid?"

"Same? Do you mean make, model, type—"

"I mean are you using the same camera you used when I met you?"

"Yes to both. I've kept that camera in working condition. The thing is a pain in the ass to find film cartridges for and they're expensive as fuck, so I only shoot with it on special occasions. Like last night. If you want the photo, by the way, the price remains five bucks. Nonnegotiable."

"Did you take any action shots of the show?"

"Nope. Five bucks."

Because I couldn't move my slept-on-it-wrong neck, I pivoted my entire calcified body so I could look directly at Mercy.

She said, "You move like a rusted weathervane."

"The wind is blowing north."

"You stubborn jerk, you should've taken the bed and let me sleep on the couch like I offered."

"Probably. Okay, where's the photo?"

"Five bucks first."

"Don't know if I want a picture of myself that badly."

"You'll want this one."

"Why? You got my good side? I don't have one of those."

"You'll see."

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As she victory-marched back to the couch, the skin on my face and neck and everywhere else flashed red and I attempted to melt between the cushions. Instead of stammering an awkward apology for taking apart her dresser or an equally cringy joke of acknowledgment, I summoned the courage to return us to the basement of my house on Echo Ave with a pointed question.

"Do you remember the last photo you shot of me?" I asked. "Not counting the one you put in my jacket, obviously."

I expected obfuscation and denial. Mercy was direct. "Oh yeah. You were home recovering from surgery, or your first surgery, and I'd snuck into your basement. Man, that was a scary-ass basement." She sat on the couch and continued. "I was, like, halfway up the stairs and trying to talk you into letting me in the house. You were still mad at me, I guess, which was probably fair, and I was still mad at you." She spoke carefully, as though the wrong word or phrase might virus out and infect everything, turn this new basement into my old one. She wasn't lying, but she was leaving stuff out. The most important stuff. "Then you opened the door, and I snapped a picture. You slammed the door shut and I couldn't see and almost bought it going down the stairs. I knew it was wrong that I snuck in there like that, but I thought you'd appreciate the effort. I know that sounds so dumb now. Then I got extra pissed you shut the door in my face and left me in the dark, so I stole a box of Corn Pops off your shelves down there. I think it was Corn Pops. I felt bad about that after."

All I said was "Oh yeah?"

"I knew how you loved your sugary bullshit cereal."

"If you'd taken Honeycomb, I never would've forgiven you."

Mercy said, "My turn to ask the true confessional question. What the hell were you doing creeping on me in my sleep and with my camera the night I crashed at your house? That was fucked-up, Art."

She sounded sincerely upset and angry, and it was so unexpected and out of character, like your favorite doting elder relative suddenly

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relative? I'd
rather be a
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scare before a kill (drinking for the kill was optional) or a line of dialogue that we both agreed was ludicrous. We were both ludicrous by the time the movie ended.

As Mercy swapped out DVDs she said she had the best idea ever. The next movie in her queue she pulled from a previously unopened, red Netflix rental envelope. It was the '80s campy vampire classic *Fright Night*.

I said, "This is your best idea?"

"Mood setting for my best idea."

"Ever?"

"Ever."

I grumble-protested that if I was still conscious by the end of the movie, the scene where the girlfriend turns into a vampire and reveals gaping great-white-shark jaws and teeth would give me nightmares.

Mercy grabbed me by the shoulders, shook me, and shouted, "Exactly my point!"

*I'm a fun
drunk who
just wants
to help.*

"I'm still waiting for the point."

"Okay, listen. Your band was good and you're really good, Art. You are. I mean that. I'm impressed. You have talent and you clearly worked hard too. I've seen you play with some of your other bands too—"

"What. You did? When?"

"Okay, I saw a lot of your bands, most of them, I think, but forget I said that." She waved her arms, erasing my further attempts at interruption. "Don't think about that part now. Détente, remember?" Mercy raised her glass and took a sip. "Hey, Art, focus, okay? I know you, and you'll hear and get stuck on the worst possible implications of my idea, so I want to be clear. As clear as . . ." She trailed off.

"Crystal," I said.

"No. As clear as, um, invisible wallpaper. Wait, wasn't that the name of one your bands?" She knee-slapped at her own joke. "Sorry. I'm serious. Okay, know going into this best idea that I am

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“Hey, relax. I’m clearly not too cool for anything. What makes you think I can write a book? Or write anything anyone would want to read?” Self-pity aside, I was already considering her idea.

“Trying something new creatively could only help recharge your music batteries. Frankly, listening between your lines, you sound worn down, fed up, and cynical about the music scene and your place in it. I want you to be . . . fulfilled, Art. Not happy. No one knows what being happy means. I don’t know, don’t listen to me. I’m kinda drunk.”

I didn’t argue with her. She was drunk. And yeah, her between-the-lines reading of my disillusionment and disappointment was spot-on. I wasn’t going anywhere with music, and worse, I didn’t know where I wanted to go with it anymore. My bands weren’t making the music I wanted to make. I was going through the motions, like a programmed drum-machine version of a plug-in guitar player. I said, “Maybe I could write a Gen-X memoir about my time in shitty bands.”

“That would be cool, but I’m thinking it’d be a tough sell. Readers want plots, plucky do-good characters and inspiring arcs, and tidy, happy endings. They probably don’t want to read the music unsuccess story. No offense. Not even if it has vampires. Sorry, I’m bumming you out with this, aren’t I. Forget I said any of it.”

Dude, I can’t even. You’re blaming me for this book too? Yes, I made a friendly, what-if suggestion, but it was obviously the throw-away kind.

“When someone says ‘forget I said that,’ it usually guarantees the opposite.”

“See? That’s some keen, observational wisdom right there. Thinking like a novelist already.”

— Was she being serious or was it more fucking with me?

[Now? Now, I’m convinced she was seed planting. Was it an act of braggadocio or ego? Did she want me to write the book because she’d be the star of it? That’s part of it, maybe even a big part of it. I keep going back to her obsessive search for photographic “proof,” and I keep going back to the sleepover night in 1989, after the graveyard fiasco and before we got to my house, when we drove around and she went on an epic rant about not knowing the why of the

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Scooting to the other end of the couch, I lunged for the end-table lamp, and as I did so, my legs flippered out behind me, kicking the coffee table and toppling it over. The table landed with a heavy thunk, followed by a raindrop patter of tabletop debris. I gathered my feet under me and turned on the lamp. The light barely cut through the murk of the room, but for my light-starved eyes, it was enough to see what I'd brushed off my chest to the floor. Sagging between the couch and prone coffee table was my leather jacket.

My forehead and temples throbbed. My brain had had enough and wanted to break free from its skull prison. My heart resumed keeping proper time, but there was a hot stitch in the left side of my chest. My lower back was weak and loose on its track. The wrong move might send it off the rails.

Because
you needed
what was
inside the
bottle in
your coat
pocket.

How about
a regular
burglar?

Shivering even though it was a warm, humid night, I gathered my coat and put it on. I decided it was time to leave, even if it meant walking to my car or directly home despite my legion of physical ailments. After warily eyeing Mercy's shrouded bed on the other side of the room, I reset the coffee table upright. In the table's skeletal shadow, Mercy's canvas bag had toppled and spilled its contents, including her Polaroid camera. I crept and crouched, and like a reverse burglar put the loose change and wallet and everything else ~~back inside~~ and then on the table. Fearing the fall might've broken her camera, I inspected it for cracks and chipped plastic. I briefly entertained taking a dead-of-night, goofy-faced selfie as a functionality test, but the whirring camera would surely wake Mercy. I was not prepared to reenact that scene.

As I bent to return the camera to the canvas bag, there was a noise from the corner of the room, near the floating dresser. A click, or a tap, though the descriptor as a singular event wasn't accurate. What I heard was fuller than a solitary note and more like a chorus of synchronized and harmonized occurrences.

I waited for a repeat or an encore and there was only the after-midnight sounds of Mercy's breathing and the hum of the refrigerator. I stood motionless and I listened, and I stared at the dresser. Something

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Dude.
 Lighten up.
 It's a funky
 dresser.

banality of the impossible no longer being possible becomes intolerable by comparison. Perhaps that is the truth of all things, as untenable as that is.

Angling my head (which, despite the shock[s], hadn't cleared and filled with the static of dread, of the fear of the near future, as if there were any other type of fear) I looked and pleaded for space between the dresser's legs and the floor, and I did not find any. I uprooted and slowly backed away. The camera rattled in my shaking hands, and I waited for the other shoe, as they say, to drop. I didn't have to wait long.

The dresser rose off the floor and hovered in its elevated position. To be clear, it wasn't resting on the floor and then in a blink back where it had hung previously. I watched it lift and traverse a vertical distance. One of the rusted rollers swiveled and turned in lazy airborne circles. Autonomically shuffling backward, my right leg clipped the couch. I stumbled but didn't fall. After a breathless pause, perhaps impatient with my clumsy interruption, the dresser continued its ascent.

Then the coffee table drifted off the floor, taking Mercy's bag as a passenger. To my right, the lamp and the end table knocked into my elbow as it too clambered toward the ceiling. I turned my back on the levitating scene. If I refused to watch, then it wasn't happening. I didn't want to see any more. I couldn't see any more because I was full. There was no more room in my head for madness.

The quality and focus of the light changed as the lamp continued rising behind me. Spotlighted, miles away, was the apartment's door. I would leave. I had to leave. The first step was always the slowest, the most unsure, the most vulnerable, and the stone in my chest splashed into the bottom of a well as I knew something was now behind me. Something with big eyes to see me. More than the sensation of being watched; it was the feeling of being sized-up for predation, a feeling centered not in your brain but rattling within the brittle bones at the base of your exposed neck. I would not turn, and I would not confront. I would run.

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The camera. I could take a picture, use the flash to find a path to the front door. Click and flash and whirl.

Instead of eidetically processing and memorizing the room's layout, my eyes were trained for Mercy, or for any figure or form moving on my left. As I stood there blinking away the flash after-images, did I hear a muzzled sigh of irritation? Fucking hell, I almost apologized for wasting her expensive film.

I didn't see enough to be able to sprint across the room to the front door without a guarantee of my crashing into something. I did recall the couch toppled upside down directly in front of me, but already my memory of the flashed room had gone memetic. Figures crouched in the corners and among the debris, their features blurred but for the malicious stares from greedy eyes.

I shuffled forward, not daring to lift my foot for fear I might lose gravity again. Fixing my view lower, toward the floor directly in front of me, I snapped another picture. Okay, there was a path. I could avoid the couch and smashed end table by moving about forty-five degrees to my right. As I sidestepped, the sounds behind me and to my left became quieter; little creaks and moans, small taps of wood against wood, delicately stirred broken glass. Imagining Mercy airily traversing over the rubble, I quickened my pace.

I thought I felt the room open in front of me, but my left shin bashed into something solid, and I screamed, then somewhat absurdly said, "I'm not feeling well, so I'm going back to my place."

I took three more pictures, one after the other. In the first flash, my route forward was clear, and I was most of the way across the room, but the coat rack was swinging down in front of the door, like the arm of a tollbooth. It clattered to the floor before I pressed the button for the second photo. In that next flash, the coats, skins emptied of their former bodies, were pooled at the door, and on top, Mercy's green jacket, and it twitched. It moved. The flash lasted for a fucking millisecond or whatever, but it moved. It turned. Maybe it was better to remain in the dark and walk into whatever it was I was going to walk into. That's how we get through most of our days

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precipice. Spread out in the distance, downtown Providence glowed and slept, and it didn't care what happened to me. It never did.

Oops, right?

I left the fence eventually and curled up on a wooden bench under the canopy of a billowy oak tree. I woke early the next morning, slicked with dew. I still had her camera.

I didn't know what to do with what had happened at Mercy's apartment. What would you have done?

Me? Thanks for asking.

Yuck. Fuck fate. Fate is the rationalization for rapacity and evangelical evil, for the privileged chosen, for a hand holding a weapon.

I tried to be normal. Scratch that. I attempted to crawl out of the haunted bottomless ditch I'd fallen into and climb back onto the road to wherever it was I was headed before Mercy's fateful return.

Prospect Park was a few blocks from Victor's (from my band Antigone, remember him?) swanky apartment, but waking him up and begging for a ride back to my car or my shitty place, especially the morning after I'd missed a rehearsal (oops) would've made me out to be more of a fuck-up than I already was. He was a bandmate, not a friend. Besides, I needed the walk to clear my head. (What a misleading bromide that is. "Clear my head" makes it sound like your mind is simply cluttered and only needs you to pick up your clothes off the floor, wash and put away the dishes, maybe move some boxes of stuff you don't use but can't bear to throw away down into the basement. The reality is more like a mental Whac-A-Mole game: with a handy mallet you smash down the thoughts that keep popping up that you don't want popping up, and you whack and smash and whack until you're exhausted or numb, and either way, you give up.)

