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Mats Engdahl

April 17, 2012

Bazaar

by

Mats Engdahl

Jim Grimsley  
Adviser

English and Creative Writing

Jim Grimsley  
Adviser

Dr. William Gruber  
Committee Member

Dr. Eddy Von Mueller  
Committee Member

2012

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By

Mats Engdahl

Jim Grimsley

Adviser

An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences  
of Emory University in partial fulfillment  
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

English and Creative Writing

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Abstract

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A novella that examines modern people's strange insistence to structure their lives into puzzles of art to be considered and put together. Other themes include the transactional nature of relationships, urban life and subordination.

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## Acknowledgements

Very special thanks to my family, my friends, my advisor Jim and the tenant in Room 905.

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LOS ANGELES— Four people were arrested on Friday after an improvised art performance went terribly awry. Daniel Torquay, Judith Milser, Francis Coquellin and Marcus Teressum have been charged with disorderly conduct and public endangerment after what Torquay called “an education demonstration in action” left four people hospitalized.

The incident occurred at Phillippe’s Original French Dip on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and Main. According to reports, Torquay and his three accomplices entered the restaurant at 5:30 p.m. with the cooperation of the manager, Angel Menendez, the four expelled the regular cooking staff from the kitchen before setting to work on preparation of a disturbing menu for the evening’s patrons.

Using a combination of rotting food, including eggplant, moldy fruit, mice, various insects and spices to mask the flavors, the four “artists” proceeded to serve any one who came into the restaurant revolting combination platters. Although most customers reported being able to detect the suspicious ingredients and push away their plates, several people were fooled into consuming at least part of their dishes, including one man that a witness reported to have “licked his plate clean.”

“I was curious when I saw new people behind the counter,” said James Dawson, 28, “but I figured that maybe the place had been hit with an employment pinch or something. I didn’t think there was anything shady going on.”



Once word of the questionable dishes spread throughout crowd, a number of patrons angrily confronted Torquay and the members of his group, threatening them with physical violence.

"I told them first that a refund would be in order, of course," said Torquay, a local artist whose performance pieces and murals have received some attention in the Los Angeles art community. "Then I told them that they were all playing a part in what I thought was an interesting piece and a successful experiment that revealed the habits of normal restaurant costumers. Namely, most people will eat anything placed in front of them without a shred of skepticism."

When asked if he had meant to hurt anyone, Torquay was evasive. "Of course with these types of things you might be too shocking for people, and occasionally there are consequences for pushing things. And this is always unfortunate. Obviously, this is unfortunate. But there is always collateral damage with art."

After an angry patron notified police, Torquay and his associates were arrested for disorderly conduct and public endangerment. They were released four hours later after posting \$1,000 bail.

Angel Menendez, the manager who allowed the artists to have control of the kitchen, has been dismissed from the restaurant. Franco Demtroff, the majority owner of Philippe's, released this statement in response to the incident: "I am extremely disappointed in the behavior of Mr. Menendez and the rest of the staff, who stood idly by and allowed hooligans to endanger customers and damage the reputation of a Los Angeles institution. Such behavior is intolerable and will be

punished accordingly. It goes without saying that I'm disgusted and wholeheartedly repulsed by the behavior of the self-styled 'artists' who thought it would be amusing to seize control of a restaurant and take upon themselves to poison innocent customers. If this kind of vulgar behavior is what amounts to art nowadays, then I guess I'll just resign myself to being a rube."

When asked about Mr. Demtroff's dismissal of his tactics, Torquay retorted "I couldn't care less about the opinions of someone whom knowingly serves slop to people at exorbitant prices in unsanitary conditions. If anything, I take Mr. Demtroff's remarks as proof that my demonstration was effective. Restaurants everywhere take liberties with their patrons' health, and Philippe's is just the place I identified as being one of the worst offenders. I hope my little experiment will alert people to the risks they take every single day sitting down to a meal of processed food."

When asked whether a specific event had triggered his demonstration, Torquay was coy. "While I cannot specifically describe an epiphany where I decided that I needed to take on the food industry, I can confidently say that there were a number of moments that both ignited and reinforced my belief that some gesture must occur. Art is the most cathartic kind of action, and I believe that once my compatriots and I start editing our film together, there will be a definitive piece to use as a foundation stone for a widespread movement."

Reaction throughout the Los Angeles art community to what is being dubbed the "Dry Fish Affair" has thus far been tepid. One gallery owner, speaking under the condition of anonymity, stated, "Although I know the artist very well and have in certain cases respected and even admired his work, I must say that I find this recent episode rather amateurish. To call it 'art' at this point, without a video or any sort of real product, is irresponsible, so I cannot comment on it in those terms. But I can say that there a lot of members of the art world that are unhappy with [Torquay]'s conduct and the negative attention it is beginning to bring to all of us."

Torquay's initial hearing is set for March 23<sup>rd</sup>.

Torquay lay on his bed, drawing perfect circles in the air and watching the vultures swooping through his kitchen door. The door was a heavy swinging affair usually found in restaurants, with a large piece of Plexiglas drilled near the edge for a hand plate. The vultures would put their heads through the thing like fists, screeching as they veered erratically towards the window. As their talons grazed his forehead, Torquay felt the inside of his eyelids burning and his stomach gurgling imploringly. Knowing that in a few minutes he would be forced to get up, Torquay finished his last perfect circle and fished around for his journal, which was lying beneath a pile of scratch paper in the compartment of his bedside table. He flipped to the correct date and began scribbling.

*Friday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, ----*

*The vultures swooping through my apartment are teaching me something very important: that it is the height of stupidity to have the kitchen located directly adjacent to your bedroom. In the six months I've lived here, despite adjusting my work schedule and consumption accordingly, I have gained ten pounds. I can drum rhythmically on top of my new belly, which alleviates the loneliness of night, but I am feeling heavier when I go out for a walk or on a job. It's especially dangerous when I'm hanging something on a roof with precarious footholds, or is slanted in such a way to encourage humans to stay off. Installing the new door was a poor mistake. Half asleep, I think I'd be more perturbed by a door that required dexterity in order to turn the handle, but a swinging one means I can stumble right smack into the fridge and gorge myself while still caught up in my dream. I am such a glutton in the middle of a dream that I have eaten through an entire week of supplies in two days.*

The racket in his stomach was too much for him to properly finish, and Torquay began searching for his ratty loafers. He glanced at the digital watch he wore on his right wrist. 10:45 p.m.: too late for the free dinner at the Homeless Service Center and too late to get anything other than coffee at the little shop across the street from his apartment building. He cursed silently while he retrieved a twenty-

dollar bill out of the vintage safe he kept tucked under the foot of the bed. Behind him, another vulture screeched on its journey out of the window. They flew through the door on strict twenty-second intervals and Torquay giggled at the patterned inanity of his imagination, which Speed and other chemicals seemed to hone excessively. Perhaps in another life he could have been an engineer, working in a world of perfectly whirring meters and gears.

He found the loafers hiding beneath a rumpled sweatshirt. Though the image in front of his eyes wiggled with abandon, Torquay walked with the confident agility of someone that had slid along the edges of highway overpasses and scuttled along decrepit fire escapes. He took the stairs instead of the elevator, hopping down the steps two at a time.

Outside, the cold air knocked through the pain of his eye and the city descended on him with terrifying speed. It was barren, quiet at eleven in a way that made each car that appeared out of a side street and every tramp tucked into a doorway feel insidious in their singularity. Torquay passed the statue of Hermes in Centre Park and wondered if somewhere this quiet really could count as a city center. That was very American, how early most things closed up. When he had lived in New York he had treated it as a European city, going to dinner at 10 and hardly doing anything during the day. He reckoned never sleeping was an Old World affectation and that New York was more Dutch than American. But L.A., was New. It was the home of the insufferably New, the New for the sake of it, the New sans progress or the New that spit in the face of progress. It was New that no respectable soul was out in downtown at 9:30. The respectable souls were firmly ensconced in their villages, several highway exits away. But they weren't anywhere near a city and Torquay felt, despite the lack of a real center, he was closer to one here than one twenty minutes away. Downtown was indomitable in its destitution, and Torquay liked how the new places seemed to slip into this sleaziness without grasping that they were sinking.

He shook his head to clear the last bits of the high, something that made his hunger more tiring. Torquay's most apparent mania was an obsession with consuming the necessary amount of water to keep his body functioning. He believed that when he was dehydrated he sweated more and that this sweat was the worst kind of rancid filth. He obsessed over sweat, Torquay, dividing it up into categories and subdivisions that one might use to differentiate bands or old sports figures. There were the sweats people worked up from dancing and fucking, which reminded Torquay of perfectly mixed paint. There were sweats people worked up from gambling beats or drug deals, which smelled like the clothes left in garbage bags outside consignment stores. The sweats created by doing mentally exhausting work, physically exhausting work and a combination of the two were drastically different from one another, and Torquay deeply preferred the second kind. There was a specific type of sweat generated by standing out in the sun, which was healthier than the sweat created by eating uncomfortably spicy food. Each sweat was laced and cut with different filaments and nutrients exiting the body. Only some had the specific task of cooling a person down, while others had the specific task of changing a person's smell, or driving other people away. The sweat created by thirst was meant as a tentative alarm bell, and Torquay thought it smelled like death warmed over. If it went on too long, a person was liable to pack it in right there, letting their insides explode from pure dryness. Torquay's worst dreams took place in deserts patrolled by insects whose mouths were black holes inhaling moisture, fire and dust.

Torquay listened a little more closely to his belly and decided that he was more hungry than thirsty. Coming down usually meant a voracious, sinus-cramping thirst. But Torquay had been lazily sipping water when the vultures began flying in, so he knew he must be fine. There was an all-night diner called Pete's on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> and Main that put squares of paper on top of the tablecloths. The waitresses wore black baby-doll dresses and the waiters wore black and white Bermuda shirts and slicked their hair from one side to other like old lounge singers and the drinks got cheaper as the night deepened.

There was a gaggle of hipsters dressed in silver suits and ribbon ties sitting by the window and a gay couple—one skeletal and the other looking as if he had stepped right off the football field—sat giving each other air kisses at the bar. A sleepy black bartender, dreads pulled back into a tight bun, watched them with amusement while waiting for one to pull away and order a drink. Torquay chose a table in the far corner underneath a pair of high-hung gray drapes. Even though it was late it took a waiter a few minutes to get to him. The kid was out of breath, and he looked like he had one ear in the kitchen and the other in a club somewhere. He rubbed his nose and stuck his fingers on the inside of the glasses that had been left on the table, which left a very unhygienic print on each interior.

“I’ll be right back,” he said.

While he waited, Torquay began doodled on the packing paper, beginning with a self-portrait as caricature. Using a stray ballpoint, he pushed his cartoon’s hairline up on the forehead. He drew a pair of Jerry Lewis circles around the eyes for glasses and gave himself a miner’s outfit: tattered work boots, a checkered shirt and a kerosene lamp that hung from a loop in his cargo pants. Behind the character he began to draw a mineshaft situated in the middle of a strip mall. Behind his cartoon head he drew a dingy guard’s station and a friendly chicken joint. Next to that he put a used records store. He was just adding a frame store when the waiter came back.

“Are you an artist?” He asked, allowing the foam from Torquay’s beer to spill lightly onto Torquay’s shoes.

“You’re spilling.”

“Oh, sorry.” The waiter looked irritated that Torquay had reminded him he was carrying a beverage and nearly spilled the whole thing setting it down on the table. “Do you do portraits or something?”

“To answer your first question, I’m not much of an artist anymore. As to your second, I don’t meet too many people that do portraits anymore. That’s fucking expensive, and besides most people think it’s creepy to have someone paint you instead of just take your picture. It’s funny, portrait painters used to be able to get patronage, but now I feel like the only portrait artists in the world have little side stores in Sears and Wal-Mart.”

“What does that mean?”

“What does what mean?” asked Torquay, puzzled, thinking perhaps that this lucky soul was so sheltered by the city that he had never heard of Wal-Mart.

“Patronage.”

“You’ve never heard that term?” Torquay must have sounded a little more incredulous than he intended, because the waiter glowered at him before snatching away the drinks menu.

“Looks like you’re one of those people that works at high school proms, drawing pictures of everyone sitting in go-karts for five fucking dollars a pop.” He stormed off, leaving Torquay to drink his beer and scribble a mustache on his caricature’s lip while trying not to laugh.

The alcohol cleared his mind a little further and he began to feel a small headache coming on. He took off his glasses and pinched his nostrils, massaging along the bone the bone until the skin began to feel a numb. Without a menu for reference Torquay decided just to order the burger and flagged down a waitress. He assumed the waiter wasn’t going to be back for a while, probably Googling “patronage” on his cell phone.

Some employee had the bright idea to put on music and big band began to bounce its way off the ceilings and around the table and chairs. Torquay cocked his head, trying to identify the song. Like any big band song it sounded like a rumba, all bass drums and jaunty trumpets. One of the bartenders



started waving his hands back and forth like a conductor. Torquay started mimicking him, waving his hands back and forth and swaying his torso more slowly since he couldn't really move his back at the same speed as his shoulders. He became so engrossed he didn't even notice SwedeZon and his friends until they were practically on top of him.

"Fucking late-night happy hour, eh Torque!" Said the leader. He was a blonde kid who was too muscular for the skinny jeans he wore, which were so tight that he always seemed on the verge of breaking through them, giving him the brutish air of someone about to explode out of his skin. His mustache had a few bare patches, which contradicted his body's robustness. Though he was big, he carried himself like someone with a little more fragility, gingerly trying to avoid touching chairs and pushing his hand too hard into doors. This was a bad trait for a performance artist to have, since so much of the work required them scraping themselves off of pavement and banging their shins into metal bars while running away from cops and irate crowds. His friends were dressed similarly, but their clothes had the look of hand-me-downs scrounged from SwedeZon's closet, and none was quite as large as their leader. While SwedeZon talked, they rolled their shoulders and flicked imaginary pieces of lint off of their neon cardigans. "Did you look at our disc?"

The disc. Torquay had been holding it in the apartment, passing it between his fingers when he decided to slurp down a few hits. Where could it be now? Slipped under his pillow? Torquay began to sputter, angry that he was going to have to look at another dud tape from a troupe of kids who couldn't decide if they were worse at performance art or improv. He got even angrier for feeling the slightest flare of guilt, because he liked to pretend he was damned busy like anyone else. "I haven't had the chance yet."

SwedeZon tightened his grip on Torquay's shoulder. He leaned close into Torquay's ear so that the heat of his breath tickled Torquay's earlobe. "I'm telling you, this disc is different." He gestured to his gang, "It's the best thing we've ever done."

Torquay snorted, taking a theatrically long sip of beer and smacked his lips before answering. He wished he had a cigarette, so he could take an inhumanly long drag like a movie gangster or movie mistress. "You have to realize, SwedeZon, that you are evoking a very feeble body of work." He began to tick off the examples on his fingers. "The first video you gave to me was of four men using semi-automatic pistols to shoot stuffed animals in a parking lot. It was seven minutes long, with the first four being in slow motion and the last three minutes speeded up so that it is difficult to discern one explosion of stuffing from the next. It ended with an epilogue that claimed three of the four men were arrested. I think you changed to the number from four to three because you foolishly believed it seemed more believable. You suggested this video be shown on a block of thirty TVs, each one on a continuous loop. Your videos have further deteriorated in quality since then. Your next showed you and your friends making a mixture of alcohol before pouring it into jugs marked "XXX" and trying to sell it at a lemonade stand. You speak to each potential customer in a poor Southern accent. The last one you sent me I almost jumped out of the fucking window: twenty minutes of hands full of glitter smacking bare asses. And somehow you catch me here, when I'm having a drink and trying..."

"Your burger sir, with the side of sweet potato fries." The waiter was back, and he threw his shoulder into SwedeZon to get around him and drop the food in front of Torquay. Torquay thought he must have wrestled the order way from the waitress, not wishing to give away the tip.

"I wanted regular fries," Sniffed Torquay, glancing sideways at his service adversary. That was the problem with poor waiters: it was hard to tell whether or not they were simply bad or aggressively, purposely bad.

“I’m sorry sir, Sheila must have written down the order wrong. Let me leave the burger with you and I’ll take these back to...”

“I’ll have those.” SwedeZon reached onto the plate and began shoving handfuls of sweet potato fries into his pocket and his mouth.

“Should I find seats for your...friends, sir?”

“No, you don’t have to do that,” snapped Torquay. “Just bring those regular fries and,” he gulped down the rest of his beer, “another one of these.”

“With pleasure, sir.” The waiter shouldered his way past SwedeZon again and walked away, his shoulders shaking from a mixture of irritation and mirth.

“Well, I’ll sit down.” Said SwedeZon, staunchly oblivious to Torquay’s discontent. “You guys go and have a few cigarettes outside,” he told his troupe. They dutifully turned around and traipsed out the door, their wingtips snapping rhythmically on the finished wood floor. Without so many people standing around his shoulders, Torquay was able to hear the music again, which had switched from big band to slinky lounge. His headache had come back and while SwedeZon talked he scanned for his waiter and the beer. SwedeZon took the seat right next to Torquay and leaned into the latter’s shoulder, muttering his words with the half-smile of a dopey thief.

“Now, would you allow me to tell you an appropriate story?” SwedeZon asked before launching into it. “When Hemingway first came to Gertrude Stein, she thought that he didn’t have the talent to make anything of the work he was bringing her. It was good, to be sure, with small sections of brilliance that Stein would circle with a felt pen so she could find them easily when she wanted to go back and make a point to the author, but overall she thought the work would fold up in the face of the sensitivity of the man who kept showing up at her apartment with his manuscripts and his stories of drinking and

boxing with other intellectuals. But after awhile, the persistence began to give what Stein was reading an aura of originality and method that Stein convinced herself she had missed herself before. Now," SwedeZon pressed his hand into the arm Torquay was using to shovel hamburger into his mouth, "Isn't that the slightest bit uncanny? I mean it's enough to send you shivering."

"My first question is have you read either of the authors you just told a story about?" Torquay was perfectly sober now. He felt mean. He felt the compulsion to poke a million metaphorical holes in SwedeZon and drag the carcass out to the idiot's friends to fuss over. He wanted to reduce SwedeZon into a stammering, incoherent waste. Torquay felt that this compulsion made great artists, that right amount of animosity that kept you from caring too much about what precisely people would say or think about your work. Great athletes tended to fail when they tried too hard, when they attempted to discern and then micromanage their mechanics in the middle of a shot or a pass or a swing. Artists always destroyed themselves in anticipation, being the person foolish enough to anticipate the needs of the audience who would just be glancing at their work in passing.

"Of course I've read Hemingway, I went to high school."

"Yes, but compelled reading is vastly different from reading of one's own free will. But you've answered my initial question. The second is that ... didn't you think it was a fairly bold move to come in here and decide that the best personality to analogize me with was Gertrude Stein?"

"No, I mean, what a proper compliment, to be compared to a luminary." SwedeZon patted Torquay on the arm reassuringly. "There's no shame in being flattered."

"Right, but I guess what I'm getting at is you don't know me that well. I met you six months ago at a gallery show. At the show you gave me a disc and told me to watch what was on it. I don't remember the pleasantries we exchanged. I don't remember where you're from..."

“Canada,” chirped SwedeZon, “Newfoundland.”

“Really? From your strange, inflectionless accent I would have assumed the Pacific Northwest, or a European city that specializes in smothering the physical and tonal culture of its citizens. But thinking about the night we met, you didn’t even really say what you wanted to happen if I liked the disc. Did you want to be one of my assistants? Did you want me to steal it for one of my own pieces? Perhaps pass it off on a producer in the market for cheap art designers? Whatever. We don’t know each other and the inquiry phase has been stifled by your pressing art into my hands. Art is built on the relationships you have with the people making the art. Our’s is pretty hollow. Suppose that I’m in reality a diehard macho hetero that can’t stand to be compared to a woman, especially an old lesbian whose complexion probably resembled hardened squash. But you don’t know that. Artists are effete, someone aspiring to become one could assume. But I’m not, staunchly not, consciously rebelling against this assumption that may or may not exist. And you walk in with an analogy certain to offend me. What then, eh?”

SwedeZon shook his head. “I cannot believe that. No artist would be interested in the appearance of whom they were being compared to. Have you seen pictures of Picasso, Cezanne? They’re uglier than sin. I bet Banksy is ghastly, with drooping lips and eyes that sit on different planes of his face. So for you to consider the physical appearance of people trying to push out of their physical being is remarkable to me.” He leaned even closer to Torquay and whispered furtively, “It’s a strange ploy, what you’re doing.”

“Here’s your fries, sir.” The waiter returned, and from the smell Torquay guessed he was sweating from irritated fatigue.

“Excellent,” said Torquay to the waiter, “the last things I need are another beer and a glass of water. I won’t even time you this round, because you’re not going to beat anything. If you really want to

expedite the process you can bring me the bill, too.” He turned back to SwedeZon and considered going into his name, but he held back. The reasons behind artist names were always terribly idiosyncratic, and it was always risky to get personal about them. Torquay could remember taking a golf club to another artist’s exhibit when the man had called Torquay’s name two notches below obscenity.

“Look, I’m going to look at your disc, because there’s always this small chance that the product will live up to its God’s decrees and bullshit. It’s not pictures right? It’s just another video?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so it’s another video. It’s another video that’s painfully aware of its audience. I’m telling you SwedeZon, there’s no more trite form than the practical joke. But I’m going to watch it, because you probably caught me when I was high or drunk and I promised I would and I have a masochistic respect for obligation, which is a problem I’m sure will plague me until I die because people are inherently ungrateful. I wish that I could shake it, but I’ll be damned if I can. Sometimes I also wish I were a violent drunk. But a promise is a promise sober, drunk or tired so I’m going to watch it. But it’s the last time I’m going to watch it or anything else of yours.

SwedeZon finally took his hand off of Torquay’s arm. He slid it absentmindedly into his pocket and extracted a handful of sweet potato fries, which he nibbled on while Torquay waited for his fresh beer and water. Wanting to appear busy, Torquay went back to adding more details to his caricature.

“That’s a very nice picture of you,” said SwedeZon.

“Thank you.” The beer and water arrived, along with the bill. Torquay finished each in one gulp and threw down some cash on the receipt. He wanted to wait for the change so that he wouldn’t be forced to reward such impudence in the serving position, but it was late and the combined exhaustion of coming down and talking made Torquay want to get home as quickly as possible.

“That’s a good idea, maybe I should start coming here and doing that.”

“Do you draw?” Asked Torquay as he hoisted himself to his feet.

“No, I didn’t know you did either.”

“With the next person you try to latch onto, it’s wise to ask them questions face-to-face rather than pausing at searching for them on the Internet. Goodbye, SwedeZon.”

“How will I hear from you?” He called out at Torquay’s back

“I’ll find you. We seem to wander through the same habitats.”

“Torquay!”

“Yes?”

“Whatever your gut tells you to do after you watch the video, don’t do it. Just find me.”

Outside, a couple of city service vehicles were blocking 4<sup>th</sup> Street, working on a water main. An impromptu river of dirty liquid had formed in the street. Torquay kept hoping a woman would appear, someone wearing black fishnets, a handkerchief held together by two shoelaces for a top, pumps and the doleful expression of someone pretty that is unpleasantly surprised at being alone. Torquay could challenge her a boat race. They could use the dirty newspaper floating around the sidewalk, folding the pages into little tissue schooners. They could start the regatta at one end of the block and whoever’s boat lost would have to take the winner back to their apartment. Torquay walked up and down 4<sup>th</sup> Street a few times, glancing at the doors of the bars to see if his competition was coming out of any of them. But the excitement of the vignette wore off quickly and Torquay walked rapidly home, dodging some stray couriers and dog walkers on his way. In bed, sleep consumed him quickly, and he dreamed of women in wingtip shoes moaning in time with Glenn Miller.

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The buzzing of his phone alarm splashed into his head like a rock tumbling into a dirty creek. It was early, much too early, and in the delirium of trying to shake the dreams off of his consciousness Torquay briefly wondered what it would have been like if humans had evolved technology in such a way that the primary form of communication was ham radio. His call sign would certainly be Bugger T, and he'd have a pair of boxy brown and beige headphones.

Waving aside the upsetting of the bell curve of technologic evolution—small, then big, then confoundedly small again—Torquay slipped out of bed. He made coffee and through the cheerful pops of the coffee machine drummed his toes on the linoleum floor. He rejoiced that he didn't have a headache.

Two hours later he sat at the head of a table in a restaurant in Los Feliz with Sydney G, Yulia and two of their friends.

"No, I think, really it's just the anxiety," Torquay had said while sagely quaffing the last of his red lager.

