Ways In Which the Ship Goes Down: Stories

by

Ryan Sheldon
Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THE AUTHOR WISHES TO THANK:

Deb Olin Unferth, for all the expert guidance and assistance she provided throughout the realization of this project; and for four years of invaluable tutelage, encouragement, and friendship.

Elizabeth Willis, for her wisdom.

Amy Bloom, for upholding the craft of story.

His friends, for their kindness and their humanity.

His siblings, for their humor.

His mother, for her love.

His father, for proving that art was worth anything in the first place.
“Laugh, and the world laughs with you
Weep, and you weep alone…”

— Ella Wheeler Wilcox, “Solitude”

“I learned a good deal there that I would later rely upon when I threw away my youth. What I learned when I threw away my youth was crucial in my development as a misdirected man, so maybe it’s all connected. What they say about character is true, though I can’t quite remember what they say about it.”

— Sam Lipsyte, “Admiral of the Swiss Navy”
Old Testament Crash Course

I was working delivery for a research and development supplier. Thin business, at this point—it was down to one shipment a week, a truck full of birds that went to the Biology department of a local junior college in town.

It’s for the birds, I would say to the lab assistant, and collect my commission. Then I would spit on the concrete loading dock for show.

The payload was regular: pretty finches, pigeons, parrots that hung together like bunches of bright, explosive fruit.

Once, I asked some poor technician what they did with the birds after the lab work. I’ll admit a vague culinary interest. You ever been to Lebanon? Me neither, but the roasted finch is worth dying over. That’s the public radio talking. More to the point, I had a niece’s birthday coming up, and given the way things had been with my sister—to say, friendly as a bad pair of ice skates—I needed to spring some doves from a box of lemon chiffon.

Turned out you couldn’t buy them back. They’re poisoned by the end of it.

He couldn’t blame me for asking. I was consigned to this lonely detail because I’d tried to pinch a skinny volume of methadone from my other usual stop, a medical firm lodged in a great glass tower on the town’s south end. The badge I claimed through this life was
opportunity, but my opportunities had narrowed down to the screaming, tropical chorus in back.

Every so often, I’d run up on protest-folk: vegetarians, animal righters, name it. There was a dependable cadre of steel-haired heads who claimed that the school was innovating ways to poison our water supply. Fluoride zombies, that old rap.

Oddest was the moment when I found myself with a quiet hand on somebody’s shoulder, saying, You know, these are kids in there. College kids. Like, twenty. They’re still figuring out the quickest way around zippered jeans.

Any driver knows you never get out of the truck. It was only one time. Patience abides by strange math. Sympathy, stranger. Most often I would just bully them apart with the rig’s deep foghorn, its piercing declaration of reverse.

But how peculiar to find when you’ve had it: like watching a violinist break his bow, or a filmstrip skip back on itself, freeze, then snap. It’s motion you could contain in the space of an eyelid.

So what?

So that day I backed it in like usual.

So I lifted the container door, and stood in the tight cages like a plantation man amongst his oranges, and I opened every one of the doors. When my birds took wing, it was like being inside a soft, warm grenade, and I imagine that from far off what you saw was great green
fire, a smoke signal that went high and disappeared against the brainy-colored cirrus of the afternoon.

Here, it was only me and these tattered, lonely people who acted like they'd come from the top of a far-off mountain. We were covered in feathers and shit.

I said, *You’ll get what they’ve paid for.*

The next day you knew it. Little piles of them everywhere, like candy cotton or streamer, or clumps of deep-blue moss clinging to the park benches. Frozen. Men in orange jumpsuits went around picking them up with litter sticks and placing their bodies in neat black bags, and for weeks it wouldn’t stop raining.
The Planet Off Its Axis

What we call the game is: *ways in which the ship goes down.*

“You could eat improperly irradiated tuna in one of those new age restaurants your mother likes so much,” Ham says, pressing real weight.

Two plates stacked on either side, and he’s crushing his ten-reps anyway. He lets the bar come to a cool rest above his teeth, pausing for show.

“Why don’t you put some serious metal up,” I say.

But really, I’m only half dialed-in. We bought a replacement VCR at a church swap meet this afternoon—a nervous piece of hardware, practically antique—and I’ve got to coax it into functionality. We run these machines hard: that is, Ham, me, and my little brother, Fat Ray, indulge a habit of four movies per weekend. Our last player burned out on us after just a month.

By the looks of things, this one ate several cassettes in its run with the nice old women who sold it to me. I work my hand around in the mouth, hunting for any stray wisps of magnetic tape; see if I can’t turn its spools easily.

Between Ham’s equipment (bench set, kettle bells, a dip bar), the heavy bag Fat Ray recovered from a derelict boxing gym downtown, and our media console—an eighties-style tube into which
I’ve woven everything from this new deck to a Blu-Ray player—our spot is made.

Ham jerks the bar up. That’s four sets, with nice, slow counts.

“I think you’re gonna be poisoned by fish. Buttery soft, that’s you. Now play your turn.”

“Bad seafood? I like to think I’ve earned a little more distinction than that,” I say. “Go for gold.”

“My man, he’s jussbuttersoft. Nah. Food poisoning is too likely for you.”

In a punished falsetto, no less.

“You’d be a ringer for theater,” I tell him.

The truth is that Ham could use some dramatic purpose now: an arena, the containment of an epic stage.

“Killer lungs, baby. Now, the way you’ve got your fingers in the machine’s guts, you might get electrocuted real soon.”

“We’ll see. That presumes some life on this thing’s part.”

“I want to up the iron before we laze out. Give me a spot,” Ham says.

We add a two fives and a twenty each. It’s a strange thing when I get behind the bench—my hands wrapped around the bar, feeling the slick heat of all that metal—and know I could never hold it by myself. Each supported press is a bizarre vote of confidence on Ham’s part.
He’s practically the only reason I rode with the football team, and, by extension, the reason Fat Ray got to cruise cool in the hallways as an underclassman: my brother was protected by our red lettermans. Football is a charmed thing at St. Michael’s. We were nationally-ranked that season. The school’s standing fluctuates on the year, but it’s never out of the top ten.

Ham’s arms waver just slightly on the fifth lift of his set. There’s a dark, ugly pain in his jaw, but then it’s up and over with.

“Come to think of it, I might lose my head right here,” he says, heaving.

“In the garage?”

“Yeah buddy. With you spotting, the last thing I’m liable to see is two-fifty coming down across my cheek.”

I pass him his bench towel, an old team-issued gift. I’ve got one, too, but the only action it sees is in my kitchen. My parents like it for dishes. I can work out and stay pretty clean, and popular science—the sort you read in men’s magazines, anyway—says the pheromones in your sweat work like natural cologne.

Not that I’m about playing ponies right now. We’re engaged in a process, and that process requires discipline. Patience. I’ve started to go heavy with all the extra protein I’m eating, mostly trunk-wise, but I can see it in my arms, too. Not just cellulite, but dense, bloody stuff.
Investment, that’s Ham’s take. So you hit the Corral Buffet for $6.99 and go heapish with the steaks, the shrimp cocktail.

Load and shave, load again. It’s all about getting lava-hot in your core—strong, fast, a burning engine. You build yourself up and work away what extra body later proves unnecessary to the whole.

Ham joined a gym once we were out of school. Brief indeed: they lured him in with a free trial, but he was soon expelled for shattering a large pane of the club’s front mirror with a fifty-bell. Some wormy old man fouled up his concentration during a set of incline flies and he lost it. That’s when he got the garage into shape. We’ve got mirrors too, but only to perfect form in.

You never preen, Ham reminds us.

Pretty shit—that’s later, if ever. The way you might look in a cut sleeve is a nice bonus. We’ve got to be ready. It’s priority.

What’s readiness? The ability to jerk your muscles like precise lightning when called upon.

Ham’s got abundant theories of disaster—in our lingua franca, ways in which the ship goes down—and I let him spin his wheels about them, just like I stand over him as he cycles through heavier and heavier increments on the bench.

Ergo, the suggestion of death by free weight accident. This scenario is not the farthest stretch. Compared to most of his
hypotheticals—an errant comet, or suburban Ebola, for example—it’s actually somewhat reasonable.

Loads like these?

My dropping a spot would kill him, if it caught his the cheek right way.

“To think you’d figure me in. I’m touched,” I say.

Ham points to his head.

“Like a grape. Messy as chicken salad.”

At this juncture, we shouldn’t make much sense. That’s alright. We will. You might call us “preppers”—a popular label for apocalypse talkers, as I understand—but that’s not what we’re about, and Ham would bust your skull for throwing the term on him. It’s not like he’s stockpiling canned turkey and rice.

Roses, spades, et cetera—the name’s not important.

Let’s get you some exercise:

It’s a cold morning; there’s been sleet. You start the ignition early. Your coffee steams in the air. Leave it on top of the car—then reconsider, because you’ve lost more than a few mugs that way over the years. After scraping the heavy slush from your windshield, you double-back inside for a scarf.