When I made it back to my apartment, mind uncleared, I ignored the blinking answering machine and I ate two bowls of cereal and then slept a full twenty-four hours, missing a bartending shift at the Paragon and another band rehearsal.

Victor woke me the next day with a phone call. He asked where I'd been in that aloof, I-don't-really-care-about-the-answer kind of tone. I

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the new guitarist was shit and Walter was going to leave Antigone as soon as he had another landing spot. Walter did not look at the photo closely. If he had, he would've seen what I saw.

The creases in the leather, the zipper, the chrome buttons, and the shadow of the lapel impossibly swirled and fit together to make a face. Once I saw it, I couldn't unsee it. That fucking face was there. It was the same, but it was also different because it sort of looked like me. And I felt it staring from inside me.

You felt it
staring at
you from
the photo,
or you felt
it inside you
and it was
staring?

In the cab I asked Walter to look at the photo again. He said it was too dark for him to see anything. When I smooshed the picture into his face and asked if he saw anything, he said, "Just you."

Walter helped me get my apartment door open. I hugged him and thanked him, and I took off my jacket and held it out toward him. I said, "I want you to have this."

He laughed. "What? Nah, man. Thank you, though."

"Everything must go. You get the jacket."

"You love that jacket. I've never seen you not in it. That jacket is you."

"I do. I did love it. Just fucking take it. I want you to take it from me." I draped the coat over his shoulder.

"Man, you're not dying. You'll be back." He tossed the coat to me. I wanted to cry because he thought I was drunk (which was true) and being maudlin and generous but I wasn't being generous. Walter, who'd been nothing but a solid friend, a good guy, did not deserve what I was trying to put on him. No one did.

I still tried to give it to him again. Walter refused. Eventually he jumped back into the waiting cab. I watched him drive away. He moved to North Carolina the following summer.

I left my jacket on the sidewalk. I let it go and it splatted, and maybe I tried stirring it to life with a hesitant toe in its water. I left the thing out there overnight and in the morning the jacket was gone and there was a puddle on the pavement in its place. (That's how I remember it anyway.)

That next day I brought all my packed-up shit to my mother's house in Beverly.

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Maybe if we'd talked occasionally after some of your shows and slowly rebuilt trust instead of our bingeing on a two-day hangout/bender, the implosion in my apartment wouldn't have happened. It makes sense now. There was so much pressure, how could our reunion not have collapsed ruinously?

Personal demons aside, I am now impressed by how deftly you've turned this whole thing into a vampire story. Plus, you credit it as my suggestion! I'm touched. Truly. Your physical ailments dovetail nicely with symptoms of visits from a folkloric vampire. Hey, that's me! Yes, I'm coming to fictional terms with my role, even warming up ~~your the idea I'm still waiting for some sort of reveal~~ ~~your self-destruction and regular destruction of my property to~~ ~~aside, I need the big scene in my basement. Ah, the vampire's~~ ~~crypt, yes?~~ I also dug the callback of my "Do you need a lift?" line from earlier in the book.

There's a lot going on in this chapter. I won't detail all my questions/issues because overall I think it works well enough as-is. But, ~~thought~~ ~~about~~ ~~the~~ ~~Providence~~ ~~music~~ ~~scene~~: There's no way you were in that many bands, even over a fifteen-year period. Plus, the rules and behavior of some of them were over-the-top, though that in and of itself doesn't necessarily mean it wasn't true. No shade to Providence, but it isn't exactly New York or LA or even Seattle. I suppose Boston is close enough geographically to create a co-scene. Still, would there have been that many bands, that many talented or angry or lost or bored young people kicking around the city at that time? Maybe. Did you exaggerate the number of bands—and subsequent firings and dismissals—to externalize and emphasize your self-loathing, or to satirize your idealized punk scene and what it had become? Either way, it's entertaining. The danger is that it can read as less authentic, like the fantasy of someone who hasn't played in bands.

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avored path, the easier one to remember, the one they were originally led down.

—This dead-of-night scene as horror: Creepy for sure, especially the bit about my shifting from Hulk-smashing through the debris to lightly walking over it. You intimate I was floating, but I imagined me stretched out and insectlike, psychopomping my bulk in such an expert way that I weighed almost nothing. Chills, dude. Even though it's written in first person and the reader knows that at this point in the book there's no way you could die within the scene, and even though I know what happened, I was worried and scared for Punk Art. Horror at its core reminds us of the inevitability of death, even if it doesn't occur on the page. However, are you sort of maybe possibly taking the make-everyday-objects-and-scenarios-menacing thing a bit too far with floating dressers and jackets that become homunculi parasites?



Doodle!

~~Yeah, when I state plainly the supernatural bits like that and without any story context it sounds silly, just as I could make so many other horror stories/movies sound silly in a minute's work. It's weird and yeah like the same time as the cotton candy, the dresser and jacket becoming obsessed with finding precisely because the dresser is the wall* the floor. That bit works because the everyday, normal thing is now strange and off and creepy. And what happens next? Eh. Perhaps it comes down to personal taste, but I was more moved by the ambiguity of the dresser, of not knowing what the fuck was up with the dresser, than by it and other objects in the room gone floaty. Like I've told you before, I don't believe in the supernatural as it relates to ghosts or demons or beings, be they devils or gods. Despite my love of horror, I have a hard time suspending disbelief in fiction/movies too. I so desperately want to believe, but I cannot. Not for a lack of trying, either. I'm not expressing~~

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on your chest. I don't understand everything—I never have—but in this moment we are in ~~two worlds of~~ many.

You stand in front of the couch, shaking in air that has gotten thicker somehow, and shaking as you stare at the dresser that hovers above the floor

—and—

you are shouting at things that are not there because your brain is on fire and in this hallucinatory frenzy you rip the dresser from the wall and you gut it, spilling out the drawers spin away from the levitating furniture, and I've never seen someone look so fundamentally frightened and lost

—and—

you are in a berserker's fury and you flip over the sofa and smash the lamp and scream unintelligibly.

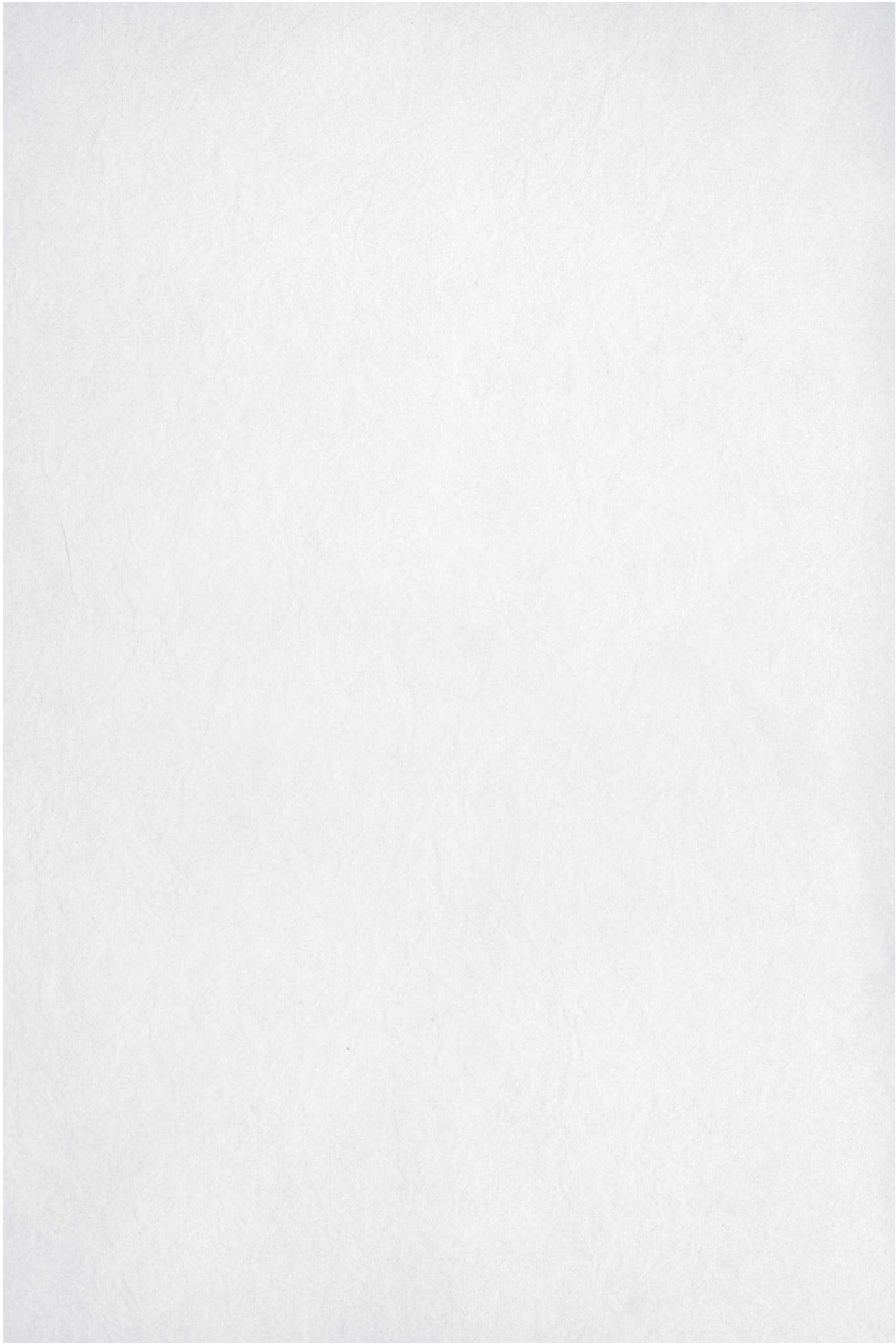
I see it all

—and—

I stretch and ~~hope to~~ ~~reach~~ you on all fours, every inch of me a claw, a snarl, a fang, and also, I fill the room, I am the room, I am the world, and I'm enraged and rapturous and I will make this last forever

—and—

I'm in bed and I can't see anything, and I'm curled into a ball and I'm so small and I'm weeping because this will ~~last forever~~ ~~because you~~ are in the same room with me and at such proximity—comparative to 1989 when I was sleeping an entire floor below you, or when I was underground, in my grave one hundred years prior—I am intoxicated and I am violence and I am possibility



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Lyrics:

You see that
 I jumped over the couch
 You see that
 I jumped over the couch

Get out the way
 Go back to work
 I've got a red and white
 Get out the way
 Go back to work
 I've got a red and white

Coal song

Admittedly, I am not a strong lyricist. Though, if you were to hear the song performed, I think you'd agree the words somehow work. Mostly. And fine, I harvested the lyrics from a screaming toddler who Super Marioed around everyone's favorite box furniture store. (I wanted the Billy bookcase and all I came home with was a headache.) The kid had a binky in each hand, one red, one white. Sorry I demystified the song for you.

"Coal Song" is a Pallbearers Club original, and I work it into my sets. Despite the band name, I play solo now.

introduce
myself?

Looks like
a devil's
tail!

Please allow me to rewind a little. After I moved back to my mother's house in August of 2007, I didn't pick up my guitar for eighteen months. I'd returned to a familiar place, but I was not, as they say, in a good place. To my eternal gratitude, Mom knew the living arrangements had to be tweaked so my prodigal return didn't in any way resemble a turning of the clock back twenty years. She relocated to the first floor and gave me the second. Aside from a common entrance (otherwise known as the front

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doesn't
mean "not
reliant."

become less reliant on painkillers. (Aside: I haven't been as faithfully attuned to my heart—the physical one—thanks-no-thanks shitty and/or no health insurance. The last time I had my biannual echocardiogram to check the size and function of my potentially rascally aorta was 2009.)

novel

What's
with all
the French?

One might
observe that
I never left,
because you
kept me
around by
writing about
me for seven
years.

So yeah, barring the unforeseen, I am not going to be kicked out of my apartment, and I feel better physically. However, I attribute the seven years of on-and-off-again writing of this memoir, as frustrating and pride-swallowing and uncomfortable and impossible and improbable as it has been at times, to my current fatalistic (Mercy will be back at some point, but until then . . .) jouissance.