"What exactly do you have to be anxious about?" A voice called down from the other end of the table. That was Sydney G, who, if you let him, would tell you that the G stood for Greenstreet and was inspired by an old 40s character actor that always seemed to pop up in Humphrey Bogart movies. He was big fat fucker whose cherub face and habit of tapping his knuckles while repeating lines of dialogue always gave his characters a hint of latent homosexuality, something that for decades after would be discussed in film and acting classes as a masterful stroke of casting and thespian skill, when in reality it had just been a tick that drove every contract director up a wall. Sydney G, unlike his namesake, was skinny as a rail but dressed in clothes that might have better suited corpulence. He didn't drink and used



this choice as an insidious way of picking up women. He'd sigh before springing a sordid back story on the girl, one that involved Sydney running away from an intervention naked, his dick flapping at passing cars while friends and loved ones chased behind him.

“Well, I’m not sure I am anxious about anything in particular, Sydney, but you have to admit that there are an inordinate number of acquaintances running around our shows that could drive one’s body towards self-destruction.” He peeked at the table to see if anyone was gesturing in agreement. He’d come with Sydney G and Yulia, who had remained friends with both Torquay and Judith after the break-up because of Torquay’s great folly at Phillippe’s. Torquay had initially empathized with the plight of the couple’s friends as the pair had descended into nasty passive aggression and a general smear campaign that included airing privileged insults that he and Di Kvinna, as he’d taken to calling her, had voiced in private. Now, the stilted cordiality and limpid handshakes of those who didn’t really feel like touching him anymore infuriated Torquay. He had started avoiding gallery openings and popshops, choosing to hole up for a few weeks in his apartment with bent substances and a hoard of DVDs.

Yulia wasn’t nodding or smirking, but staring into the bottom of her water glass as she chugged it, ice included. The other two people—an couple that Sydney had asked to join them—were swiveling their heads back and forth between Torquay and Sydney in unison.

Sydney’s face was cloaked with an odd expression of defiance and concern. The look made Torquay feel old, like a rickety batter stepping into the box to face a prodigy who had just been called up from the minors. Torquay was only five years older than Sydney, but the former had always been the more-lively artist, more willing to run out and attempt a performance piece or some improv sketch on a street corner. He knew that the defiance in Sydney’s look was because Torquay had spent most skirting the reason that the dinner had been convened.

Torquay was prepared to get back into the art world, to do an installation in a gallery. He was also broke, and the disaster at the French dip restaurant and the aftermath had turned Torquay into a pariah. Torquay was going to need money, or at the very least an endorsement from his friends to get anyone with a gallery to show something of his.

The concern in Sydney's face was Torquay's bubbling own; which was if he was really equipped to get back into anything at the moment. But Sydney G was going to worry and needle, and there was little Torquay could do but raise his glass and deflect a little bit.

"Your last experiment was a travesty."

"My last attempt was a travesty," agreed Torquay. There was a basketball game playing on the television above Sydney G's head. The moonlighting couple had caught sight of it and they were staring intently at it, gamely trying to derive some interest in the game. The players were running hard enough for their skin to be slick with sweat. Torquay had never been much for sports, but the contest suddenly interested him, and he found his eyes flickering back to the screen every time light flashed off a player's soaking bald head.

"And then you had the terrible sense to blame Judith for giving you the idea to prank a restaurant, trying to save your dignity when the more dignified choice would have been defending your work, or at least admitting that it was your idea all along, your conception of a perfect performance piece."

*That wasn't true*, thought Torquay. He'd thought the same thing at dinner but he hadn't said anything, letting his eyes flick back to the TV. Judith had told him once that he had a terrible habit of staring too intently into people when he was having a conversation with them. The basketball game, he told himself, gave him reason to be polite. But part of Torquay felt that Sydney might want more

attention, so he tried to force himself to listen a little more intently. But it wasn't entirely true, certainly not. Judith was the one that had stood in the middle of the studio, tipping over sculptures and telling him that normal installation pieces weren't all that interesting anymore. "It's a public domain kind of world nowadays, Turkey," she had chirped. "People need all those big beautiful things brought to them."

"The whole thing was just a little gauche, Torquay, if I do say so myself." Yulia had finished chugging her water.

"I'm so sorry," said the female half of the moonlighting couple. Torquay jumped a little bit; surprised to hear either of the two speak. She patted Torquay on the top of his hand. "You have a very endearing voice, and I just can't help but feel that whatever Yulia's strange friend is talking about, you didn't deserve."

"Oh, Margot stop it, you're going to make me embarrassed for inviting you over." Yulia had neglected to introduce either of her friends. Torquay rather liked the name Margot, it reminded him of the name for a lion tamer's companion, or maybe an ace trick pilot. Looking closer he noticed that Margot had a thin sliver of light silver hair running through her strawberry blonde locks. She had one dimple and a too-big mole on her chin. She kept patting the back of his hand and pursing her lips maternally. "But, whatever happened, you're not dead, so it can't be the worst thing happen to you."

Torquay snorted into his beer. "Thank you, Margot. *And thank you* very much Yulia and Sydney, for ruining this summit. What happened to my friends? Stop telling me the food piece was so bad, I already know it was."

"Well, we're here Turkey, so you can't be very angry for us." Yulia had started flicking the screen of her iPhone with a chipped purple nail. Flicking through what, it was difficult to say. Torquay, like every

other soul in the developed world he felt, had succumbed to a smart phone. When Torquay pulled out his smart phone, when he was anywhere, he enjoyed looking at the names people had given their wireless networks, and if he bored enough to be bold, he'd try and guess their passwords too.

"Mclovin" or the "Markan8" could indicate someone—male, certainly male—who enjoyed harboring wildly inaccurate assumptions about "the Biz" and the needs of women. 'General" was a dog owner, a war buff, an S & M enthusiast or simply a person lacking skill with pet names.

"Turkey, you're not listening to me in the slightest." Yulia was still flicking, but one opaque eye had swiveled to stare back at Torquay.

"I despise that name," whispered Torquay into his beer, which was rapidly decreasing. It was his third drink, and he, began to think that perhaps it was time to request something with more kick.

"What was that?" asked Sydney.

"He whispered something," answered Margot's beau reflexively.

"We know that, Marco." Snapped Yulia.

Torquay looked up. *Margot and Marco?* "I said 'I hate that game.'"

Yulia looked at the television for the first time. The contest was entering the final minutes, and the players on screen were rolling their heads and complaining to each other and the referees like they wanted to get out of there. When he was a kid Torquay's father would yell "Free baseball!" at the top of his lungs if the game they were attending were going to extra innings. Young Torquay would sink his head and kick the chair in front of him. Old Torquay had thought that the players were looking a little tired, so if the close game went into overtime and the referee screamed "Free basketball" they might sink their heads and start grinding their sneakers into the hardwood. "Well, of course you don't like this

game,” said Yulia, “it’s very dull, although I’ve noticed you watching it. Either listen or ask the waiter to change it to something else.”

“I don’t think it would be polite for me to ask him to change it.” The waiter was at the other end of the room entertaining a group of middle-aged women, spreading his hands like a blossoming flower, to poorly suppressed giggles.

“So you’re going to listen?” asked Sydney.

“Well, I didn’t say that.” Margot starting patting Torquay’s hand again, but he slipped it off the table and into his lap. Margot didn’t follow, but she pursed her lips a little harder and tilted her head to the right. Marco remained engrossed with the TV and Torquay suspected that he couldn’t wait to get out of the restaurant and rush home quicker than necessary, so he could throw Margot on the couch and either make love to her or show her a record he’d dug up in some vintage store that she probably was going to hate.

“Turkey,” Yulia sighed, “We know why you called us in, and I think Sydney already indicated, I’m not sure if other of us really approve of this meeting. What you did at that restaurant was awful, and you didn’t even have the good sense to tell us about it. Even if you have the most righteous and genuine position in the world, Judith will never be either of our enemy. And if you were going to plunge back into the art world, calling us here and making a little announcement of it, expecting us to fall all over ourselves with joy, was pretty vulgar. You don’t even have anything to show us. I’d bet the last art you attempted was ‘the Dry Fish affair.’ If that’s the last memory we have of you, why would we agree to help you.

“Results,” chimed Sydney G, “*performance. R-e-a-sonable output.*”

“There’re new kids, Turkey, that we really love.”

“And we love them.” Sydney ran both of his hands through his hair and leaned back in his chair. “I mean, they’re just fucking fun, you know?”

“But the point is Turkey, I’m not sure it’s really our place right now to help you with whatever it is you want to do. You’re so brave, Turkey, because when you sat down at the table and offered to pay for the first round, even Margot and Marco. That was dear, that was dear. Then you sat down and ordered that first round and you took the pains to remember our drinks and order our drinks for us.”

“Gimlet. You bastard.” Sydney toasted Torquay just as his namesake might have, with a lopsided and grin and a kidding shake of the head. *You bastard, you fucking bastard! A card, that’s what you are, a real card.*

“Yes, that was very cute, Turkey, but I’m reeling you in right here. Right here and now, to get serious with you. There’s going to be some time elapsed...”

“That’s fucking terrible...”murmured Torquay.

“You’re an awful mumblor, Torquay. You’re always screaming or mumbling, screaming or mumbling. It’s really embarrassing to be on either end of the spectrum.” Yulia’s hands were patting the top of the table, searching for some other source of water. She had been on an extreme diet, Torquay remembered, something where you had to drink eight glasses of water a day and not eat the skin of anything. The insides of everything were perfectly fine, but all the fat was right there at the surface. “But we can’t help you, right now, we just can’t now. We can’t sully ourselves by the association”

Torquay sat still for a moment. The game had gone into overtime and the referee had refrained from running to center of the court and yelling “free basketball!” and the players were running and jumping with consternation of fatigue and stubbornness.

“You might take the hint, next time, Turkey, next time that we march over neutral parties, not to prepare to launch into a personal matter.” Yulia leaned toward Marco and Margot. “I’m very sorry, you must be uncomfortable.”

“I always feel a little off in this place,” said Marco without taking his eyes off the game, “So I’m not really feeling all that different that normal. Margot says that if you go on enough walks in enough crowded places, or you scroll through enough sordid websites and flip through enough trashy TV shows, you get kind of inured to discomfort. Carry on.”

“Well said, Marco.” Sydney gave him a lopsided grin too. “Well said.”

“I thought you asked us over to help with the flow of conversation, Yulia,” said Margot with a note of hurt in her voice. Torquay felt that she probably hadn’t been desensitized to anything, and he thought that Marco and Margot would make one of those perfect childless couples were one half was saccharine and the other was a tyrant.

“I wanted you to be a levee,” said Yulia curtly. “I’m sorry Torquay but I’m not going to let either Sydney or myself get sucked into this.”

She began to gather her phone and her other things into her purse. Sydney G had managed to slip his jacket on without anyone really noticing, and he was rocking back and forth towards the door on the balls of his feet. His thinking beginning to clear, Torquay wondered how long he must have been gone from the community. Enough time, it seemed, for Yulia and Sydney G to form the type of platonic partnerships that were often much harder to break up than actual marriages. Enough time for Torquay to have slipped into an arcane spot where the only way people could speak to him was with passive-aggressive condescension that was typically used for talented writers, directors and football coaches that have grown very old. The scary part of these exchanges was the mutual weariness that both sides

usually exhibited. And it was true, Torquay felt tired. He felt fatigued from the excitement that he had manufactured from nothing for this meeting, from the alcohol that he was consuming in gradually increasing sips, and from watching the flashes of light that were coming from the television—reflections from the parquet floors and the photo-shopped teeth that appeared in every commercial, and of course from Margot’s reassuring drumming on his arm, which was arrhythmic and not very reassuring at all.

“Our coats? Our coats?” Sydney looked around, smiling in a flexed, demanding kind of way. Torquay felt compelled not to wait and stood up, turning around in a succinct twirl that he felt giddy for having pulled off while being drunk. He felt manic, like he had been riding in a car for hours and hours with nothing but the same songs to listen too over and over again. It wasn’t until he was outside and wandering past the Gibbering Gopher that he realized he hadn’t left any money to help pay the bill. If Judith had been at that dinner, she would have insisted on everyone playing credit card roulette.

Torquay walked and looked at the city. There was a disconcerting lack of street performers in L.A., it seemed to him, and he felt maybe that was the next great artistic avenue for him, although he chided himself for thinking of this possibility in purely market terms, as a part to be cornered, rather than an undertaking that was romantic and quixotic.

Judith had loved the word “Victorian”, and how absurd it sounded when applied to the two of them as a couple. One year, she had even suggested that they dress as “Victorian” for Halloween. This had conjured up images of red military uniforms and mutton-chops and pince-nez in Torquay’s mind, but Judith pointed out that this was the strictest possible definition of the word. “Victorian” could just be a shirt buttoned all the way up to the neck, or a brimmed black hat. It could mean trying to pay for drinks with shillings for the whole night. Perhaps they could dress up as the characters from a religiously themed painting. It was a marvel to her that no one had really thought to dress up as a concept before –



“concept” of course meaning an abstract idea that would take a few queries from other costume party-goers for them to completely get.

The whores were out on Spring Street, and it was unseasonably cold.

“Can you buy a girl a cup of coffee, babe? Just a nice cup of coffee please, it will be worth your while. Trust, babe, it will be worth your while?”

It couldn't be that cold, could it? The best temperatures existed in the netherworld between late night and dawn. The best drinks existed in the netherworld between late night and dawn. The whores that opened by requesting a cup of coffee worked in the netherworld between late night and dawn.

“I really can't, I'm sorry. It would be irresponsible to spend money on a credit card right now, you know?” Torquay hadn't made a profit on a work of art since Judith had disappeared. *Disappeared* was too melodramatic. *Faded*.

“Come one, you're walking lonely.” Torquay liked the hooker's crow's feet and the permanent indentation that her dimples were making at the base of her cheek. Her hair was petrified from a deluge of color changes, but at the moment she had settled on auburn with a few gold highlights, which were surprisingly subtle. Her dress gripped her torso too tightly below her breasts, and Torquay couldn't decide if she was out of breath because she was walking to keep up with him or because the metal of the exoskeleton was pressing into her lungs.

“No, I'm just walking home, you know?”

She skipped to catch up with him, looping her arm through his. “Come on, you look like you've been done wrong.”

“Done wrong? You don’t have to talk like that, you know.”

“Like what?” There was a lilt in her accent, and Torquay knew that she wasn’t a local.

“Like I’m the schmuck in a country song.”

“Schmuck?”

“Never mind.” He left her goose-stepping with bewilderment, and he comforted himself a little by thinking that maybe that the exchange had been the meanest she had ever experienced with a client, because it had been so damn confusing. A simple “fuck off” probably would have sufficed. He felt the tips of her fingers brush against his elbow and didn’t feel bad at all. He had only eight blocks left before he got to his apartment. He picked up his legs, trying to imagine that someone was following him.

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It was the beginning of some sort of season in Los Angeles. People were rolling about with scarves, pretending to shiver and exchanging knowing platitudes to one another at coffee shops. People don’t know that it gets cold here, but it does. Walking home from the bus stop at two in the morning a wind can blow up and you’re freezing all of a sudden, pulling at your jacket so that it sat a little more snug around your shoulders. Some people walk faster, to get the blood going.

Of course, it was 75 degrees in the dead of night. The buses in L.A. are considered full if they’re half-empty. And no one walks anywhere. When people sit down for too long with their hands wrapped around their crotches or stuck firmly in their armpits, their blood slows down. That’s why sometimes when people stand up too fast they feel so dizzy, because their pulse is jumping too quickly for the rest of their body. This happens to everyone in L.A. at least once a day.

Torquay was dizzy. He'd tiptoed to the fridge at least seven times, despite the fact that the frugal selection was diminishing more and more with each trip. A beer, a Gatorade, a couple of resilient pieces of sushi, which ended up sitting poorly on top of the dinner and booze he'd consumed at the restaurant. It felt like someone had taken a few pieces of charcoal and put them on top of a pile of rice inside his stomach. He'd taken two pisses and one shit and he hadn't sat down for the shit: he'd torn off the toilet seat two weeks ago in some sort of fit.

The phone began to ring in the sink, clattering against the steel angrily. Torquay ran to it as fast as he could, loping through the swells of vertigo. When had his apartment become so fucking big?

"Michael?"

"No," answered a feminine voice.

"Judith?" Torquay asked with a little more trepidation. The voice didn't sound like hers, but the amount of contact he'd with females over the past couple of months limited the possibilities fairly significantly.

"No," the voice deepened into smug masculinity, "It's your newest confidante."

"Oh," Torquay sighed as his stomach let out a gurgle. "What do you want right now? How late is it?"

"Oh my God, how late is late for you? I should really get details like that straight if we're going to do things like this."

"This is SwedeZon, right?"

"Yes, of course, I'm being fucking rude aren't I? I mean, God. How are you? Other than being up too late at—wait a tick; my phone is my clock—1:30. Early evening in the past for you, right?"

“It’s still pretty fucking early for me, but too late for you to be really butting into my things right now, don’t you think?”

“Did I seriously wake you? I want you to be honest with me because if I can be honest with you, which I find really gratifying by the way, you sound either drowsy or totally fucked up.”

Torquay picked the phone up out of the sink and slid over to the couch, sinking down so his ass was just above the floor. “I’m not tired or half-asleep or drunk. I’m just dizzy.”

“Dizzy?”

“Yeah, like I’ve just gotten off a carnival ride.”

There was a long silence on the end of line, and Torquay could tell that SwedeZon was trying to anticipate what was going to happen next. “Do you want me to help you right away? I mean I have some more long-term stuff for the two of us to talk about, but we can’t do any of that if you’re stumbling around feeling dizzy all the time.”

Torquay ran his hands over his face, but he asked anyway. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’ve got some really incredible stuff. It’s in my mind right now, and I bought it from someone I trust. So breathe easy

Torquay didn’t want to really try to imagine the loose parameters of SwedeZon’s trust, but he hoped that the kid was one of those savants that trusted everyone with a pulse and a smile. Some of the younger modern kids had been so instilled with the idea that they could find art in anything, and since they assumed art was good, that there was artiness and goodness in everyone, that they would befriend any snake that glided in front of their eyes. Through the ear-piece Torquay could hear the steady *oomph*

of house music in the background and a couple stray voices yelling raucously. It was terrible, but the very idea of drugs was giving him a clearer head. Perhaps that's because his brain was preparing for the amount of thinking on the fly one has to do after making a terrible decision.

"Where are you?"

SwedeZon's teeth clacked on the other end of the line. "I'm in an old warehouse on the corner of Jefferson. It's right by the Ralph's in J-town. I can't explain right now, but I can't come to you."

Torquay's irritation had evaporated. He began to kick up the magazines around the floor, looking for his shoes. Although he didn't admit it to anyone because he believed stolidly that one of the surest signs of natural stupidity was a short attention span, he liked to imagine the strange parts of his life as movie trailers. Like, right now there was a camera slowly doing a dolly shot around, he was moving in slow-motion and then they would cut to him walking into the warehouse, the pretend club, and bouncing confidently into the big room. Well, not bounce necessarily, because the ultra-cool people don't bounce anywhere, they slinked. Bouncing implied the possibility that the person could collide into something. And cool people in the middle of movie trailers where things were happening in slow motion didn't run into anything. Other super-sexy people slid off of them while looking demurely or hungrily at the slinker. Judith had been the fucking master.

"You going to come?" Asked SwedeZon, interrupting Torquay's mental editing. The lack of a dependable car made constructing the mental trailers a little difficult. Torquay liked to imbue them with as many real life elements as he could.

"Yeah, I just...I just have to get myself together, alright? Don't pressure it too much or this will never work out."

"Right, right. I'd never want to do that." SwedeZon answered.

Torquay found the sneakers he was looking for and began untying them. "How will I know where I'm going? I mean how will I know when I get there? There so many warehouses down there which haven't been properly spruced up yet."

"No, this one is spruce I promise. There's some beautiful new graffiti on the side facing where you'll be coming from. You still live in Downtown right?"

"Yeah, but who painted it?"

"Jimmy Delt-Tri."

"Who the Hell is that?"

"Oh, what? Well, we have some other stuff to talk about before we get to the long range stuff but let me assure that Delt-Tri is here and I can honestly say that he will be very excited about meeting you."

"Well, what does the wall look like?"

"Mmm, it's cool. We can break it down a little when you get here, but it's kind of like a triptych of pink elephants standing on their hind legs and propping their front legs the shoulders of the elephant in front of them. The front elephant is wearing a space helmet and holding kind of a trippy black wand that looks like the obelisk from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But don't worry. I don't really enjoy the direction the DJ is going in so I was going to take some time outside anyway. I'll just wait for you."

"Okay."

"Perfect." SwedeZon's voice had gained a little more steel, but he couldn't hide the gush as he told Torquay that he was looking forward to seeing him.

“Wait, you never told me what was in your hand.”

“What?”

“You know, I’m still feeling dizzy.”

“Oh right. Don’t worry about, we’ll do a little when you get here.”

“The walk may help get rid of the dizziness, you know?”

“It doesn’t fucking matter, sir, I’ll see you soon.”

Well, Torquay had to go. He had already created the loose commitment in his mind and even though he wasn’t sure if liked SwedeZon, hated him or was ambivalent about him, he couldn’t bear the thought of disappointing him. What if he talked to someone he knew—maybe Sid, I mean Jesus, possibly Sid—and would tell him Torquay was chickenshit.

The walk took a little less time that expected and Torquay greeted SwedeZon with a clear head. The younger artist was wearing another snap-back hat that partially concealed a mod cut where one side of his head was shaved while the other side was kept long. He was wearing a varsity jacket with two dragons on the sleeves, although neither was blowing fire. When he saw Torquay, SwedeZon pulled out his left hand from the jacket and held it out with a facetious grin. The elephants weren’t only pink but had little coats-of-arms patterned into their bodies. Each successive one had been painted to look a little more decayed than the elephant that preceded it. The leader in the space helmet carrying the obelisk looked like the picture of health, while the last one appeared totally atrophied, its tusks hanging from its face like crusty branches..

“Take this and we’ll see how you feel in twenty.”

Torquay didn't take his eyes off the mural while he let SwedeZon drop a little baggie into his hand. The process of degeneration had been done perfectly; he couldn't decide if it was the same elephant shown in time-lapse—the hose connecting to his helmet had been cut, perhaps—or if it was a bunch of different elephants of the same pink species, with the alpha having been awarded with a sustaining space helmet and a blessed obelisk. If Jimmy Delt-Tri was smart he was designing the t-shirt and trying to get marginally famous celebrities to be photographed standing next to someone wearing it.

“Where is this guy?” asked Torquay pointing at the mural. “I want to talk to him about this.”

“Hold on, let me get him. Don't come inside yet, this joker on the decks is still making kind of mess of things.”

“I haven't liked dance music since I dumped the last girl I was dating.”

“It won't take long to get back into the good stuff.” He pointed at the baggie in Torquay's hand. “To both that and what you're hearing.” Torquay looked down at the packet sitting in his hand. A small piece of pink and black paper had been slid into it. The powder was light blue, which made Torquay a little nervous. He started to think about his bed and the vultures but he couldn't bear to walk away. He desperately wanted to hear about the elephants.

Jimmy Delt-Tri was Indian, with his long beard and hair wrapped up inside a beanie with ear-flaps. He was slight, and his cheeks were drawn enough to look like he was trying to suck the beard right back through his skin. The look in his eyes was both interested and bedeviled, and Torquay couldn't help but get the feeling that SwedeZon must have spent most of his time inside convincing the kid to come out and talk. Some guys didn't like to articulate anything about their shit. It was too stupid, too time-



consuming. Jimmy Delt-Tri's slightness was a little surprising, since all the Sikhs Torquay had read about were supposed to be stout.

"It's nice to meet you," said Torquay, accidentally holding out the hand that had the powder in it.

"I haven't met you yet," said the Sikh laconically. His eyes darted down at the powder in Torquay's hand. "What the fuck is that?"

"Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry. I was so mesmerized by your mural that I forgot that stuff was in my mind." Torquay let out a nervous laugh. "I don't even know what it is. Maybe you do?"

"Fuck no, I don't know what that is. I don't even drink coffee." He turned to SwedeZon with a tight smile on his face. People who smiled when they were angry made Torquay extremely uncomfortable, and he felt a few drops of sweat dripping down from the hairs in his armpits.

"What? Come on, Jimmy we put on this party for you man, and we all know what you don't enjoy seeing at your parties."

Jimmy shook his head. "Well, I'm not sure if you were specific enough on the invite or the flyer or whatever because there are definitely high people scheming in the corners. There's some chick in there wearing an onesie who's run through about fifteen Blow-pops. If she grinds her teeth any harder she'll probably break her lower jaw clean off her neck." He grabbed the packet out of Torquay's hand and brandished it at SwedeZon's nose. "Did you give him this?" He turned back to Torquay. "Did he give you this to you? Or did the Blow-Pop girl have it snickered up her skirt." The Sikh's smile was getting tighter and wider.