A compact-statured meth fiend, tuned on a morning hit and
lurking on the other side of the neighbors’ dead hedges, makes a move for the car.

He’s not dangerous; he doesn’t want your wallet—he’s a buddy. This is the same man who might ask you for change outside Wendy’s, wait for you to head in, and kiss you off by unwiring your stereo. Think of the last time you gave away thirty cents, a dollar, whatever—do you recall that face?

Our operator here, he’s low radar, just a man in your bushes. There’s nothing remarkable in him but quickness and a will to outwait frostbite. Plus, he’s juiced—and with this energy comes a panicked forecast of the afternoon’s empty tank. Cousin has to stay afloat. He knows just how.

You never see it coming. The car is primed for him, sitting there with the keys in it. Warm, even—and later, you think: rarely does the alignment of chance tip so far in someone’s favor.

Over the course of a single day—say, between the hours of seven and ten AM—four vehicles go missing in like fashion, rolled from driveways as their engines shiver into life.

I read my news. That happened once in some rubbed-out town near Detroit.

A feast of calamity, telephone calls. Maybe you’d just laugh.

So you get on the line with your people, insurance, the police—Or perhaps that isn’t what happens.
Instead, you start driving towards your office as you normally would. The light is fresh and clear; sun catches odd in the frost on your back window. Still, there’s a patch of black ice that you’ll never see, and when you hit it, nothing stops you from pitching the side of the road. Down an incline—the car rolls several times. If you reach the hospital, repairing the damage to your skull is paramount.

Ribs, whether or not you have lips, the ridge of your brow—these are secondary concerns. It’s the brain they’re after. Maybe the lungs. Hopefully they’ll have attended to your heart with the bus’s defibrillator on the way in.

That’s an old one of Ham’s, just to give you another idea of how things are played.

The pastime is recent, but Ham and I learned to think this way on a road trip for football. It was a Friday night contest against Ridge Parochial, a smaller outfit that relied on a throw-heavy offense, deep targets. The coaches knew that going in, and their idea was to counter with a consistent, crushing run.

Tonight’s purpose, they told us, is instructive punishment. Our sport has its own wisdom, the whole of which accrues only after a lifetime of careful study—which, in the case of our unlucky opponents, is a study of mortification.

Such is the true haughtiness you only find in football brains.
Saint Michael’s: We deliver redemption.

Laughable—or it would be, if the team hadn’t won almost every one of its games in the last four years. The Red and Gold ranks have bled into this country’s best. Check a D1 roster at random, and you’ll find our people there. These are men who I’ve seen naked and wincing and flubbering down mustard fries after two-a-days. Now they’re crushing Bowl games or burning up the NFL Combine.

Ham had been a rocket since freshman tryouts, and by our last year at the school, you couldn’t help but call him dangerous. He’d had seven concussive run-ins over the course of his career.

Boys would get tattooed over it—you’d add tally marks for each bomb-squad hit that took someone out of a game. Ham’s arm looked like a prison wall.

I’ll give you our zero incident in real-time:

Ham, at fullback, roots Parochial’s line all through the first half, and in the fourth quarter, the staff decides to try him at defensive end. It’s hardly a gamble, with his quickness and strength: a late blitz—all competitive bloodlust aside, I can tell you it was beautiful—and Ham cuts a perfect gap, then, with a world of run-up space at his disposal, spins at their quarterback like a planet off its axis.

When Ham jumps up, you can see the slightest tremor in his neck, a rogue little pulse in the muscle. We watch Parochial’s
quarterback stagger to the lines, bolts loose. He knocks his shins against the metal bench and slumps over.

Someone on our side yells: “Get that boy some Elmer’s!”

You feel it then, an urge to move with true velocity in ways other players could never predict. That sense of blood in your legs, such iron heaviness: the only way to cure it is by means of impact.

There’s the damage of this sport. To my mind, it’s never the hurt that really bothers people, but the relish with which it’s executed.

That feeling, it’s raw, oxygen-sweet.

On the bus back, the two of us to a seat, Ham tells me, “It’s lucky that you only kick.”

“Yeah?”

“Doing the boot isn’t going to break anyone’s neck.”

“Thinking about that QB?”

“Say one day it’s me,” he says, “Better yet, think of the time when the other dude doesn’t get up at all.”

For two minutes, each man on the field had assumed that was the case. We were ready for the stretchers. We were always expecting stretchers.
How can you keep hungry and alert if you don’t assume the worst of possible outcomes? Riding home, it seems right to bear this logic out. We start talking in daisy chains.

First, we review current events from homeroom:

—Unforeseen weather patterns on the Asian continent introduce a two-week spell of brittle heat over the Russian heartland, causing major agricultural damages and driving up the price of wheat in China.

A short story from English class:

—A passenger on a commercial airline begins an affair with the stewardess, and his marriage collapses six months later.

Or Human Biology:

—Carcinoma cells multiply, migrate from the lungs to the brain.

Close to home, Ham says, “The man’s violent behavior is precipitated by his years of aggressive physical activity.”

“Precipitate,” I repeat. “My boy’s been hitting his test prep.”

Ham says, “I’m trying to play big ball. Coaches have to take something to their admissions men, you know?”

Violence was a precondition of the sport. Ham was our hollow-point. He was the penetration man. He exploded.

But we’d found a strange nerve here, some germ of suspicion about what Ham and the other boys were doing to themselves. I only
kicked field goals, so it didn’t much apply to me. Little did, truthfully—I could probably count on two hands the number of failed third-down conversions we’d had in four seasons. It was rare that a drive was stunted such that I was called into action.

The Parochial game was no different; I’d idled on the lines. I saw the sharp backward snap of the quarterback’s helmet just after Ham broke the O-line. That’s why you buckle that strap (or should—I never did).

Concussions, amnesia, brain lesions—health officials from the district school board came by the team room every other week to distribute literature on cerebral health and safe playmaking. I collected the pamphlets, mostly for their pictures of CT scans—blooms of color: thundercloud purple backgrounds; those reds and great livid greens.

*  

The scene’s like this:

We’re at the counter place just past the practice fields. Tall colas and toasted bologna sandwiches on white. Ham goes through four orders, quiet and fast, a machine. The waitress brings him a check with a loopy slash on it.

“The trick is to be safe. You aren’t safe about your hits,” I say.

Ham mops a mayo spot from his dish.
“Excuse me? It sounded like you were telling me how to conduct myself on the field.”

“NCAA recruiters are smarter now. Good programs want fresh, undamaged heads who can learn the plays, go a strong three-year distance, minimum. You put your undergrad time in, then you go bonk out on some NFL redshirt squad.”

“I attract notice. That’s my game,” he says. “I’ve never had so much as a headache.”

“It’s a question of liability,” I say. “Someone’s got to tell you this.”

It won’t be our coaches—old men who have boiled their virtues down to an ethic expressed in calisthenics, line drills, and, once the weekend times off, the flagellation of the enemy.

Their professional counsel?

Mortify the body, son.

Like bad monks.

*

Before each contest we’d offer a Hail Mary for the other team. It was a requirement of the St. Michael’s administration that we maintain good religious practice on the field, and the coaching staff turned prayer to their purposes—every verse meant: *bring it down on them*. Like, God help you, we are going to turn your boys to
matchsticks. We said things like *full of grace*. Then we said things like *ripper* and *stinger* and *airborne division*.

In theology seminar, we’d learned that Michael was the patron saint of combat. You might be straight dumb—a three-watt sluggo stoned on janitorial huffers—and you still couldn’t help but learn that every statue of Michael in the world figures the angel carrying a big sword. It’s the one he uses to defeat Satan in the last battle.

We were out to run heads through on that sword.

Our Catholic fathers showed up at home field every Friday in regalia, robes and all. They too yelled *airborne division*; they signed four-point blessings after TDs. All was forgiven, all was redeemed.

I know it’s yolk shit, but at the halves, I always hunted the stands for Fat Ray, my mother, even Bill. If they saw me pin uprights just once, I’d shine for hours. Ham’s mother never made our games. She worked nights at the hospital, nursing in triage, so she was either eating breakfast or sleeping when we played. The conversations I’d had with her since ninth grade might’ve tallied to a half-hour. Sometimes we exchanged hellos when she walked through the garage.

Mrs. Taylor does not attend the game where her son suffers that critical collision.

You can’t help but watch the ball straight off a fumble. It’s easy to lose your fix on the runner in that jumble of legs. Imagine trying to
find Waldo in the gruesome jamboree of an Old Flemish canvas.
Wayward angels and bodies cobbled out of unwanted limbs: that’s
what I’ve got in mind as I search the pile-up for Ham’s outline.