If you read the preceding passages and think, "Living with Mom isn't very punk, Art," or "I don't sympathize with Art because he's so passive," you can go fuck yourself.

Monsieur, that's not very
jouissance-like.

When I eventually limped back to playing live music, I started with local open mics. Besides fearing I would see Mercy in the audience, the hardest part was overcoming my teenagery dread of running into ex-classmates. That happened less frequently than I had anticipated, mainly because the ones who remained local were married, had children, and were not frequenting the bars at which I performed. On the occasions when there were Beverly High alumni in the audience, most of whom (if I'm allowed to be gloriously mean and petty) had peaked as teenagers, socially if not physically (hello, polar-ice-cap receding hairlines), they remarked on my physical transformation. Like I said before, I do love my six-four height, Faustian-back-pain bargain be damned. I also had a scruffy, youth-culture-approved beard and carefree curling hair. When they said "Wow, look at you" or "You look great," it was meant in comparison to the willowy, zit-infested, stick-bug high school me, in comparison to their diminished and/or exaggerated

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for his use or amusement. At least he looked like shit. Purple eye bags, a jowls starter kit, and hair too thin to even say it was thinning.

Clearly drunk, he said, “Fan-fucking-tastic, brother.” Gross, right? Who says shit like that? He chuckled my shoulder and joked about how I needed his permission to use the Pallbearers Club as a performing name, as he was once a founding member.

*I wonder if
that applies
to why you
stayed at
your old
house.*

By this point Kate and her husband wisely fled. Eddie bought me two beers. I honestly don’t know why I stayed. Eventually, during his bragging about myriad shady economic dealings and conquests, I extricated myself, claiming I had to pack up gear that had already been packed. I shrugged into my blue leather jacket, and Eddie made a crack about my being late for a motocross rally in the Liberty Tree Mall parking lot. I bumped into his arm, oil-spilling his drink onto his blazer and tie. He claimed I did it on purpose. I didn’t disagree. I thanked him for the beers and tossed bar napkins at him. I left him grumbling and his Neolithic associates breathing through their mouths and unsure when the violence might finally start. I told Meg (the bar owner) I was leaving my stuff in the back room and would get it tomorrow, which was not unusual. Too buzzed to drive, too pissed to care to ask anyone for a ride, I walked the two miles home.

Before leaving, though, in a low moment, I keyed deep scratches into the driver’s-side door of Eddie’s car. It was a low moment because I guessed the BMW SUV was his. Oops.

Through sheer determination and persistence, the Pallbearers Club had semi-regular gigs at Mercy Tavern (I’m not making the name up, I swear) in neighboring Salem and the Copper Dog in Beverly. What set me apart from your typical nostalgia act of auto-tuned, drum-machine-accompanied, acoustic renderings of flower-power standards and soft rock “classics” (not that I’m judging) or shitty contemporary pop country (I am judging), was that I played electric and awash in distortion. The band was me, my electric guitar, and a

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than the prior one, but that was the point of the purchase, and I like blue). There was a smattering of applause. I do get a few regulars at the shows; not people who follow me per se, but people who go to the same bar each week and I was the equivalent of their favorite booth or stool.

I strummed a ringing E chord, which turned a few heads in my direction, and I said, “I’m the Pallbearers Club,” and I launched into a crowd-pleaser, “Luka” by Suzanne Vega, arranged at twice the tempo and using suspended chords with heavy distortion. Why a song about child abuse was a crowd-pleaser I couldn’t say, but I had to give the people some of what they wanted. I played the usual ’90s standards from Nirvana, Pixies, Belly, Neutral Milk Hotel, Sugar, Social Distortion’s version of Johnny Cash’s “Ring of Fire,” and some deeper cuts, including Bob Mould’s “I Hate Alternative Rock.” After the Bob tune, I paused and told the bar crowd the title of the song. It elicited a few laughs, head nods, and smirks. Oh, you jaded Gen-Xers, acting as though some of you hadn’t become some of the worst, most entitled assholes on the planet. At this point in the set, I had a full sweat going, so I shed my blue jacket and guzzled some water. Time for some banter.

“I’d ask how everyone’s night is going, but I really don’t care as long as you subscribe to the Pallbearers Club YouTube channel.”

Some applause, laughs, and lots of shared *seriously?* looks.

Part of the joke was that I did have a channel. I created two-minute-and-thirty-two-second (the length of the song “New Day Rising,” because in my meaningless world I must make everything mean something) mini documentaries for famous punk and new wave bands and forgotten local Boston and Providence heroes. Each band got the same egalitarian treatment. Offscreen I nasally narrated factoids, band highlights, and personal appreciations as well as critiques (I don’t do hagiographies) over a montage of live performance clips. (As of the writing of this, I have 10,019 followers, not that I keep track.) A former bandmate reached out recently to ask if I’d be

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relented. Less than two years later both were in serious relationships with other people. Mom was going to marry Larry, who had spent his adult life as a tech for National Grid on the natural-gas side. He helped Mom pay my father \$5,000 (which represented their original down payment) so the house would be solely in her name. Larry was a good person, even if he thought I was a hopelessly slacking lounge-about, which, fine, wasn't true (not counting my bands, while in Providence I generally worked sixty-hour weeks that weren't really weeks and more like a string theory of unrelenting days), but there were and are worse things to be. Larry treated Mom well. Tragically, five months before their scheduled wedding day, he died of a sudden heart attack at a work site. With the one-two punch of divorce and the United Shoe Plant closing, my father found (or re-found) religion. He somehow finagled Catholic back channels to officially, in the beady, weaselly eyes of the Church, annul his marriage to Mom. Her agreeing to the annulment, more than the ceremonial five grand (not that that wasn't a significant amount of money, particularly in the mid-'90s), was ultimately what got Mom the house for keeps. While Mom hasn't been a practicing Catholic

for decades, the annulment remained a sore spot. Dad married a bouncing electron of a woman named Gretchen. She was a good person, even if she thought I was a hopelessly slacking lounge-about and, worse, a heathen, which, fine, because in the case of the latter, I was. She treated Dad well. She had some money squirreled away from her prior marriage to a real-estate developer, and in '98 they moved to a Christian gated community (not sure how it works, and I don't want to know) near Boca Raton, Florida. The two of them opened a hair salon called Curl Up and Dye. They've since opened two more salons on the southeast coast of Florida. Around the holidays (including their own birthdays and anniversary) they sent me über-religious cards with checks for \$25, a photo of them tanned and on the beach, and neon yellow and pink adverts/coupons for their salons.

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We sat at opposite ends at the rigorously rectangular table. I drank water and Mom drank white wine. We had to remind ourselves to not be continually shocked at how old we were.

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Mom asked me about the show because she knew I wanted to talk about it. I told her what songs I opened and closed with and the originals I played and what the crowd reactions were to those songs. Onstage or after, I never admitted I wrote the originals. If pressed, I credited the song to one of the bands I used to play with. Usually Rat Moat. I liked saying that band name.

my

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Mom asked if either of my two briefly tenured girlfriends (since returning to Beverly) were in the audience.

I said, "Yeah, they were both there, dancing and cheering, and throwing roses at me."

"You think you're so funny."

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A brief silence, acknowledging the glow of the evening was fading. I asked her about her day, her week, as recently we'd only seen each other in passing. She itemized her walks around the neighborhood and Lynch Park (including her terse confrontation with a man who didn't clean up after his Labradoodle), phone calls with her sister who lived in West Roxbury, dinner with one of her bank-teller friends who'd had a hard go of it lately. I diverted conversation away from the friend's hard go. Selfishly, I didn't want to hear about it, not then. So, I preemptively answered one of her usual questions about a gig.

I said, "No former classmates in the audience, tonight, which is always a plus."

"You're almost in your mid-forties, Art. You need to let those high school grudges go."

I laughed. "Says the person who still complains about when she was a freshman and her senior brother let his friends make fun of and embarrass her at a high school dance." It was kind of mean to bring that up, though I didn't do it to be mean. I took an odd sense of comfort from listening to a seventy-year-old (one who had lived a full life, a life blessed with a roof always over her head and loving, if

no

kit

novel

"I don't think so."

"You can't write a memoir about things that haven't happened to you yet. It sounds like you're done to me."

"Doesn't feel like I'm done." I couldn't tell her that I was afraid to be done because for the seven years I'd been writing the book I hadn't seen Mercy. She hadn't come back. It was silly, but I wanted to believe my writing was a talisman, *the* talisman keeping Mercy away, keeping her from returning. Seven years was a long time. Not equal to my time in the Providence scene, but music has never been a talisman. Mercy had been there with me in Providence the whole time, hadn't she? Even if she wasn't at every show, she was at enough of them, and I'd bet my soul she went to every final show I'd had with each of my ill-fated bands. I knew the talisman thing was absurd, and correlation was not causation, but I also knew I wouldn't survive her next visit. Or worse, I wouldn't want to survive because of what I might then become. So, I would continue writing and rewriting the past. Forever if necessary.

Mom asked, "You don't have an ending planned?"

"I guess that's it. I'm not sure how to end it." I tried a joke. "Is that a funny thing to say about a memoir?"

novel

"You'll figure it out. But you better make me look good when you write about me."

"I'm trying my best."

"Hey!"

"What? I didn't mean anything by that."

"Yeah, sure." She laughed ruefully, but it was the laugh of an opponent. I wondered if she was thinking something awful about me. We all think awful things about the ones we're closest to. She followed it up with "You were always so creative. I'm sure it's great because you're very talented at everything you do, and I can't wait to read it." She said it with such sincerity, I felt awful for thinking she was thinking awful things about me.

"Thank you. Yeah, we'll see."

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The other half of the curse was that within the adult child's aging eyes the parent inevitably changed and became someone else, a person in whom the adult child saw their own best and worst selves.

My one glass of wine had already turned into a headache. I gave her a quick hug and tottered off upstairs with a large cup of water. Instead of bed, I plunked down at my writing desk and wrote about the show and my time in the kitchen with Mom. When I first sat down, I scribbled some thoughts into a notebook, something I didn't intend to include in the book.

But here it is anyway:

I wonder where we will be in another seven years. Will I still be writing this book? Will I still play live music? Will Mom still be who she is now? Will I? Will you? Will we have finally painted the kitchen? Will I still be living here? Will she be here? Will something terrible happen? When will something terrible happen? Is the worst always to come? The worst is always to come.

Sleep clouds in as I stare at the last sentence, wanting and unable to offset it with something more hopeful (and that's a failure, one of a million failures) but also, fuck it, my having written it down and acknowledging the truth of it will have to be hope enough. I let myself slump into my chair. I don't need to leave and retreat to my bedroom. I'm in the chair now and I'm in the chair in my head. Inside my head is a perfect replica of the house. I wander the hallway of this house. The hallway is quiet but not static, like everyone and everything the hallway is in the process of slowly decaying, and I realize this is what the hallway is like when no one is in it because I'm not in it now. Then I vapor down the stairs and into the dining room and I won't look at the latched basement door, and then I go to the kitchen and the light is off, but I see the outline of my blue jacket I left on the chair, and I'll have to move that tomorrow.

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be finished. At the sink I turn on the tap and let the cold water run over and through my hand and wrist and then to fill a glass. I luxuriate in the sensation again because I'm still so permeable. I'll decide to worry about that after I decide I am no longer thirsty. I drink and I drink forever and the cold fills me until it doesn't. I am both recharged and thinning away, but then, an unbidden thought: *Mercy is in the basement again*. I drop the emptied glass and it clinks and clatters into the sink. Mercy has returned and she is in the basement again and that is why I am permeable. But that's not how I felt the last time I was with her and the other last time before that. There's no pain, and my heart isn't spasming, and, if anything, my heart has gone quiet, gone into hiding. Regardless, what am I going to do? I waver into the dining room and stare at the basement door. Mercy is somewhere below. In the house in my head, I don't dare go down into the basement. I am not permeable. I am here. Should I simply run away again? Get out of her range? Where would I go this time?