Torquay fidgeted a little on his feet, wishing he was still a little dizzy or that he had just taken the stuff before or remembered to put it in his pocket. "I mean, I haven't even been inside yet."

“So you brought it with you, son of a bitch. You weren’t invited to this shindig and you brought it with you. Who the fuck is this again Douglas?”

“This is Torquay, remember? He wants to know about what you’ve done here.”

“Yeah,” Torquay piped up, “I really, really like the elephants. I actually had two questions about them and I’m sure I could probably think of some more.

The Sikh rubbed the back of his head. “Look, I don’t know you.”

“You’ve heard this name before Jimmy, I swear. He did the fake diner piece. Do you remember that?”

Jimmy cocked his head, trying to remember what SwedeZon was talking about while Torquay stared at the ground, mortified.

“Didn’t people get poisoned because of that? Weren’t there a few hospitalizations? Rancid meat and shit?” Jimmy’s smile was loosening a little bit, and the skin seemed to be coming unglued from his skull to form a more inquisitive and less-aggressive smirk.

“No, no,” SwedeZon looked bemusedly at Torquay, “Maybe, one? I can’t be certain of it.”

Jimmy’s curiosity was getting the better of him, and it occurred to Torquay that one thing about younger people is that they could forgive people for some really reprehensible shit if they thought the person was cool enough to merit it. Nothing screamed cool like silently and imperiously going through a cycle of atonement. Torquay tried to arrange his face to look properly put-upon. “I mean, there may have been a few people down.” Torquay fixed Jimmy with a laconic stare. “But I wasn’t waiting around to see if anything had really gone down.”

Jimmy looked bewildered. “So did anyone die?”

“No, no, Jesus, come on man we wouldn’t be standing here.” If SwedeZon was worried that this introduction wasn’t going swimmingly he was doing a neat job of hiding it. He clapped the pair on the back and rubbed along their shoulders.

“Oh my God,” Jimmy snorted, “I mean, I was thinking I was talking shop with a killer. That would have been fucking incredible. I mean,” he shot a derisive look at SwedeZon, “That may have made the party.”

SwedeZon tried to huddle them together, but Torquay rocked back a little, using the interlude to slip the baggie into his jeans pocket, where it could be forgotten and wait for latter. “Look, Jimmy this is making your party, which means something coming from me because I planned your fucking party and I always create the absolute best, even if meat and intoxicants aren’t allowed inside of the building. But you have a legitimate art maverick asking about your mural. There may be a t-shirt in the offing here.”

Jimmy smiled and rolled his shoulders like a boxer preparing to step through the ropes. “What did you want to know?”

Out of habit, Torquay took a small notebook out of his breast pocket before remembering that he’d been too out of it to remember a pen. He went forward with the questions anyway. “What’s your real name?”

“My real name is irrelevant in this context, but since it sounds so fucking cool, I’ll give it to you: Ranjit Marbat Khan. Did you need pen?”

Torquay tapped his index finger to his temple. “I got it right here.”

“Alright, well, I’m going to ask you some questions for the street blog I do later, and I don’t have a damn thing to write on and I will jump off this warehouse before I learn how to take notes on a touch screen. Let’s go inside.”

“Thank God.” SwedeZon cupped his hands over his mind and pretended to blow. “It’s been so cold lately.”

“Why do you think I wore this hat?” Jimmy said, slapping SwedeZon firmly on the ass. “But seriously no weather talk inside, people will think that we don’t have anything to talk about with each other.”

“It’s really not that bad,” murmured Torquay, floating inside. Past the threshold of the door, trance music and sickly orange light enveloped them. Torquay wished that there were some big band playing instead, although he had to concede that you could probably slink better to electronic music. The air tasted like iron, as if someone had just sprayed a fire extinguisher everywhere. He felt nauseous and felt around for the tiny baggie in his pocket. It was still there – good – soon that and a bottle of water. There were makeshift bars at either end of the room consisting of metal carts topped with old doors salvaged from nearby dumps.

Along the far wall, away from the door the three artists had just entered, was an array of faux VIP areas. One was made up of worn beanbags, while another contained five desk-chair combinations that everyone endures when they’re in middle school. Jimmy’s area consisted of four Gothic high-back chairs arranged to face each other around a pockmarked coffee table. Three of the chairs were empty, while a tall girl dressed in fur boots, mini-skirt, corset and a ski cap sat draped over the other. The orange light made it difficult to see if her hair was faded pink or auburn. Her breasts were too small to fill out her top, making it look like she was wearing a novelty-size Band-Aid. She was peeling an orange and tossing the pieces of skin as high as she could into the crowd. On the table was a cooler containing cans of beer and vodka in plastic pouches.

Jimmy handed Torquay one of each and motioned for him to sit down. Torquay tried not to stare at the girl as he sat down, taking the booze and staring at it impassively. He thought about the

cauldron he'd stirred up at dinner and wondered if it was very good idea to add any more booze to the mixture. He decided that he didn't want to stir up the impetuous Sikh and cracked the beer, although he felt a little angry being pressed to drink by someone that didn't seem to have any interest in following suit. With no beverage in hand, Jimmy sat down and began to bite his nails while staring balefully at the go-go girl who, having disposed of the peel in the crowd, was now dividing each slice into halves before devouring them.

"Cambria!" HOLLERED Jimmy above the spacey din, "Who brought all this shit to the table?"

She shrugged and indicated the crowd. *Someone from out there*, she mouthed.

"What?" Jimmy yelled, cupping his hand around his ear.

"Someone from out there." Said Torquay, smiling at the girl..

"Are you his girl?" SwedeZon yelled at Cambria. She widened her eyes in mock disgust and shook her head, biting her bottom lip.

"Okay, okay," Said Jimmy, rolling his eyes, "Go dance, please." He menaced SwedeZon with a finger. "Don't fuck around with that shit Douglas, not until I have the last word."

"Douglas?" Asked Torquay, taking a sip of is beer. It was pretty vile shit, basically water with a tablespoon of alcohol and carbonation. SwedeZon cast his eyes down to the floor.

"Is that okay?" He asked Torquay.

"What do you mean?"

"I wasn't really sure if you wanted to know my real name or not."

“I mean, I don’t really care. We really won’t talk too much outside of the realm of art, so I guess knowing your real name is fairly inconsequential.”

“Oh,” said SwedeZon, sinking back into his chair, “I guess you're right.” He shot a look at Jimmy and shook the beer he was holding at the Sikh. “I thought you were running a clean ship around here.”

Jimmy shrugged and peered around the party, “I think it probably would have gotten in anyway. Booze, at least.” He snapped his head back around at Torquay. “No fucking drugs though. I’ll take that shit away from you.” Torquay nodded and ripped the top of his vodka pouch, taking a quick gulp. “Now, tell me about those people you fucking poisoned. Some Mexican construction workers, right?”

“I thought we were going to talk about the mural first.”

“Shut the fuck up, Douglas.”

“If you’re going to call me that, call me Doug.” SwedeZon leaned and whispered into Torquay’s ear.

“Don’t tell me the rest of it. I know the name you sign your art with.” Torquay gently pushed SwedeZon away. “It’s okay, we can talk about that for a little while. I wish the music was a little lower.”

“I can hear you just fine,” yelled Jimmy. “I just couldn’t hear Cambria very well.”

Torquay had stopped sweating, and despite the beer’s taste it slid a little more easily down Torquay’s throat while he wetted his lips. “If I had know there was going to be booze here I wouldn’t have freaked out so much on the street when you got in my face.”

Jimmy’s smile appeared again. “Do you still have it?”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to do any around you. That would be even more uncomfortable for me than for you, and since I hardly know anyone here I won’t try and disrupt whatever rules you’ve set up for this space. What are you calling it, by the way?”

“Calling what?”

“This temporary club that you have, it’s like a pop-shop, but it will be around for a couple of nights, I’m sure. What are you calling it?”

Jimmy turned to SwedeZon. “The Lurch. The same name the mural’s being called before it gets painted over.”

“You know you should really turn the elephant with the helmet on into your sign, your motif. It would really good on a black t-shirt.”

“Preparations for that are well underway,” answered Jimmy, “But I want to hear about this diner. What was the diner?”

“It was Philippe’s on 7th...and it wasn’t a diner, really, it’s a French dip place.”

“The original French dip,” chimed SwedeZon.

“I think I’ve been there,” Jimmy looked up thoughtfully, “It’s kind of like one of those old-timey cafeteria places? With pieces of pie and shit, and old railroad lined up along the walls.”

“That’s the one. I used to love it, getting an original French dip, piece of pie and a cup of coffee. I used to do that with my girlfriend every night.”

“Did I know your girlfriend?”

SwedeZon started a little in his chair and tried to mask it by taking the last pull from his vodka pouch. Torquay stared at Jimmy, trying kind of hard to remember if he may have known Judith—who had hated the French dip place from the beginning. *You can see the cracks beginning to form in the plates*, she used to complain. This had been in her amber streaks stage, but Torquay was sure that she had changed the color many times over by now. “No, I don’t think you knew her.”

“Yeah, maybe, but if Douglas here says that I absolutely should have known you back in the day then it stands to reason that I probably definitely known her well.”

“I didn’t say that Jimmy, I said that you should have known *of* him.”

“Right, what he said. If I should have known of you then I should have known of her too, even if she wasn’t some ditzzy bitch artist, even if she was just a scene-girl, out and about to chill.”

Torquay paused for a moment, letting the rest of his vodka pouch fall to the floor. “No, she was an artist. If she’d been a groupie I think it would have eaten at her pretty hard.”

“We’ll get to her later. You’re sucking down pie and coffee at Phillippe’s without a care in the world and two shits for your body. And go.”

“Well, I went to Phillippe’s with my girlfriend one time and we sat down and I was waiting for my food and I looked down and saw a cockroach run across the top of my foot. And I didn’t think much of it at the time because that’s one of those things you assume when you’re walking around old buildings: they have bugs and mice and all types of vermin crawling up and down the inside of walls and the underside of floors. But it stuck with me and I didn’t eat the meal and my girlfriend didn’t eat and we ended up going to an Italian place down the road for dinner. In an old building too, but we hadn’t seen anything run across the tops of our feet, so we scarfed everything from there down. I was upset, and I didn’t really mention it to anyone again.



I didn't go back for two weeks, and when I returned I didn't go back with her. She refused to come; she was calling for a personal boycott. But I go back and order what I like and wait. I'm scanning along the floor for cockroaches and my bouncing my feet up and down because I'm so nervous that I might actually see one and freak out. But before my food gets there the manager comes out from the kitchen to sit with me. I'd been going so long that I knew who the manager was, and I remembered that the night that we left the food behind he had come out to talk to us, too. He must have seen the two of us leave our food behind."

"Is this Phillippe?" Jimmy was slowly becoming engrossed.

"Let me finish my story. And no. So the manager comes out and tells me that my food's coming, not to worry, it'll be on the table any second. I say I'm not worried. He asks me where Judith is. Not here. *Oh*, he says, *she not like it very much?* I lie and say that of course she does but she's just a little under the weather. And we go around like this for a few minutes, me waiting for him to ask the question and him waiting to see if I'm ready for it. So sensitive, those restaurant guys. I guess that's why a lot of people call them artists now, too. But we're in a really bare-bones place, and the only grace I've seen is from the cockroach getting across the foot so quickly. There's no grace in the manager coming over and talking about why I left his food sitting there. There's no grace in him caring about it. But he finally asks."

"What was the manger's name?"

"Angelito, because when he was younger he was small for his age, and now that he's older he's big for his age, but you never get rid of things like pesky monikers. But he asks and I say that I couldn't eat anything after seeing a cockroach run over my foot because it disgusts me. Angelito shakes his head and apologizes and you think that's it, but then he says this. He says that I shouldn't worry about anything because he knows that the kitchen is cleaner than the rest of the joint. He didn't say it exactly like that, but I think I've paraphrased it pretty well. The kitchen is cleaner than the rest of the joint.

"I'm deadly curious, and I ask if maybe I can see my food being prepared. Angelito thinks about for a little while and says okay. We walk back into the kitchen and there are a million people running around, throwing food at one another and screaming at the top of their lungs. There's food hitting the floor and people are picking it back up and Angelito is chuckling as I watch box after box of processed everything being taken out of the fridge and slapped onto buns and plates where you can see the cracks beginning to form. Angelito looks at me and tells that it's all right because all of the food is processed, so it's pretty much cleansed by the time it reaches the restaurant. Obviously this is bullshit, and I'm so incensed because its such a poor lie. I ask if I can do a little cooking in the back one night with some of my friends. I didn't think he would say yes, but he did. I think I told him that I would bring my chef friend and we would cook for some of the crew. I left without my food again and as I walked back towards my apartment I could feel my veins clenching in fury.

"Two weeks later we return to Phillippe's—a group of four of us: me, Judith, a cameraman and this kid that I knew from the local coffee shop who claimed to be very interested in art and didn't waver when I told him that I was in the middle of phase where I only did performance art, or more accurately active performance art, which borrows a lot of elements from improv. I don't think he quite understood what I was driving at. But anyway, we have a lot of things with us—some fresh, some rotten. Eggplant, artichoke hearts, caramelized ants, dog meat, plucked mice, veal, small pieces of cloth that had been cut just so to look like calves, a few black berries where the mold had grown in a way to look exactly like powdered sugar, pieces of tofu that we had dyed with food coloring that would later be banned by the FDA. There was other stuff, good and bad stuff, but I can't remember everything. There may have even been a chocolate cockroach or two, I don't know. I definitely could have been that impetuous.

"We show up early, before there's any rush. This is one of those places that don't have anyone there unless it's peak hours. It was five o'clock and the only people there were a very stern-looking Asian

family and the workers, who're lounging around smoking and watching the Dodgers on TV. We began to make our dishes, whipping up the most gruesome things we could think off. I remember feverishly grinding the ants into the artichoke hearts until the caramel was beginning to seep off with the juices that burst from inside each tiny exoskeleton.

"They were big ants."

Torquay grabbed another beer and leaned a little bit closer to the table. Jimmy hadn't said a word in twenty minutes and was stroking his mustache over and over again with his index finger and thumb. Cambria had wandered by a few times, doing her very best imitation of a go-go dancer, and Torquay supposed that the attention she was being paid out on the dance floor wasn't substantial enough.

"But we're flying away, whipping things up pretty haphazardly. Meanwhile our cameraman has set up and is walking around the restaurant, asking employees about their diets and if they ever eat at the restaurant. I think later he said almost every single person said they ate at least one of their meals at the restaurant every day. It was disgusting, and I berated myself for having eaten this crap for so long, for eating at someplace that does cuisine entirely out of boxes. And I wondered how the people working there didn't know that what they were and how they were preparing it was crap. I really felt like they should know.

"But I wanted to know if people really looked at their food when they got it. I know that it's commonly held belief that people are very observant of their food. Yet every one eats like shit. So I wanted to see how much shit we could get people to eat.

"I was nervous about the idea, but I felt like Judith was backing me up. My friends Sydney and Yulia weren't really, and in the end they kind of let me shuffle over a cliff I'd created for myself, which is kind of fucked up, but that's alright, we let that one go.

"But we're cooking and we're cooking; pouring spices and salt into everything to kind of mask the taste and give people a little challenge to discerning the quality of what we're offering. Judith is spraying air freshener everywhere and lighting matches to mask the smell. At this point we also have customers filtering in, so our cameraman begins writing specials on a blackboard. People are asking if they can get their normal shit and we're telling them that we're trying out this experimental menu. Some people leave but some people, so used to just being in this restaurant to eat at all, assent and order what we've put on the board. I can't recall precisely what had been written but it was garish.

"Finally we begin to serve food. We're watching from the back room and our guy is filming. God knows if this is going to work, but we're filming and hoping that something interesting is going to happen. The first guy that we serve is some big fat fucker. I thought he was going to take a bite from the pile we put in front of him for sure. But he takes one look at it and walks out. Judith rescues the plate and, after bringing it back to the kitchen for a little more spicing, gives it to a teenage girl. Teenagers were supposed to be picky so I didn't hold my breath. But she eats the whole thing in about 5 minutes. Maybe she was high. Maybe the plate was one of the not-so-bad ones. But either way we had caught our first fish and thus, to a certain extent, proved our point. I think she ran to bathroom after twenty minutes. I'd say about thirty more people cycled through the place that night and at least twelve ate what we gave them. It was disgusting.

"Eventually someone realized that what was going on was not on the level and started yelling about it. People started to get angry—irate—and we definitely began to feel uncomfortable. I tried to tell as many people as I could that the whole thing was an honest-to-God, well-intentioned experiment

but not a lot of people were buying it, even after I told them that every dollar was going to be returned, plus a few on top as a thank-you to every person that participated. The cops appear and, as we're thinking about making a run for it, we're arrested. I posted bail with the help of some friends. And that was that."

Torquay sighed and tried to corral his brain back down between his temples. The tale had taken a great deal more exertion to tell than he had anticipated, and he felt oily; that the hairs on top of his head might run clean off from the street-begotten droplets that sprouted from his skin.

SwedeZon was staring at the illuminated screen of his phone but not doing anything except pressing it every time it flickered off. It seemed as if he desperately wanted to demonstrate that he had scores of other people to talk to other than the two men seated beside him, a situation he had gone to great lengths to create.

It occurred to Torquay that up until that very moment, the moment when he finished his strange and ludicrous story about his own impetuous attack on art and reasonable taste, he had been operating under the impression that Jimmy Delt-Tri was stupid, and that it would be fairly easy to impress him. But the look with which Jimmy was considering him now—eyes half-closed; lips smacking in slow rhythm, an action that was at once made insidious and cartoonish by his moustache and beard—made Torquay realize that he was speaking with someone that was at least as discerning as Torquay had been, used to be, always was.

"You didn't really finish the story." Jimmy said slowly, "Which makes it harder for me to believe it."

"Oh, but it was all over the papers." interjected SwedeZon, putting his cell phone away for a moment, "I mean it was definitely an event that received some coverage."

"I don't read the papers. I guess I should say that I don't read anything that was once pulp. And I doubt that it would have covered by any paper unless someone had died. Which no one did, which makes it less interesting." Jimmy pushed the cooler towards the edge of his table with his foot, sloshing some water onto Torquay's shoe. "Where you even arrested?"

"Yeah, but nothing really came of it. A few weeks in jail, probation and community service. I had two friends who really helped with that."

"Is this why I've never heard of you? Because you dreamed up such a shit idea for a demonstration that the community just threw you out as a matter of general principle?"

Torquay chuckled a little bit. "You wouldn't think they would do that to you?"

"I have a question." SwedeZon waited a moment for either of his companions to acknowledge him, but launched into his question despite no one answering. "When did we start generally referring to this large group of people as a community? I cannot recall anything cohesive ever being put into place. We don't have a governing body, elected officials or even a newsletter, but we constantly refer to ourselves..."

"Ourselves or do you mean the community you're surrounded by right now?" Jimmy held his arms aloft, twisting his waist. "*This* is a circus that has learned by itself to cycle its performers out of the rings efficiently." He pointed at Torquay. "You have the recycled, the lion tamers that aren't agile enough anymore to sidestep away from the claws of a lion." Jimmy patted himself on his chest. "Then you have *moi*, who has managed to combine the motorcycles-riding-in-a-sphere-of-doom act with the lion act, which I think every one in this room would agree has become pretty dull. I've revolutionized it."

"By painting a time-lapse mural of rotting elephants?"

“No, that was just something I threw together.” Jimmy got up and started walking around. “No, I think that for once, Douglas here has done something particularly good. By bringing us together. Because I think that what you did at the diner was impulsive, moronic and too self-aggrandizing, but I also think there were elements of bravery in what you did. And, as someone that refuses to eat beef, especially beef that is cynically advertised as ‘Prime,’ I can appreciate the message that you were trying to put out there, although it was pretty unfocused.”

“Well, we never edited the video footage into anything coherent.”

“But I think there’s a way that you can help me nevertheless. I don’t think I can pay you, but I am the ringleader and I can sneak you back into the circus, if you want to help me. Because my next substantial project is going to be something that really, really exposes the tawdry, the sexual, the delicious. I want you to be my project consultant, and if you say no, you may have to be content designing logos for push-pin buttons indefinitely.”

Torquay pushed back into his chair and thought first about the surprising inclusion of the term “consultant” into the conversation, before realizing that he was going to say yes. By asking him to come on board to his project—the details of which Torquay was ignorant, but judging by the feverish nature of Jimmy’s movements, his project was going to be ostentatious, vulgar, or in the very worst case, criminal—Jimmy was acknowledging that Torquay had mastered the formula necessary to garner attention. What Torquay had just described was an orgy of bluffs that was provocative enough to incite some reactions, but Torquay had neglected to tell Jimmy just how short the story’s stay in the news cycle had been. Jimmy didn’t read the papers, so he didn’t know jack about the incident but knew less about how the words devoted to Torquay’s strange, grand gesture had dwindled so quickly, and the referendum on modern art had never come.

“Will you do it?” Even as he asked this question, Jimmy glanced sideways at SwedeZon, who was holding his beer just above the point of spilling, looking dejectedly at the floor and tuning the conversation out. But even if the meeting had been a great meeting of the minds, it should have been obvious that the person responsible for orchestrating the event wouldn’t be remembered. It was a shame, since the difficulty of reigning in cantankerous genius was difficult, but it was just easier for people to remember the genius.

“SwedeZon will be there too, alright? I mean, I definitely can see where his suggestions might be useful in a thing like this,” added Jimmy, perhaps sensing that SwedeZon was slipping away from the conversation. “But I’m fucking impulsive, so you can’t ask me if there’s anyway to let me know, Tucker.”

“Torquay”

“Torqued?”

“Torquay”

“Right you are, but before you get up from your chair, Torquay, and proceed to roam around dripping little drops of beer all over everybody, I need to know what your answer is going to be. So take a few seconds to reflect, and consider the perks of being grandfathered back into this community,.”

It might have served Torquay to hesitate a little bit, but he didn’t. He got up and extended his hand towards Jimmy, who grasped it while letting out a feverish whoop before clapping SwedeZon on the shoulder. “Where’s a bottle of water, I feel we should be seriously toasting to this. Cambria!” Cambria slid out from between a couple of ravers, bouncing up and down convulsively while producing a bottle of water from a fanny pack perched on top of her belly button. Jimmy grabbed it and patted her on the cheek. “Alright, grab whatever shit you feel like consigning to your body and let’s do this.” The three hoisted their drinks in the air, lamely tapping them together before taking sips. Jimmy started



spinning his arm around in circles, drenching SwedeZon, Torquay and grateful passersby, who were beginning to overheat with the flux of bodies into the warehouse. Cambria clapped a few times and kissed everyone on the cheek. Remembering the little baggie in his pocket, Torquay patted his pants to make sure it was still there. Reassured at feeling the outline, he began to look around the crowd for the easiest way out. At the beginning of his story, the party had been a few dozen people milling about, but all types of scenesters and drunks had begun spilling into the room, creating a schizophrenic mass of people, where every push elicited a more violent response twenty feet away.

“It looks like news of your birthday has hit the streets.” Torquay yelled at Jimmy over the din.

The Sikh started looking around, clutching his beard in mock fury. “Oh shit! I knew this would happen. I hate it when things get this crowded, the skin underneath my beard begins to peel and crumble in these disgusting little cakes of dead skin.”

“You get dandruff on your face?” Asked SwedeZon, a smirk dawning from under his gloomy countenance.

“I mean, my skin just dries out more quickly because of the heat and the beard, but fuck you very much for the insinuation, which isn’t appreciated in the least. Cambria!” Jimmy screamed out his girl’s name a few more times, but she was firmly lost in the crowd, the bumping of the techno and the yells of the horde too much for effective communication. “Fuck, she knows how much I hate it when she wanders too far away.” He grabbed his cell phone out of his pocket before thinking better of it and slipping it away. The crowd was swelling to the point where the chairs were being pushed in towards the table, and the three men were beginning to bump into each other. “What does it take for one of these things to be broken up?”

“I mean, usually someone vomits on a nearby resident’s car or something, or there’s a complaint about fire code from a Samaritan walking their dog or cat or ferret.”

Torquay poked SwedeZon on the shoulder. “Is there another way out of here, other than the door by the mural?”

SwedeZon thought for a moment. He stood on his toes trying to peer over the heads of the crowd, a fairly ludicrous gesture, since strobe lights and lasers were only lighting the room intermittently. “I think there’s a service entrance...that way,” he said, pointing lamely over Torquay’s shoulder.