Everyone is screaming about possession. Scott Kujiwast, a
three-hundred plus junior with calves like a draft horse, lows at the
linesman, “Hell yes, we’ve got it.” The verdict goes to our O-men: it’s
St. Michael’s ball, spotted on the opposing fifteen.

Rule One is don’t turn around for the crowd. Rule Two is don’t
break ranks for an injury. Rule Three is don’t celebrate unless we’re
kneeling in the final minute. Our training staff starts rolling out the
gurney. I’m poised to violate Rule Two.

It’s like watching myself through a telescope: there’s the Red
and Gold kicker burning across the grass in full sprint. From over top,
I can see blood already gumming in Ham’s chinstrap—dangling, as a
matter of habit—and the front bolts on his cage have sprung loose. I
see his eyes. The left pupil is dilated, a full black moon.

Then I fall back into myself: EMS is off the field, and I haven’t
moved. My head’s between my legs.

Someone leans over my shoulder: “You’d better not miss.”

I’m barely even warm. Usually, a kicker will test his legs
periodically against the practice net, but it’s almost never worth it for
me. How many times have I been called in this year? Twice?
We line up for the snap, and inside, I’m screaming, *visualize*, but all I can think about is Ham digging into that lineman, antitank-style, bracing his body for the helmet-to-helmet.

I can’t even watch the flags on my follow through.

Coach starts motioning at me with his finger—circular, like a drill, that strange athletic universal for momentum. If you catch it coming off the field, you’re probably about to get railed.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I couldn’t focus, not with Ham going out like that.”

“You’re stupid, son,” Coach says, “Pardon the French, but your kick was good.”

Ham doesn’t wake up for two days.

At the hospital, we tool icy pints of vanilla and watch the Giants lose on the small TV in his suite. When I see his MRIs, they’re nothing like the pamphlets the trainer’s been raining on us at school. Ham’s brain seems eminently fragile—like a big, blue-and-red Fabergé.

“Bring *House of the Dead* next time, or some shit,” Ham says. “I’m wasting in here.”

“You’ll be out too quick,” I tell him. He’s only got a few days more of observation.

Then I aim for the ribs: “But the world is probably safer with you bedded up.”
“It’ll be safe for a damn while, then,” he says. “I don’t expect to get back on the field.”

He looks at me like: please offer some contest. Truth is, I’ve taken to lurking outside the staff offices, and he’s not wrong. Our AD, the coaches—everyone’s been arguing furiously with recruiters, all of whom phone in with the same singular purpose: to offer condolences.

A concussion so big it kills your senior season? Ham’s a scratch on their lists. Recruiters have to maintain current depth charts. It’s the whole point of scouting.

“You ever sign a letter of intent?”

I could be fucking tactless sometimes.

* * *

Everyone put up holly in the windows. The pawnshops sent out circulars for holiday diamonds, and from the radios came that stream of jingle designed to mush you to insanity, or purchase too many digital cameras and fat pretzels at the Palisades Mall.

Amidst the buzz, we kept waiting for the odd recruitment letter, some coach’s pleading offer to rush Ham’s application through processing. There had to at least one college outfit willing to gamble on questionable goods.

By winter vacation, nothing of the kind had arrived.
Ham was coffin-ed; my prospects had been nil to start with. New Year’s, St. Pat’s, graduation: I marked time in weak holidays until summer started to come in.

So we hadn’t applied away to school—plenty of people didn’t.

Ham spun it like this: “Neither one of us is getting away from the other.”

*

Ham’s problem, in the wake of football?

It’s a question of thermodynamics.

There was once we came upon a group of Marine picks performing drills in the parking lot outside their recruiting office—which, by whatever accident, is adjacent to the only liquor store in town that sells underage. Friday, kick day, so we were there early. It was probably around four, the sun still up. The whole point was to avoid trouble. Some carrot-stick men in brown fatigues were trying to flip a huge, ribbed tire up and down the lot.

They were struggling, horribly—like ants making a go at a bagel.

“Check these punk willies,” Ham said. “Our fighting men.”

He waved them off the tire, whipped it vertical, and sent it rolling towards the Pakistani laundry. The drill sergeant was impressed, if unamused. He looked like murder, ready to break face on us, but Ham caught him in a deadlock. One of the cadets fumbled around with his cell and started to dial the police.
“Clothes don’t make the man, commandanté!” Ham yelled.

Fat Ray was beaming and tense. I thought he might cry from the adrenaline. We decided to try elsewhere for beer.

*

What am I doing, really?

Working at a video rental shack sandwiched between a Chinese takeout place and a dance studio for little girls. That’s most of my time right there. Otherwise, I’m exercising or watching films, or running new electrical routes through the back of the garage. I hit the Y for morning free swim three days a week to vary my cardio.

Saturdays, we jerk iron while our VCR flutters bloody music behind us: horror scores, alarm bells.

Ham’s got a semi-regular job hauling pizzas, and I swear he must reserve entire evenings of roadway for the formulation of new exercises, survival tactics. I picture him cruising around for hours, just dribbling mantras to himself.

Then I think of *Annie Hall*—classic Woody doesn’t cross the threshold of Ham’s garage, so this is when I’m on my loner grind—and the scene where a young man at a party says into a beautiful silver telephone: “I think I’ve lost my mantra.”

How that line cuts me up.

It’s my condition in a gemstone.

You’ll never catch me breathing a word of it off work, but I
much prefer that comedic ease to the bone cruncher shit we watch most days: troll hunting, Nazis on the moon. I’ll admit a certain soft spot for low-budget grime, but nothing to recommend the frequency with which we’ve raced through the canon’s deep cuts.

_Apocalypse:_ say that word the wrong way, and Ham goes flat-faced with the cool, expert passion of a scientist. His models for a water-based biological attack would take days to explain. He’s greatly suspicious of the postal system. Doesn’t use banks, either.

“There’s always the possibility of an economically-inspired civil war,” he reminds us. “And I don’t play for that shit.”

Money in the mattress it is—but when you’re only making weeknight pizza deliveries, that’s sustainable practice. They pay him in cash anyway. I get regular checks from Video Star, so I’m content to wrestle the devil at my local branch.

Fat Ray is a junior now, and his boys like to rag each other down with the inevitable question: who’s getting trapped?

Who’s got his foot in the hometown vortex?

Often, Fat Ray tells me he’s not afraid of staying here, that our parents—my mother and his dad, Bill—can eyeball him all they like, but he intends to leave his college mail unopened and weather the course with me and Ham.

Ray makes proud defenses of our first year out of school. He’s
yet to lose the mantra: we are biding our energies, he repeats.

But when I know we won’t see Ham for a bit—say he’s working a weekend favor for his cousin in Queens—I take my brother aside for some real talk.

“There’s no game in this, Ray. That’s just me being honest. Hanging out in this shitpen is going to stop being fun soon.”

“Nah. We’re putting in work here,” he says, nodding.

“Regulating. I can dig that for days and days.”

That’s Ray’s mistake, the quickness with which he finds purpose in Ham’s language. Sometimes it’s necessary to give him perspective, add fresh air to the diving bell. Like: Ham lifted that phrase from a G-funk track, and there’s nothing for us to police here besides ourselves.

“We’re working out in a garage and driving around an empty block,” I say.

If the parents are out for a day, my brother and I will take Bill’s guns to the range (old hunting rifles, collector’s pieces) and pot away at skeet. Fat Ray’s got an inexplicable bush of hair on him—I won’t lie, it’s jungle—and the sight of that fro compressed under his safety muffs is enough to split me.

Weird, but it’s these moments that make me proudest of him: his silent application as he picks clay birds from the sky and drills them.
Mind, I don’t let my character slip often. Ham’s programmatic fever is contagious—the fitness routines, dawn patrols in his mother’s LeBaron: you can’t help but get nuked on that. I grunt through my pull-ups—not as hopelessly as I would’ve a year ago—and when Ham compliments my form, my reps, I can tell you: I feel game to get out and hand-test those would-be Marines myself.

But when I’m back at Video Star, or tooting the same chicken and brussels my mother has made every day since middle school, I know we’re playing at poor opera.

The way Ham sees it, we’re under the lens of a great, savage eyeglass. Me, I think otherwise. I think the bottom of a disaster rots out on you like anything else. What’s your canoe sinking in two feet of water? Wet.

If anything’s going to have your flesh dead and hopeless in ten years, it’s daily wear. Lack of movement, or calcium, or sunlight, probably.

Which is why you can buy special Vitamin-D lamps.

* 

Don’t get me wrong: I threw plenty of wood on Ham’s fire.

I had come off my Friday shift at the video store—five to eleven, plus another hour of restocking and catalogue entry—and was hovering in the shop’s basement, flossing my teeth with leftover lo-mein and combing tapes for something to watch.
I settled on *Dr. Strangelove* for its glorious shivers of human error.

We were in heavy traction after graduation. Ham was still reeling from the lack of scholarship offers. He didn’t so much as yell during that winter’s Super Bowl.