And what about Mom? In her bedroom, in what was our TV room when I was a kid, Mom coughs. She coughs on cue, as though I decided she should cough. I am not permeable. I am diffuse. I am in the air. I can reach without reaching. I can be at the basement door and back here in the mouth of the kitchen. I don't open the basement door even if the latch quivers to become unlatched. The metal hook vibrates and clinks as though my fingers tickle it. Inertia is a lie. With my hands at my side, I don't feel my side. Instead, I feel the latch and hold its thin, coiled tensile strength, and I lift then let it drop. I am diffuse. The latch is at rest. I don't run for the front door and to my car and then away, driving until I'm out of gas or out of road, and then on foot, walking until I'm forgotten. I wisp more than scuttle (I think I have done this before) the short journey to the TV room. The French doors are open. I don't go into the room, and I don't stand over her sleeping form like a mantid fiend. I hover, a cloud in the doorway. A crouched, kyphotic shape sits on my mother's chest. There isn't much light, but as the shape flexes and unflexes, adjusts, throbs like a heart, I see it is blue. It is a blue

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Since I wasn't in this chapter, I appreciate that it was relatively short. I also approve of your shitting on the bands that need to be shat upon.

Okay, I had to get the jokes out of the way first.

There's no good segue to the following:

I am so sorry about what happened to your mom. It kills me that you are—by the act of presenting this book as a memoir, not a novel, though it is a novel, the most novelest novel ever noveled—blaming yourself for her passing, and it is more than a little worrisome. I'm not good at expressing deep emotional truths—I'm not the writer!—but your mom was a good person, and you are also a good person. ~~Back to the story you don't believe in. You're a good person and, because she's happy, she's happy. At the happy place. As late in the early~~ sections of the book, with the notable exception of the Eddie-in-the-barroom confrontation. I don't blame you there. He was and is the worst.

Scratch that "happy" bit. I meant hopeful. Fuck happy.

I'm not sure if you need to include the two songs you wrote, but, you're the musician. I'm so vain I think that second song is about me. We're deep into this novel now and I think I've pieced together more of the rules or whys of the supernatural/vampire element. You've made it abundantly clear that your assorted health issues are the result of my noshing. According to the Mercy Brown folklore, the victims almost exclusively wasted away via consumption/tuberculosis, but I'm okay with you switching it up. The supernatural works in mysterious ways. But, if only to satisfy my agnostic/skeptic self, I want more talk of nothing "supernatural" happening, and more than a "this was all a drug-and-painkiller-aided delusion." Maybe you should posit that you're now infected with an interdimensional or extradimensional virus/being whose very presence alters, blurs, or splinters reality.

frightening them. That's not what you're writing about here. You're attempting to make me and the original M. Brown, and now you, more empathetic by grappling with choice. Beyond the curse of having to live, if not forever, then for a fuckload of time, and what that might do to our minds, how do we justify our living off others? Your vampire must lie to herself about being a good friend—or in your case, being a good son—but still having to subsist off the loved one's, um, subsistence. Why is it always someone closest to us, someone we love? Why can't we choose someone else? Can we choose? Is our having no choice a lie, or the lie? When you believe you have no choice, it frees you from personal/societal responsibility. ~~It's not possible to think about being a vampire without this vampire model, history.~~ ~~And nothing points to this story is the bit on page 201 where your mother blurted out a name different from Mercy. I was surprised you didn't comment or write about it at that point or at any point. Maybe you're in one of those forest-for-the-trees situations. Just because Mary is my real name doesn't mean you can't use it. I mean, fuck, you've used everything else, why not my first name?~~ For hundreds of pages the reader has been wondering if I am *the* Mercy Brown. Maybe at this point, they assume that, but I'd still bet your house that a part of them would be like, "Wait, wait, wait, the Rhode Island farmers already burnt Mercy's heart and consumed her ashes. How is she back?" Which is fun, in a way, that they would assume the cure worked. Sure, it's similar enough to the stake-in-the-heart stuff for someone to be culturally lulled into thinking drinking a heart-ash slushy killed the vamp dead. But in the world of this novel, if the heart cure worked, then why is Mercy still slam dancing around? ~~I've been waiting for you to pivot to that, but you haven't.~~ Therefore, I am not Mercy. Yeah? You haven't once wavered away from Mercy as Mercy in the

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Brown. Real life works **that** way, but not stories, not novels. Not the ones we want to read anyway. Novels are lies. Great, big, wonderful lies.

I've said this multiple times before, but I am dreading the upcoming pages, the final pages, even though, at this point in the editing/critiquing, I know how it ends for all but the shouting. You have some shouting left to do.

I want to get the following in writing though:

If/when you/we publish this, you/we should consider including my notes. I give my blessing. In fact, I insist. What you've written is very cool, Art, and I can't say that strongly enough. You're a good writer and you tried, tried like fuck, but you need me to fill in some of the holes you left. ^{Just look at that deliciously ironic previous sentence: The vampire who steals life/soul from you is offering to then} **add** to your book. Huh? That shit is gold, Art. You know you want it included. Ah, the jagged ouroboros of life.

You don't even have to include my name—fictitious or real—as a coauthor on the cover. I don't mind, and not what I'm looking for. Honestly and as always, I'm here to help you.

Look, just like how we wrote your history paper on poor Mercy Brown, we're collaborators. We always have been.

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back home? After I still cowardly call it “it” and not “me”?), I threw away my blue jacket and I slept with my bedroom door closed and locked. Each morning when I woke the door was unlocked and ajar. One night I moved my dresser in front of the locked door. I had to take the drawers out first because it was too heavy to move otherwise. The dresser was back in its usual spot the next morning.

Mom’s cough got worse. She lost weight. Her diagnosis was swift and irreparable. Irreversible.

I didn’t know what to do. I tried staying awake while she slept, and I became a zombie—no, a ghoul. I became who I was.

I wanted to leave, to move out to keep her safe from me, from what was in me, but how could I have told her any of that? How could I have said, “Hey, I’m a weird kind of vampire (as opposed to the regular kind) and I haven’t been doing it on purpose, but I’ve been feeding on you so it’s my fault you’re sick, and now that you have cancer, I’m going to get my own place and leave you alone”? It was already too late anyway. It was. (I must believe that. There is no other option.) As Mom became more ill, she asked me, as sheepish as a child admitting she was afraid of the dark, to sleep on the couch in the adjoining living room. It would make her feel better knowing I was close by, and I could leave the light on out there and read or work on my book while she slept, she didn’t mind. I couldn’t say no. I could not say no. (I must believe that. There is no other option.)

When she slept, her breathing was an excruciatingly wet sound, a foot being pulled out of pond muck, and each night the foot sank deeper. I stole that from her too. Now I must keep it forever.

In the morning I would ask her if she slept any better because I was supposed to ask. I already knew the answer. She said the nights were hard, and it felt like she slept with a mountain on her chest.

I cut down my hours at Newbury Comics to part-time so I could drive her into Boston for inpatient treatment. On the drives she thanked me. Said I was a good son. She asked if I remembered going into Boston for my many back appointments and the surgery, and she talked about how worried and scared she was for me, and

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Some nights we could look at each other when she said it.
 I kept saying I was sorry. Mom, I'm so sorry.
 She said it was all right, it was okay.
 It wasn't.

For five months and twenty-nine days after she died, I left the house only to deal with probate lawyers, sell her car, and buy beer and occasional groceries. I still needed regular food, too, apparently. Not that I was eating much. I tried to waste away on my own. I became my own ghost, again. I've always been my own ghost (or my own ghoul, self-consuming, all-consuming). Like in the summer of '89, I haunted my own house, drifting around the first floor like I was broken, listening until I didn't hear any sounds I wanted to hear. There was nothing to hear.

Why did I never get or ask for help?
 Who would help me?
 Who would've possibly helped me?
 What would their help look like?
 Who would believe me?
 Who would believe *in* me?
 Who wouldn't say, "I believe that *you* believe this is happening"?

Sometimes I think about dying, despite how far away it now seems, despite its contiguity, and it brings temporary relief because I think, *At least then I won't have to worry about any of this*. This way in which I fantasize about dying is utterly ridiculous. I imagine it as akin to staying in bed all morning with my eyes closed, sometimes dozing, sometimes awake, and I'm able to see how people react to my passing, to see how the world shrugs and goes on without me. I invariably fast-forward to when everyone and everything that ever was is gone, except for me, because I'm still there to witness the

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childishly think coping hides the fact that there is no purpose and no reason for anything.

novel

Fucking hell. The author is a monster. The ~~memoir is a~~ vampire, and it needs you to breathe life into its voice of the dead; like any book, it needs you to survive.

I wish I never fucking wrote any of this.

Yet here I am. And I have a new plan.

I will find Mercy.

Mom had a small bank teller's 401(k) I used to pay for cremation and settling her (and my) credit card debts. I probably should've used it to pay down the mortgage a little bit. Instead, I lived off it for almost two years. I quit the job at Newbury Comics. Besides being grief-stricken, depressed, existentially bereft (and vampiric, did I mention vampiric?), I worried that I might be unconsciously gnawing on or syphoning off my coworkers if I spent too much time around them. I didn't (and don't) know how this vampire thing totally worked. Yeah, the big feeds seemed to happen at night, when people were sleeping, but it's clear to me that Mercy chewed on me like I was bubble gum whenever we hung out together. Though, I have never been physically recharged or reinvigorated after a shift at work. Quite the opposite. And I feel like a beat-up person in their mid-forties. Or mid-four hundreds. Christ, can you even imagine living half that long and what that would do to your head, your spirit? No, I don't think you can. Our new advancing ages turn us all into cowards eventually.

How about
a mixing
straw?
I loved
chewing on
them.

Anyway, I left the job because I didn't want to drain and sicken my punk or punk-adjacent comrades in black T-shirts, Doc Martens or Vans, hole-punched piercings, and sleeve tattoos. And I left because the store had long ceased to be a record store (sure, we sold some records, though vinyl collecting was now an exorbitantly pricey hipster niche pursuit), and had devolved into a pop-culture

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your mom?

I leave a card pinned under the Honda's windshield wiper. As I walk back to my car, the card rattles against the glass in an invisible breeze. It's like I'm making the note nervous by watching it. Should I leave a second one under the other wiper? No, my cards don't grow on trees, and they must be strategically rationed.

Back in my own failed-inspection-twice vehicle, with the Fit out of sight, I reflexively check my phone for a text from Mercy, which is stupid, I know. There aren't any other orange compact cars parked in the neighborhood. I'm tempted to leave cards with random cars on the off chance she isn't driving an orange one anymore. If only I could dowse her car. (I love the word "dowse," and pledge to use it whenever I can.)

Obviously, she might not live here anymore, and even if she did, she could be working. I try to imagine the job she has: wedding photographer (that makes me smile), a photographer for dying newspapers (but an anti-Peter Parker, one who husked both Uncle Ben and Aunt May), or maybe her gig is totally random, like an archivist for one of the one zillion libraries in the area, or a conservationist accounting the yearly decline of barnacles growing on jetties, or writing term papers for college kids and ghostwriting online dating profiles, or a ride-share driver who leaves her fares with a backache or a cough. The latter is the least likely, I think. She's not that deliberate.

I can't
tell if I'm
insulted or
interested

I park and walk. Across the street college students sit on marble stairs adjacent to the yellow Shunned House. There are so many shunned houses, and I don't know why this one has sole claim to the name. The kids have sketch pads balanced on their packs, so I'm guessing they go to RISD. Maybe I'm self-conscious (duh), but I'm dressed like they are, or they're dressed like me (bootcut jeans, hoodie, black skully, chonky glasses; one has a thicker beard than I have but not patched with gray), and they watch me iceberg past. I'm the future natural disaster to be avoided (good luck with that, kids). One of them laughs as though all of this, everything, is funny. Maybe it is. The most cosmic of jokes and horrors. I have the urge to shout "Boo!" and scatter them like birds.

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Not the usual description of a vampire being mortally afraid of God's house, but we'll work with it. The past is not dead.

slyly crouched and beckoning like a carnival huckster at the front of the lot. The church itself is another headstone or monument to the dead past within a flat plain of stones.

I turn my car right, onto a dried and rutted dirt road and pull over almost immediately. Mercy's grave is a few steps away and clustered within the family plot. Mary Olive is on Mercy's right, closest to the road. To Mercy's left is a scraggly tree and the headstones of her parents. Edwin's grave is there too.

Mercy's story has gained notoriety (if not popularity) in recent years. I didn't realize how much so. Granted, it's only a week past Halloween, but I'm surprised to find so many trinkets (including, in case you can't make it out in the photo, coins, seashells, a black rose, a white rose with drops of red, and two Disney princess Band-Aids) left by . . . by whom? Fans? Curiosity-seekers? Believers? People who want their heart consumed too?

A metal bracing rings the base of the stone and runs up its back, as people have tipped the marker as well as chipped off pieces to keep as mementos. Mementos of what? Of a real vampire? If they really believed, wouldn't they be concerned they were inviting misery into their lives? Misery is coming for them regardless.