“Let’s get going then, I think there’s a cafe around the corner where we can talk a little bit more.” Before Torquay could answer, Jimmy shoved him roughly forward, sending him sprawling into a group of hipsters dressed up as fab cowboys, with gold-sequined hats and skin-tight leather jackets and tapered chaps. Angered by the interruption to their trance swooning, one of them began to pistol whip Torquay with a plastic water pistol, bringing the fluorescent yellow butt down repeatedly into his ear, while another wrapped his arms around Torquay’s legs and tried to pull him onto the ground. Momentarily shocked by the stinging blows and the fear of being trampled, Torquay recovered by elbowing the pistol-whipper in the nuts and the other assailant in the face, forcing the latter to let go as he stumbled into the crowd. Out of the dark, a fist connected with that cowboy’s temple. Girls in the crowd began to scream, and the red lasers made it seem like a flurry of hands were clutching at his shirt. Chucking the rest of his beer into the crowd, Torquay began running straight ahead, roughly parting the sea of bodies with his shoulders. The farther he got into the crowd, the more readily they parted for him but he could feel his lungs constricting with effort—flimsy garbage bags that had sagged irreparably in the nine years he had neglected real exercise. He wondered how foolish he looked, how old to be stumbling around at a party where all the songs blended together in a manner he hated, wearing a too-

tight shirt that looked like it had been soaked in a bucket of water and smelled like it had been soaked in a bucket of vinegar. He dearly wished he hadn't ditched the beer, but that had been instinctual. Alcohol was so rarely necessary in flight.

The door appeared between a couple of almost-normal guys wearing blue and purple argyle suits. They moved politely for Torquay to get out of the way. Outside the street was empty, and slick from a rare late-night Los Angeles drizzle, which Torquay was disheartened to realize had passed over. It was the main entrance, and glancing to his right Torquay saw Jimmy and SwedeZon leaning idly against the mural. "Thanks for the help back there," he screamed at them.

The two looked over and, realizing it was their Torquay, broke into foolish grins and began miming throwing elbows. "I'd hustle home, if I were you," crowed Jimmy, "I have the feeling they're going to turn the posse loose."

Torquay heaved a breath and walked over to meet them. "Who knew that a couple of fags could cause so much havoc?"

"Hey, hey," Jimmy cautioned, his face reverting back to serious, "Take it easy with that shit, I thought you were an artist."

"I am, so what?"

"I mean, that's just not right. To use words like that."

"Jesus fucking Christ, you and your fucking sensibilities. Fine. Who knew that people who wear gold-sequined hats could hit so hard."

"Hey, it's okay," reassured SwedeZon, "They didn't seem like they were hitting you too hard. And you're definitely not bleeding or anything."

“You know, I think I’m going to bounce,” Jimmy was smiling in his tight way again, “I just don’t think we need to talk about this stuff tonight. I’m going to go find Cambria. Do you have his information?”

“Yeah, I have it,” answered SwedeZon.

“Okay. Well then I can just get from you when I need it.” He turned to walk back into the warehouse.

“Hey, you never answered the question about the mural,” called Torquay.

Jimmy waved his hand and kept walking before being swallowed up by the entrance. The street was quiet, which made the ringing in Torquay’s ears sound eerie. He patted his pocket again and, feeling the baggie still nestled at the bottom, breathed a low sigh of relief. “I wished he hadn’t insisted that I tell that story,” he said casually.

“I’m really sorry about that,” answered SwedeZon quietly, and Torquay was confident he meant it. He was too tired to be angry, and he regretted not telling the story with more bombast. Perhaps his *de facto* expulsion from the community was because he’d failed to grasp the necessary theatrics of everything. “I just thought that was something that he’d have heard of.” SwedeZon finished lamely.

“Have you seen any of my other stuff?”

SwedeZon paused for too long and Torquay began walking. He was tired, but he felt like his legs were moving in a pattern that he didn’t really feel up to stopping. SwedeZon yelled something, but Torquay was so enraptured with his heavy steps that he couldn’t make out what he heard, something about that not being the way he discovered him but the way he had stayed with him. SwedeZon didn’t try to follow him, and it wasn’t until Torquay was seven blocks away that he realized the original purpose of the evening—for Torquay at least, he couldn’t be certain about any one else—had been lost.

He hadn't unwound in the least, and instead had relived the drudgery of his past grand gesture, his infusing of improvisational comedy, culinary and performance art, an experiment born the moment that the cockroach had skittered across the top his foot. He thought about Yulia and Sydney G, feeling relieved that he hadn't run into either of them at the party, and seriously hoping that if they had glimpsed him, it had been when he was simply sitting in the makeshift VIP areas, and not thundering willy-nilly towards the exit. He was certain that Jimmy Delt-Tri was one of the up-and-comers who they'd been thinking about.

He took the most direct route home possible, and by the time he reached the front door of his building the soles of his feet were aching to the point of being unbearable. There was no doorman, which was disappointing, since the idea of chilling and shooting the shit about the basketball game earlier was appealing.

Torquay had left the lights in the apartment, which irritated him slightly. Even though he was coming off a bout of joblessness, Torquay didn't have a problem with spending on big bills involving food and drink. He assured himself by being frugal about the lights and water, assuming in his mind it would all balance out. He threw the powder on the table but didn't take it. After putting on a big band record and switching off everything, he took a couple aspirin pills before dropping into unsatisfying sleep, aware when the record turned off and every time he turned over.

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The next few days were a flurry of pointless activity. Torquay visited a dozen different bookstores, buying something at each one, believing that each book would provide the catalyst for a new push of creativity, although he only read a combined forty pages. Some of the titles were *A Fan's Notes*, *Spider* and *The Ginger Man*. He prepared the ordered list of what he wished to finish first and then promptly ignored the books' presence, pushing any visible titles under the bed.

He did cook, and was sure to charge his phone in case people tried to call. The day after leaving SwedeZon standing by the entrance of the warehouse he worried that his gesture had angered his would-be protégé into refusing to give over Torquay's contact information to Jimmy.

He had worn the carpet around the coffee table down, pacing and glancing at the baggie that was still perched on it. He hadn't felt the urge to take it, and so he hadn't touched it. But it remained a strange blemish on the apartment, one that he wasn't certain about how to eradicate. It could be the impetus to throw a party.

There were things that Torquay didn't do. He didn't exercise, except for the walks to the bodega. He didn't go swimming in the pool on top of his building. He didn't clean anything except the pots and pans on the kitchen counters and the phone in the sink, which he deposited in the dumpster.

He did think about the peculiarity of being lonely in such a vast metropolis, and the pull of all those people on him. He thought that the loneliness didn't make him acutely sad, but it made him recollect encounters with strangers with clarity: seeing a man in a Coast Guard hat ride by the same bench on his bicycle three times, which made Torquay wonder if the man was riding by to see him, before considering any other possibilities; a plain woman who looked gorgeous caked in dirt and sitting on a bus bench waiting for her scrambled eggs while Torquay tried not to be caught staring at her; watching a little boy run away after knocking a smoothie out of Torquay's hand.

He didn't pick up the phone when it rang the first time, his cell phone this time. He let the second call ring four times before picking it up and wheezing out a hello.

"Hello?" Said the voice on the other end.

"Yes, hello," repeated Torquay irritably.

"Oh, Torquay, sorry I wasn't sure if I was hearing correctly. It's Delt-Tri."

“Jimmy?”

“Exactly. How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling fine?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure, what the hell is this all about? Why are you calling me like this?”

“I was just making sure, it’s nothing important.” Torquay swore he could hear the tongue smoothing the beard over the telephone. “But I’ve been thinking and I think it’s time we set to work.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what we talked about at the party, which was a pretty big riot after you left by the way, I’m not sure why you were so intent on leaving when you did.”

“Getting pistol-whipped with a plastic gun isn’t very dangerous, but it still hurts getting mashed into your face.” Torquay retorted.

“Oh right, the hipster cowboys, look I’m sure they got what was coming to them, so don’t worry about it. I thought you handled yourself beautifully, by the way. Seriously. It was pretty cool what you did.”

“Stop with all that shit.”

“Hey,” Jimmy’s voice cracked noticeably, a sound he tried to cover with a feigned bout of violent coughing.

Torquay snickered. “Have you been smoking?”

“Motherfucker, you know that I don’t do that.”

“Whatever, look, I’ve never been a consultant on a performance art piece before.” Torquay looked around the room, noticing how dirty it was, thinking for a moment how easily it could be for Jimmy to stare at the mess through the phone, or hear the mild disgust the surroundings brought out in Torquay’s voice. “And I was wondering what the compensation will be like.”

“I thought I was explicit about this.”

“Were you?”

Well, you have to understand that the other night’s show of affluence—the warehouse, the booze, the DJ, the girls—those were all things that were supplied by Douglas—“

“SwedeZon?”

“Exactly. All that was provided by him, and I know that you have been absent from the community for awhile but I would guess that a lot of those things were just provided as friendly gifts and tokens of respect.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah, But the thing about it is that, at the beginning of the process I’m not going to be able to pay you. But I can promise you two things: full exposure when the project becomes the phenomenon I fully anticipate it to become. Second, real input. Real, solid input with a goal of making the project worthwhile. And if we start making money, you’ll get a little on the back end.” Jimmy added this last part very casually.



“Where do you want to meet?”

“Is that a ‘yes’?”

“No, just tell me where you want to meet, so we can talk about this.”

“Just meet me in front of the athletic club in an hour.”

“L.A.?”

“Hell yeah, man, I live downtown.”

“How come I never seen you around the bars or anything? Or the bookstores?” asked Torquay.

“I don’t think we move in the same circles. Usually, I mean.”

“Oh.”

“Right, so I’ll see you in an hour.”

Torquay purposely dawdled to make sure that he would be the second person to arrive, and indeed he was twenty minutes late, but Jimmy seemed to have more patience than Torquay did. He waited another half-an-hour before Jimmy sidled up in a linen shirt and dark suit pants, his sunglasses turned the wrong way around on his head. Without saying anything he beckoned Torquay to follow him. They walked around the block and into the alley before entering a bare metal door, From there Jimmy led Torquay up four flights of stairs before ducking into a hallway that was painted a sterile green and floored with bright white tile. They went through the fourth door. The inside looked like a converted recording studio. The soundboard had been ripped out and replaced with a bay of hard-drives, monitors, scanners and few other elaborate machines that Torquay wasn’t sure how to use. The other room was full of racks of men’s clothing: oxford dress shirts, polos, V-neck t-shirts, cashmere sweaters, khakis,

designer jeans, suits, raincoats, plaid scarves, turtlenecks and ascots. There were sneakers, wingtips and motorcycle boots. Everything was organized neatly, with the shoes perfectly lined up beneath the clothes. Four cameras were pointed down into the middle of the room, which was marked by a gray circular platform.

Jimmy moved quickly over the machines, switching everything on and booting up the monitors. There were two office chairs arranged in front of the equipment, as well as a backless couch slid up against the far wall. Next to it was the kind of large metal cabinet most often found in the supply room at a school. Torquay flopped down onto the couch and closed his eyes.

“Don’t get too comfortable, you’re going to have to get up in a moment.”

“Okay, just give me five minutes. I haven’t been sleeping well lately.”

“That’s fine.”

Torquay closed his eyes and folded his hands across his chest, like a mummy lying in a sarcophagus, and listened to the whirring of the computer fans and the clacking on the keyboard as Jimmy’s fingers danced over the keys. A minute stretched into five, then into ten. Torquay was on the verge of falling asleep when Jimmy called him over to the control board.

“Take a look at that,” he said, indicating the screen sitting nearest to him. Torquay leaned over his shoulder. On the screen was what looked like a normal social networking page, although more garishly colored than normal. The wallpaper was bright pink, with a white letter logo consisting of an “L” speared through a dotted “B.” The pink outlined a few gold boxes, containing pictures and basic information. This particular profile belonged to “Arthur Scheff,” whose main picture was a medium close-up of him seated at a large glass desk, one hand supporting his chin while the other touched a small marble globe. He wore a charcoal color suit with no tie and was smiling without showing any

teeth, which combined with his lank strawberry hair and unframed, circular glasses, made the smile seem very conciliatory.. Under his occupation Arthur had listed “foundation director.”

Jimmy clicked to reveal another profile belonging to “Jim Felch.” Just like Arthur, Jim was fastidiously dressed, with a grey turtleneck nestled beneath a canvas colored jacket. Jim’s hands were shoved into the pockets of his trousers, and he was looking down at the camera, making it impossible to accurately ascertain how tall he was, since anyone caught in that pose looked gigantic. Scanning his information, Torquay noticed that his occupation was listed as “gallery director” and that Jim’s hobbies included “Asian fusion cuisine, the music of the Boss, and glamorous adventures.” In the section titled “What I’m looking for,” Jim had written “someone who doesn’t mind a little (did I say a little? I mean A LOT) of doting and fits perfectly into the crook of my arm. Being open-minded is always a plus!”

Jimmy clicked the screen again, making another page appear. In the picture, a bespectacled Jimmy wore a linen suit, a blue-striped shirt and a shiny white tie. He was giving the camera a full smile, and his teeth were white enough to appear doctored. The way the shirt stretched across his chest gave the impression of extreme fitness, which the physical Jimmy wasn’t the precise picture of, looking nearly emaciated leaning over the keyboards, his thin fingers twitching over the keys in anticipation of clicking through to the next page.

It was Jimmy’s picture, but his name was listed as “Kash Guarv.” Under his occupation Jimmy had listed “Personal wealth advisor/personal trainer.” He’d listed his interests as “varied, but when I get into something I dive into it both feet first, conquer it and then move on. My passion right now is tai chi, but I’m beginning to feel antsy and there’s a chance motorcycles might be in my future!” There was a list below this pronouncement titled “previously mastered” that included “rock climbing, cooking breakfast, yoga, writing letters, skiing, and banishing fear.” It was salacious in an overachieving way.

Scanning down, Torquay saw that under the category listed as “Spiritual Beliefs” Jimmy had listed, “can’t say that I believe in a single entity or anything like that, but there’s definitely a force that draws us all towards one another and together. I guess that’s the force people call God or Yahweh, Allah or Shiva, Buddha or Zeus.”

“What’s going to happen when they realize that you’re a Sikh?” asked Torquay.

“I’m still not convinced that many people know what that is.”

“But your beard is a pretty big giveaway.”

“Everyone has a beard or moustache nowadays, even those among us who are supposed to be managing wealth.”

“Have you been on any dates?” Asked Torquay.

“No, not yet. I only discovered this website about a week-and-a-half ago, so I’m still trying to get just how the game works. You can’t ask for a date right away, because you’ll scare anybody away.”

“Why not, isn’t this just any of those other dating sites?”

“For sure not. Let me explain a little bit better. You see the little logo, the merged B and L?”

“Yeah.”

“That stands for ‘Basic Liaisons.’ This isn’t like any of those other sites. If I understand the thing completely, it’s a website for people to set up affairs.”

Torquay paused for a minute. “But you’re not even married.”

“I know, I pretend to be in order to attract the type of girls I’m looking for.”

“But I don’t understand the point, I mean, you’re not married. You’re adding on the stress of sneaking around a fake marriage when you don’t even have to. You’re creating obstacles for yourself that most men would kill to avoid.”

“But can you imagine the humiliation I would feel if the girls realized from the outset that I wasn’t married, when they’re specifically diving into something that is titillating and superficially wrong.” Jimmy got up and walked into the other room and began picking clothes off of the racks. “I mean, it’s the rules of the game to be married, and for all intents and purposes, once I go out on a date, I will be. I’ll be checking my cell phone feverishly while ordering appetizers. I will give out an e-mail address that I will assure each girl was made especially for her. I will delete my Internet history each day as if there were something to find and somebody to find it. I’ll keep air freshener in the car and mention to the girl that it’s meant to mask their perfume.”

“Is this how you met Cambria?”

“No, aren’t you listening? I haven’t been on a date yet. I’m still in the planning stages of this little experiment.”

“Experiment?” Torquay asked with a little trepidation.

“Yes, we’re going to examine something. Come here.”

Torquay warily started walking toward the room when a loud BING emitted from one of them, causing Jimmy to drop the scarves and the sky-blue fedora he was holding and run into the control room.

“I have a message!” He shoved Torquay out of the way and sat down, furiously clicking back through pages. A flashing window appeared on the screen: YOU HAVE RECEIVED A CHAT INVITATION FROM CURLYCUE545, DO YOU WISH TO ACCEPT?”

“Yes, yes, yes! This is really exciting stuff, Torquay, the beginning of something.” Jimmy abruptly jumped out of the chair and ran to the cabinet and began rummaging around inside before producing a video camera. He threw it across the room to a startled Torquay, who barely managed to catch it.

“Start filming, make sure you can see the text on the screen.” Jimmy sat back down and opened up the chat window, while Torquay opened up the viewing screen and searched for the record button. CurlyCue545 had written in navy blue font, *Hey, I luv ur pic but I think u should add a few more so I can get a better idea ;).*

“Ah, we’ll have to do some work later, I knew that not having more pictures would be a problem.” He stroked his beard before typing in a response. *Hah im new to this! I have to find sum pics where it’s just of me! Do u like what u see though??*

The response wasn’t immediate, and to pass the seconds Jimmy quickly opened up an mp3 player and put on some hip-hop. “Turn that off,” whispered Torquay.

“Why?”

“Because we want to be able to hear what you’re saying while you’re typing, it might be some commentary, which is what I think you’re going for.”

“Ah, you’re right.” Jimmy switched off the music. “Shit, that’s such a good song though.” He turned towards the camera and smiled. “It’s kind of weird waiting, you know?”

“Sure.”

The screen binged again. *CurleyCue545: I have to admit that im feelin th beard a little bit.*

“Can you look at her profile?” asked Torquay, trying to keep the camera as steady as possible.

“No, the way it works for a new member is that you have to wait for the women to send you invitations to view their profile. But you don’t want to rush it or ask them if you can look at it too early because they’ll more than likely freak and stop talking to you.” Jimmy cracked his knuckles. “No what we want to do is try and get the girl to invite us to take a look.” *Well, its looking kind of raggedy right now but if we get the chance to meet ill shave it.*

“Lightly flirtatious, but direct enough so she knows what I want.” Jimmy explained.

They waited for the next bing, which wasn’t quickly coming. Jimmy tapped into the music window again but quickly thought better of it. “It’s strange knowing how the waiting feels.” He cooed to the machines. Torquay tried not to breathe too loud, while thinking that if operating the camera was going to be the range of his consulting, he would have to get out gracefully.

The bing came. *Curleycue545: Ahh, its cute that ur willing to shave for me!!*

Jimmy abruptly closed the window. “Not the level of intelligence we’re looking for. Poor attempts at innuendo are a bad sign for what we want to accomplish with this. She won’t be intelligent enough for what we’re doing. I should have known when I saw the username.”

This was a comment that was superficial but didn’t feel so, but was because it dismissed a person for a throwaway comment in a naturally superficial environment. Torquay was not especially literate with the Internet, but he felt that depth was an especially fleeting quality on the ‘Net, and that something that was a more effective hypnotizer than television was something a deep thinker would consider dubious. He put the camera down on the desk next to Jimmy’s hand and rubbed his wrist, staring around the room.

“Why don’t you go and try on some of the clothes?” Jimmy was flicking through other male profiles again and scribbling on a pad, taking notes about what each middle-aged lothario was wearing

and how prominently they displayed their rings. Torquay had never cheated, so he was bewildered a little by the idea of person's commitment to another acting as an aphrodisiac for a third-party. That wasn't to say that Torquay was especially prudish or innocent about love and exchanges with women. He could be curt to the point of cruelty when addressing his girls, a habit that filled him with a measure of perverse pride but that he wished he could break a little, although he wasn't sure how to go about accomplishing the latter. He felt that he was adept at discerning the intentions of women he talked to, who was naturally sweet or just cynical.. He believed he knew which women considered sex an augmentation of their central identities and who thought fucking was an occasion to construct amusing or thrilling aliases that, if it was done right, could relieve the natural melancholy of life.

Judith was one of those who never broke from herself when doing anything and eventually their sex had become like a favorite song or movie, where the gasps and switches were remembered just as favorite lines or shots, easily mimicked in breakfast table conversation and familiar enough to be parodied without any sort animus. Torquay never used sex to be cruel, and he had appreciated how much the act with Judith had improved across the relationship until the day they'd left it. She was herself rolling across a row of pillows, and she always fell asleep the same way: curled into a ball with her back rubbed up against Torquay's side, so she could move easily while still realizing he was lying there even as she dreamed. She didn't want any other part of him touching her, because then she might feel obligated not to move and spend the night fitfully, staring at Torquay's head trying to force him to roll over with telekinesis.

Torquay picked out a few ascots and a couple of wide-brimmed hats. The sunglasses were mostly vintage. He grabbed a few Wayfarers and a couple of Beat-inspired frames—hard black tops with gold wire frames—and threw them on one-by-one. He peered into the lens of each camera.

“Are those for surveillance or for a personal photo shoot?”



Jimmy looked up from his notes and, noticing Torquay pointing to the ceiling, followed him into the makeshift dressing room. He put his hands in his pockets as he walked around Torquay, looking him up and down.

“You know, I think being a little older suits you. That’s one of the things I’m afraid of with this experiment.”

“What’s that?”

“That I look a little too young to be really convincing, I mean, even with the beard I feel like the secret of my baby face is right there.” Jimmy brushed his fingers through the hair on his temples. “And I don’t have any gray.”

“Neither do I,” laughed Torquay.

“But you look like you’re just on the verge of getting some, you know?”

“Not really.”

“Well, a lot of times you can tell just before a person is about to have a heart attack or is about to tell you that she’s pregnant. I feel you know right before a person is about to start sprouting gray hairs as well, and if they’ll go white or silver, but that’s kind of an ethnic thing. I’ll go silver and you’ll go white, I’m sure. He began whisking through the hanging shirts. “Maybe we can find you something that will project the feeling.”

“What feeling?”

“Affluence sweetened by age, or affluence that’s just intrinsic to your age. Hold on.” He reached deep into a rack and pulled out a navy blue button-up. “Throw that on, maybe it’s going to be easiest to

give you that past-sailor feel. We can say that you met your wife while preparing to compete in the 1995 America's cup."

"So that's what you're going to have me do? Create a profile on Lechers' World?"

Jimmy paused. "Having affairs with adults isn't what I would consider very lecherous, and besides you don't have a wife and the girls you'll be meeting won't have husbands, just irresponsible boyfriends they keep around for their own amusement. They know what they're doing."

"What types of girls use the site?"

"A lot. College girls who don't really want the clichéd stigma of being a stripper; young professionals that have the ability to set their own hours, so that they can entertain a busier gentleman's fantasy without impinging too much on his schedule; single mothers, divorcees. They're all kind of employees of Basic Liaisons, and I think they get to keep any gifts their sugar daddies give them. It's a very mixed bag. If I had to guess I'd think that CurlyCue545 was one of the college students or a really out of practice single mother. Kids deaden your social intelligence pretty drastically."

"Okay, but where does this become an exhibit or an exhibit?"

"SwedeZon did a better job explaining your little polemic with the food than you did at the warehouse, and I suppose that what I'm doing is pretty similar to what you're doing. We're not going to get much audience for the acts of creating your profile, or the dates we go on and the stuff that comes after that. We're creating a movie, like you were going to, but I don't think we'll be arrested for seeing this one through."

"It wasn't really a polemic, I mean, an instantaneous crusade would be the better way to describe it." Torquay didn't like it when people talked about his moment of madness as a premeditated campaign. He felt that putting it in such a light magnified his arrogance at carrying it through; at worst

he wanted to make it seem like it was a quixotic blackout and that Torquay came to his senses in the middle of one of his community service activities, around the same time people decided they weren't going to buy any more of Torquay's welded sculptures or paintings created out of melted Crayon. "What are we doing here?" Torquay finally asked, "I've been wandering around here for an hour and I want to know what I'm doing before I go home."

"We are beginning the process of delving into the fundamentals of human sexuality and interaction, as well as the cross section created by love, business and choice," announced Jimmy while holding up a finger like a dragnet detective announcing a vice sting. "In order to do this, I need you to describe your full sexual history, with an emphasis on describing your prowess. I lied when I told you that I was bringing you on as a consultant. You are a fully functioning member of this operation. You are an essential half of everything we are going to do."

The computer binged, prompting Jimmy to scramble back into the control room. Torquay dropped the clothes onto the floor and shuffled back into the control room. Jimmy had another chat window open and was peering intently at a girl's profile picture. It was a black-and-white photo taken from behind her, leaving her face hidden but accentuating the curve of her spin—no way to tell if she was arching her back or not—and the way she had shaved the back of her hair.