But it wasn’t depression—you could sense new, hungry discipline creeping around in him. He refitted our exercise equipment, loaded up on jugs of anabolics. He started talking to me about assembling a survival cache of C.B. radios, batteries and emergency rations, surgical masks.

The man kept my cell phone hot. A massive hurricane ripping up the coast; an influenza scare, like the one that had put our town on quarantine alert the year previous; a terrorist attack on the transit authority—Ham was riffing on all this shit late into the evening. Everything was expressed in terms of limits and thresholds.

I thought, If I’m losing rest over this, Ham must be running on gasoline. So the Saturday after I’d found *Strangelove*, I decided we’d use the tape to take a laughing swing at the end of the world. Shrug it off.

Ham was over at our place early, reading the paper and swilling coffee with the family. He started narrating a story about piracy off the Kenyan coast—he’d snapped up the International section immediately—and I could see my mother made nervous by the way he
jabbed his fork through an omelet.

Time to move off for the day.

I asked Ham if he wanted to watch Strangelove—Fat Ray, too, who looked ready for a day of couch-bound entanglement with some comics anyway. We’d been running Godzilla tapes for weeks, and there came a point where you had to get your beef up.

“It’s Stanley Kubrick, my man,” I said. “Classic.”

We jogged over to Ham’s garage to let breakfast curdle for a few hours. It put Fat Ray in a wheeze; I wasn’t much better. We’d been wasting that summer, but I tasted a little endorphin kick. We let Strangelove roll. Fat Ray howled when the film mushroomed into its credits, and I nodded approvingly—my idea was to show him that sometimes it’s all you can do to laugh when you see yourself caught in the teeth of a big machine.

I’m thinking of that moment when Slim Pickens rides a nuclear payload from the bay of his ailing B-52. In this vacant stretch of June—bright sun, milk-sticky heat—we looked to be caught in the teeth of a rather small machine.

My counsel? More laughter. That logic did not carry far.

Ham shut off the box and said, “That’s only one way in which the ship goes down. I’ve considered it, the nuclear option. Had it on the brain plenty.”

So he’d missed some things.
“I like that. ‘Ways in which the ship goes down,’” I said. “It’s got rare poetry.”

“Well, we’d better start keeping a list of these. Ways in which the ship goes down. And I don’t mean the big stuff, only. Not just towers falling, you feel? I’m talking about some punk getting mean with his steel, and you not being able to do shit about it.”

Ham had been spending too much time up in Queens, working odd construction and harvesting copper from burnt-out warehouses in Jamaica. Nobody was running around our zone with heaters. What would be the point?

“You remember that guy at the Little League yard?” he said.

Here was actual precedent: last summer, a group of adolescents who’d been patrolling a nearby Little League park went raw-dog on a man who’d claimed their crew—some minor gang that identified itself with a four-letter tag in the current cartel fashion.

Fat Ray was nearly green. Hackled. He’d played one summer’s worth of baseball there, and the news had shaken him up terrifically when it broke.

Ray knotted his brows, circled his wrists. It was a gesture he’d make when my mom scabbed him for going in on extra mac at dinner, or leaving exercise socks on our kitchen table. He said, “I see you, Ham. I’m not trying to get beat down by anybody.”

You needed that personal foothold.
“What would it take to get you moving? You gonna let some dudes fuck up your little brother before you get in shape? And I’m talking mental, too. The willingness to act when called upon.”

“Why the hell does it have to be me?” Fat Ray said, panicked.

“No reason, young sir. It’s hypothetical. They’d have no cause to mess you, but that would hardly matter. They’re just razzed. It could happen outside the St. Michael’s stadium. Or the Italian ice spot. The movies. How about that store where your brother works?”

Ham smirked at me, deep and evil.

“Shut up, Ham,” I said.

But in the grander scheme, he’d won me. Had I considered the chance that goons might hop the municipal line—the town over was arguable hood, basically a gone-under steel mill and some bodegas—and catch Fat Ray and his boys by surprise?

We were falling victim to the chill of the flesh you get from sitting too long. Or delivering pizzas, renting out videos. Necrotic. Paranoid-sick: if we weren’t going anywhere, it only stood to reason that something would come for us.

*

Ham’s doing scuba at the Y, perfecting his procedurals for an upcoming open-water test. I’ve got Fat Ray spotting me on a guillotine press.

“There it is, Butter,” he says.
Ever since Ham called me “Buttersoft,” my brother hasn’t let up—at the dinner table, or when we’re crowded around the sink in the morning: Butter. He nearly sings it, the same way Ham did.

It’s funny, too, when you consider Fat Ray’s pudge. It’s like he knows I can’t throw the name back at him for decency’s sake.

“Next time we spar, I’ll have you pissing blood,” I say.

“Careful, or I won’t help you with that bar.”

But he takes the weight off my neck. One-sixty—I’m not disappointed.

Ham pulls up in the LeBaron and practically jumps across the garage to grab me from the bench. A wetsuit is still wrapped around the lower half of his body and he’s dripping water everywhere.

“Get in the car. Little Raymond, you’re going to have to hold it down solo for a minute. Your brother and I need to drive out.”

“I’ve got another set,” I say.

“Air out your weakness, and let’s go.”

I shoot through my final reps and throw on a sweatshirt.

Ham and I start flying west on Old County road. It winds up to a rough little overlook called Great Point. You can eagle on the town from this vantage: Main Ave, St. Michael’s home field, and just above the trees bristling on the far ridge, a lambent slice of Manhattan skyline.

I tune in some Hot 97 for the ride, but Ham cuts the radio.
“Listen to me,” he says. “We’re on some real business. There’s been an attack. Just like what happened in ’02. Poison shit in the mail.”

“Somebody send you a sad valentine?”

“Don’t twist it. There’s no time to get fresh. I’m not fucking around.”

The sun is neon orange, like something you’d want to bottle for a window display. We step away from the car and scan the valley.

There are fire trucks moving in line far below, an ambulance behind them. A train of strobing lights. By all appearances, our fire department’s constantly engaged—it’s rare that you can spend an evening downtown without having a truck scream past—but it’s difficult to imagine what they might actually be doing down there.

I say, “Lay it on me. I know you will.”

Ham produces the weekend Ledger, and sure enough it’s on the front page: “ Anthrax Death in New Jersey.”

For all his usual bluster, he’s not just speculating.

An elderly postal worker from the town over has just died of an anthrax infection. Exposed to concentrated endospores: they found him slumped at his kitchen table.

There’s no word on where the bacteria came from.

“Scope the trunk,” Ham says.

Inside, he’s got gasmasks—three of them. A new set of hiking
boots, some rubber waders and gloves. There’s scuba equipment still knotted up in the back. The whole mess reeks of chlorine and locker room.

“This makes you look insane. Like an insane Navy Seal gone AWOL.”

“Anthrax, man. Marinate on that for a second.”

I say, “You do realize that the stuff was probably never in the mail. It’s weird, but there wasn’t any attack. I don’t think you need all that.”

“We do. You, me, Ray. We’re entering the alpha phase. Serious preparations.”

“With the car stocked as it is, you look about poised to escape into the ocean. Maybe we ought to head down to the points.”

Ham grabs me by the shoulder.

“Laugh, but I could, and that’s the idea. I could do any goddamn thing. Now check this.”

He rearranges a few pieces of gear and—how could I not have expected it?

A small black firearm.

I think, At least it’s nothing explosive.

But no, you can’t excuse this. Figure how it plays five minutes later, in the garage: Ham will wave that piece around while *The Warriors* drones in the background. He’ll unveil his plans for
intensified training, rail about the necessity of active self-defense. And there’s my younger brother, who will lap up every word of it.

That cannot happen.

Ham draws his fingers over the barrel. The serial number has been filed away.

“Cousin Rondo hooked it up last weekend, when I was out in Hollis. This is like twenty hours’ worth of roofing right here. And no record. Good to roll with.”

“Ham, you are going to drive me home. Then, you are going to bury that in the ground behind your place, and I’m going to pretend you didn’t show me you could be so fucking harebrained.”

“That’s exactly the way it’s going to go down? I’m not so sure.”

I can feel the lactic burn of those bench presses in my chest.

“My brother is never going to see that thing,” I say.

“The young blood should make his own call on this. Way I see it, that anthrax shit is a warning shot. Thunder. This is the time for escalation. We’ve got to be ahead of the wave.”

I take him by the hand—cool, though, nothing aggressive—and raise his gun up to my face. It’s level with my eyes.

“Keep that trained right where it is. Go ahead.”

“Just get in the damn car,” Ham says.

He tucks the pistol under his swim fins. I call Fat Ray and tell him to lock up until I’m back.
“Lock up? Like I can’t even hear you. I guess you don’t know what your boy’s about, then.”

“I’m trying to think the way you do,” I tell him. “Which is to say, one can never be too careful.”