Unlike my other notecards, I place this one in a plastic sandwich baggie, then I lean it against the stone. That's not good enough, and with the added sail of plastic it might fly away in a breeze. I try pinning it under the small pumpkins, but some of those have already gone soft. Finally, I slide the card between the metal brace and the stone. That will have to do.



I have one card left and I leave it at her older sister Mary's grave, mainly because there are no Halloween-themed or gothy tchotchkes left at her stone. Not that I believe Mary knows what is happening in and

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online search engine. Maybe I should repeat this note-leaving exercise with other quotes from favorite books or song lyrics to share a little joy, momentarily connect with a stranger in a half-analog, unanticipated way? Then I remind myself I left those notes because I have been turned into a monster and I am trying to unbecome one by finding the one who made me.

The other note-sourced texts I receive over the next week are decidedly not rooted in Vonnegut's vision of kindness, or not in kindness toward me. One text lectures me to leave "M" alone. Another texter replies with a similar sentiment via a lowercase "creepy" and three puking emojis. One restaurant threatens me with banning because my note got wet and froze to the glass and had to be scraped off the bay window. Having worked in my fair share of restaurants, if I were suddenly saddled with having to go outside and scrape a window, I'd be salty too. I texted back: "Sorry. My bad." Yes, the "my bad" is passive-aggressive. It is also a two-word symbolic representation of Art Barbara.

Click
goes the
digitized,
avatarized
sound of
a phone's
"shutter."

Two people texted me photos. One is of dogshit, likely generated from a large breed of dog, given the size of the pile on the sidewalk in front of the Strand (artfully composed, though). The other is of Mercy's grave. It's the headstone photo I included in the manuscript.

Three months pass and we're into March of 2017.

Mary
Brown?

After bleary insomniac nights I spend my blearier hungover mornings scanning online obituaries in Beverly, Essex County, and Providence. I search for obituaries that are light on family detail, or any detail. I search for the name Kathleen Blanchet. I search for names using the initials KB. I search for names using the initials MB. I search for women who are roughly my age and of the ages of Kathleen and Mercy. Most afternoons and evenings I am a one-person Pallbearers Club. I have attended thirty-three wakes for

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heart stomping out final warnings. Maybe I'm not feeding it what it needs.

It's April, and with Mom's IRA money all but gone, vampire or not, I need a job because I am not going to sell our house. Mom's house. It was and still is hers. I may not live here for long (certainly not forever), but I am not selling it now. It's too soon. I haven't even painted the kitchen yet. That needs to happen first.

I get a job driving a hearse at MacPherson's Funeral Home in Danvers. I tried Stephens Funeral Home first. Mr. Stephens retired ten years ago and sold his business to his nephew Charles. He wasn't hiring, but he and Mr. Stephens (from his retirement cottage in Virginia Beach) kindly found me a landing spot and put in a good word. During my interview, the implacable and silver-haired Roger MacPherson asked if we'd met before, said that I looked familiar to him. I played dumb and didn't tell him that I'd been to his establishment for three wakes in the prior two months.

It's a big and busy funeral parlor, so it's easy for me to keep to myself as much as possible. I don't interact with the bereaved beyond a quick introduction, tip of my cap, and I'm-sorry-for-your-loss. Because of my back issues I supervise and encourage the pallbearers as they load and unload the coffin to and from the hearse. I'm the kindly but distant, we've-seen-this-horror-movie-before tall and sad-faced driver. I like to think of my hearse and accoutrement as honest and proper stay-away-from-me messaging. So much so I'm not above grocery shopping in my regalia. When I'm inside the hearse, alone with the coffin, I take a picture with my phone and I may or may not have a conversation with the deceased on the drive to the cemetery, tell them about how many people showed up, how many people loved them.

When I come home from work, I watch TV, or I lie on the floor and listen to music at a volume that leaves my ears ringing. I listen to music like I did when I was seventeen years old, which means

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location and
uttered an
'80s action-
movie quip,
then we
could have
an epic Final
Boss battle.
Nah, guy,
I bought it
online and
roughed it
up a little.

The curtains in the dining room reach out as though to stop me, or to pat me on the back with a sarcastic *Yeah, good luck*. Sarcastic Curtains, were I ever to form a band again, would be a great bad-band name. A bad band is the only kind I ever wanted to be in.

I open the door.

Mercy, forever evergreen, stands on the front stoop, the storm door ~~open~~ and pinned behind her left leg. She says "Truce?" and throws a headless living shadow at me, its greedy arms flapping and wavering.

I didn't think an attack would happen so soon upon our reunion, but it is happening. I swallow a scream, but some of it kettle-whistles between my lips, and I squeeze my eyes shut, preparing to stoically absorb the apocalyptic assault. Whatever it is bounces off my chest with a brief jingle and puddles on my flip-flop-clad feet.

"Hey, um, it's your jacket. It won't bite."

I bend and pick up the black jacket by the scruff, the leather cracked and worn. After a quick visual, tactile, olfactory inspection, there's no question it's my old jacket, the same one I left (abandoned) on the street in front of ~~my North Providence~~ apartment, and it's gorgeous.

I mumble, "No way." I should be frightened and disturbed, but I'm neither. I'm honestly relieved. Mercy and I get to begin again, which means we're almost, finally, over. At least, that's the plan.

She asks, "What did you think it was?"

"A replica?"

"You're frightened of leather jacket replicas?"

"Pleather is terrifying."

"A few weeks after the blowout at my place, I went to your apartment," Mercy says, "and I found it on the sidewalk. I buzzed your room like ten times, but you didn't answer. So, I left and took it with me. Like you took my camera."

I won't say anything about her camera yet. It'll piss her off. It has taken me almost thirty years, but this latest, least-greatest version

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“So, hey, do we have a truce or what?” she asks.

A truce implies a battle continues to wage. If so, it has been a decidedly one-way ass kicking. When I said I had a plan, my continued pummeling at her hands *is* the plan. Lose the battle and lose the war. What isn’t a part of my plan is a truce.

Is she disappointed I’m not saying more? Is she impatient with me? I can’t tell. I weigh the jacket in my hands but don’t put it on. Maybe I’ll try it on later tonight.

“Can I come in?”

I say, “Wait here a sec.”

She remains on the stoop. I leave the door open and dash upstairs to my neglected music-studio-cum-writing-office in my childhood bedroom, and to the closet, my cryogenic chamber without the popsicled body parts, the same closet in which I used to hide my back brace. On the lone shelf above the row of empty clothes hangers is her Polaroid camera. It’s dusty and hasn’t been touched since my moving here in 2007. I want to smash it in front of her, see if that triggers an all-out offensive on her part, but that doesn’t feel right. The truce talk has me rattled and sinking into my own quicksand. But when Mercy calls out, floating my name up the stairs, I get an idea. A wonderful, awful idea.

Yeah, I
found a
note, like
I “found”
your
Pallbearers
Club flyer
all those
years ago.

“Be right down,” I say, and fuck it, since this might be it for me I sausage myself into the leather jacket. It fits. Almost. I love it and I hate it. But it’s way too tight on me to hide her camera within the lapel. I check the pocket and find one of my Vonnegut notes I left in Providence or in the graveyard. ~~That she took this long to come~~ to my house means something, but I’m not sure what. I repocket the note, peel out of the jacket, and drape it over one arm and over her camera like a deranged waiter. It’s a look, and it’ll have to do.

Back within the doorway I tell her, “Yeah, okay, a truce. And I can complete a ceremonial swap. I still have your camera—”

“Surprise, surprise. I figured you sold it.”

“Sold it?”

“Yeah, for drugs.”

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latch, and it *was* hooked. Now I worry Mercy unlatched it, letting me know she is one hundred steps ahead of me.

Mercy says, “Man, you left it in that damp-ass basement? You might as well have dumped it in the Shoe Pond.”

“Don’t worry, I kept it safe.” Struck with a sudden superstitious urge, I relatch the basement door, eyeball it for a beat, then lift it away with a flick.

We walk down the softening wooden stairs for what could possibly be the last time, and I note, with gratitude and hope, that my heart announces its irregular presence with a clunk, a flutter, and a stitch in the center of my chest. The goddamned thing has always been a hopeless puppet eager for the ventriloquist to steal its life and secrets. Or maybe my heart can’t be contained any longer and is trying to bust out, be like the cute, toothy embryonic xenomorph from *Alien* that, once free, will quickly grow up to be its own unstoppable monster.

Behind me, Mercy monologues about what mildew does to cameras, but I’m not listening, not really.

The ceiling is low, with skeletal beams, joists, and wire snarls exposed. The cement slab floor is gritty and cracked. Cobwebs greedily latch on to our arms, legs, and faces as we navigate past the boiler, the mini staircase to the rusted bulkhead, past Mom’s stuff piled in a leaning tower of boxes, and to the floor-to-ceiling wooden shelves that are all but empty.

My head is an exhausted and resigned swimmer lost at sea. My heart continues its wounded spasms, caught on a fishing line. My numbed toes spark with needles of pain at their tips. It has already started or restarted. This is what I want to happen, what I’ve wanted to happen. This must be it now. We’re in a basement again. I mean, we’re subter-freaking-ranean! She can’t resist who and what she is, not down here. She can’t help herself. She has no choice. Like with me and Mom. That is the horror of us.

I wait and expect the hanging lightbulb above my head to wink out, or perhaps explode, showering me with glass and filament, or maybe I’ll rise off the slab and smash into it, and I won’t fight it.

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From the top of the stairs, she says, “Do you have any double-A batteries up here? This is an emergency.”

I find her in the kitchen flipping through this manuscript.

“Hey, what’s this?”

“A book.” I toss my jacket onto the back of a chair and cross my hands in front of myself, as though she’s seen me naked. I sink into a different kind of bottomless well. “It’s a memoir. Just something I’ve been messing with. Off and on. It’s not ready. Please don’t look at any of it, not until it’s finished.”

“No shit.” She restacks the flipped-through pages then backs away with hands raised. “Wow. A book, huh? What inspired that?” Her eyebrows arch and her mouth hangs open. I can’t tell if she doesn’t remember or is, again, fucking with me. “Wait, tell me later—first batteries. We must find batteries before the truce can be ratified.”

Those
bottles
weren't your
mom's, as
you imply.

We find a pack in one of the kitchen’s utility drawers, buried under loose birthday candles, a roll of thread, Scotch tape, empty prescription bottles, two thermometers, and an assortment of pens. She pops the AAs into the Polaroid while I gather the manuscript and clutch it to my seated lap, and surprise, the camera works. I should qualify that statement by saying when she presses the shutter button, the flash flashes (albeit yellowed and weak, like the light it emits has gotten slower), and a photo slides out of the slot. I don’t know if the photo develops properly, don’t know if it displays me, or some form of me with her blobby is-it-a-thumbprint-or-astral-terror because she won’t let me look at it. If she can’t look at the book, then I can’t look at the picture. She doesn’t say that, but I know she’s thinking it.

We sit at the kitchen table. I await some verdict on the photo or on me. One of my legs jitters up and down.

She says, “It works,” and pockets the photo.

“Any of your proof in the photo?”

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you didn't—would you want me as a roomie while I figure my shit out?" She points the camera. "I won't step on your toes, get in your way. You'd be helping me out and I'll help you out too. Pay some rent."

Okay, this is more shocking than the truce bit. She is most definitely fucking with me (how often do I think and/or say that?). Is this off-the-cuff, or did she arrive planning to ask to live here?

Being around her has always negatively affected my health and literally curled my spine, but her two major feeds/attacks on me happened at night, when we were both asleep in the same place. Within the folklore and my now-detailed personal experience, night and sleep and the consumption/consuming are conjoined. Her staying here while I'm sleeping in the house needs to happen, needs to be facilitated.

My destroy-the-me-monster-in-the-basement plan A didn't work. So now it's on to the decidedly nocturnal plan B. I say, "You're welcome to stay as long as you need."

She gavels the kitchen tabletop with an open hand. "Great. A pleasure, as always, Art. I'll be back tomorrow with my stuff. I'll leave it to you to decide where you want to put me." She gets up and walks out of the kitchen and out the front door.

After she drives away (her compact car is old and orange), I'm filled with the hope of anti-hope. To celebrate, I sausage into my leather jacket, drink my face off, and play guitar upstairs, the amp cranked to eleven.