"Her username is a derivation of her name, I'm sure of it," whispered Jimmy, apparently afraid that the girl might hear him from the other side of the connection. Of course, that was probably the smart thing to do: whisper around technology. The name was *jdANJI*, and her message was just a simple *hey, I was told I was what you were looking for, so hello, I guess?* This was apparently enough to get Jimmy excited, since he was whispering "no shortcuts" over and over again while shaking his head in befuddlement. He grabbed the camera and held it out to Torquay. "Start filming."

Torquay turned pressed the recording button. "Okay," he whispered.

Jimmy turned towards the camera and smiled. “So, um, for those of you that—“

“*Who, who,*” whispered Torquay.”

“Fuck y—goddamit,” Jimmy settled his voice by breathing through the nose. “For those of you that don’t know me I’m a visual, conceptual and performing artist and I would like to think I’m welcoming you to my next great project, but like with any good art there’s a degree of chance to what’s about to take place. I’m talking to women, and there have been some false starts but this is the real thing.” He gave the *keep rolling* signal and turned back to the computer.

After deliberating for a moment, Jimmy typed out *Hey I like the directness of the response. I like ur pic I think we would definitely get along.*

“I’ve got some sort of gut feeling about this, Torquay. Keep filming. This is going to be the introduction, or the credits sequence or something.” The bing sounded again, and a clumsy dance commenced.

*jidANJI: u think so, i don’t know I get nervous doing this stuff*

*Jimmy: I wouldn’t worry too much about it ur doing fine*

*jidANJI: u really think so, i think ur bluffing*

*Jimmy: sure i do, this conversation hasn’t ended yet has it?*

*jidANJI: if i stopped talking to u right now ud be left wondering wouldnt you*

*Jimmy: id wonder for about fifteen seconds, and then the next id remember u would be fifteen years from now and i would feel this strange mixture of wistfulness, relief and bewilderment, but lets forget about all that because were chatting!*

There was no answer for a few minutes, which Jimmy punctured by saying “This is one of those rare moments of consideration that occur when you’re looking at a screen. She could be getting out her credit card while thinking about buying a Rolls and it wouldn’t take this much thinking.” He smirked. “I hope you got that, because I’m not going to write it down.”

Finally: *jidanji: that was 1 of the better things ive heard on this thing. Do you want to view my profile?*

“Fantastic! Fantastic! Unbelievable!” Screamed Jimmy ecstatically, leaping from the chair and giving the camera two thumbs up. “I have found my meal, my sustenance, my prey, and I will devour her with consideration and vigor. As will you, Torquay.”

“But I thought that we were remaining patient for right now.”

“No, I said that CurleyCue454 was bringing out a painful feeling in my gut, and that the instinctual was what was most important for me right now. I have a tremendous feeling about this.” Jimmy climbed back into the chair and peered closely at the screen. “Let’s see what we can make of her profile.”

The bing sounded. *jidanji: did u accept?*

“Quickly, my love, quickly! The straps of our impatience are coming off, coming off as quick as they can.” He clicked the link for the girl’s profile page, revealing a page where the pink scenery had been replaced with metallic gray and the Basic Liaisons logos mixed in with little winking mice, with round ears tilted just so to avoid confusion with Mickey. Unlike the men, women were not compelled to reveal their full names, and *jidanji* had simply christened herself *Suspiria*, which seemed highly unlikely as a real moniker. Apart from her original picture, *jidanji* had five others: a sepia-toned of her in a striped blouse holding a balloon in front of her face, a picture of a metal sculpture that looked like it was

made of several smaller sculptures of the mathematical symbol for infinity, a picture of her holding a Picasso postcard in front of her face, a still from the final scene of *Chinatown* that was captioned: *LA, siiiiggggghhh*, and a picture taken from behind her of her leaping into the air in front of a grocery store.

“That’s irritating,” grouched Jimmy, “I mean they tell you when you sign up that each and every girl is given a thorough assessment based on their looks, but you still want a little confirmation.” He began typing again.

*Jimmy: I can't see u! where r the pics!!*

*jidANJI: i cant show people anything yet, besides how i look here is drastically different from how i would look the first time you saw me in a room, u understand?*

*Jimmy: that's true but only because you've made sure it will be, since i won't have any foundation from which to imagine ur face*

*jidANJI: but thats just it, ive given u a better way to conceive how I would look, and it wont matter what u imagine because ur previous perception will just become tailored to my actual appearance, no matter if u find me striking or plain*

*Jimmy: where can i meet u? when can i meet u?*

*jidANJI: have u ever heard of pete's downtown?*

“Have you ever heard of Pete’s downtown, Torquay?”

“Yeah,” Torquay answered with mild wonder, “I was just there actually.”

“Perfect, that means you’ll know the best places to film, and where we should sit and when we should go to see if I can get any good sound. It might actually be best to go buy a hidden microphone or something along those lines, don’t you think?”

“I think that I have an idea of what you want to do, but I want to confirm a few things so I’m sure about what exactly we’re doing here. I’m going to stop filming.”

“Don’t do that! I’m about to answer.”

*Jimmy: Ive definitely heard of it*

*jidANJI: good, then you know its more of a late night space*

*Jimmy: place?*

*jidANJI: no, space. So lets meet there at around two in the morning. im sure u have stuff youll be doing until then*

*“Not really.” Jimmy: are u sure you don’t want to meet up there when maybe there arent as many people around. maybe avoid any type of rush that’s attached to the place.*

*jidANJI: isnt rush kind of a part of going to a place? like going to a breakfast place at eight oclock at night when the idea of breakfast food is only occurring to strange families. u wouldnt go to a bar at ten in the morning.*

*Jimmy: i might*

*jidANJI: maybe i would go with u on Derby day...*

“What? Maybe I haven’t been flirting enough lately.”

*jidANJI: ...but it seems kind of stupid to waste the feeling of a place just because one of us might bump into someone else's shoulder. meet me at two. Think of something*

"She'll see where impudence gets her, but right now I don't really feel like pushing the issue."

*Jimmy: okay, see u then wear something ur proud of*

Jimmy closed the windows and switched off the monitor. "I wanted to plan your role out a little bit more, but circumstances are dictating that I should be the focus for right now. You thirsty?"

Torquay put down the camera down for what he hoped would be the final time. He could feel the bones in his wrist striking flint against one another. "I don't need my role planned for me, I just need it explained to me."

"Mm," Jimmy almost choked on the water, "I know, shit I'm sorry, I do that, I get excited and forget that every one else is in the dark. Okay, what do you want to know?"

"Where's SwedeZon? Why isn't he here right now."

"That's a good question, so let's save it for later."

"No, tell me. And do you realize you do that so poorly?"

"Do what poorly?" The tight smile was reappearing. The origin of such an odd facial expression had to be repeated mental and verbal abuse as a child. Torquay imagined a childhood Jimmy sitting dejected in the corner of a foursquare court, his full bird looking perfectly naturally on a youthfully fat face, while a bunch of clean-shaven bullies dressed in crisp white shirts and skinny black ties mocked trimming their whiskers. The younger Jimmy's desire to play on the four-square court—the most addictive of playground games—caused him not to push back but just to internalize anger, slowly letting the dapper bullies wear themselves down with the monotony. You could only say "hairy pussy" in so



many amusing ways. But as the insults staled, and as Jimmy wrangled his emotions eventually the only things that remained were the occasional lazy jibe and that tight smile. It was a tightly honed reflex.

“I mean you’re terrible at ducking a question.”

The smile tightened. “You think so?”

“I think so, I think that if the definition of effectively ducking a question means you don’t answer and avoid answering until the questioner forgets. I haven’t forgot asking about what I’m doing here and I’m not forgetting that I just asked you where SwedeZon is.”

“Alright, alright,” Jimmy twisted the water bottle he was holding a little and sat down, “Look, Douglas and I had a fight and I didn’t want him to be here today because I didn’t think he would be contributing anything constructive today. He’s a fucking sweetheart but I don’t think he could be focused today.”

“But I don’t know, I know him. I don’t know you. And sometimes it seems like sometimes with this stuff I feel like I might need a translator with you. And he’s the only guy I know who speaks both of these languages.”

“He was preoccupied at the club. Did you notice that?”

“The warehouse?”

“Don’t you fucking correct me!” screamed Jimmy, leaping out of the chair and grabbing Torquay by the shirt, “Do you want my help?” He released Torquay abruptly and fell back into his chair, spinning around. “I’m sorry but you’re taking this confrontational stance with me and it’s making it difficult for me to talk or think. How am I supposed to make an impression in this state. What time is it?”

“I, uh...it’s 4:30.”

“I have 34 hours to get rid of this stress before we really begin the project.” He rubbed his eyes. “I’m sorry, I’m very sorry but I just jump my energy sometimes you know? Look, Douglas—the one you call SwedeZon—we had a heated private conversation, where he disagreed about the direction where I’ve been taking this exhibit.”

“Experiment or exhibit?”

“Excuse me?”

“This,” repeated Torquay slowly, “this what we’re doing right now, because you made it pretty clear that we’re in the middle of whatever experiment or performance or exhibit that you’ve been referencing, and this isn’t really a Mayflower experience for me in terms of enveloping art odysseys.”

“This is the slow sculpturing of a human being’s emotional faculties, and the slow inuring their emotions to the point where they question the purposes and motivations that saw them elect to try and marry sex, business, excitement and love.”

Torquay pounded on an imaginary table and scanned Jimmy’s face for a hint of a wink or inclusive wink. Jimmy’s face was stoic, however, and Torquay wasn’t really sure what to say.

“Are you going to say anything?”

“I’m sorry,” Torquay replied, “I’m waiting for a more clear answer.”

“Alright, well let me try and explain this in layman’s terms. The canvases of art have changed. It used to be normal canvases, stapled or tied to pieces of wood and those still exist, but they’re certainly not the egalitarian choice anymore. Not any kid with an image in his mind can just grab a canvas. Eventually, paper became cheaper and that became the easiest thing to flatten your mind onto. But the problem with paper is, with just the paper I mean, how do you get the people to see it? You can’t carry it

around to each and every person you think will appreciate it and try to get them to see it. So then there's the creation of a printing press, but that kind of doesn't solve nearly anything because what if you get unlucky and people with control of actual distribution make a mistake and don't think what you give them is any good? Jump ahead a little and the next mass shit is television and movies. Same problem.

Thank God for the Internet, because now we have an egalitarian and malleable medium to explore these questions that bore into our heads until we dig the bug out of the hole in our temple. And it's clearly changing how people compartmentalize their lives and how they structure perception of themselves, which is terrifying." Jimmy was quaking now, like a kid bleeding out a sugar high. "Terrifying, I mean, I think about things and don't remember them very quickly after seeing an image or hearing a piece of information. And now we're consigning the most intimate parts of ourselves to a pulsing cloud that is sightless but singses our fingers and stings the tops of our hair. So the point of this film will to be demonstrate that, armed with the power and information the cloud has absorbed about us, we will mentally erode a woman to the point of oblivion, at which point we'll pull her back before any serious psychological damage is incurred."

The last time that Torquay had driven on the highway, he had been stuck in a traffic jam on the arcing overpass that connected the highway coming from the airport to the highway coming from downtown. He had felt like he had been waiting in line on the top of an icy mountain. Apparently the president had been in town and security forces were diverting every single car in Los Angeles away from where the car needed to go. Without anything better to do, Torquay had started idly looking around at the cars surrounding him and he was surprised how far he could see and how many drivers he could glimpse. He felt immediately that everyone was looking at him. Not with hostility, but with the impassivity that was even more disturbing. And he felt that they were waiting for him to do something,

to turn his car suddenly and smash the luxury coupe sitting next to him. Or for him to get out of his car and start walking at a faster pace than the cars were moving, or to start climbing over the cars, leaping from windshield to windshield and smashing each into a spider web; just watching and expecting to see him do something; to lead but not be followed.

But after a few minutes of quietly disintegrating, he did nothing, and after another few minutes the cars had found a flow and began moving. Nevertheless, the feeling had shadowed him after he'd dropped the car off and even as he walked away from it.

The same feeling crept through his body now, and he wondered if perhaps it wouldn't be crazy to pick up the camera and film for a moment. His thumbs felt welded to his palms however.

"How confident are you that you know where oblivion is?" He whispered.

"I'm sorry?"

"How confident are you that you're certain where oblivion exists exactly for jidanji, or Susperia, or whatever her name is?"

"I'm certain because that point comes just after her eyes film over into wet cue balls and her nostrils start trying to sew themselves together. The spittle will fleck her thin mustache before beginning to petrify. I'll know, Torquay, I'll know."

"But you're going to do this on your own? I mean how will you keep a woman around long enough to complete the breakdown? Won't she just leave the minute she realizes that you're awful?"

"You see, that's the challenge of attempting this because we will be relying on any human elements. I'm sure that you had the same problem when you attempted to poison most of the population of downtown Los Angeles."

“I didn’t try to poison anyone! There was nothing imminently fatal in what we were serving!”

“So what were you trying to do?” asked Jimmy, steadily. “Were you attempting to deliberately hurt anyone?”

The public service of art was such a conundrum for Torquay, because he felt that the only means of getting people to care about contemporary art was to have it harangue the people, to prod first instead and, if probing was too much, have it prod only. This project—it had not been named, yet, not branded in the normal sense, not created—was boldly and petulantly haranguing, and the prospect deeply intrigued the cruel procreative instincts in Torquay. He could imagine himself becoming preoccupied in the life of the project, which obliged him to become ambivalent to the other things around him.

But then he felt the venom that had been showered upon him for his first mistake, an asphyxiating serum that rendered him dumb and blind in front of a canvas or a computer. He had so hoped just to find a wall again, but the anonymity of spraying his forgotten logo on chipped brick felt impossible to go back to. There was always a certain amount of collateral in good invention.

“I never meant to hurt anyone,” Torquay declared, gathering up his things, “Because even while I guaranteed the opposite, I was sure no one would ever allow themselves to be hurt, or ever allow themselves to be hurt by me.”

There was an interview with a linguist and sometimes graffiti artist, alias Scion, that Torquay had read some time ago. In it, the former had said:

*I think there’s a moment that hits every mugger, every murderer and every bully while they commit a crime. I do not think that this moment happens the first time they violate the law, or the ethics of society. I don’t think it happens very often the second time they do it, or the third, fourth, fifth, etc. I*

*think there's a moment that occurs well after they master their craft that is more cathartic the more odious their transgression. I think that moment is when the violator leans back and stares hard at their victim and wonders, perhaps aloud or perhaps not, "Why are you letting me do this to you?" I think that implicit in that statement is the inherent weakness of the criminal, for if anyone stepped in and said "stop," they would not have the necessary fortitude to go forward.*

Torquay had read that either in the waiting room of the doctor's office where he received a physical in preparation for jail or during the cab ride over to the police station in order to turn himself in. He'd asked Sydney G to save it, so Torquay could read it again once he came out.

"But were you surprised when they did? Were you disappointed or hurt?" Asked Jimmy doubtfully. "I mean, I ask because in order for this to work, I'll need you to be the second suitor. If I understand the women whom frequent the site correctly, then I have to believe that there's never a time where they're seeing someone exclusively, and that they alter their personality and their approach for each person. If there are two of us, we'll be able to exchange information freely, and thus form a more complete picture of exactly whom Suspiria is. To her it will appear as if we're psychic, which will simultaneously scare her and ensnare her. She won't be able to walk away because we'll be finishing her sentences for her, outwitting her in contests that she won't even understand."

"Conversation as competition," chimed Torquay.

"Exactly."

Torquay began to pull his things together, thinking hard. "What time did she say she was willing to meet?"

Jimmy perked up a little bit. "Two in the morning at Pete's in downtown. You said you knew it?"

"Yeah, I know it. I was there with SwedeZon not too long ago, actually. But I told you that."

“Right, right. Shit. Sometimes I have absolutely the most atrocious memory. It’s awful. But are you going to be there?”

“I’m not sure.”

Jimmy sighed and shook his head; one who despised indecisiveness or consideration of any sort. “We’ll, if you do decide to show up, I would appreciate it if you showed up at the restaurant at one, so we could have an hour for going over logistics. Just in case, I’m going to find some hidden mics and cameras so that I’ll get something recorded regardless.” Jimmy got up and, taking Torquay’s arm and raising it to shaking position, grasped Torquay’s fingers in an oddly jovial pump.

“I will expect and look forward to having you there by my side. Douglas—the one you call SwedeZon—was right about you. You have a certain aura that is razor sharp, just cuts through glass and diamond. It’s nice when he’s right about things.” With that Jimmy strode out of the room, waving two fingers over his shoulder as he went. Torquay lingered for a few minutes, choosing a few colorful t-shirts and several pairs of khakis to steal, before beginning the walk back to his apartment.

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It took five calls for SwedeZon to finally pick up his phone and when he answered, his voice sounded as if his nose was plugged with two moist cotton balls.

“Hello?”

“Douglas?”

“Jimmy?”

“Shit, no, I mean I’m sorry, of course I meant to call you SwedeZon but I just spent the afternoon with Jimmy and some of his habits are beginning to rub off on me.”

“Please don’t make calling me Douglas one of them.”

Torquay snorted. “Do you think that you’ll ever change your name?”

“That seems like an awful lot of trouble to get a few dozen people to refer to me by my performing name. I can just introduce myself. I mean, the only people that really have to change their name are people that wear name tags to work, like athletes and suit salesmen.”

“Well, I guess you’re right there.”

“It’s strange,” breathed SwedeZon, his voice clearing up a little.

“What?”

“You’re being nice to me.”

“Let’s not get excited,” Torquay tried to say sternly. “But there’s definitely a time when you need to award your sycophants.”

“What?”

“Never mind, forget I said that word. But I wanted to tell you what happened today. Jimmy told me about his project.”

“He did? He hasn’t even really told me all that much yet, just something about fixing the discoloration of technology.”

“Is that what he really said?” asked Torquay.

“Well I can’t be certain of what he said exactly, but I know it was about reversing or eradicating the discoloration created of by technology.”



“Discoloration?”

“I think that’s what he said. But I have a really sketchy memory. I am sure that the way he explained it to me was how when you’re walking down the street at night and you look up at the street lights and how they’re orange. Black should absorb everything, but somehow the orange of the street light kind of silts over the sky, and that it makes the night sickly.”

“Doesn’t he have a Twitter account?”

“Yeah, but everyone’s on the Internet, Torquay. I bet that the Amish have a website somewhere, although they probably have to pay someone to maintain it for them. But what did he say about the project, what are we doing?”

“He didn’t really say whether or not you had to do anything, but I think you’ll get a mention in the film.”

“You think?”

“It was definitely discussed.”

“Ah, finally. And that’s really great and all, and if that’s what I get, awesome, but I’d really like to be in the film if at all possible, you know?”

“I’m not editing the film, Swede, I’m just consulting on it, remember?”

“Of course, I’m sorry, I’ll just...you know we’ll see. You were saying what you guys were doing.”

“I was having difficulty understanding completely, but I’ll do my best to paraphrase it as best I can. Have you ever heard of Match.com, or any of those other sites?”

“Sure I have, I mean, I’ve seen the ads on TV and shit.”

“Right, well today Jimmy took me to his studio...”

“The painting studio?”

“No, the one that looks like the thrift store inside the original headquarters of Motown records.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind.” Torquay could feel himself getting impatient. “It’s just like a room of fancy clothes that Jimmy uses to fashion identities for himself to use on these dating sites.”

“What is his next piece going to be ... actually killing someone?”

“No, not that bad I don’t think, but the site he’s using is this thing called Basic Liaisons. It’s like a website where married guys go to have affairs.”

“You mean like SugarBabies.com?” Asked SwedeZon. The congestion was still present in his voice, but he sounded like he was moving around now.”

“Which one?” Torquay paused, confused.

“That’s the one where coeds log on and find an older wealthy guy who might be willing to fund their tuition or pay for dance classes or bartending college.”

“No, I think the one he showed me was more for professional women, I mean, it was customizable. The pages for the women, I mean. But he logged onto the site while I was filming and he found a girl named Suspiria and started messaging her. They have a date tomorrow night late and Jimmy thinks that he’ll be able to massage it so that she’ll start going out with me after I make a profile. Once that happens we’re going to start trying out some mental tricks on her and see how far we can go.”

“Oh, I mean, he could’ve have asked me.”

“You’re too young to look anything like a man trying to have an affair.”

“But isn’t Jimmy younger than me?”

“I don’t know, we haven’t really gotten to that point where we’re talking about our ages or anything. Remember that he’s a Sikh, and most beards, when fully grown, add a decade to your perceived age.”

“Maybe I should grow a beard then.”

“You’re blond. It will just look like a duckling’s unsettling fuzz. But shut up and keep listening. He’s meeting this woman at Pete’s. Do you remember Pete’s?”

“Sure, it’s the last place that we sat down and had one of our little chats about art and life.”

“Well, it was probably the first time that that has happened, but yeah, the place with my nemesis the waiter. That’s where the date is; she suggested it. Two o’clock and I’m going to be there, filming ... filming and scouting. Deciding what I’m going to do with her, how I’ll play the whole thing.”

“Incredible! Your comeback has arrived!” It filled Torquay with satisfaction to hear someone else celebrating his good fortune. The incentives and beloved habits he’d entertained while a part of the community began filtering out of his mind, at the same time the doubts about the despicability of what he was doing leaked out. He remembered free coffee and doughnuts at the Risky Riser whenever a new one of his murals went up around downtown. There were the free bottles of Cavalier Whisky next door at Wingtip’s whenever one of his murals was painted over. There were the local punk bands that lauded him in improvised songs on Tuesdays at P.S. 145, where the owner made key lime pie and every menu was pasted on the inside of a taped-together comic book.

On Mondays he could rely on free gourmet hot dogs at WuertzKutch, although never even at the height of his *Gogol Symphony Trilogy* reign of terror on the local billboards was he ever able to swing free beer. That was okay, though, because there was always a rapper or a TV actress who wanted their living room spruced up with a portrait that included a few tigers and panthers, or angels and cherubs. They paid well enough to enjoy a few beers and maybe a little extra time with a dancer at Seventh Veil who appreciated the artistic types. Then there were those Judiths, who walked around with dancing pupils and laughed every time Torquay told a joke to a bartender he wasn't going to tip. Those girls who bounced in their flats in rhythm with Torquay's motorcycle boots.

"I guess maybe we can start thinking about a return. But I'm calling you because I believe I'll need you there for the date, which I'm sure will be no real problem for you."

"Okay, I'm really glad that you've called."

"I am glad to be sharing such good news, too."

"No," SwedeZon's voice caught for a moment, a little hitch of trepidation, "I mean you saved me the exertion of picking up the phone and dialing."

"What are you talking about?"

"Wait, wait," the hitches were coming fast now, and Torquay felt that he might start screaming if his would-be protégé did anything rash like start crying, "I should ask before I say anything whether or not you watched the video I sent you?"

"Which video?"

"The dance routine, the choreographed bit that took us hours and hours to get right. You know I hired those dancers right the night I saw you, right?"

“That wasn’t your own crew?”

“No, no, they were these guys I got from the local arts high school. They look so big now, and I only graduated like three or four years ago.”

“But, but they weren’t a part of your crew or anything? They don’t tell you how great your work is or how much they respect your endearing, boa constrictor focus?”

“Well, they definitely liked my shit. Definitely liked it. And I paid them a flat fee for their work, so then I had them come with me to give you the tape because it seemed appropriate, you know?”

“Um, I didn’t feel like doing anything specific.” It seemed hazy now and Torquay looked around his apartment for the stray clue. There were the big band records, still strewn across the floor—he thought about the preaching he’d done on behalf of big band, trying to get a few punk bands to cover a song or two, Iggy covering Artie. There was the journal, but the idea of flipping it open suddenly felt revolting. And there was the bag of blue powder, nesting on the too-nice coffee table.

“You thinking about the Judith stuff?” said SwedeZon knowingly, commiserating.

“Yes, yes! How did you know that?” Panic devoured him. “How the fuck did you know about that stuff? How the fuck did you know about the stuff, you fucking mongoloid, you less than shit, you lower than the fucking pond scum?”

“I liked French dip for a time.” SwedeZon said, not threateningly, but matter-of-factly. “I liked to really soak it when I got the chance, so that the texture was like pieces of gum stuck together that were beginning to disintegrate. Nothing worse than dry, grungy French dip.”

The peculiarity of meeting one of the customers for the first time diffused any fear Torquay felt, and he thought that what was occurring was a unique feeling for any artist. Performance artists who

manipulate the audience in a way that's a sweetly a coerced partnership can never meet those people again ... their victims. They're not supposed to stare into their eyes and wonder if it's right to ask why they let you do that to them. Movie directors, actors, regular artists, musicians and writers don't feel the same because they aren't there, for the most part, when their work is served up to the consumer.

"You didn't tell me that you were there."