It’s my own house that’s glowing in my mind—my mother, Ray and his dad, the lot of them crowded into a frame that Ham and I have yet to enter. Then comes the moment where I’m waiting to unlock the front door, for Ham to drive away in the LeBaron. Once that happens, I can breathe a bit. Right now it’s a matter of calculation and tactics. Of minimizing threat.

I’m not saying it doesn’t hurt to think of him like that, but I’ve got reasons.

*

I wasn’t until after the Varsity’s senior dinner that I started to notice Ham’s slips. He’d forget his locker combo. He brought thick novels to the Chemistry lab.

What finally lights him up is the quadratic-fucking-formula.

We’re in Deacon Ailee’s Al-2 class, slogging the trig final, when Ham explodes out of his seat.

“I can’t look at these numbers anymore.”

He beelines for the front of the room and grabs the Deacon by his collar.
Ailee joined the order twenty years ago, and that’s just his recent history. We’re talking old, here: loose bits of hair, a balding pate and wire glasses, silver scruff. He’s the kind of person who’s forever trailing into reminiscence about cold winters and rotting wood houses and somehow expects you to connect that back to math.

We’ve got the holiday concert after classes, and Ailee is wearing a loose, gold dalmatic for the occasion. The vestments are slack around his body. The way Ham’s got him in the air, Ailee looks like a lobster that’s just been liberated from its shell.

Ham says, “Write the quad formula on some scrap for me, and I’ll finish up easy.”

“Taylor, sit down immediately, or I’ll have you removed,” Ailee says.

I can still hear that awful smack of head on desk: like a tennis ball served straight into a wooden garage door.

Any other student, and they’d have called the police right off the bat, but our coaches make a powerful appeal for Ham.

Taylor’s given blood and time for St. Michael’s, they argue. The outburst stemmed from his field injury, no question. It’s a chronic condition. Beyond his control. They want to graduate him with a clean record in view of his athletic efforts.
Decoded roughly from the administrative tongue, this means: the boy could easily turn around and sue the school’s athletic program for medical damages.

It’s a gentle suspension, all things considered. Just two weeks. Ham will return after the close of the winter term. He’ll get to walk with our class. But if the head injury wasn’t enough, his disciplinary record will seal it: not D1, not D3—there’s not a JC left in the state that would waste money on a player like him.

When I watch the men file silently from the disciplinary hearing—Ham, Coach and the coordinators, AD Daniels and the vice principal, Father Andrews—each one looks like he’s gotten away with something, just not cleanly enough.

*

Eight o’clock, and the family is scrubbing up the last hunks of a meatloaf. Super quiet. We haven’t gotten a knock at the door. My phone registers no missed calls or messages.

Fat Ray says, “What was with that lock the house rap?”

“I don’t know. I wanted you be on top of stuff. You ought to lock doors. Here, eat a vegetable.”

I pass him the broccoli dish. My mother nods her absent approval.

“Didn’t sound like all that on the phone. You sounded worried.”
Bill sips his Miller, gets that foam-lipped walrus look.

“You’re harping, son. Don’t be overly inquisitive. It’s about good habits.”

Bill says this like he’s not a man who spends his nights toying with an outmoded PC flight simulator and winnowing cheese puffs from bags of party mix.

Fat Ray won’t let the matter drop: “What did Ham have to show you so badly?”

“His cock, and the motherfucking sunset. You good now?”

When my mom loses her fork in the gravy dish, I know I’ve gone wrong. Fat Ray has a beaten-up face on, and rightfully so; I’m being straight vicious. Somebody should let fly on me, but—nothing. I come under no fire. I swell over the table, a fat shadow.

Everyone’s mute, like the silent consensus on the matter is that if they shouldn’t be afraid of me, they definitely ought to be scared of Ham and whatever happened at Great Point.

“I wanted you to leave it alone,” I say. “But if we can’t, have you seen the Ledger? The anthrax case in Break Ridge. Ham told me about it. I didn’t want to freak anybody out.”

Par for the course: the news is ripe for one of Ham’s rants, and it stands to reason that I wouldn’t want to trouble them with whatever paranoid scenario he’s concocted from it.

They certainly don’t have to know about his gun.
“Let’s everybody calm down here,” Bill says. “Clear some plates. Relax. Until we know more, it’s not worth worrying over.”

“So I told Ham.”

Later, Fat Ray comes by my bedroom. I’ve been laid out since dinner, watching the numbers roll on my red-eyed digital, sweating the sheets. Nine-thirty, and still no contact from Ham. He’s trolling me long and slow.

“Yo,” Ray says. “I don’t give two effs about dinner.”

“Just relax on it.”

“We’ll get smoothed at Ham’s tomorrow, I’m sure. Should be real.”

“Ham’s?”

“Yeah. He offered up his spot, said we’d kick it. I figured brews and movies, like what else?”

Ham’s sly, resourceful—of course he’d call Fat Ray. He’s hoping for a chance to lean on me in company.

“Sure,” I say. “If you want, I’ll try to tempt the neighbor’s cable box into feeding us pay-per-view.”

All mellow: that’s what I need to project. The years around Ham and me have given Fat Ray a cool eye for nerves. He takes our moods to heart, and with those questions at the table? I can’t afford to let his mind wander.

From far off—but getting closer—you can hear the watery, red
scream of an ambulance. The trucks stop a few houses down the block from us.

I tell Fat Ray to stay inside.

I’m thinking, Here’s the next anthrax case. Or it’s Ham running down the street with that handgun, ready to blow somebody’s head in because he thinks there’s a war on. For all I know he’s perpetrated a home invasion just to get me and Ray thugging with him.

I can hear his voice: Time to hold our end down, fools.

Bill and I head outside to get the read on things—I’d prefer it were just me, but there’s no reasonable means of shaking my stepdad—and it’s Mrs. DeBrezzi, shivering next to her one-story in a chiffon night dress. Smoke is billowing from the kitchen’s rear window.

We poke around the edge of the yard. The Fire Department and the police are trying to warn off gawkers, but Bill gets the old woman’s attention and she waddles over.

“Everything alright, Mrs. DeBrezzi?”

Someone brings the lady an emergency blanket from the ambulance. She’s almost eighty, by any good estimate. This chill is a pneumonia spell for her.

“Tomorrow’s sauce, ruined already,” she mumbles. “All day. The waste. All those tomatoes, and I have to start the whole thing again.”

*
Bruce Willis is frozen on the monitor behind us—Die Hard, because, like Ray said, what else? Tape’s nested, most likely. Our swapped VCR has finally started to show its bones, but that’s just as well, because Ham’s wound up to cover some distance.

“You know why I’m so fucking good at football?”

I break in: “Our whole team was.”

Was good at football. We’re more than a year out of school, and Ham’s got his old colors on. Where he dug up that St. Michael’s varsity suit is beyond me. The crimson pants and jacket are still enough to dazzle Fat Ray.

“Why were you so good?” Ray says.

“It’s because my blood’s from Waco, Texas. Now, Waco’s the spot for Texas ball. I would’ve played there if my mom hadn’t been so set on getting close to New York. Fourteen, I didn’t know shit about Jersey. But I’m glad she did. It’s damn hot down in Texas, and you get people going nuts in such heat.”

Beaming—Ham’s about to spill on the Waco siege.

“Branch Davidians,” Ray says. We’ve both heard this line a thousand times over.

“That’s right. Comes down to who gets armed and ready, and who doesn’t, you feel?”

I stop him: “You know, some basic questions have occurred to me. Where’s your generator? Your solar oven? Where’s your forty-
pound drum of uncooked oats? You’re not preparing, you’re mongering.”

“Mongering?”

“Like a violent clown. Where are your textbooks? The theory. That’s what I want to know about.”

Fat Ray says, “I mean, we’re all doing lifts together. And cruising.”

He flexes his biceps—a goof, like he’s easy—but it isn’t hard to see the worry in his diplomatic attempt.

“Your brother’s just not with it, little man. That’s the truth. He was punking on me just the other afternoon. Getting real blowhard, and now he’s intent on staying sour.”

Ray says, “What are you guys talking about?”

I lay it out: “Ham picked up a piece on a trip to the city, and now he’s convinced that we need to start carrying that shit around. You tell me what you think about that, Ray. Tell us both.”

Here’s that metal. Fat Ray doesn’t offer a word.

“I’m talking total package protection. Bringing my streets into line.”

I say, “There are no streets. It’s just you running around like some ex-military nutter.”

“That’s not something you say to the man with the gun.”

“Well, I told you not to bring it around here.”
“Need I mention that this is my house?” Ham says. “But you said you didn’t want it around your brother, that’s fine. We’ll take a drive somewhere. Us two.”

Fat Ray goes baby bird on me all too often, so I don’t look at him as I’m getting into Ham’s car.