I wake on the floor, fossilized next to my buzzing amp. Mercy rings the doorbell impatiently (the adverb here meaning her stabby finger continually depresses the button; the doorbell is equally as unhappy as I am). Fucking hell, the amp isn't buzzing; it's my hangover head.

I groan, as I haven't decided where she is going to stay briefly (the briefiest, one night, less than one night if it goes the way I want it to). And she is going to grill me about it. I could give her the

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pullout couch downstairs and she's going to buy a futon. Sure, why not. At least the decision of the charade sleeping arrangements is made.

To sort of quote Camper Van Beethoven, I froggily sing, "*Take the vampires furniture shopping, take them furniture shopping*," as we pass through the automatic sliding doors.

"You can't make a stake with particleboard," she says. "We won't be long. I promise. I know exactly what I want. But would you be mad if I bought a little dresser too?"

Stop being
a whiny
baby.

Thirty-seven hours later, we are finally leaving the lot with the unassembled futon and dresser in the truck bed. Then Mercy says, "Side trip," and pulls into the lot of the neighboring home-improvement box store (not the orange one, but the other one that spends less on political donations to hatemongers). As long as I can stay in the truck and nap, I agree to allowing Mercy to paint the wooden paneling in the living room-turned-bedroom, and yeah, sure, it'll brighten the space up, make it airy, and the painted paneling will look like clapboard, almost like a beach house. Mercy returns some untold time later with painting supplies, along with a screwdriver and pack of interchangeable screwheads, a toothy hack-saw, and a formidable drilling hammer. The latter two items have my full attention.

Back in the truck she waggles her eyebrows at me and says, "You're gonna have some fun with those."

"Wut?"

Back at the house, the home goods unloaded and not without great struggle and back pain, we stand in the living room/bedroom holding sweating glasses of lemonade.

Mercy says, "The futon and dresser were bad enough, there's no way you and I will be able to lug the pullout couch out of here. That sucker weighs a gazillion pounds."

"I can do it."

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Finals game played at the Oracle in Oakland. I say I want to work on my book a little and then get to bed because I have to wake up hearse-early tomorrow, and yeah, that's a term in the funeral biz, and whoa, my back and everything else is really sore and stiff and I know part of that is my fault because of how self-inflictedly hurt I was this morning after the all-night rock-out and beer binge that left me toadstooling on the floor next to the amp, and without any segue I offer an estimate of how many despair-filled steps we walked within the Dantean hell of the furniture store and then I added 25 percent to my steps total because of the trips in and out of the house I made transporting couch debris, and oh, the neighbor two doors down, the one with the dog, a hound mix that barks at leaves twitching in the wind and roams the streets until the sun goes down, unburdened by place or duty, that frigging dog

Hence all
your rambling
paragraphs.

already marked and re-marked the pile of couch, and I talk on and on and on and I can't stop talking because I'm the kind of bad excuse-maker-liar who makes it so obvious by saying everything else in the world possible except the truth or what it is I really want to say. Which, in this case, is fine, because I want Mercy to know I'm lying about something, and from that I want her to infer that I know she knows I'm lying, and from there, I want her to know I know something is indeed up or afoot, and that something is the quick end to the truce. The truce is up. I'm ready for it to be up, or over. I eventually stop talking to fill my mouth with ibuprofen and carbonated beverage. Mercy takes the opportunity to turn up the TV volume.

I drag my calcifying carcass upstairs and collapse into bed. Despite being exhausted, I'm too excited and anticipatory to fall asleep. Each noise from the floor below is something creeping up the stairs to finally claim the overdue me. I tense up and my head fills with a banner-size, all-caps thought bubble: THIS IS IT. But this isn't it and, eventually, I fall asleep. The night passes without incident. My xylophone-toned phone alarm wakes me in the morning. Later, the hearse I drive feels permanent.

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stains on the walls, freshen things up a bit. And she might be able to add the backslash herself. I say, “No, please don’t.”

On our sixteenth night as roommates Mercy tries to get me to watch one of those hokey paranormal reality TV shows. In this one, a fourteen-year-old girl was supposedly possessed. Episodes, for the moment, have been uploaded illegally on Vimeo and are bound to be taken down any moment, or, as Mercy speculates, it’s a pre-publicity stunt to drum up interest in a DVD/Blu-ray release or a reboot. The show was filmed in Beverly a few years back. She can’t believe I didn’t watch when it originally aired and she launches into a feverish recap, including what happened to the poor family after the show, and how it was all unimaginably terrible, although, given the level of detail she provides, it’s clear she can imagine the terribleness. Throughout the campfire retelling of the show’s tragic aftermath, she is performatively unsettled (zealot eyes wet and shinning, hands clutched under her chin) and exhilarated (unbidden smiles, breathless half-laugh punctuations).

I tell her that it rings a bell but, also, I was more than a little busy and preoccupied with my dying mother while the show aired. I add, “Sorry I couldn’t join in the pop-cultural rubbernecking.” Mercy slams her laptop closed, clearly exasperated with me. She says, “You act like your mother dying was your fault.” Then she stops talking. What for most people would’ve been a comma is instead a period at the end of a single-sentence paragraph. I wait and she doesn’t add *But it wasn’t your fault*. It’s the cruelest thing she’s ever *not* said to me, even if it’s not true. I seethe because she doesn’t get to *not* say that and leave off her own responsibility link in that chain of horrific events. She smirks because she sees me boiling on the inside, threatening to diffuse into a scalding steam, threatening to go permeable, and now I’m thinking, always thinking, her final attack is coming. Maybe now. Please now.

On the twenty-fifth night as roommates I borrow the hearse after a Saturday-morning funeral. Instead of coming home and filling it with dump-bound couch bits, I drive it around Beverly

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After
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Eddie at
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conference,
you're
overstating
his follicle
deficiencies.

it is enough to cover his balding pate. Yeah, he sees me, and I waggle oh-hi-there fingers. *Send not to know for whom the hearse rolls, it rolls for thee, motherfucker!* His discovery of a waiting hearse is enough to momentarily unplug him from a barren inner landscape awash in inveterate narcissism, fatuousness, and cruelty. Eddie arches a villain's eyebrow and indulges in curiosity; contemplates a mystery outside the foulness of himself. He peers from his architectural opulence and wonders why a hearse crouches at the end of his fortified drive. Bringing his drooping face closer to the window but hiding his slacking, softening body behind a rolled curtain, he suffers a chill of promise and possibility. The heavy, off-time thudding of his heart flutters the bespoke cloth above his breast. Waves of exhaustion crash over him and the riptide sucks at the sand around his feet and ankles. He coughs, the kind that foretells of many more to come. The cough fogs the glass. He remembers a long-ago morning when an indifferent parent scolded him to cover his mouth after he had purposefully coughed on the kitchen window. The other less-indifferent parent added, with a familiar taint of sadism, that his soul will escape from his slack-jawed face if he isn't careful,

and look, there's a piece of your soul there already on the glass, a piece you'll never get back, and the parent laughed and wiped the soul away, and Eddie clasped his hand over his mouth then, but later, when he was alone, and he was often alone, he spent hours breathing on and fogging the windows in his room, thinking if he did it enough he would see what his soul looked like, but also, he fretted about how much soul he was wasting and if it would grow back and how much did he have left, and he dreaded what would happen when he couldn't fog the glass anymore. This long-buried memory reveals his inevitable approaching death is as capricious as the strange hearse in front of his house and as transparently real as the glass inches from his face, glass that is no longer fogging as he breathes on it. He is breathing hard. And now Eddie is afraid. And maybe, just maybe, he feels me reaching across the expanse of his front yard and into his home and into him and he feels me reaching

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as I am feeding off it. We are our own parasite. We consume our secrets, our thoughts, our memories, our identities. We consume everything and we are consumed by everything. As the hearse crests, dips, and swells within the road, the rollers shimmy and spin, and I have never been so frightened.

On the sixty-sixth night as roommates I can't sleep, which is not unusual. For the last two months plus I haven't been able to sleep for more than a few hours at a time. I lie in bed and my brain races with all that's happened and all that's supposed to happen but hasn't yet and I convince myself the next time I close my eyes will be my last, or the next time I open them I'll finally see her, or that part of her, squatting like a Sphinx on my chest, squeezing out the last bits of me. Some nights I go downstairs to the kitchen for a glass of water I don't need and then sulkily return to my room via the circuitous route, one that takes me by Mercy's room. She sleeps with the French doors closed and curtains pulled over the plate-glass windows. I do not linger.

Why are
you always
creepin'?

On the seventieth night as roommates Mercy returns from a day trip to Providence with her Polaroid camera repaired. She says it is finally working to her satisfaction, no thanks to me. "Say 'cheese.'" I reenact the famous Johnny Cash middle-finger photo. I lack the acoustic guitar hanging from my neck like it was there when I was born, and frankly, the honest commitment to the gesture, given I'm a faded middle-aged wannabe punk in a mass-produced *Jaws* T-shirt, resigned to the slowest of deaths by vampirism. The cyclopean shutter opens with a ~~white flash, another moment~~ vaporized in a mini Oppenheimer glare. Maybe I am imagining things (again), but there is hunger as well as relief on Mercy's face as the photo of what was develops.

Aren't we
all.

On our last night as roommates I stalk downstairs and into the dining room, my leather jacket looped over my shoulder. The dining room remains empty of furniture. It is less a neutral space than a

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Well, the
count is up
to three
pieces.
That we
know of.

and if I kick the books out from underneath, the dresser will hover in its elevated spot. (If/when this book is ever published, I wonder, will it hold up your wobbly legged couch or chair, will it be a door-stop or a bookend holding up the more beloved books, will you lend it to a friend to never see it again, will you donate it to a library or callously throw it into a donation bin, or will you leave it on a dusty shelf until you die and someone else then has to sort out what to do with it, as though the responsibility of the book was a curse to be passed on to the unsuspecting?) I'm sorely tempted to pull out one book. Just one, to see what happens. But I'll leave it be. I don't want to get a reputation as a wanton furniture destroyer.

"Guy, what are you looking for?" Mercy asks. "Whatever it is, it's not in my room."

Wrong, Mercy. What I'm looking for is in your room. (This is me in my head now, by the way. It's where I'm safest and most dangerous.) And I am going to take it. Once I do this, there will be no turning back. As absurd and risible as this act will seem, it will bring everything out in the open, and it will force your dastardly hand into reaching or flexing or crushing. And admitting. Mercy, just admit it.

I snatch her green jacket off the blue chair, holding it away from my body like one might hold a hissing cobra, and I gunslinger into the living room.

Mercy pauses the streamed home-improvement show. "Eh, sorry, I don't want to go out. I'm too comfy and I want to see if this couple sells the house or stays. I've watched it before, but I don't remember what they do. Just the chips. Pretty please. With salsa on top."

I kneel in front of the hearth-bound television and sit back on my feet. My arthritic knees crunch and pop loud enough for Mercy to say, "Ow." I hold out both our jackets, one in each hand. They dangle slackly.

"Art. I said I'm not going—"

I say, "I know what you are and what you've done to me." I don't say it as me though. I say it through the left side of my mouth and

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An eerily
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portrayal of
the evening
thus far.
And I
still don't
remember
if the
TV couple
stayed or
sold their
house.

Right,
"helping."

doing. He chooses doom over the pyrrhic victory of continued parasitic existence. The green jacket billows open, exposing its greedy, leviathan maw, and engulfs the other, swallowing him whole.

I fall away from the jackets, settling into a splayed sitting position. I'm sweating and out of breath and I've wrenched my back.

"Does this mean you're not going out to get me chips?" Mercy asks.

"No chips."

"Okay, I'll bite. ~~What's this all about?~~"

For over an hour I outline the evidence. Granted, it's a tad rambling and unorganized; Daniel Webster I am not. I use a whiteboard on an easel (I bought it a few years ago when I thought I might tutor SAT math as a side gig; I got as far as the whiteboard and an SAT prep book) and I divide the space into two columns with a red marker. One column is for circumstantial evidence (my various physical ailments and their onset or deterioration once Mercy started hanging out with me; her being so well versed in the Mercy Brown lore and helping to write my history paper on her; the blobby Polaroid photos) and supposition (her apparent agelessness, bands breaking up or kicking me out after she saw a show). The other column features my direct testimony and accounts of the sleepover night, her week-long basement break-in after my back surgery, and the two nights at her apartment in Providence. Distilled, it sounds utterly ludicrous, and I'm leaving things out, important things. I was never a good public or extemporaneous speaker, never excelled in live, impromptu arguments where I invariably become instantly overwhelmed, angry, stupid, and loud, or I shut down and then hours and days later come up with the perfect things to say after having replayed and rehearsed the failed argument a billion times in my head.