"I was. I used to love that place in high school, I'd go there between getting off school and preparing to go the art studio. I mean, I've never seen a restaurant with such a devoted base. You chose the right spot for your experiment, no doubt."

"That wasn't a statement," answered Torquay quietly, "I mean you didn't tell you were there. Why?"

"I mean, it's not like I was so hypnotized that I ate what was put on my plate. I think the cover sandwich I ordered was hummus and cabbage—which would have been disgusting enough done straight, but I think you and your helpers went the extra mile and made the hummus with Reese's Pieces cereal soaked in rancid milk instead of chickpeas. I took a bite and I thought it was the sourest thing I'd ever tasted. I didn't go to the hospital or anything like that—that was mostly just crack heads who were so zonked out that they really weren't aware at all what they were eating and ingested whatever they had put in front of them."

"Does that mean the experiment didn't work?" asked Torquay with a little humor.

"No, but I think you exposed a well-known correlation between being high and eating total shit. And you made the papers." SwedeZon paused. "I haven't known that many people that made the papers."

"Well, when you saw me in the papers, did you want to kill me?"

“No, I felt more like I could do a better job than you, at some point you know? I mean, I used to stand by the community posting board in high school and I would either play my trumpet or I would read poetry and I would get some comments and maybe a little change. So after the stomach stuff went away a little, I started doing my own little performances. And I figured that until I reached the level above you then I would position myself to best know you, since you were my best reference as someone in the community.”

“I need you to be at Pete’s for that date.” Said Torquay.

“But we haven’t finished talking about Judith.”

The relationship was one that had derived its strength from the funny stories that Torquay and Judith had shared. Torquay’s initial pick-up of Judith had included a spirited argument about the relative merits of specific Jane Austen novels, none of which Torquay had ever read. Their first date was to a Nostalgia Night at the Greek Theater.. Their second date had taken place at a bar called Tiki-Ti, which was only open four days a week and only played Rolling Stones songs. There wasn’t a bar, just a menu consisting of tropical drinks, the recipes for which were a carefully guarded secret of the owner. They’d ordered electric-blue Zombies, and Torquay had wasted no time in spilling his all over Judith’s white skirt. He thought it was over, that he had just committed the type of fatal *faux pas* that doomed him to chuckling memory. They left early and he’d called the next day to apologize again. Judith had suggested they meet for coffee and showed up wearing the skirt, electric blue stain still conspicuous on the front. She’d bought the coffee and, when Torquay had begun to think he’d escaped with a miracle, she’d spilled the rest of Torquay’s cup all over his light gray jeans. He’d stood up in rage until he saw her giggling, which prompted him to start giggling too. They’d spent the rest of the day walking around museums and parks, sticking their stains out at strangers.

Judith's natural mischievousness meant that she'd taken to Torquay's strange method of performing with all of his gusto, but none of his self-seriousness. She took time off from waitressing and doing makeup at the mall to help him design costumes for public performances of his one-act play "Bungle," a winking treatise about male incapability in the bedroom. ("Based on true events!" She'd yelled during the first performance, to his dismay). Though she had a fear of heights, she would help him paste canvases when the climb wasn't too much for her. They liked to drink, and liked to look up new recipes to spring on bartenders on special nights. When Torquay's pieces had started to develop into more of a challenge for the audience, and eventually took a more aggressive bent, Judith had agreed to play test subject.

It was inuring, then, when a relationship built on inside humor was felled by a bad punch line. Judith had her reservations about the great Phillippe's food flip, described by her later as "just one rung below prank and just one above failed magic trick," and had suggested the day before they were set to carry out the plan that the whole thing be called off. By this time, Judith was an artist, with her own following in the community, and her comments about Torquay's increasingly more moralistic pieces were starting to sound weary and hard. But the image of the cockroach scuttling across the top of his gold and purple shoe, more and more grotesque in Torquay's mind as his planning became more and more focused, could not be banished or belittled. He had thrown the supplies at Judith's feet and told her they were going.

While loading the car and waiting for the cameraman to arrive, Torquay had described his idea as "total art," which implied both seamless combining of media and a threat to subjugate all of those that came in contact with the experiment.

Torquay had spent hours wondering how much Judith had actually helped in preparing the food or interviewing the guests. There was certainly something wrong about her very appearance and stay at



Phillippe's, but Torquay had become so absorbed in concocting and watching customers that she had just drifted into a corner to stare listlessly while he threw slop together with garbage, waiting for the moment to say that she was right, and he was wrong.

Torquay had walked out of the courthouse and Judith had been waiting for him, with purple stripes in her hair and hawkish make-up like war paint smeared on flat side of a shield. They'd gone home together, put on the old records, and cooked each other's favorite dishes. They hadn't made love because Torquay complained that he was too tired. Torquay woke up after twelve hours to find a two egg sandwiches resting on plates in the middle of the studio floor. One had two bites, small enough to seem like just one. The door hadn't been shut with enough force to close entirely. He hadn't called.

"Why would I want to talk to you about her?" asked Torquay, suspiciously.

"She fell out of the community along with you, Torquay. She couldn't sell anything else anymore, and the ignominy of working at a department store or a restaurant again was a too much for her."

"Is she still painting?" Torquay asked stiffly.

"Not really with a brush," responded SwedeZon slowly, "I think a wordsmith would describe what she's doing as a form of painting, but I don't think she's using any sort of regular oils or brushes, or anything like that."

"Can you ever give me anything straight?"

"I'm fairly certain," SwedeZon's voice had become maddeningly conspiratorial, and if Torquay had been feeling chummy before, the feeling was evaporating quickly. The implication in the voice was that whatever was going to be said was going to bring the two men together, on equal footing, "That she is paid for her *company*."

“Fuck your explanation. Meet me at Pete’s tomorrow at two in the morning. We can talk there if you actually have any significant shit to say.” Torquay hung up, another fancy ruined. He shrugged; their age gap had been too wide for him anyway.

Company? Perhaps she’d become a therapist, or a psychic? There had been veiled talk in the past about the two of them going back to school, when commissions had taken longer than normal to appear and there were no parties, a set of circumstances that made Torquay and Judith feel dangerously useless, utterly lacking in anything interesting to gloat over at brunches. The psychics were something kitschy to appeal to the hipster kids downtown, something they could do drunk at four in the morning and laugh about smoking weed the next morning.

He called Sydney G but got no answer. “This is the rotate-dial of Sydney Greenstreet. There will be a beep in a moment. I suggest you start talking after it.”

“Sydney, I realize that our last meeting, whether you re aware of it or not, went about as well as any coerced surrender could have. Since you were the victor, and applying your terms ruthlessly and effectively to suit your needs, I can’t expect you to have even the slightest amount of reasonable empathy. But we can agree that it did not go well, although I thank you for coming, which I didn’t do earlier, so sorry. I’m ambling, not really rambling. To the point ... Tomorrow at two o’clock in the morning I will be reentering the community quietly and with dignity, but forcefully. It is the first footage in a performance film. I would like for you and Yulia, as well as those two eyeless dolts from before, to be there so we can talk as friends and colleagues.

I’m looking forward to seeing you. As ever, Torquay. Can you feel impending installation? Can you feel it, my friend?”

He hung up and dialed Yulia, who didn't answer either. They were probably together, sitting across from each other and speaking in their own varied language while their phones vibrated in the next room, pointedly ignored.

"Yulia. Torquay. It is Torquay, I mean. I'm calling, although I'm also the subject of what I'm about to say. I just left an extended message for Sydney G and since I'm sure you'll listen to either message together on speakerphone, I'll try and paraphrase what I said there on here. No disrespect intended, naturally. But I think it's safe to say that our prior meeting went nowhere near according to plan. It was not bitter, but there was an undercurrent of resentment flowing through the dialogue surrounding the basketball game and my reentry into the greater Los Angeles performers community, per your blessing. I am calling you to inform that tomorrow night at two in the morning—at Pete's, shit I may have missed that—at Pete's near my place I will be reintroducing myself into the community. I'm still uncertain about when we started calling it a community, but I will be returning to it nevertheless. I would be honored if you and Sydney could come so that I can explain what precisely my new project entails and start discussing some gallery space.

"I feel like I'm going to start creating again. Maybe creating by destructing, we have really gotten into the theme of symbiosis yet. Put that down as potential conversation material for our chat.

"Of course I've gone over the allotment of time I gave myself! So sorry, I hope the two of you listen to both messages, to remind you of the time. That time, naturally, is two in the morning at Pete's near my place. We used to do cappuccino and tiramisu there. All good things happen after two o'clock is what a drinking buddy of mine used to say."

The fact that Torquay was arriving back to the neighborhood, to the community (when had they started calling it that?), without knowing where exactly he had come from, left Torquay with the sensation that he had been conscripted, or crawled out of a cave on the other side of a mountain that

he had initially meant to climb but had instead fallen into. He knew and felt inside that he was Torquay, maker of things and disruptor of other things, but he was suffering from lack of total recall. His panic came from not knowing exactly what he had done with the time and his despair derived from the knowledge of his waste of the time. The dash of optimism that perhaps he'd done something wonderful with the time did nothing to alleviate his feelings, but rather as a catalyst for more acute pain.

He finished pushing the table up against the wall and began to pile his belongings around it. He took the pots and pans from their places in the cupboard and shoved them underneath. He stripped the sheets from his bed and wrapped them around the top, tying them in thick knots around the legs. He dragged the mattress off of the box spring and tried balancing it on top of the kitchen table but couldn't manage the trick, instead choosing to lean it against the adjacent slab of wall. He stacked his pillows in a neat pile on top and positioned the big band records right next to them. He stacked his chairs around the table before balancing his books one-by-one in a little wall around his haphazard fort. Deciding that the books would require extra fortification, Torquay pulled his couch in front of everything, followed by his canvas easy chair—the most uncomfortable piece of furniture he owned—and the metal trash can. Searching for space on the table-top, Torquay managed to find space to rest his antique Smith-Corona typewriter and backgammon set. He put a picture of himself – standing on a boat holding a boom box as if he'd dragged in from the sea – on top of the records. He took a picture of Judith sitting with her back to the camera and placed it facedown on the pillows. He rolled up his rugs and threw them next to the mattress. Tiny pieces of miscellany—pens, notepads with nothing in them, old scorecards from public golf courses, lamps, scarves and rolled-up posters—he tried to stuff next to pots and pans under the table. The last thing Torquay threw onto the pile was a set of classic golf clubs, a collection of Wilson Arnold Palmers with wooden drivers painted red. After thinking, Torquay couldn't fathom where he had possibly got them, or the last time he had even played.

He selected the largest of the drivers from the bag, leaning everything else up against his mattress. He then nestled out a place for himself on the couch, hugging the driver to his chest and gradually, calmly fell asleep.

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When Torquay awoke he didn't bother checking for any messages, knowing that there wouldn't really be any that he wanted to hear. He checked the time: 9:00 p.m. It was dark out and Torquay wondered if he had slept through a storm whose residual clouds had blocked out the waning light. He had four hours until he was supposed to meet Jimmy at Pete's.

Torquay couldn't think of anything he needed to bring, grabbing only a notebook and pen from the fort. He considered bringing the driver, turning it in his hands to feel the weight, but dropped it to the floor. As he was walking out he noticed the little bag of blue that SwedeZon had given him the night of the warehouse party. He pocketed it, slamming the door behind him. He took the steps in the stairwell two at a time, dinking his way past a couple of kids loitering in the stairwell and a harried graduate student hauling her clean clothes up from the laundry sanctum.

With nowhere to go, Torquay began walking up towards 7<sup>th</sup>. Pete's was six blocks away, on 4<sup>th</sup>, but at this time it would probably be crowded even though everything else felt abandoned. He didn't have much money for a drink, which made the idea of haunting the bar while he waited for Jimmy feel embarrassing. There would be fashionable people at Pete's—bank executives and the odd movie person—and Torquay didn't much feel like enduring their curious glances. He imagined the stories about him they would concoct in their heads, stories to explain his being alone, his particular choice of drink.

No, a more destitute place would have to do for killing time. He passed 6<sup>th</sup> and kept walking towards 5<sup>th</sup>, past the derelict jewelry stores and the old movie palaces that had been turned into Big

Lots and seedy nightclubs. He felt an odd fascination with those places, how the patrons were either underage or grossly overage but never in between. There was one called Blink's, on 7<sup>th</sup> and Hope. It was housed inside the carcass of the old Orpheum Theater.

He hit the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> but didn't look down the street towards Pete's, keeping his eyes focused dead ahead. He could see the 101 Highway overpass and the infinity of car headlights squeezed in between crumbling concrete barriers. Everyone appeared to have agreed to meet there tonight and party silently in their cars, waving and winking to each other from behind dirty glass.

He reached 3<sup>rd</sup> and made a quick left, looking over his shoulder as he hustled across the street to make sure there weren't any garbage trucks bearing down on him. He walked past a row of cars and tried hard not to peek at himself in the windows. When he was a child his seat at the dining table had been across from a mirror. Years of staring at himself growing up had transformed Torquay into a mild narcissist, so that when he walked down the street he found himself glancing at every car window he passed to see if he looked right, to check that his nose hadn't slipped down a few centimeters and that his eyes hadn't started to drift away from each other. After passing one window he'd look down at his feet and brush his hair and then look up at the next window to see if he hadn't missed a strand.

Up on the next corner was a bail bond shop, which stood next to a thrift store that also specialized in selling used adventure books. Next to the thrift store was a half-full parking lot. Pushed back behind the lot was an old ranch-style building painted yellow with gray brick framing the large brown double doors. The green neon sign above the entrance flashed "Phillippe's."

Torquay walked through the brown double doors and looked around the main cafeteria. The normal dinner crowd had long departed and the only diners were a tourist couple wearing matching trucker caps with "Ghost of L.A. Tour" stamped on the front. They had finished their French dip

sandwiches and were sharing an aged piece of pecan pie, carefully allowing one another to cut off a bit before going in for their piece. They weren't smiling but looked happy.

Torquay scanned the floor, trying to detect any movement. The harsh lights made every cranny visible, and Torquay couldn't see if anything lurking beneath the plastic furniture. Unable to remember if he had a favorite table, Torquay opted for the one closest to the door. There weren't any baseball games going on, so the ancient television sets in each corner were showing an old movie in which every scene appeared to consist of men in trench coats and ill-fitting derbies peering through windows and around corners.

"Hey, man" called a burly white guy with muttonchops and fish tattoos on his forearms called, "You have to order up here at the counter. This ain't the Ritz and you ain't royalty." He chuckled but grew serious when he saw Torquay unmoving, rooted to his chair. "I'm serious dude, if you want something you have to come tell it to me." Muttonchops glanced up at the clock. "And you better be quick about it, too, because we're supposed to close soon and there's some cleaning up we have to do."

Torquay got up and shuffled to the counter. Muttonchops, his patience waning, rolled his eyes and rotated his hands. *Come on, come on.* Torquay glanced up at the menus. They hadn't changed, remaining painted on the back of old railroad-crossing signs. The food hadn't changed either: French dip sandwiches, burgers, coleslaw, mac and cheese, chips and pieces of pie. No fries, which probably angered the fatter patrons who waddled through the doors. The only thing missing was the old chalkboard where the specials used to be advertised.

"Waddya want?" asked Muttonchops, pen poised.

"No nametag?" Asked Torquay slowly.

Muttonchops glanced down at his shirt before shaking his head. "Don't do that anymore. Most of the people who come in here know our names anyway." He swiveled his eyes towards Torquay's face. "You look like a sandwich would be exactly what the doctor ordered."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you look like a stiff breeze would knock you over. The inside of your jacket must be tickling your rib bones. Now come on, what do you want?"

"What is your name?"

Muttonchops squinted. "Marcus."

Marcus Muttonchops. "Where is your health board rating?" Asked Torquay nonchalantly.

Marcus Muttonchops smirked. "So you've heard about that? The fiasco with the rotten food and those crazy artists? That happened way before I got here, they fired most of the people who were around for that."

"Really? So who's the manager now?"

Marcus Muttonchops jabbed his chest with the pen. "You're looking at him." He shook his head. "Jesus, the balls, you know?"

"What?"

"I mean the balls on some people. I mean, I'm an artist myself. I do some landscapes and a little tattooing on the weekends, but I can't really understand what the fuck they... him? It might have been one guy. But I don't have a clue what they were driving at."

"So you don't really think performance art is art?"



“I mean, I think there’s plenty of room for some funny performance art,” replied Marcus Muttonchops earnestly, “Just last week I saw the Youtube video of Mami Kotak giving birth in her gallery. Two hundred people in the room! Someone in the comments said they were there and that the whole time she was screaming ‘The highest form of art!’ at the top of her lungs. I don’t know if I could have sat through the whole thing, but I thought that she had a point. She was creating something, and chances are that it was going to be symmetrical one way or the other.”

“Is that why you have the same fish tattoo on both arms?” Asked Torquay.

“Mostly, although I did the design myself and I liked it so much that I figured I should get at least two of it.”

“Do you think that when people get tattoos they should always do it symmetrically?”

Marcus Muttonshops shrugged. “It’s not the worst idea in the world, but body art is a pretty individual jam, so I can’t really tell people what’s right and what’s wrong for their body canvas.”

Torquay nodded pensively, staring down at his shoes. “What did you say you’re health rating was?”

Marcus Muttonchop tapped the front of desk, just above the familiar white sign with a big blue A painted in the middle. “Flying colors, my man, flying colors.” He peered a little closer at Torquay. “Did you come in here to order something or not?”

Torquay shook his head. “I guess not.” He gazed around the room. The tourist couple had finished eating their pie and had started gathering up their things. Torquay looked again at their hats. “Have you ever been on that tour?” He asked.

“What, Ghosts of L.A.? Hell no, man. Too weird for me. I mean it’s quirky in a really creepy way. I actually live right by where the tour begins, on Fountain and Crescent. Apparently the lady who played the 50-foot woman used to live in the corner house. Real eccentric ... one of those types that drove away everybody towards the end. A hoarder. Used to think that people were stalking her when, you know, who would stalk the 50-foot woman except for Rod Sterling or something? But I guess she died and no one checked on her for months, so gradually the body mummified beneath all of the old newspapers and teddy bears and shit. I don’t think the house is actually haunted or anything, but the story is still pretty creepy, you know?”

The woman had heard Marcus Muttonchops talking and shot him an irritated look as they walked out the door. Marcus responded by giving them an overly jovial wave, but refrained from yelling out anything.

“Is this on the tour?”

Marcus Muttonchops squinted at Torquay like he was crazy. “What? No. No one died here.”

“But something bad happened here, didn’t it?” asked Torquay, desperately, placing both of his hands on the counter.

“Are you still talking about the stupid poisoning thing? That was a prank gone wrong, dude. I mean, it’s a dark mark for performance art, for sure, but nothing really bad happened. Just a few stray newspaper clips and a few people spending a night in the hospital. Now ...” Muttonchops leaned towards Torquay conspiratorially, “If the dipshit had really wanted to get some attention, he would’ve gotten some beef with a little E. Coli sprinkled in. Then there might have been a couple of ghosts running around here, looking for blood. I wouldn’t work here though, the ignominy of it would have been too much.”

“But isn’t that the point of anything cool these days?” asked Torquay? “To be so stupid, so painfully weird and uncool so as to not be cool anymore? Something is only cool if it triggers our sense of embarrassment and discomfort?”

“No, shot brother,” answered Muttonchops firmly. “Your definition of cool should be reconsidered.”

“If someone had died, would the Great Phillippe’s Food Poisoning, the Dry Fish Affair have been cool?”

“I definitely would have endured. Now are you going to order anything?”

Torquay stared at Muttonchops for a long time, long enough for the server to put down his pen and retreat into the back room, where Torquay could hear pots and pans clanging in the large industrial sink and voices, Marcus Muttonchops and unfamiliar ones, insulting him without imagination. He began to shake his head, turning and leaving quickly.

The lights and the sign stayed on as he walked out, and the night felt like a door closing on him. It was warm, and Torquay had the distinct feeling that the air was getting stickier, as if the clouds had sucked up a corn syrup factory. Though he had been retracing his past, he felt neither the remorse that he thought would slip in between his fingers and toes when he walked into the restaurant. He did feel scared, but not the nauseating senselessness of terror. Just the lowly ache of trepidation, anxiety about how his past would begin informing the singularity of the events in his future. He peered around for the couple with their matching hats.

Ghosts were not completely wards of the occult, but just memories howling under the weight of consideration. Except for the cars rustling along the highway, Torquay could hear nothing. Seeing a gas

station, he walked towards it and, feeling no eyes on him, broke into a full run. He skidded in front of the glass doors and poked his head in.

10:30. Feeling antsy while time peeled away.

There was a frustration building inside of him, a wondering whether there would be a moment of catharsis in his career. Because that is a moment that compels people to create, or to destroy and call it creation. That constant search was what he had signed up for. He was chagrined that he was realizing, just now, that no stock moments of catharsis existed in his field, there was nothing preordained that he could cultivate for his artistic satisfaction. If he had started acting, or directing, or writing, there would be awards he could be nominated for – and if he was good enough – win. In regular art he could always look toward a sales price as an indicator of his success; climatic moments of satisfaction.

Though admitting it would have been death to his perceived artistic integrity, Torquay yearned for the structure inherent in these chains of moments. Though he had conditioned himself and others to scoff at the idea of “goals” and the practical acts that supported the terminology of “goals,” he felt envious of those who could easily articulate and accept these things. There was a dumb thrill in running a mile in seven minutes or completing the basics of learning a language. If you weren’t affected, there was a thrill in getting somewhere in twenty minutes when it should take thirty.

Where did these moments come from when your work was ethereal, so sudden that it was constantly in danger? A picture on the warehouse wall could be painted over, and the picture of it could be deleted to make way for more pictures of things that would be covered up. Torquay’s organs sank because he realized that memory was not enough for him. He was too voracious to be sustained only on the mental. He was too clumsy to explain exactly his visions. He wanted them interpreted by second and third parties; the grandiosity added in for him after the fact.

He thought about returning to the restaurant and taking one of the signs inside, throwing a bottle at the neon sign. Torquay's work was a palimpsest, easily written, erased and written over. He was flattered to believe that whatever was at the top of the moment had tiny vestiges of what came before within it, but it was difficult to know. It was difficult to know if the chain of elephants that Jimmy had painted would appear, however slightly, in the next thing that popped on the wall. They certainly wouldn't appear when the building got demolished, save for the single pink brick perched atop the rubble.

Muttonchops had been onto something when he'd described the woman who had given birth as a demonstration; there was at least a slight guarantee of endurance there. That particular piece, if mixed right, would live for several decades. It would, willingly or not, take on vestiges of its creators and predecessors. Why hadn't he insisted that Judith leave her birth control home one day? He was a man, so his age didn't matter. It was kind of stylish for an older man to have kids. He could have described the feeling as "refined patriarchy" to Sydney G and Yulia, who might have been godparents to the little girl or little boy (or little of both?). They wouldn't be now, thought Torquay with vehemence, they'd missed that boat. Any seed of his wouldn't have a shared credit, unless maybe he could give it to SwedeZon. If this most recent project came off, maybe he'd give the title to Jimmy. It would be a more unique gift than some champagne or a watch ... more exclusive, too. It might be just the kind of thing to forge a substantial alliance within the community. There couldn't be anger or animosity if there was an ickle junebug hanging over the proceedings.

But who to have it with? Judith would have been a fantastic mother, Torquay was sure, alleviating the pressure his myriad schemes would put on the child, reminding them that it wasn't just a prodigal experiment, stroking its hair while Torquay stomped around the nursery in frustration at a missed note or a missed shot. She'd have spontaneous activities in mind to break the monotony created

by cycles of classes and lessons. She would indulge the cherub's clandestine dreams that flew in the face of Torquay's solutions. She would've have been the best confidante, the most graceful ally. Once they had gone to a party where a great man of the people was there as were parents and dog owners, whose chief pleasure in conversation was pretending to complain about the idiosyncrasies of their dependents. They ate too much junk food. They talked back. They were taken ill every week. They'd started cursing. They said they hated you. Judith had responded by saying that never, ever could she imagine herself becoming a parent or visiting a kennel with the intention to adopt. The idea of becoming totally obliged to another thing was antithetical to everything that she wanted to do, then and down the road.

But Torquay had known she didn't mean it, and indeed the absent look that appeared in her eye when talking about matronly things had shocked him. The impulse seemed ordinary, an unwanted bridge between her and other women who couldn't hope to compare to her. At first it had been frighteningly unattractive, and their sex began to be punctuated in his mind with a discomforting possibility. He had felt it perfectly within his capabilities to walk out if she ever walked into the room, hair done up in a smart bun, mouth creased in a determined frown and declared that their two was three. Then he could have done it, renounced the thing like Arthur Miller and so many other greats had done before him. Judith would have been instantly transformed into a story, one that he couldn't tell until his very old age, in repentance to the people who still loved him. And even then he would not have been seeking her forgiveness but theirs, the proffered atonement to those right in front of him, and it still would have seemed as if Judith had barely existed.