I figure we’re making for Great Point again, but Ham heads towards the town’s north end. It’s industry gone gutless: spare, ruined warehouses; the dockyards, with cattails and swamp beyond them. Ham parks the car under a rusty scrap crane. He drops to his haunches, starts painting little trails in the sand with his fingers.

“What am I actually about to do? That’s what you’ve got to ask yourself,” he says.

“Yeah, I’ve been at it. Got nothing.”

Ham floors me with his strong right cross: wild force, a full-body wind-up. My ears might as well be full of cotton. I catch my milky, dark reflection in the LeBaron’s paint, and there’s a nasty red grin on my forehead.

“Mother of our Lord,” I say, still crawling.

“Damn right you got nothing. Like I’m out to body someone. Your thinking is weak shit. Always weak. Maybe I really should stomp you out in front of your brother. Now put your ass in that car.”

When we get back to the garage, Fat Ray’s waiting on the
pullout with one of his dad’s hunting rifles. The deep shine of its polish, the long black barrel: it’s like something out of a museum. Baroque dangerous. What surprises me, really, is the speed of Fat Ray’s decision—what little time it’s taken him to run back to our house, unlock the gun safe, and post up here in the dark.

Ham says: “See, little Ray’s all over it. He’s got a quick head, and that’s why he knows we’ve got to step up the game.”

My brother is laughing, because there’s nothing else to do. Because prediction never avails you completely.

Say you want to get out.

Where is out that it’s so far away?

You can look across the chocolate crags of the Palisades, stained up in red and yellow loops of tag, and make out the rises of New York. Traffic is groaning its way towards the tunnels.

You could take the bus over. You probably won’t.

I’m not saying we’re hard up, precisely, but this isn’t rich.

You tried to find a decent urban remove. You wanted campgrounds. You wanted real public schools—or maybe, like our parents, a fine Catholic institution where your kids could learn to exact turf-based punishment on other members of the nominal flock.

So you came here for the curious blend of nature and industrial knots, and the city not far off. There are decent woods, the border
lakes, mountains. You can go camping and get lost. Stalk for whitetail or bear, when the seasonal count says it’s appropriate.

Your children will argue such points when confronted with the smokestacks which have made this place famous, the highways that snake through the state’s corridor, up its dragon back.

They’ll say, How the fuck could you get anywhere without roads?

We are still trying—

That’s what I keep repeating to myself, ears awash with pulse, as I watch us grow ugly before we’ve gone old.
What’s in Your Guts?

Mayarkovsky and I were watching the local coaster park send hellish neon flares over US 1 when he first told me about the kidney. Nana-joon had retired for the night—Mayarkovsky lives two floors above her—and he’d opened a frozen fifth of thrice-distilled polska to toast my arrival. Cold, colorless, loving—some liquid diplomacy to bring us into proper kinship.

Call it a crash landing. I was hardly foot to ground in Florida, and already I’d learned that the man who was courting my grandmother had once ferried an organ across a city in little more than a glorified lunchbox.

He told me, “I carried it in a Styrofoam cooler. It was winter. Freezing. Can you imagine this, snow blowing in my face all night? At the hospital, I asked to keep the cooler. Styrofoam, yes, but stupid to throw away.”

I said, “You expect me to believe you were just walking around with a kidney on ice?”

That’s when Mayarkovsky brought out his model, something he’d probably nicked off an internist years ago.

At Grove City Clinical, the subsidized outfit where Admiralty’s residents go for scrips, the doctors still have on hand crates of drug rep flair—stillborn, vinyl hearts; rubbery stomachs and lungs
emblazoned with names that, rendered from their medicinal Greek, mean things like “de-acidifier” or “reflux inhibition.”

Maybe there was instructional use for the layman, like: in case you’ve failed to comprehend the essential notions of tissue necrosis or myocarditis or blood poisoning, have a look at what’s dying inside, and how.

Take the human heart, cast in plastic: you could break apart its yellowing ventricles; choke and release the valves; remove pockets of sour steroidal fat.

I sat with the souvenir kidney in my lap, separating its lobes and testing the elastic nephrons with my fingers. Mayarkovsky beamed while I held it, as though, by sheer totemic presence, the toy organ corroborated the whole of his story: snowy whips of blizzard; a group of faceless men huddling round their cooler of renal tissue.

I could humor and grill him at the same time: “Who was the kidney for, Mayarkovsky? How shady are we talking? You’ve been trading in intangibles. Now, start trading in kidney flesh.”

Mayarkovsky lifted his shirt, exposed a ripe quarter moon of belly. Like a perfect document: ugly purple stitches running spine to stomach. If you ever drew train tracks as a child, you know exactly the pattern I’m talking about.

“Sometimes, it’s better not to pay attention to such things,” he said.
Did I taste a finger of bile at the sight? There was my litmus
test—yes, I believed him.

* 

Since that night, I’ve yet to see Mayarkovsky’s passport or find
his ID—state or otherwise. Trust me, I’ve rifled the bureau drawers:
nothing but cleaners’ receipts and peppery jeremiads about the
building manager.

But if pressed, I can guess at the sum of unholy flesh
Mayarkovsky suffered up to get to Florida. On average, the human
kidney weighs about four ounces. Plus blood, you’ve got to figure.

So: a quarter-pound, and how much blood, just to arrive in this
Elysium gone wrong?

Thank Christ, I remind myself daily, my brother died in
Michigan.

* 

Like all of us, Mayarkovsky tends a little place: pink stucco, a
few off-golden lamps, shag carpeting. Plastic ferns. He saves copies of
Auto Planet and Admiralty Gable, the condominium’s weekly
newsletter.

Here’s Mao, the ratty Siamese he found wandering the trash
bins alongside the building. She brushes past me like an angry fur
whistle.
“No attention from her,” he muses. “This means I can trust you.”

Mayarkovsky doesn’t drink anything but lemon-lime soda and vodka distilled from potatoes. He prefers backgammon to poker. Swears by light cotton and zinc oxide for sun protection. He is not a citizen and so cares nothing of the vote.

Sometimes we venture poolside so he can touch his soles to the first foot-lubricated rung of the stepladder. The water is copper green, algal, and smells like it looks: a fresh burn of chlorine and salt to the sinuses. We never swim.

“Like bleach,” he says, kicking droplets from his toes. “Today, I wanted to play the shuffleboard. Alas, the shuffleboard is not yet repaired. It’s what you get from Collins, that slimy king. You know what happens to the king of the castle?”

He draws a finger across his throat for Collins, the super, owner, and manager of this glittering slice of waterfront premium. A nearby marina? Two minutes from the Super Save? Perfection. But alas, look to our shuffleboard court, and there’s indeed grass sprouting from its unkept fissures of clay.

Mayarkovsky says, “And so you learn already about the hardships of exile. You are my comrade in this.”
Personal expulsion is a private humor of mine: the way my mother forced me down south after Brother Sam withered in his final hepatic throes.

That was how I knew him all the way through: Brother Sam, not quite Uncle—like an island floating off the American shore. Maybe he was Cuba. Once, Sam broke two of my father’s ribs with a folding chair, but he was a safe person when he wanted to be. There was a decade between us; he could’ve easily been my uncle.

Brother Sam was the one thing that could terrify my mother into shelling out for copays and buying extra gallons of milk. He wasn’t what you’d call traditionally persuasive—his style of argument relied heavily on shattering flatware. I didn’t mind. I was good at things like sweeping and ducking.

When the Hep was just coming on, Sam could still toss saucer plates; they’d float through the kitchen and explode over the television set. Like a carnival ringer. My logic followed these lines: if I was still on an aggressive sweep schedule, we weren’t yet dealing with an acute hepatic catastrophe.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he’d sneer from the couch.

Later, I didn’t need Sam’s doctors to tell me his liver was failing. I knew it when he could no longer bring himself to knock teacups from the counter. His eyes had gone foggy, gold-rimmed with
jaundice: in that final hospital cot, he looked like something from an Egyptian burial tomb.

I never claimed to be easy after that. Nor blameless—but then, was I the one at the prescription pad? Lithium, Seroquel: I chewed them down diligently, even after the first round of imbalanced salts flensed my skin to something reptilian.

I never played discus with our china. Not once did remove my mother’s dresser to the street corner. Me? I was a bet-and-spend man, and even that was mostly cheap scratch-and-wins. By comparative metrics, I was shining a study in cooperation.

After I sold the family pick-up to chop artists on South Ave, my mother took a different view: namely, that functional independence was either proven or it wasn’t.

Her arithmetic? Prove it elsewhere or sign back into treatment.

She said, “It’s Florida with Nana-joon, or back to the Carrier Home.”

I knew certain remedies would always hold magic for me—steady hits of Valium; the shock; and, in a nervous pinch, writing down some essential facts of addition. Aggressive shock worked best, but I was not going back to Carrier.