During the presentation, I refer to my notes and this book. I don't think it's going as well as I hoped, and I would be better served to instead read the book out loud from page one, no matter how

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“Wait. You admit to all this?” My voice quavers.

“Jesus, Art, no. Even if it were all true, I would never attack you like in your puppet show. I am, and always have been, your friend.”

At least my jacket-performance intent was communicated clearly. I don’t respond. A low-pressure front of quiet settles into the room. The air stills, waiting to be filled. I don’t move and my edges grow fuzzy. There’s a low drone in my ears, and then I hear her jacket rustle. Looking away from Mercy is probably a mistake but I do. Her jacket is on the floor, unmoving, but it lies too deflated, pressed too flatly to the floor, as though my much thicker leather jacket is no longer pinned underneath it.

Mercy says, “You know I don’t believe in the supernatural, but to, um, respect all the thought you put into this”—she waves her arms in the air—“for the moment, and only for the moment, I won’t refute any of it.”

“You won’t?”

“I won’t. But—”

“What’s the but?”

“The *but* is a question. Maybe two questions. Has anything you described previously happening to you when in my presence—”

“Or vicinity.”

“Vicinity, sure. Has any of that happened in the two months since I moved in? Has anything at all strange happened?”

I blurt out “No,” and then inwardly chide myself for not mentioning what I felt that first night of her return, when we were in the basement getting her camera. To be fair, I’m not sure what I experienced was because of Mercy or if I was too geeked up for something confrontationally big to happen. Ultimately, nothing happened, nothing compared to the something I wanted to happen, and nothing has happened since then, and fuck, I’m rattled. I say, “Well, I’ve been getting heart palpitations and extremity numbness. But she holds the o long enough to pin me in place, “you weren’t experiencing either of those symptoms—which are concerning by the way, please see a doctor—before I moved in?”

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She says, “I told you I wasn’t going to refute any of this, so I will *not* point out that your connective-tissue disorder existed before you met me and that I do *not* have the power to change you on the cellular level. I will *not* remind you how high we both were the night I slept over your house, and you took a picture of me sleeping because you thought I looked like a dead woman—gee, thanks, by the way— and that my jacket had, um, a face.” Mercy crosses out items one by one while *not* refuting. “I will *not* pretend I was there the times your bands broke up or gave you the heave-ho and I will *not* posit that you were struggling with alcohol and painkiller addiction and therefore likely not the most reliable bandmate. Further, I will *not* bring up the pills I found in your jacket and how blotto you were when you trashed my apartment. Hold this for a second.” She hands me the marker and fishes a hand into her front jeans pocket. “I will acciden- tally take out my driver’s license, but I will *not* force you look at the picture and date of birth and contemplate my agelessness.” She pulls out a thin zippered wallet and removes her license. She holds it in the palm of her hand while looking away from me.

Why not
make it
1964? Then
it would be
Mary Olive
Brown’s
DOB plus
100 years.

I peek. It’s a Rhode Island license. The picture is hers, and whenever it was taken, she looks the same now. Her listed date of birth is February 17, 1968.

I try to play it cool while I’m melting inside and say, “Three years older than me. I mean, *at least* three years older. And it needs to be renewed.”

“You’re such a liar.” She pulls the license away and inspects it. “Oh, wait. Dammit.”

She returns the wallet to her pocket, and I give her back the marker. She continues, *not* telling me what I did and didn’t see or feel or experience. She does *not* say that within the Mercy Brown lore, the vampire was dead and buried, or undead and buried, and wasn’t walking around, as far as anyone knew. She ends by *not* pointing out that Mercy Brown’s heart was burned, consumed, and cured.

Mercy has not succeeded in placing doubt where there isn’t any, but I am drowning in hopelessness. Sure, there’s a chance now that

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Mercy shrugs. “I don’t remember what the basement one looked like, but I’m guessing it was too dark to get a good shot or the film got overexposed, and the club one, seeing a face in the folds of your jacket is like—like seeing a face in clouds or your breakfast cereal. It’s there because you think it’s there.”

“Take a picture of me now, then.”

“Really? The film is so expensive. I’m trying to save shots for special occasions.”

“This is a special occasion.”

Mercy shrugs, her shoulders getting right to the point. She says, “Fine,” and goes to her room.

It has been almost three years since the night the new (or old) part of me ravened on my mother’s chest. During that time, I’ve attempted to suppress the insuppressible, which is akin to trying to prevent my lungs from absorbing oxygen (although one can hold their breath, deny the oxygen, but one can only hold one’s breath for so long). I am not claiming that I am not responsible for my actions because I can’t control a process I do not understand. But now I am, for the first time, attempting to will my inscrutable vampiric inner motor to action.

I close my eyes and empty my lungs and, like I did the night after my last Pallbearers Club show, I build the house inside my head. But the one I build is not the now house. Maybe the house in my head is from three years ago, or maybe older, or from a different time altogether. There’s something wrong with the head house, even if the dining room has a table again and the TV room’s wooden panels are unpainted and the old pullout couch is where it always was. I am alone in the living room now and I am alone in the house in my head. My heart gongs in my chest. I am not permeable or diffuse and I want to leak into the adjoining empty dining room, puddle on the floor, and cry.

Mercy returns with her camera. “I shouldn’t be indulging you with any of this, Art.” How she says it is the opposite of what she means. Her *how* is saying *I thought you would never ask*. “What

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"I used the side of my thumb, not the pad."

"No. Your thumb never touched. I never saw your thumb touch."

"You didn't see it because I'm quick and I'm good. Years and years of practice," she says. "I can show you, teach you, if you want. You'll have to buy your own camera though."

I toss the photo at her. It dodges her torso and fighter-planes behind her, death spiraling onto a chair. I turn and walk out of the room, toward the front door. I don't know what I'm doing. I never have.

"Where are you going?"

"Out. To get some chips."

"No, you're not. Really? Art. Hey, you're upset. I know, and I'm sorry. Stay and let's talk some more, yeah?"

I say, "I won't be long," which is a lie, even if I don't yet know how much of a lie it is. I snatch my car keys hanging from the rack on the wall next to the front door.

"Don't you need your jacket?" she asks from the living room. She is not following me, not stopping me.

I open the door and pause for a moment. I say, "No. I don't think I do."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes."

I wait for her to say something else to stop me, to keep me. Nothing. Then I hear a rustle and a flourish, and I don't need the house in my head to know she picked up her green jacket off the floor.