He knew that it had been the reason he had been shying away from her, distancing himself coolly and methodically. As her skill and acclaim as an artist had grown, Judith had pressed more and more for the two of them to collaborate on something: a film, a painting, a triptych, a two-person play, anything would have been acceptable. It would have been a test of his collaborative skill and patience—

the two most pertinent skills for a parent. He had always been wary of her shrewdness, her analytical and photographic memory that could absorb and synthesize information quickly and efficiently. The mistakes of any collaborative effort would have been recalled effortlessly in the theater of parenting, any success would be selectively forgotten. That vindictive bitch would have been a treat.

She had kept pushing and cajoling, increasing her own output as Torquay's creative output had eroded, his ideas dried up. She had tried to extend her domain within the apartment, imperiously shutting off the big band music if she thought it was interfering with work. Chores were neglected, and he often found himself cleaning up after her. She began acting like a child to prompt the discussion of having one, demanding long appraisals of her work, seemingly every day; sessions that required Torquay to sit cross-legged in the center of the apartment and stare at increasingly more esoteric pieces and try to come up with something substantial to say, even as his ability to critique became more fragile from the strain of his own lack of creation.

He hadn't respected her commitment as a performance artist, and as an artist in general. Her preferred medium was canvas—which she considered classical even though most of the things she painted evoked cheesy movies and dime store novels. She could perform in public, and if she harbored any hatred for confronting normal people, she had done a perfect job hiding it. But she wasn't as vicious as Torquay could be, not as willing to be strange. It was innate to Judith that she could make the most abrasive things cordial. It was maddening. She didn't consider the looks of bewilderment or disgust on people's faces to be rewarding in the least, and he suspected that any effort she displayed was purely to humor him. How, he had wondered, would she ever accomplish anything in the art world without tenacity or imperiousness? How could she make any sort of point without a willingness to manipulate feces? How could she get any coverage without using garbage and pressing it on people?

But she kept pressing, and even Torquay's constitution couldn't withstand her passive aggressiveness forever. So Torquay had dreamed up the vilest piece he could think of and presented it to her with enthusiasm. *I've been dreaming this up for years, planning it for what seems like forever.* It was true that the joy in her face was slightly tempered by suspicion. It was true that the day before he had screamed obscenities in her face for asking him to turn down the music and come take a look at her latest painting. But he assured her that it was just the final force of his unwillingness fading. That was true, but his idea for collaboration was wicked. It was also that he had been thinking about the conundrum of poor eating for a long time. The disgust Torquay felt at other people's diets, at the willingness people displayed to shovel shit into their gullets was an acute part of his snobbery. But it was false that there had been a cockroach that scuttled across his foot. He had been a regular for a long time, but just for the occasional pie. He thought there was too much salt in everything else. The experiment had been for Judith.

Torquay started giggling as he walked. If his first and only collaboration with Judith had been a test drive for fatherhood, he had proven himself to be a very sadistic candidate for the job. Torquay had done an effective job in the early stages of planning at concealing the endgame. He had talked about taking over the restaurant as a stage; about convincing the employees to give them free rein over the space. That would be Judith's job, it was decided, and she found the delegation of the task to her very flattering. The tension in the apartment had abated for a few days. The subterfuge had quickly become harder to maintain, as more specifics of the plan emerged. The strange food orders, the digging around in trash for discarded ingredients, the apartment fridge beginning to smell like a warmed-over mortuary. What had kept her going, Torquay believed, was the inability to admit a mistake and, because she was so angry that he had exposed this fact, the desire to see the experiment out until the end and gloat over Torquay's inevitable destruction, an outcome she could clearly see with cold fury. Torquay hadn't, even flattering himself to believe that he had skillfully stumbled upon a masterpiece.



But a child might have been the elusive masterpiece, and as Torquay slowly made his way towards Pete's he rued his inability to see that or even conceive of it. And now he was admitting that he should have kept her, should have talked to her about the ideas he couldn't think of painting or performing. She could have provided the perfect canvas that Torquay might have built up and either nurtured or destroyed. Perhaps after this particular project they could pose as a gay couple and start hounding adoption agencies. That would be better, actually: to enter into a performance as complicated as child rearing with a collaborator who would be on the same page as Torquay. It would be the toast of the community. He began to walk more decisively, putting his hands in his pockets, where he felt the baggie nuzzled amid the lint.

Torquay sat down on the curb. The baggie seemed smaller in his hand than before, but he remained cautious, sprinkling just a small pile into his palm. He rubbed it with his fingers, spreading across lines and small ridges of his palm, imagining he felt each miniscule crystal pricking his nerves. It was extraordinary that he had lasted this long, he reasoned, and therefore thought a reward was appropriate.

He snuggled his nose into the dust, not plunging into it like so many amateurs were wont to do. His snort was gradual, starting delicately before becoming a powerful huff that propelled the snot in his nose into the back wall of his throat. Despite the promising start, the drip was slow to begin. He heaved himself to his feet and began walking to get the fluids in his body moving.

Thirty steps down the street there was driveway that Torquay didn't see until he was on top of it. The stumble was catalytic, and odd swirls began to lick the sides of Torquay's skull, like squares of carpet being rubbed against each other. He began rubbing the fuzz on the nape of his neck and licking the roof of his mouth.

Gradually, his footfalls began to feel like he was sinking into snow, the kind of wet snow that sucked you down towards the ground and into the Earth. The grinding in his joints and the snapping of his tendons started to ebb.

The neighborhood was rickety and everything was leaning to one side. Torquay thought that some of buildings looked like they were trying to fall asleep on their neighbor's shoulder. He was wide-awake though: manic and bubbly. The introspection of a good high began to filter into his brain. He knew that he wasn't as good-looking as he thought. His rubbish habit of glancing sideways at car windows to catch his reflection was ridiculous and unbecoming of his age. He wasn't getting old well, and how he monitored his health meant that he would certainly look past his age, not winning the battle against it. He dressed like someone with a meager understanding of chic, but well prepared to defend his choice of a shirt or hat.

He recalled the appearances and habits of acquaintances harshly. Whenever he saw SwedeZon, the young boy looked furtive with the latent understanding that his only talent had been found lacking; all the people in SwedeZon's life who had ever offered him encouragement and praise would be branded as sadistic accomplices in his failure, and SwedeZon would consider them traitors.

Sydney G and Yulia's eyes were always casting about for partners in abuse. They looked for people who could aid them in making nasty appraisals of colleagues and competitors. When there was no one else around they could balefully eye a partner and go in on him or her. Small snips like abrasions from a hammer. When they glowered they were angry that they couldn't formulate a cute remark. They had found each other, and if Sydney G and Yulia married and consummated their consulting partnership, the resulting children would flee to corners of the world to get away from them, if only to eventually repeat their personalities with a different tenor and in a different setting.

Jimmy's tight smile was brilliant. He was the type of person who answered questions vaguely so that the other person would be forced to ask a follow-up question. Then Jimmy would have an opening to explain something more thoroughly and thus prove just how smart he was. This desire to provide more soliloquy and instruction signaled inherent antagonism, and heralded the arrival of a superb artist, Torquay thought. It was true that all great artists were assholes, and Jimmy was a beauty. His request that Torquay work for him had been one of those pleasant surprises that Torquay had been obliged to regard with suspicion, even for a short time. But now he chastised himself for being so wary, for thinking so rationally. Where had he been taught wariness like that? To be so utterly lacking in impulse? He didn't know. Perhaps that's why there was drug abuse. In the midst of a high was pure understanding, the transformation from a bumbler to a sage. He felt masterful. That was the moment of catharsis he needed, right? To work with someone he had been assured was the best within the community. He didn't know, but other people certainly did.

He imagined Jimmy Delt-Tri was the petulant tastemaker within the Greater Los Angeles Art Community; hated but always trusted. This experiment, this dismantling of a perfectly sane human being, caught on film and shared with a shocked, yet grudgingly accepting audience, would be analyzed for months and years. Torquay's name would be all over it. He didn't need to steal a sign from a restaurant, or vandalize any imposing stone walls; he didn't need any simple people whispering his name on a prayer bed.

It really was exquisite stuff. He was shaking rhythmically. Remarkable.

He recalled perfectly Judith's pensiveness, how she looked at him like she was at the summit of a mountain, waiting for Torquay to leave the base behind. She was infuriatingly impatient, and subsequently never stood up for herself. Instead of confronting Torquay for his bad joke, for his failed experiment, she had simply left. He wasn't remotely sure whether or not she'd been charged with

anything, as he had. Whether or not she had been charged with disturbing the peace or being criminally mischievous (an expression that Torquay found strangely oxymoronic). She had just let the thing wind down, to let the snake eat away at itself. The stated point of the Dry Fish affair had been to expose the lack of attention people paid to what they consume, even if it's rotting right in front of them. It was enraging then, Torquay realized, that Judith had provided a more definitive answer to that hypothesis than he had. She'd proven that to prove something, that when he wanted to prove a point, Torquay had no qualms about devouring himself.

The spit inside his mouth was becoming rancid in the grooves of his teeth. He let it dribble slowly from his mouth to the ground, attempting to write a "T" with the moisture. He was getting closer to Pete's and the crowds were picking up. A conga line of painted faces billowed past him. There were women and men who smiled and reached out to shake Torquay's hand.

"You look fucking set, man!" One of them shouted over his shoulder.

Torquay gave a double thumbs-up, his hands. A glass of water would be good. A glass of Coke would be even better. The sugar would help balance him out, so that when he sat down or stood up quickly, he wouldn't keel over. Torquay did hate how carbonation screwed a little with his muscles, though. He felt that too much Coke would cause his muscles to detach from his bones, and that one day his flesh would rip away completely from his skeleton like a piece of gum from the underside of a table. The image made him shiver.

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Torquay slunk into Pete's wishing he had stomped in. The atmosphere was turgid. Someone had dimmed the lights, making the main dining room feel like a cave. The sign at the door was touting a late

night happy hour, with specials on drafts and burgers. Forgetting his previous desire for a Coke, Torquay opted for a beer.

It was a bazaar. Every one sitting around the tables was talking excitedly about the sound of the concert or the décor of the bar they had visited just before.. Every person was talking so excitedly and with confidence, not too soft or loud. They seemed like they were going to be an appreciative audience. They seemed like the kind of people that could understand life as a performance and wouldn't mind if it was lacking the necessary amount of elegance. There was a mad vision of people rising and boogieing out through the door, not taking care to check shoulders or avert hips away from other hips, all the people grinding their way through the gutters and into a bodega and breaking it down in the chips aisle. There was an inkling of spontaneity. Every one in the room seemed bound together by faith. They had faith that they were preparing to see something lively, the makings of an impressive story.

He wondered if Jimmy had placed all of the camera equipment here already, to minimize the hassle of setting it up. Maybe he had set up equipment already, covertly sticking cameras in the corners of the ceilings. To cover his bases, Torquay waved to each corner of the room. The bartender gave him a quizzical look, but dutifully came over to refill Torquay's glass when called upon for a third time. The clock above the TV read 12:55, meaning that Jimmy was going to show up any moment.

The end of the third beer was heralded by mushrooms beginning to sprout out of Torquay's knuckles, or at least that what it felt like. The feeling was soft at first, like tiny lesions growing together under the hair of his knuckles. But the pressure grew. Torquay examined his hand but couldn't see anything poking through the skin. The knuckles seemed the correct height, and it certainly didn't appear as if the skin was being stretched. Torquay nervously cracked his knuckles and pushed the beer away.

The next feeling was like a knife being sharpened on the underside of his stomach. Probably gas or hunger. Torquay tried stretching out on his barstool to let the pressure dissipate, but sat up rigidly

after almost tipping over. He could feel the sweat beginning to run down the strands of his underarm hair. Conversations began to garble.

“I love the man who’s early,” said a deep voice behind Torquay. Two brown hands with black nail polish on the forefingers rubbed down his shoulders. Torquay spun around violently, sending the barstool into a wild rotation before it clattered to the ground.

“Jesus fucking Christ, take it easy!” Hissed Jimmy, who quickly hustled Torquay away from the contingent of staring customers towards the bathroom. Once inside the Sikh slammed the door behind him and locked it. He moved towards the sink and turned on the cold-water tap, wetting his hand and spritzing it petulantly in Torquay’s face. “It’s only me you idiot,” he said derisively.

“They’re going to think we’re doing drugs,” Torquay managed to gasp through the spray. He was having difficulties getting his breath back.

Jimmy started laughing and clapping his hands facetiously. “First of all, this is a fancy restaurant and we are fancy guests. They won’t care if we are doing drugs. Second, please calm down. I cannot begin this work if you are carrying on in this embarrassing fashion. You’re acting like you were the only person riding the train home and you were mugged one stop before getting off. Third, as I’ve reminded you many times, I do not do drugs nor do I condone their use, although I indulge my associates using them because I don’t have the patience to try and convince them otherwise. However,” Jimmy said, his tone dropping menacingly, “I will not tolerate my partners using them if it means the jeopardizing the work.” He peered at Torquay. “Are we clear?”

“Perf...perfectly.” Torquay felt like shivering.

“Good.” Jimmy stood up and straightened his clothes. He’d shaved his beard and his hair was concealed under a floppy white beanie. He was wearing light jeans, with a blue-and-pink striped shirt

underneath a blue velvet jacket. He had a fake Rolex on his wrist and shiny chrome rings on both of his thumbs.

“I thought you couldn’t shave your beard,” said Torquay from his seat on the floor.

“Not unless there are extenuating circumstances. Like war. Do you think glasses or no? I have some here in my pocket, but I wasn’t sure. I need to be a little better at dressing, like I’m good but I definitely have the capability to be great.”

“No glasses,” Torquay murmured from his seat on the floor, eyes snapped shut. He was cold. The noise from the main room of the restaurant was dull but present like a dull knife hitting the top of a granite counter.

“Hey, hey!” barked Jimmy, roughly dragging Torquay to his feet and pushing him up against the wall. “What are you doing? This is an intelligence assignment for you! You have to generate your own focus! I can’t hold up signs in the middle of dinner and demand that you pay attention!” He rapped Torquay in the chest. “I understand that it’s late! You’re washed up; you have to keep it together if you don’t want to be obscure anymore. You want to be back in the community, you have to show some sort of initiative from within! Fucking people.”

The fronts of Torquay’s eyes were getting filmy, and he wobbled a bit getting up. “Where’s the camera equipment? I can go get it.” Torquay mumbled.

“No equipment tonight. I have something in the lapel of my jacket, but I don’t want you to have anything so you can focus completely on cues, on how we’re going to set up the dissolution of jidanji alias Suspiria. I just want you to observe alright?”

Torquay nodded. What was this? He was going to kill SwedeZon when he saw him. He felt like he might start a coughing fit. He almost wished that there were hallucinations occurring, just so he could

blame whatever meltdown might occur on tentacle spiders spewing up a toilet. But all he could feel were alien changes to his body, and he was feeling jumpy. Judith had affectionately and spitefully labeled him a hypochondriac, who used sniffles as the basis for imagining much more terrifying ailments. Meningitis, gangrene, AIDS. Torquay figured that the really terrible things always had such mundane beginnings, and that this was especially true of illnesses.

“Do you have something to write with?”

“Ummm, yeah, I do actually.” Torquay pulled the little notebook he had extracted from the fort out of his pocket.

“Is that going to be big enough?” Asked Jimmy.

“I reckon that it will be.”

“Okay, but be precise with your notes, I don’t want you turning too many pages while I’m talking, it will attract attention to yourself that I’m not interested in defending or pretending to confront you in a manner that will appear heroic and chivalrous.”

He walked briskly out of the bathroom, motioning for Torquay to follow. Torquay pocketed the notebook again and, taking a ragged breath, he stepped back out into the main dining room. Jimmy was picking through the chairs, searching for a grouping of empties suitable to the operation. He indicated a spare table right next to a vacant barstool. *Perfect*, he mouthed before looking at his watch and holding up ten fingers.

The room was still dank, but Torquay was more aware of how the shadows of the patrons were dancing around the walls, appearing more lively than their fleshy partners, more chisled despite being destined to disappear and reappear. That was the paradox of nightclubs, to have so many people getting so dressed up to not be seen clearly. Torquay wondered what a nightclub with bright, discomforting



lighting would feel like. All the walls could be painted in the most reflective white paint, and every piece of furniture could be white. All the liquor would be poured out of its original packaging into white bottles. The temperature would be magnificently hot, and the dancing would be furious enough for sweat to pool underneath the customers' feet. There would be a few collapses, and Torquay weighed whether or not the rest of the people in the room would ignore them.

Torquay snapped his head and rubbed his eyes. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was sliding in his shoes. Jimmy was patting the seat of the barstool impatiently. He wanted things to be ready quickly.

"We have ten minutes. What's your drink? I'll buy this one for you. It's the least I can do." Jimmy signaled to bartender, fishing around his pockets for his fake leather wallet.

"Get me an old fashioned."

"Appropriate, although I have no idea what that is. One old fashioned please," Jimmy said to the bartender curtly. "I'm guessing that it's probably a drink where all the ingredients are alcoholic, gin mixed with rum."

"That would taste terrible. And it's bourbon, it uses bourbon." Torquay answered

"Even better," crowed Jimmy as the bartender set the drink in front of him, "I can't imagine a better drink for someone like you to be drinking. It's what I would think old crooners that used to play good nightclubs back in the heyday of crooning, but now have to settle for strip clubs owned by ex-boxers. It's the perfect drink for the gravel-voiced veterans jealously clinging onto their dignity. I'm almost tempted to have a sip, but I remember that I am part of the healthy living resuscitation revolution."

Torquay took the drink from Jimmy. He could feel tiny particles of dandruff scaling off his head and he tried desperately not to scratch his scalp; it would only make the problem more pronounced. He cursed liking processed food so much, and booze and stress, not that he particularly liked the latter.

He suddenly felt idiotic for inviting anyone. What had he been thinking? He had invited people to view him taking notes on a conversation whose conception was mired with strange and unnecessary conceits. Jimmy pretending to be married, trawling a site devoted to sugar babies looking for a sugar daddy. Pretending to be richer than he was, which was decidedly less interesting than the traditional starving artist trope, although Jimmy didn't look like he was starving. He was illuminating from the addled portion of his brain. How, for instance, was Jimmy going to fake the normal trappings of the rich? Cloths were easier than a car or an apartment. How was Torquay going to do that? His belongings were scrunched up in a pile in his increasingly more-derelict apartment. How desperate had he been to agree to something so forcefully half-baked? How would this become a piece of art?

How did he even know that Jimmy had painted the elephant on the wall of the warehouse? SwedeZon could have painted it. Torquay could have painted it in his period of no memory. Sydney G could have done it. Cambria could have painted it or Jimmy, a male with more bravado than she. There was Judith, who had so effectively grown her career, and was probably sitting in a chair in a gallery, staring at something she'd just made, her legs pushed into her chest, feeling pleased with herself. Perhaps she had painted it.

Torquay's body was slowly coming apart at the seams. More and more flakes were flying off of his head scalp. The nails on his toes were too long, catching the inside of his shoes, coming closer and closer to breaking off.

"Hello, Jimmy?" Said a voice nervously. It was nasally, not completely at ease with its seductiveness.

“That’s me!”

“Where’s your ring?” Asked the voice, Judith’s voice. She had put a slight accent on it. How fucking ridiculous of her, he thought happily. He felt like sobbing at the circumstance. SwedeZon hadn’t any idea how to break it to him.

Judith’s art had become her company.

He turned just so she could see his profile and he could see hers. She had changed the twin streaks in her hair to silver, and she seemed much younger while being courtier. She wasn’t smiling, not grinning, just pressing her lips together in a manner that could be mistaken for coy. She was holding Jimmy’s hand like a jeweler, peering at it with slight disappointment. It took her a moment to see Torquay and when she saw him she started chuckling, looking skyward and nodding her head. Jimmy looked from her to Torquay and then back again, his tight smile appearing on his face. He was annoyed but not sure what about yet.

“The return!” she exclaimed, smacking her hands against the sides of her hips. “The return, the return!”

“To what?” Asked Jimmy, forcing himself to bray out a laugh.

“Oh, God, we can’t do this now, can we really?”

“You’re a hooker?” Blurted out Torquay. “That’s what SwedeZon meant?”

“Douglas?”

“Swedeypie?” Said Judith. “He told you about me? He’s hopeless isn’t he? He’s a prodigy in switching media and giving up short of beginning. I met him when he was still doing dance and I must have mentioned you, Torquay. We’d just left it after what happened at Phillippe’s. He told me he’d

discovered dance after cooking hadn't really done anything for him. He's moved into performance art now?"

"Yeah, a little," mumbled Jimmy, "But he hasn't done too much, just a few videos and some fake preaching routines in the park."

"I used to be good at those, really something. I bet if I had been born some place where that type of thing mattered, I would have been really something at it," reflected Torquay. "He did a dance routine for me. I thought he was alright."

"I thought he had some talent. I'm sorry," she said quickly, turning back to Jimmy, "I'm not answering either of your questions. The return to Pete's! I've been in here a lot over the past year and I haven't seen Torquay yet. This used to be one of his favorite places. And I meet up with men here for the free dinners. They are so willing to do anything for unconquered territory, so I let that string out for a while. I don't generally come through on the sex part though. I think I've been doing it wrong my whole life, because I haven't ever really enjoyed it."

"You didn't like ours?" said Torquay, crestfallen.

"You don't really like sex?" asked Jimmy. "That wasn't conveyed very well during our messaging."

"Yes, but you have to realize that most anything that appears on a screen is suggestive inside that mind of yours."

"Are you saying I don't think with my head?" bristled Jimmy.

"I think if you think with your head twenty percent of the time, you're a wonder."

"But you're not a hooker?"

“No, Torquay. I can’t think that the answer really satisfies you, but I’m not. After we ended things I thought about that, about doing a book on it. But then some other enterprising girl got around to it. So I did a few charcoals while I thought about what I should do next and I thought I might go one rung down from the sex worker angle and just write about fiscally sound dating. It’s more advice than arty, but it’s all personal experience in the end. Easy to mind, easy to market because everyone thinks art derived from personal experience is closer to them.”

“Are saying that I was going to be a chapter in your book?” asked Jimmy, his voice rising.

“Well, I haven’t gotten to any chapter-writing yet, so I’m not sure,” responded Judith absentmindedly, “Just collecting on a lot of free dinners. I do have a lot of notes right now though, and I definitely would have taken a few mental ones on you. Starting with the lack of ring and the fake watch.”

“If I had a fake watch, how did you think I was going to spring for dinner?” asked Jimmy defiantly.

“Married men looking for affairs always end up springing for the checks. It’s more in their interest to try and manipulate the proceedings into something more of a transaction, in order to instill in the woman some sort of obligation that will make it easier to achieve what they want in the relationship. THAT will be a chapter in my book, rest assured.”

“SwedeZon must not have approved what you were doing, or he’s a tremendous prude.”  
Chuckled Torquay.

“What do you mean?” Asked Judith.

“I mean he was cryptically inferring that you were a call girl or something, and I was very much trying to spin it in my head that you must have become a therapist or an acupuncturist or something.”

“I mean, I wouldn’t shy away from that sort of thing if I thought a project was worth the time and mental strain.”

“Okay,” retorted Torquay, slightly annoyed, “But I’m allowed to be relieved that you’re not doing that right now.”

“You’re allowed to do whatever you want my darling, I think it is the vested duty of an artist to let others do as they please without critique or qualm. I don’t think you’ll agree with that, you’ll probably even violently reject it, because the ‘biggest project of our career’ was a macabre public service announcement to try and convince people to eat right, even though you eat like total shit.”

“I can’t believe this bullshit,” yelled Jimmy, throwing his napkin down on the table, “Art is the only arena where ‘do as I say, not as I do’ is a defensible doctrine, and it is the duty of every artist to take advantage and reiterate that idea again and again.”

The whole of the restaurant was staring now, and a few people were taking out camera phones and beginning to film the exchange. Torquay could feel a little thrill running up his spine. “So you renounce the idea of art being entertainment?”

“I think that it is dangerous to take something that can be so serious as entertainment!” yelled Jimmy, spittle forming at the corners of his mouth, “And she can’t really disagree with me, since she’s writing a fucking advice book on how to screw married men out of dinners. That’s money that could be going to their kids! To their retirement plans! To tithes at their local churches!”

“To be fair,” answered Judith calmly, “I haven’t written anything yet. And there’s a difference between advice and art, and advice is not a sleeping tonic that can be forced down someone’s throat, just as art isn’t, either. I just put both out in the world and hope that someone takes them down.”