The clinic was committed to exploring somatic holisms—during ECT off-days, we miled up at the running pagoda, braised in country
sun. I planted yards of alfalfa and sweet potatoes. I wrote letters and locked them in a sock-drawer. I sucked on carob.

Group therapy was conducted in the Buddha room: we’d convene daily to wage meditative siege against our old souls, which were often described as terra cotta warriors—humanoid, chrysalitic, also sad-sacked. The idea was to welcome them out through the chest; you had to visualize egress.

Yes, really. According to Carrier’s literature, therapeutic praxis demanded nothing less than a consummate engagement of metaphor.

That, and a high tolerance for sweat and dry heat: in my experience, the vestiges of past lives dripped mostly from your forehead.

I was a diagnosable case—hypermanic, delusional, I grant—but you had to be off the fucking dock to subscribe to this magic. I swam for shore not long after the inception of chakra logbooks.

Carrier was blind people leading sick people, and the other way round—which was fine, provided you were interested in healing measures like lotus birthing. The insides of my brain were already bright as a sodium lamp; I was practically kindling with holy light. Further illumination of the soul seemed like a dubious, even dangerous prospect.

I needed more electro, maybe, but there wasn’t enough voltage in the state of Michigan to make up for the Home’s dharmic effluvia.
*  

I shouldn’t imply that Mayarkovsky knows everything. No, I gave him an anemic rundown—nothing about my E.R. visits, or electrotherapy at Carrier.

What I told him was, “I arranged the damn funeral.”

This was accurate, at least in partial degree: we’d settled on express cremation. My mother wanted Sam stashed in a prison cemetery, or donated to medical research, or whatever they usually do with hospital leftovers, but I bent her thumb about it.

Before you advance judgment, let me clarify some things. Expedited would be a much better name for this arrangement—the incineration process itself takes no less time than usual; it’s just that the ashes travel door-to-door.

True, it lacks a bit in ceremony, bearing your dead on the postal bier, but when they mentioned the free two-day rush?

At least I’d brought him home.

The box was small and brown—cedar, probably. It didn’t smell bad. It smelled like something you’d put in a closet to protect sweaters. Some of the big bones—ones left uncrushed by fire, tough nubs of leg and spine—you can have those preserved, recombined with the fine grind.

I told the undertaker to save me some wishbones.
Not long after we got the package, I caught my mother shaking Sam’s ashes, inverting the box. This was late—say four or five. I could hear a garbage truck moving somewhere off in our neighborhood, the lows of its diesel engine. She had her ear pressed against the wood, as if she were winding an analog alarm, or trying to find a heartbeat in a cold sparrow.

Shivering, too—I could see it in her hands.

I said, “What, Ma? You afraid he got out?”

She served me with the one-way to Florida not long afterwards.

That’s a memory I keep in the vest; until I learn Mayarkovsky’s provenance, it’ll stay there.

Petersburg, old Moskau? The great Gulag reaches of the East? I’ve pictured him clam digging in Black Sea sand, that granary stomach bowing over the waistline of crimson trunks. It’s equally plausible that he skipped to France and spent years running a back-alley checkers hustle on Polish tourists.

My hours editing this geography have not yielded one concrete inch. I expected to root through his decades and find freighter trips; soggy drifts of radioactive snow.

Go head—open your computer and query: “Mayarkovsky,” “kidney,” “Soviet.”

No hits result.
“Didn’t they teach you anything in school? It was just big soup, all of it,” he says.

Oh, this language and its lucky pitfalls.

“Nana is from Iran,” I offer. “I think that's where the soup went after Europe.”

* 

Ask for yourself, and: “Mayarkovsky is a gentleman of the continents.”

This is how he first introduced himself to my grandmother. She was struggling to haul groceries into the condominium elevator: pomegranate molasses, walnuts, dried lemons. She’d hit Super Save, then headed to Sadaf Persian Goods on Ocean—an ordeal already, and with the way her old black Lexus heats under the lot’s full sun...

“You have quite foreign taste,” Mayarkovsky told her, regarding the loops and slashes printed on her bags. He fanned her gently with a coupon circular he’d picked off the lobby’s security desk.

“Cheaper than from the Internet,” she said.

* 

“From there was love? One thinks and hopes and believes,” says Mayarkovsky.

Their romance has come to me secondhand: gems of pyrite washed from his accounts of their earliest meetings. You can’t trust everything Mayarkovsky says, but I’m certainly not about to take my
grandmother aside and say, “Nana-joon, tell me everything about your new stranger.”

We need our small blindnesses.

Imagine the two of them sandwiched in a bed: humid flesh unwrapped under ceiling fans, sea breeze filtering in—and still, what perspiration. The simple thought’s enough to disturb my sleep. If Mayarkovsky spends the night at our place (a requirement of courtesy, as joona’s not given to leaving her condo more often than is most necessary), I jump two floors up to his apartment and bed down on the rough canvas couch, read for a few hours, stroke Mao until my evening dose of pharma hammers me into the ground.

When I come downstairs, they’re no doubt breakfasting on fresh pink slices of melon, water-soaked almonds, flatbread and cheese. My grandmother’s television is never off; by this hour, it’s usually tuned to a daytime physician who lectures about things like coronary health, proper avocado selection, and the perils of non-stationary cycling.

Today, I watch Mayarkovsky pack a nugget of sesame halvah into the center of his bran muffin. One day he will fill the room, lunar, spilling over my grandmother’s lounger. He pours himself another cup of chai and adds a morning’s thimble of vodka from his silver pocket flask.

“Kovsky-joonam!” says my grandmother.
A demi-glass of red, and she’ll shoot the moon. Habits, habits. Baba was a cardiologist, but a man after his stomach just the same; Nana dedicated the last years of their life together to banishing cholesterol from his plate. Mayarkovsky will not yield so easily: in him you have a figure of radius and history. He resists exercise that does not involve sliding a small ceramic disk across a numbered court.

To remain in place is a matter of dignity and station.

There was no Soviet pickaxe for Mayarkovsky, no bending with the camp-issued thresher, no—but here, as always, I must admit to speculation.

“Can you believe this lady?” he says to me, unconcerned by her chiding. “This lady who calls me joonam. Dear one.”

I’ve yet to determine where Mayarkovsky gleaned his slight Farsi.

* 

“Mayarkovsky is in the shit,” Mayarkovsky says through the phone.

How many times has he summoned me upstairs, and over what? Stuck shutters, a clogged drain, the light, piney choke of his neighbor’s mentholated slims creeping through the sitting room vent.

I’m down on the beach, curled under sappy green palms. A proper day starts around three: I thumb sunscreen on my stomach and wait for some trace of pre-retirement to saunter by. The
binoculars are out. Call it a craving for fresh legs—or, plainly, legs. I don’t even bring reading along anymore, that’s how red-alarm things have gotten.

The dry, the low slash: I’m at the point where I’d gladly bat around multicolored inflatables with some airy teen and discuss the radical qualities of cake-flavored liquor.

“Up here,” Mayarkovsky says. “I am in the deep royal with your Nana-joon.”

I scan the building’s back façade: he’s lowering a bucket down to our apartment on what appears to be my Ethernet cable.

“What are you doing? Have you tried the condo’s wireless? Be careful with that cord,” I say.

How could he understand its umbilical necessity? His computer links him only to Amazon, a free solitaire website, and grainy news outlets of Cyrillic dispersion.

“How could he understand its umbilical necessity? His computer links him only to Amazon, a free solitaire website, and grainy news outlets of Cyrillic dispersion.

“Your grandmother still won’t let me in. I am sending roses in this cup. Also, dried yellow plums.”

This all began when Mayarkovsky forgot to grab Nana-joon at the airport last week. She was settling a matter of sale at her old house in Michigan. Two long layovers on the way back, and where is Mayarkovsky? An hour late!—such is her grudge, anyway. She’s refused to see him for three days running, but he assures me that the situation merely calls for patience.
“She is cooling, as one often must,” he said yesterday.

The love bucket suggests otherwise.

“Where is your mettle, Mayarkovsky? Where is your steel?”

“For shame, talking like this. She is your grandmother.”

Far off, there’s a young woman shining golden in the surf. It sets my stomach in a groaning motion—dizzy, the deck at quarter-tilt. Everything about her says get walking, but I’ve got obligations to this man in my ear.

“Are you returning home for dinner? Coming soon?”

It’s hardly even five. I tell him so.

“There is rice cooking. I can smell it. Better use the pool shower,” he says.

I chuck a small green coconut into the scrub of some nearby dunes; prepare to take up my sling and arrows.

Collins is in the locker room when I get up from the beach. Lithe muscles, old and tight. He’s probably just off a run, this anti-Mayarkovsky—you can see the tough cordage in his neck and shoulders standing out. His calves are tense, and the sight of those well-stretched tendons brings to mind a strange and pleasant vision of snipping cello strings.