She says, "Hey, where is your jacket? I didn't see you move it. Neat trick!"

~~~~~

I drive through the town in my head. I don't have to build it. It has always been there.

I intend to drive aimlessly, but my car slots into the track previously forged by my hearse. And in no time (I persevere on the expression "and in no time" and how wrong it is; everything pays

Your jacket  
was on the  
floor under  
mine. But  
I wanted  
you to come  
back to  
look for it.  
I wanted  
you to stay.

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to travel backward in time. What if they are the children of my former classmates? I briefly imagine myself as the kind of ugly monster that had been locked away for a generation, and now I descend upon them, fangs bared and scything, reaping arms outstretched to extract revenge for the sins of their parents. That is, of course, not fair to them, but it's their lot, their doom. For a moment (still a price, a fee, in time), I come closer until I am right behind them, on their heels that kick up sand and leave joyous, divoted prints for anyone to follow until the ocean will wipe them away as it will one day wipe away the Farms. There are four in their group. I hear their rabbit heartbeats and I smell their intoxicated and intoxicating breaths and they taste of salty, silly, beautiful hope and the vinegar tang of fear.

I pull away and fall to my hands and knees on the sand. I will not choose them, so I blot them from my mind. I wait for my own hitching breaths to recalibrate, to order themselves, then I stand. I could walk straight into the water and see how far I could swim. Maybe I'd make it to the wonderfully named Big Misery Island. It looks closer than it is. Instead, I scurry left, to where the sandy beach ends at an outcropping of seaweed-slimed rock. The wind is behind my back, urging me forward. I am fortunate the tide is out. If I keep to the rocks, I won't have to go in the water. The climb is treacherous and gothic in the indifferent moonlight until I step down onto sand again.

Weak sauce.  
You can't  
lay this one  
on me. You  
planned on  
going to  
Eddie's all  
along.  
Are you  
talking  
about him  
or you?

Why I am here? (It has taken me hundreds of pages to explain why I am here.) Despite my clunky reveal Mercy didn't put a stop to me and she didn't and wouldn't tell me why she chose me. Now I need and want to know if I can control it and if I can choose.

And, yeah, I choose Eddie. I will use him to learn what I can and can't do. I will use him to find out, finally, who I am. I will use him until there's nothing left and there's no coming back. I know it's wrong, even if he is a shit person by most people's metrics. But also, he's a shit person, so why shouldn't I? I'll answer: because to choose is to destroy (Mercy can never admit that to herself). I already know who I am, and I'm not that. Or I don't want to be that.

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Part of me flows through the house's interior as a chill, a draft of cold air, wisping through the antiseptic kitchen and then the vaulted-ceilinged, wainscoted dining room with its expansive baroque table that never once has been fully seated, and then through a maze of other rooms to the black-and-white marble foyer with an avaricious chandelier satelliting above a split staircase that foolishly insists one has a choice of direction.

Back in the garage, my eyes adjust to the light starvation, but I don't want to see. Within my cluttered nook, I find and quietly unroll a section of landscaping tarp.

The walls of the second and third floors are porous membranes that cannot contain this part of me, and I drift like time, and as I progress, the wood, drywall, fixtures, furniture, paintings, and family photos molder in my wake. Even if they are to be fixed or replaced, they would molder again because decay is the state of all things before me, during me, and after me.

I am gravid with exhaustion; the splitting and multiple existences drains me. I shakily pull the tarp over my body and head. It is dark enough and I am weighted down enough to easily imagine I am buried under the ground. The tarp will keep weeds and grass from growing over me.

Welcome to  
Dracula's  
castle?

The part of me I feared was never there, the part of me I feared was always there solidifies, and now on all fours, I ascend to a turreted bedroom on the top floor. The door is closed. The door is open. The door has always been open.

Under the tarp I can't see anything. I wrap my arms around my legs and I'm curling, shrinking, and I cry because I don't want to do this, I don't want to be here anymore, and I'm afraid this will last forever.

Part of me finds Eddie alone in the polluted sea of his king-sized bed. I am permeable. I fill the room. I am the room. I am the world. This is the mantra. This is the prayer. The bedroom responds, the yellow walls mood-ring into other colors, curtains raspberry their tongues, the nightstand and lamp and furniture tilts, lifts, and bows to me, and his bedspread ripples, then swells like a thunderstorm

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length from the un-fogged window glass of Eddie, and I will steal his breath and I will eat his withered, tainted, unsure heart, and I will feed until there's nothing left of him but clay and dust. And oh, I feed. And it feels like floating.

The pain in my chest mercifully ebbs, though I can't tell if that's because my heart has given up. I'm afraid to listen and feel for it. With my right hand clutching my chest, holding it together, I mount my feet, shuffle across the garage's back wall, and enter Eddie's house. I follow the trail that has been left. The trip to Eddie's bedroom is a journey across the desert of me and it takes decades, all my previous decades, to traverse. I see everything I've done and been and forgotten. If I was never quite happy and if I didn't know who I was and if I was never able to identify the formless yearning for something unattainable, there's solace in who I am not and there's solace in my continuously and infinitely halving the distance toward a bittersweet, wondrously, longingly inexplicable truth. Gabba gabba hey, right? When I finally arrive at Eddie's bedroom, I might be too late. The bedroom is dark and fuzzy, which might be a me-and-my-shrinking-corona-of-vision problem. My chest is full of shrapnel. I sway and limp to his bedside on feet that are fully numbed. I am winding down, but I still have a few ticks left. I bet.

Damn right!

Eddie's aging face is graying and wrinkled. So is mine. I don't need a mirror to know that. I don't like seeing the part of me curled atop Eddie's chest and, sorry, I will not tell you who or what I see. I'm keeping that for me too. I say, "I could stand here until I can't stand anymore and watch you shrivel up, you fucker." I wearily climb onto the bed that's as soft as a marsh and I crawl onto Eddie's chest and part of me tantrums and howls and beats its mighty fists against me as I reclaim it. No one likes a whiner, right? Eddie's face has gone a splotchy, puffy purplish red. A hiss splits his lips when I shift my weight. I say, "You will be visited by three other spirits," just to fuck with him a little more. I roll off Eddie's chest and bed. He coughs and retches and gasps for air. Whole but still split in a way I'll have to learn to live with, I mosey out of the bedroom a hero or antihero

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I've written and rewritten and crumpled and recrumpled so many notes regarding this last chapter. I didn't get through any of them without crying. Stupid crying. So, I'm going to just plow ahead with this one and not stop to make it pretty. I'll write down everything I want to, even if maybe I shouldn't. ~~I'm sorry, but I don't think what you wrote should be the~~ end of this book. Never mind that it strikes me as a wee bit sentimental, certainly and surprisingly more so than you ever were in life. Unless you were keeping that deep, dark secret from me all this time. Possible, I suppose. More to the point, the end you wrote is not the end, not the real end, even if it's the one you wanted.

When we publish this, I won't cut or edit your ending—I made a promise I wouldn't rewrite your stuff—but we're going to include my notes, all of them. I do feel bad that I have the last word, or I'm taking the last word if it was a bigger person ~~that~~ ~~you~~ ~~wouldn't need to~~ finished and then printed out. Let's work out the timeline. I didn't find the book until after the cops came by the house to tell me they'd found your body. You'd been missing for more than two days at that point. After the cops left, I drifted upstairs in shock, and I don't know why, but I was afraid/freaked out. It was like that instant blast of grief was too much to handle, so I had to convert some of it to irrational fear, or the not-so-irrational fear of being alone. It took all I had to work up the courage to go into your music/writing room ~~open~~. ~~The printed-out manuscript was on your desk~~ ~~as I could~~ like a nervous parent waiting for you to come home. I fell asleep eventually, and then later, God knows what time, I heard you come in through the front door and shut it quietly, and then you pattered up the creaking stairs, and man, I was so relieved. You came back. I was convinced that you wouldn't. But

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used during my move-in and bedroom remodel. I didn't tell them I'd dumped it there as a joke because things would've become way more complicated than they needed to be. As it was, they searched the house and confiscated your phone and iPad, which they still haven't returned. I made sure they didn't get their grubby fascist hands on your laptop or this manuscript though. I had to protect you and protect our book. I did that for you, at least. And, I will do one more thing for you/us too. Besides making sure, <sup>Man, if you could've seen, snivelly old Eddie at the press conference he ran from his front yard. He was shit-scared and</sup> the book gets published, raving about having been poisoned and that you were part of a larger commie/anarchist/antifa conspiracy against him. He did look like shit on camera, but purposeful, exaggerated shit. Like someone painted purple eye bags under his eyes and powdered his face. He had a nasty cough, though. A frog throat, in that when he coughed, you could imagine literal frogs spewing out. The day after the presser he checked into a hospital and reportedly he had a drug-resistant strain of pneumonia. Again, apparently, it got dicey for ~~When Zylar came home from the hospital, mean, surprisingly, I~~ <sup>When Zylar came home from the hospital, mean, surprisingly, I</sup> ~~along with the falling-over-side-of-the-escape-of death was a~~ catastrophically ruptured aorta. Is there any other kind of aorta rupturing? I won't shame you here, now, about how you were supposed to be monitoring and taking care of your heart, however one does such a thing. I can't help but think that it didn't have to happen or didn't have to happen this way.

What are the odds of your heart grenading in Eddie's garage, though, right? Has to be at least 3 to 1.

~~Sorry, I have to joke or I won't be able to finish this. The reality of the timing of your heart attack doesn't work as fiction because people will think it contrived. Though, maybe~~

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was late and now it is early, almost dawn as I scribble this, and this is why I'm not a writer because I'd get bogged down in the details no one else cares about), I snuck into St. Mary's Cemetery. The sneaking wasn't difficult. Yeah, there's a formidable wrought-iron gate (hungry for your shorts) blocking motor-vehicle access, but it was flanked by a shrimpy stone fence, about waist high. I'm not as spry as I used to be, but me and my bigger shoulder bag (I splurged for a new one) had no trouble scaling the wall. The cemetery was a big one, though, and the lengthiest part of the evening was the walk to and from your grave. It was cloudy, dark, and chilly with full-on autumn temps; I could see my breath. Can you make smoke rings with cold breath? I tried to (I'm representing within the text that I was avoiding thinking about what I had to do next) and failed; no rings, only ghosts. After about ten minutes I was deep enough into the cemetery that I couldn't see Brimbal Ave and the giant gas station and convenience mart across from the entrance and I couldn't see any neighboring homes. There was not for the paved car and walking paths, I could imagine I was only where else and anytime else. Maybe even Chestnut Hill Cemetery in Exeter, Rhode Island, more than a century ago. (Ooooh, right? Is this me being truthful or playful and fulfilling wish fulfillment? I mean, this isn't necessarily a confession of my being Mercy or Mary. I could still be anyone or anything else and I'm just trying to put the cherry on top of the sundae. Or story.) Eventually (er, sorry, I forgot where you were laid to rest, but cut me some slack. It was dark and the place is a fucking unorganized maze, and maybe I enjoyed the walk, wanted to make the pre-part last a little bit longer because when the end happened, that was it; it wasn't happening again), I found your grave, covered with a fresh lumpen roll of sod. Three bouquets of flowers piled at the head of the grave. One of them was from me. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what to say, so

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the grave and its choking chemical smell. So gross. The top half of your coffin was already open (I helped choose one that had an upper and lower lid. The one-lidded ones are a giant pain in the ass). I was crying this whole time, Art. I want you to know that. I'm making this sound way easier than it was because I don't want to linger here any more than I have to. Jesus, your face. Should I tell you what you looked like? I was reminded of one of the earliest chapters of this book when you attended and saw "Kathleen Blanchet" in her coffin, or when you saw me, and went on about her/me being your first dead person and it didn't seem real, etc. Well, it was real. Me seeing you was real too. So, your waxy, dead face staring up at me is the other bookend of the book. Yet even though I knew better, better than most, it didn't seem real. With the top of your head haloed by thin, curling vines, you seemed shrunken, almost kid-size. Clean-shaven and all, you know, I tried. I pushed aside the suit jacket flaps and popped were back to being the Art I first met. Oh, by the way, I lost off your shirt buttons, and holy shit, you had on a Hüsker D-shirt the funefary clothing battle, as your dad had you buried in, a suit underneath the dress shirt, the one I gave to Mr. Stephens's nephew. Fuck. (I had to stop there for a minute and hold my face.) I said, "Sorry," and tore the shirt down the middle and exposed your zippered chest. I leaned away from you and sat back up. I needed to take a break and inhale a few breaths filtered by the collar of my shirt. A yellowish-brown fluid pooled under your neck and shoulders, and good on you, Art. Your body was rejecting, pushing out (or creating more gaps between things) the embalming fluid. I had dared hope that would be the case, but I wasn't sure if you were strong enough (for lack of a better phrase) yet. I wasn't sure if your heart would be tainted. Fucking cremations and modern industry-standard embalming are why it is now so hard, almost impossible, to make someone like us, to keep us going. I don't know this for sure, but my theory is if the heart was part of the embalming process, then that was it, there was

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olive oil (I know, aerosol cooking spray isn't good for anyone, but there was a limit to what I could and wanted to carry in my pack). With a burning twig I ignited the heart. It burned quickly and with a somber light show that I wish I'd recorded with my phone. When your heart was ash, I poured wine (plain water??? Pfft) into the bowl. And I drank. I won't wax poetic about the taste (unavoidably smoky, but with a perfect layer of sweetness) and my gourmand palate and the rush (swallowing supernovas) or anything like that. No one likes a braggart, but this was the culmination of a lot of work on my part, and your heart was the best one I've ever had, certainly the longest one in coming/making over too soon, always too soon, ah, the eternal lament, I packed up. I'm embarrassed to say I almost forgot about the Polaroid picture. That would've been a disaster. Within the photo was a lovely, the loveliest, blue orb above your grave. The color was full and bold, and the shape was boundaryless and morphing and reaching and nebulous and, well, pulchritudinous, and it welled in me a tsunami of grief and gratitude. I wanted to keep the picture, put it in a pocket so it would always be with me, but I couldn't. That would be me being too greedy and not honorable. I sent the photo spinning down into the grave. I didn't watch it leaf its way down, but I assume it nestled where it belonged, inside your emptied chest. Then I left the graveyard and drove back to your house. I sat in the kitchen with a bottle of wine. I How about one final toast to you, my dearest friend, then I reminisced and remembered and toasted you, my friend, then I For you, Art, I will be the monster you wanted and needed me to be. moseyed (as you say) up to your room to write this.

Salut.

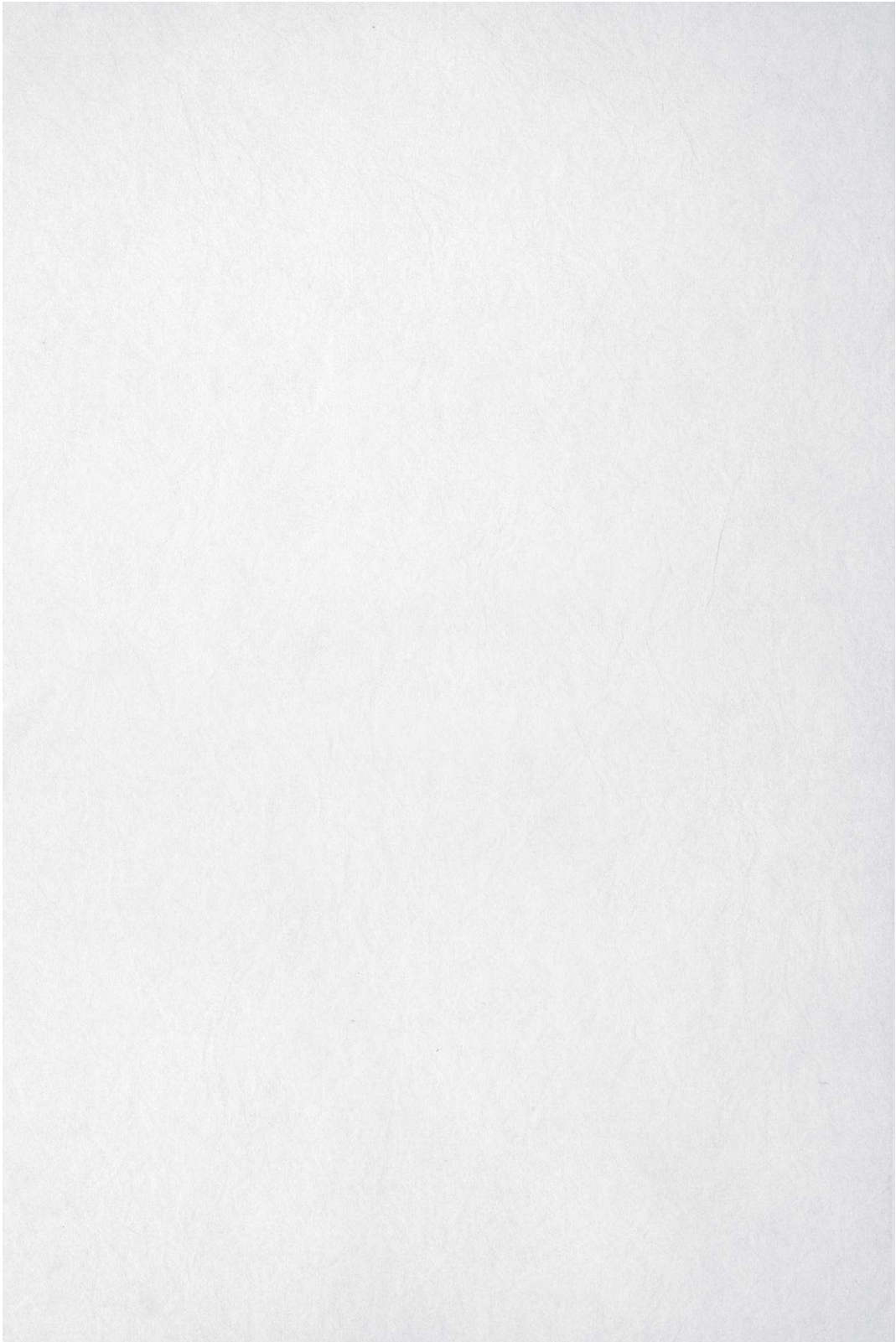
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Thank you, kind reader. And bless your delicious heart.

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