Jimmy leaned very close to Judith's face, causing her to recoil slightly. "The body of life is a work of art, and if you're some sort of follower of his then you certainly won't have any type of good grasp on it." He drew his hands in a circle around his body. "I have done my very best to make that impulse a mantra and a personal dogma, and it fills me with contempt to see two people so blithely losing it. I take it that the two of you know each other."

"We knew each other, yes." Judith replied coolly.

"This is not what was meant to happen! Not by a long shot." Jimmy was beginning to get frantic, bouncing on the balls of his feet like a boxer, hands smoothing the sides of his velvet jacket. People were really starting to stare now, no longer trying to conceal the fact that they were filming. Jimmy noticed a young woman in a straw fedora turning on her camera light to get a better look at the trio of mad people. Torquay shook his head at her, miming for her to lower her hand.

"Pay very close attention," hissed Jimmy into the camera, "Because what is going to happen is going to be very important in your life and the lives of whoever you show that clip to." He turned back to Judith. "I don't really care how the two of you know each other, and I guess I'm embarrassed that I'm surprised. You might be a plant of some sort, but I doubt it. The only genuine thing about you was the look of surprise you gave this wash-up when you saw him sitting at the bar. But I should know that such destitute persons would run together. It could have been anyone from the site and he would have known her. Drunken, purposeless and depraved. He was drunk when he first met me, and I know that he's got a loose grasp on his wits right now.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Jimmy called into the room, turning like a ringleader on the heels of his boots, hands aloft. "I came here tonight, with potentially a morally questionable purpose. Depending on your feelings, of course."

“This is like a crack head giving a TED talk,” whispered someone near Torquay along the bar.”

“But I came here with a purpose, nonetheless! I came here tonight to reveal a scourge on your browsers, on your screens, on your culture.” It seemed that Jimmy was stretching in height before them, standing on a stage in the middle of an arena while the seats gradually fell away around him, leaving every one watching expectantly at his feet.

“I was going to begin documenting this scourge, filming the stretching of an odious human face over a cloud of sin.”

“A cloud of what?” Someone yelled out from the crowd.

“Sin! Sin! Vice, all the bad things that feel empty and worthless but you do them anyway.”

“Torquay, what on Earth is he talking about? Who is this person?” Judith whispered in Torquay’s ear.

“He’s some new artist that SwedeZon recommended to me. Where is that person anyway? Why isn’t he here?”

“You invited Swedeypie? To do what?”

“I guess to have a drink with me, to watch whatever was going to happen,” Torquay whispered back.

“It should be noted that I don’t drink and I don’t smoke,” continued Jimmy, ignoring the ex-couple, “And that I do not subscribe to this new idea that art is not meant to be instructive. It is the only valuable tool of instruction we have left. Big things usually start small, but it seems that axiom doesn’t really apply to me. We are having a big beginning for something big, and we are all a part of it. Give yourselves a round of applause for being here right now, for being lucky enough to have stumbled on



the making of something right now.” Jimmy started clapping his hands above his head. No one else followed suit, although everyone was stuck in rapt attention. Some people had moved their chairs to get a better look. Near the door of the kitchen, waiters had gathered to confer about how to best handle the situation. But the ruthless command of Jimmy’s tone had stopped them too, and they stood dumbly, fingers shielding their frozen mouths.

“If you are married, raise your hand.” A few couples put their hands into the air. It was compelled recollection; for a moment every person in the room had forgotten that they were holding jobs, that bills sat lying in wait on their coffee tables and instead were sitting through a lesson in school, taught by one of those eccentric substitute teachers they couldn’t immediately decide if they liked or hated. “I commend you,” said Jimmy, bowing, “You’re indulging in a practice that is quickly becoming more archaic by the day for reasons that correlate strongly with the rise of the Internet, a portal for which we all have in our pockets or our purses. If you would be so kind, would you take your portals—phones or tablets—and boot them up please.”

“Sir, if you would step over here please,” It was the cheeky waiter, the impudent bastard who had goaded Torquay the night he’d been in here doodling, the night he had mistaken SwedeZon for somebody, instead of some weirdly fit kid who couldn’t seem to decide if he wanted to be a dancer, a tagger or a performance artist. The waiter was the only person who appeared to have shaken off Jimmy’s hypnosis. “Sir, over here.”

“Hey, shut the fuck up,” screamed a gruff male voice from the back of the room, “We want to see where this is going!” A murmur of assent rippled through the room, and Torquay caught the people sitting either side of him nodding their heads.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am so sorry that you had to witness this. I assure you that Pete’s isn’t the type of place where this public display of obnoxiousness is tolerated, and shortly you will be able to

return to your meals in peace. Sir..." The waiter put his hand on Jimmy's shoulder to try and guide him away from the center of the restaurant, "If you'll just come this way, we can discuss this in private."

A large Hispanic man wearing a dirty plaid shirt and a red cardigan stood up and pushed in between the waiter and Jimmy. The waiter, wary of engaging such a behemoth backed away. The Hispanic, grateful for not being forced into pulverizing someone, smiled politely at the waiter before turning back to Jimmy. "I think every one here is kind of interested in what you were saying."

"Thank you, now that you've had a moment to let your devices turn on and detect a wireless network, I want you to search for a website. It's called 'Basic Liaisons. I'll give you a moment before continuing."

Dozen of fingers began to flash across screens in unison. *Dinner and a show!* Seemed to be the happy thought that was bouncing around people's minds.

"I've got it!" Yelled a thin Asian man from the far end of the bar. His face was triumphant for a moment before falling. "It doesn't have a guest function, it says I need an username and password to login."

"Shit!" Shrieked Jimmy, "I forgot about that. Okay, okay wait. Can I give someone my username and password so they can login and explain what I'm trying to demonstrate."

"What the fuck is this?" Asked another voice, "Is this a porno site? What the fuck?"

"You're losing us," howled another voice.

"You just went on a rampage against vice and you have a membership to some hardcore site?" Announced another female voice accusingly, "Look at these pictures. What a bunch of sluts."

“In order to combat the problem you must sometimes infiltrate it!” retorted Jimmy, casting around for his detractors. “But one of those skanks is standing right in front of you! Look at her!”

Judith smiled and waved. “Hello, I’ve never been paid for either my sex or my cooking. I have a witness to that, sitting right here. I came here looking for a late night snack, as I’m sure you all did too.”

“No, you don’t,” murmured Torquay.

“Shut up! Shutupshutup. Shut the fuck up!” Jimmy was nearly tearing his hair out now, and he banged the table so hard the cutlery fell onto the floor.

“Hey, relax dude!” Yelled someone near the door. The novelty of an impeccably dressed Sikh lecturing them was fading, along with the other trappings of the group’s bender. People, too impatient to wait and see if there was an easy solution to the username problem, had slipped their phones back into their pockets and continued to shovel food into their mouths. A few people were still filming, and Jimmy began to ham it up for them.

“This is a harlot,” he said, pointing at Judith, who curtsied to the crowd, “She is a gold-digger, searching for married men’s wallets with her talon hands.”

Torquay heaved himself to his feet. The motion caused most of the people filming to swivel their cameras towards him. The body quakes and starts had slowly started to abate, and Torquay felt a little more solid on his feet. There was anger inside of him, and self-irritation, but he was joyful because he realized the origin of his mistake.

He tapped Jimmy on the shoulder and, belying his age, unleashed a cross that would have been at home in Hearn-Hagler III. As Jimmy—175 pounds of useless, coiled muscle descended to the deck—Torquay bounced backwards on the balls of his feet. The community—when had they started calling it that? —Was a pool of water that couldn’t be perceived from the inside. Living in it meant not

understanding the depth, or the ceiling of its surface. The parameters shifted as more water flowed in, and closed as water evaporated. It was nebulous enough to disappear totally, with the sun's illumination. The pool was clearer to those outside of it, staring down with bemusement.

Jimmy smacked his cheek against the floor, eliciting a loud "ooh" from the crowd and causing the would-be cameramen to stand up to get a better look at him. The Sikh blinked three times before letting out an almighty bellow. He jumped to his feet and started to strip off his velvet jacket. He caught his arms and had to take his eyes off Torquay for a moment. Sensing the opening, Torquay charged forward, slamming his shoulder into Jimmy's chest and driving him back into a pair of chairs. Diners scattered, whooping and yelling out encouragement.

"Van Damme! Van Damme!"

"Sweep the leg! Sweep the leg!"

Torquay was on his feet first, but couldn't dodge a punch to the knee. He went down while Jimmy yelped in pain and clutched his hand to his chest. The waiters who had been struck dumb in the middle of Jimmy's diatribe rushed forward, shouting platitudes and assurances to the patrons, all of whom seemed to be treating the fight as a raucous good time.

Two waiters managed to take hold of Jimmy's arm, pinning him between them. He was laughing and the glasses in his jacket pocket had slipped out and cracked on the floor. He wasn't bleeding but the right side of his face was already discoloring. It only took one waiter to grab hold of Torquay, a fact that registered uncomfortably in the heart of his ego. The pain in Torquay's hand was driving out any lingering effects of SwedeZon's tiny blue bag.

Judith had sat the entire time looking on stoically, no doubt gathering the mental notes needed for another chapter of her book. With both of the men subdued, she smiled, walking over to Torquay and rubbing him along the small of his back. "That was very chivalrous."

"I guess it kind of was."

"You pair of fucking beauties." Jimmy was breaking into guffaws and trying to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth. "That was the worst kind of sabotage drill I've ever seen. It was brilliant." He nodded at Torquay. "Really well done, I certainly didn't think you had what it took. But it's my duty and great pleasure to tell you that your attempts were futile"

"What's he going on about?" Judith asked.

"I'm talking about this one's diabolic plan to unseat me as an artist in the community, to substitute me with himself. Of course, that just demonstrates what a tenuous grasp he has on the workings of the community. It isn't some sort of pyramid that can be clambered up and plummeted down like other groups of movements. It exists more as a group of gravitational pulls that repel and feed off one another. I made the mistake of pulling him into mine, and I can only hope that he didn't feed too much off of me."

"Has someone called the police?" asked one waiter to another.

"They should be here any minute."

"Oh," Judith said softly, "I don't think that you need to take this one away. He was just doing his best to calm down what was very nasty speech."

“Look miss, we’re just going to tell the police exactly what happened and let them do whatever they think should be done. I admit that it’s not looking good for either of them, but especially for him because he threw the first punch.”

“But,” Judith’s voice took on a slightly more pleading lilt, “He’s not violent, and he wasn’t threatening anyone.”

“But he was here with me,” said Jimmy, “And considering what we were planning to do, that should count for something.”

“What the fuck does that mean? Were you going to drug her?” Growled one of the waiters.

“No,” scoffed Jimmy, “Please, God, no. Give me a little more credit for sophistication. Drugging her for what? To have sex with her? That’s the least creative thing I’ve every heard in my life, and it was totally not in step with the experiment.”

“Experiment?” asked Judith.

“But you know about that, don’t you because I’ve become the subject of a coup. That must mean that Douglas was in on it.”

“SwedeZon?”

“I invited him,” sighed Torquay, “We won’t see him but I invited him.”

“You invited him to shove it in my face?” Asked Jimmy.

“No, I invited him to see my reintroduction into the Greater Los Angeles World. I invited Sydney and Yulia, too.”

“Oh, they won’t come darling, I’m sorry,” answered Judith, “They hate this place. But I’m still confused about what exactly you were inviting them to see? You were just sitting here and drinking. You could have invited them to your apartment to see that.”

“This was supposed to be the beginning of something,” moaned Jimmy.

Two burly police officers wearing their hats walked into the restaurant. “I’m guessing that these two are the ones doing the disturbing?” the shorter one asked, cocking his eyebrow and giving a thin smile.

“Thank God,” breathed the waiter who had insinuated that Torquay and Jimmy were planning on date-raping Judith, “Yes. This one,” he continued for the cops, rubbing Torquay’s head, “Punched the other one in the face. There were a couple of other punches thrown before we were able to jump in.”

The taller officer looked down at Torquay inquisitively. He was blonde and the top of his neck was covered in angry red bumps. Torquay could barely discern the cop’s eyebrows from the pale forehead. “You don’t look quite in fighting shape, do you?”

The cop pulled his flashlight from the holster and shined it into Torquay’s pupils. Seeing the light, flash back and forth in his eyes, Torquay felt a swoop of panic. He hadn’t even bothered to look at himself in the mirror when he’d been inside the bathroom. His irises could have been swallowed by black.

“Hmmm, the pupils look alright, but they are bloodshot.”

“I’ve been drinking,” Torquay said, not quite believing he’d ever be happy to say that to a cop.

“You drunk?”

“I ... I don’t think so. I just lost my temper.”

“Well, that’s a shit excuse for an adult.” The cop moved over to Jimmy. The waiters had let him go, and he was sipping a cup of water he’d managed to find, not taking his eyes off of Torquay. “Sir, do you want to press charges? Or can we work this out like civilized people?”

“But he was hitting him too!” blurted out Judith.

“That was self-defense,” replied Jimmy airily. There were still people filming with their camera phones, a fact that the officers seemed not to notice or not to care very much about. He scratched his head and kneaded his eyebrows in frustration. The schoolboy in Jimmy wanted Torquay handed over to a proper authority, who would supply an arbitrary punishment that Jimmy would be able to gloat over. But the cameras ..., the cameras could martyr a person quickly, at the very least make him the people’s champ. There was no guarantee that he and Torquay’s dance would go viral, but there was precious little guarantee that it would be buried either.

“I don’t give a fuck about pressing charges.”

The blonde cop shook his head. “Sir, that’s not really an answer to the question.”

“It’s a perfectly good answer.”

“Well would you mind giving me another in a less aggressive fashion, please?” The cop asked earnestly.

Jimmy rolled his eyes before bending over to pick up his blue velvet jacket and batting the dust off of it. “I don’t think that there’s any need to arrest him. But don’t you dare fucking come near me again!” He ended, pointing at Torquay.

“There’s no need for that, sir.” The cop pushed down Jimmy’s finger and pointed him toward the door. “I suggest that you and your friends head on home.”



"I came alone," said Jimmy defiantly.

"Then go home, fucking guy!" Yelled the other cop, prompting Jimmy to briskly walk out into the Los Angeles night, doing his level best not to turn around and look back.

The waiters let Torquay go, allowing him to stand up and stretch his arms over his head. He groaned as the bones in his back compressed like old piano keys. He looked around for the old-fashioned, but it was gone. He wondered how audacious it would be to order another in front of the cops.

"Look guy. I know that that guy is a huge asshole, but you have to be better than that." The blonde cop had slipped his arm around Torquay's shoulder and was slyly leading him outside. Judith, a little put out that she had been robbed of a proper late-night snack, trailed behind, playing with a map on her phone, searching for any late-night grocery stores nearby.

"You can't be the older guy that thinks it's his responsibility to make sure every single one of these younger swinging dicks is acting in line. You'll just be setting yourself up for a lot soreness later, not to mention a little humiliation."

They were standing outside, letting the other late-night patrons stream out beside them. The manager, fed up with the scene the impetuous arty types always made around the dining room before dawn had decided to use the fight as an excuse to shut up early.

"Do you get what I'm saying?" asked the blonde cop hopefully.

"We had a working relationship," muttered Torquay.

“Ugh. Even worse, even worse. You could be going around with that guy for years if you’re not careful. Take it from a piss and vinegar guy, don’t sweat the tiny stuff while you’re letting it go.” He drummed Torquay on the back and cocked his head towards the corner. “Let’s shove on out, partner.”

The cops waved over their shoulders as they tramped down towards the corner, but only Judith waved back. The people coming out of the restaurant were touching Torquay like they would a lucky statue. The succession of presses on his lower back and belly was creeping him out, and he started heading towards his apartment. The streets, which had felt so stretched and spaced out before, had regained their claustrophobia. There were a few enterprising stall workers laying out tarps for the next morning. When the sun came up and the business people started to flow into the city, the tarps would be covered with towels, the towels covered with a few woven carpets. On top of the carpets could be anything from fake sunglasses to shot glasses, depending on which corner you were standing on. At the end of the day, they roll every thing up and count their money together, and they know if they’d done something by judging the girth of the billfold in their back pocket.

“So, were you two going to meet before he and I had our meeting, or what was going on with that?” called out Judith as she caught up to him. She didn’t slide her arm through his, but with each step she swung her torso towards him. Together they made a shuffling dance team, walking down the street.

“I haven’t painted in awhile,” began Torquay, as a way of explanation. But he hadn’t destroyed anything either, and it felt strange to understand that the aftermath of either creation or destruction was an identical feeling. “I think the idea was we were going to dismantle you.”

“What do you mean, take me one limb at a time at put me back into the box that I came in? Don’t forget I was a Blue Light special at K-Mart.” She laughed and looked down the street. “But, seriously what do you mean? Because it doesn’t sound very nice.”

Torquay realized that he had been too passive in the conception of Jimmy's idea ... his idea to ignite the gradual disintegration of a personality. It was a petty obsession of the artist to try and simplify such a particular process. It was kind of funny that people shied away from art as being too complicated and beyond their understanding. It was just over-simplification. There was the chance that Jimmy was trying to apply process to someone's own plunge because he was going down himself. Torquay preferred to prop himself up by thinking that way. Documenting a duet of mentally abusive relationships was a mad, mad thing to do.

"I think the idea was, and keep in mind that I'm paraphrasing, but we were planning to date you simultaneously and use the exchange of information to slowly drive you crazy."

"Ah, well that is an undertaking. I bet you thought you were going to get some college girl who would be easy as pie, Well, I was just looking for the free meal, and that's always a sign of someone that can hold their own in a mind game."

"Are you mad?" asked Torquay.

"I mean, I don't think you really know what you're doing anymore," said Judith flatly, "I mean, what happened to sketching? Why the mixing of psychology, art and teaching? Why drown what you're doing in all of that consideration?"

"I was sick of tagging, and you seemed to have wrangled all of the talent out of me for yourself. I couldn't fucking do it."

"Draw real art anymore?" She breathed.

"Sit around while you needed me to collaborate, when I knew that it wouldn't really be a collaboration, since I couldn't think of anything except a messy scheme."

He waited for an answer, but Judith remained silent. "Why did you let me do it?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"Almost poison a bunch of strangers trying to prove a point?"

"I don't know, because the way you described it to me it didn't seem that bad? Fuck, Torquay, I don't know. It sounded good when you said it, and any project would have been fine at that point, the way you were moping around the apartment, not listening to any of the big band records, not giving me any suggestions on what I was working on. So when you come up to me one day with a Cheshire Cat smile and say that you have a new idea that you think I need to help working on, I did it. And when it started to look like something that wasn't going to work, that might even be dangerous to your life, I kept going because it was your vision, and I assumed that you knew what you were doing."

"I didn't have a clue what I was doing," Torquay muttered, sarcastically.

"You fooled me."

They reached Torquay's corner and he stopped. She kept walking for a few steps before stopping and turning around. She didn't walk back to him, instead standing with her arms folded. She was drawing on the sidewalk with her toe, tracing imaginary platters of steak and cups of French fries. She wasn't level when she was hungry, and Torquay thought about leaving her and maybe coming around to talk to her later after she found something to tide herself over. But he stood rooted, trying not to move too much.

"I made a fort back at the apartment."

"Out of what?"

"All of my stuff. Some of our old stuff. It's nice. It's got a little unintentional symmetry."

She shook her head. "That's still doing it. You need to compartmentalize these things. Like now I have my art and I have my advice. And I have my dinners and I have some other things but I don't try to make one into any of the others."

"I know you don't."

"No, I don't, but you're building forts in your apartment and getting in fights with artists in your old haunts, which was sort of funny. But it's tiresome. It's really tiresome because you start to lose your focus, your attention to what you're doing and what you're trying accomplish. What were you trying to do at Phillippe's? You were trying to offend me to the point of abandonment? Or were you trying to make a point about the food? Were you just seeing if you could shut down the business? No one knows, no one fucking knows. And no one talks about it anymore.

"It doesn't endure.

"People have to furrow their brows to even have a prayer at remembering what it is, but when they do remember, it blocks out any memory about work they might have had otherwise." She shrugged. "There used to be photographs and paintings sitting around in galleries. I used to love standing there and having people come up to me and ask me if I knew the artist. Sometimes they would ask me to explain a few things, and I would be content waving my hands around and cramming ideas together. I didn't care if they were being facetious or not. But all of sudden there wasn't anything to explain anymore, and your parting piece at Phillippe's is, for me, inexplicable."

She let out a little whoop before letting a luxurious yawn escape from her mouth. "It must be about dawn. I hadn't planned on staying at that restaurant for more than thirty minutes. It's really a shame when your simple pleasures get ruined."

Torquay shuffled his feet a little. "I was glad it was you that came tonight, but not necessarily because I wanted to see you again. But I was glad it wasn't a stranger."

"Yeah, well, it wasn't the most flattering coincidence. But it was interesting." She thought for a second. "I'm glad it wasn't a stranger either, because even if I have trouble grasping what your plan was, I can infer that it wasn't going to be worth its salt in anything. Maybe that's why you were attracted to it, I don't know." She pointed across her chest, down the block, where the dark of the night was graying and a few buses and cars were cutting across on the side streets. "I'm headed this way."

"Do you even live in downtown anymore?" Torquay asked.

"No, I guess I left this den awhile ago."

"You haven't gone Westside, have you?"

She nodded. "It just felt too small down here."

She began walking before beginning to skip, flicking her feet in the air before landing on the sidewalk. She was wearing sandals that had straps that tied up around her ankles, and Torquay chuckled at the thought of her running out in front of armies, flying from the scene of a glorious battle towards sleepy Marathon down in the valley.

When he got home to the apartment he took the mattress down from the wall and laid it down on the middle of the floor next to the three stencils he still had to his name. He took no pillow and took no sheets because he wanted to imagine that he was sleeping in the middle of a forest or a desert. He liked to imagine that there were trees nearby to carve into and rocks to stack in elaborate piles. The groups to worry about were a group of baleful coyotes or some solitary grizzly bears. In the morning he thought he might take the fort apart again and lay things out differently. Maybe he would change the layout every time he left, so whenever he came back there would be a new home to get to know. In the

morning he'd have to get some groceries and felt pens. He was drifting off to sleep and the sound ringing in his ears was coins raining down onto the floors. There wouldn't be any parting shots.

Los Angeles is a fortress that began to overflow its walls about sixty years ago. Since no one wanted to see anyone drown, the buildings started moving east, over the mountains and into the desert. Give it time and it might reach Baker.

That's it right there, that feeling that the city. the whole damn metropolis. is unfolding to receive you. At night driving in, the filmy orange light peeking over the mountains might have been the top of a head, with pieces of electric lint swimming through the hair.

You turned down the radio when you started approaching San Bernardino because you think that there's a chance you'll miss a piece of critical information that's whispered between the other invaders whizzing towards the center, the locus. There's a mist that becomes heavier as you approach and you realize that it's fucking smoke, smoke that's been pushed into the Inland Empire from the coast. You imagine the peons living along the beaches getting squads of menial laborers together to gather up the smoke in bubbles or large bags and driving it to the other side of the mountain to release it. The way the mist mixes with the buildings makes it feel like each structure has floated down at the precise moment before you turned the corner to see it, like pieces of confetti that blew to the outer limits of the party room. That's a mania you share with all people moving to big city: that it was created a few days, a few moments before you got there. The history for each neighborhood doesn't exist because it is a palimpsest erased and rewritten with celebrations and occasions for the people that wander through. It's the arrogance of the starry-eyed. Each gas station and truck stop you drive by is stared at cinematically and you believe that nothing could be remembered as acutely as the details of *this place right now*. A pink fast food sign is electrically pink, and you think that it cannot dull in your mind, even as the smog around it dulls the light emanating from the rods. Riding through the mist makes you panic

because instinctually you believe you are poisoning yourself (and, very slowly, you are). The air conditioning isn't enough to filter out all the toxins and you try to hold your breath for several exits until you nearly pass out from exertion. Driving into L.A. is like diving into the BosphorusBosporus and gradually letting the oil pull you towards the bottom. The oil wraps around your foot and conjoins it to the accelerator. Even as you speed up, your sensation of sinking heightens, and after a few long moments of panic you, amazingly, inconceivably, relax.

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The astute way to think of Los Angeles is to imagine it as one of those spherical cages at a circus, the ones where guys ride around and around on motorcycles. The center is air and cannot be humanly reached. If you touch any of the other people in the cage you'll crash and die. If you slow down you'll fall to the bottom, break your neck and die. People in L.A. aren't sharks because they're vicious and tear each other to bits. People in L.A. are sharks because it's fatal to stop moving.