It’s my habit to avoid the rule-prescribed shower and trail sand right upstairs, but Collins’ gaze gets me reaching for the soap
dispenser. My tenancy is, after all, a neat violation of Admiralty’s ban on pre-sexagenarian residents. I occupy a curious limbo: that of the permanent guest. It’s like trying to win asylum.

Nevertheless I lather firm flesh in his shower—not a cut above twenty-five—and give Collins a look like, *Feast upon my youth, and weep*.

“No word on when those shuffleboard courts will be fixed?”

“The condominium’s board is still reviewing this month’s physical budget, Mr. Faruz. Speaking of which, rents are due soon. Your foreign friend is two payments behind. You might mention it to him,” Collins says.

He drags a straight razor about his chin. You can read delight in these deliberate strokes: here’s a man who enjoys watching more and more of his face appear in the mirror.

Rent, this is your want?

Where is our damn shuffleboard?

I say, “Mayarkovsky is sitting on a gold mine, or so I’ve heard. Oil revenues. The Black Sea.”

Collins’s razor hits the ceramic of the locker room floor.

Upstairs, I carry a platter of salmon and dill-flecked rice from the kitchen. Nana and I sit in the ever-hum of local news, its tan faces and dead-eye smiles.
The roses Mayarkovsky lowered down to the balcony anchor our table; his plums are nestled in a crystal dish. My grandmother has not cleared his regular setting—we’ve got three plates, and all the silver’s out—but that’s as far as her pretense extends: she will not invite him up.

Hopeless, this display? On the contrary, she’s ripe to bite.

I say, “No Mayarkovsky this evening?”

“Perhaps he forgets, as he is wont to do. I know what he’s been speaking to you, but don’t listen so close. He thinks the world falls at his feet. I can wait like I waited on the runway, in the baggage claim, on the roadside.”

She is not entirely wrong on this count: Mayarkovsky is a force of belief.

“Could have been bad cell reception,” I say. “What with the air control towers, interference, who knows?”

“Interference!”

The woman’s grasp of technology is far from current. If I scale my ears back some decades: sure, it seemed worth a try.

“Nana-joon, the man makes you happy. Forgive him.”

“We’ll see,” she says.

But in whose good time?
Soon the tide will close over our beach; the condo’s wicker will rot with sea-damp. At the pawnshop off US 1, Nana’s gold will go soft between my teeth.

My say: don’t waste what little remains.

I have a strong mind to secure them two adjacent plots at Lemon Tree Memorial. Mayarkovsky in love, that’s a planetary affair. I think of Nana-joon in his orbit and swoon because there’s nothing left to swoon over.

The shoreline is red as Mars in the falling sun. I take my binoculars out and comb for the human patrol that lost me here.

Glorious, that ocean, but not a soul in it.

* 

Mayarkovsky teases table lace across two pool loungers and starts piling rye with fish and olives. A bottle of polska sweats in his snap pack. Under his direction, brunch becomes a colonic firebombing: I can already feel my guts blooming with heat. Pure misery—but such are the trials of exile.

“The key to apology, happiness, the rest. It is the stomach. What is your grandma on about, always no fat, no vodka?”

“She worries about cardiac trouble. My grandfather went that way,” I say.

“Lose one heart, you buy another. For the right price, one can find such things.”
He hefts the scarred side of his stomach, varicose pigskin. My attention has cooked down to one tunneled visual channel, and I can’t help but stare.

He says, “Merely a joke. Pretend you did not hear this last part.”

There’s a smear of clotted cream on his nose. It looks unholy, dead or devilish. I hand him a napkin.

“Anyway, joona takes a long time forgiving,” I say. “You just have to make the right kind of apology. It could be worse. She’s still mad at Baba for that last heart attack, and sometimes I fear it’s a hole he’ll never climb out of.”

No laughs doing, but I’ve heard comedy is the last domino to fall in the mastery of a foreign tongue—it’s something in the timing, the way jokes lift like leaves from the reach of unstudied ears.

“We must think a bit,” Mayarkovsky says. “I will make her come around.”

He rubs a messy coat of zinc on his face and lies out in the sun, pale and wide, a slow-cooking egg. I watch the snowy retirees walk in and around the pool and demand: What’s in your heart, lady? What do you wish for beyond most things?

We work his vodka down until the bottle’s husked, half of what it was. Soon, a two-propeller Cessna flies over our heads, trailing a banner ad for a dinner buffet: Charley Ribs Early Bird Special!

*Barbeque works for cheap!*
I recall Mayarkovsky’s wisdom: What’s in your guts?

“Now here’s an idea. A night on the strip. Nana-joon could use a break from her kitchen.”

Mayarkovsky lets out an apneic roar. He’s asleep, or perhaps just rumbling with thought: a reactor buried in deep soil.

“For her, early bird. For her, all-you-can-eat at the Charley Ribs.”

This is a woman who wears sunglasses indoors to cut the glare coming off her patio glass. You will not find an earlier bird.

*

My grandmother has gone out for emergency supplies—we’re down to a meager can of no-pulp orange—and that means I’ve come into a luxury: a quiet apartment to be filled on my own terms. I pull up Discovery Bulletin on my computer. Yesterday morning, a meteor of considerable size fragmented in a patch of atmosphere above Russia. You can watch videos of projectiles exploding brightly against the morning indigo of an eastern city. A magnesium plant looms skeletal and windowless; there’s glass scattered throughout the photos.

No one was killed, so let’s be clear: this was an object of beauty. It makes me think of the time we waste trying to protect ourselves from perfect things.

I close my eyes and let the day’s drinking hit me hard in the temples. Naturally, I conjure some other Mayarkovsky hunkering
down while pieces of meteor fall over his head. I’m almost out—my nights have been lockjawed, insane with sweats—when Nana-joon gets home and starts in on dinner.

She’s bought fish again: her head buzzes with Omega-3s, good oils and protein. When consumed sufficiently, these can extend a life by ten years, fifteen—it’s all been explained by Dr. Mehmood, of Channel Three fame. Nana needs a man who can spare those fifteen butter-free years.

“Don’t do anything yet,” I say. “Mayarkovsky is determined to take us out tonight. ‘My contessa requires a feast of honor.’ Those were his exact words.”

Her good knife is poised to guillotine a lemon. “Really?”

I dash off a furious text message: Get up here, now.

“He’s found a banquet buffet special. Charley Ribs. I’m told it’s a storied establishment.”

Our doorbell rings, and the afternoon shudders back to me. Mayarkovsky must be hosed—so much vodka would turn anyone’s mind to syrup. Red and roaring, swaddled in his ridiculous paisley? He’ll look like ruins. I’m figuring the Colossus with its shot-off head.

But when I open the door, Mayarkovsky’s in a clean yellow polo. Scents of iodine and bar soap follow him in. He kisses my grandmother’s hand and bows as deeply as his knees will allow.
“Surely, grandson hasn’t spoiled the surprise of my visit?” he says.

Things continue to burst and shine on my laptop screen.

* 

Mayarkovsky falls asleep in the back seat of my grandmother’s Lexus, and soon he’s snoring. Once in a while she pats his hand. It’s not far, Charley Ribs, but there’s enough green road to get me thinking of my grandfather—not because he liked the restaurant, but because he snored with similar vengeance.

In his later days, Baba started using a device called a CPAP to improve his nighttime respiration. Like scuba equipment: you had to fill its reservoir with pure distilled water, plug it into two separate outlets, and attach a fighter-pilot mask to the main machine using a vacuum hose.

Nana-joon has never tried to wrangle Mayarkovsky into the CPAP. It’s in our utility closet, next to the extra linens and an untouched stack of Vogue magazines from the late eighties.

* 

I was expecting a bazaar: carousel lights, a mascot, a Viking boat overflowing with deli salad. Seeger on repeat. The local Elks Chapter rearing to crack the steak buffet. That kind of restaurant.

Charley Ribs is low-lit, paneled over with fudge-colored wood. The counter is viscid with sour mix. A fat strip of jungle-print
wallpaper lines the dining hall, and they’ve got fake palms in plastic planters. In the rear of the restaurant is a large, tropical looking room fronted by an aquarium window. It’s full of parakeets and lovebirds and miniature cockatoos.

“We require a table by this box,” Mayarkovsky says to the hostess.

He turns to my grandmother: “The full treatment.”

Joona takes off her sunglasses, squints.

“Next to the birds? Will that be nice?”

“Like a queen herself would dine,” Mayarkovsky says airily.

In fact, it’s like eating in the presence of sixty miniature headsets that have been turned as high as they’ll go.

By rule, Mayarkovsky eats no fewer than three pieces of bread each time he visits a restaurant. The service staff rushes back and forth to refill his basket, forage more butter packets. At his command, they dig out two bottles of drugstore champagne.

Our waitress is probably thirty-five, and from my present vantage, that’s rare youth. She has dark hair, a garden-hedge perm. Legs that suggest an elliptical regimen. No, not terrific, but then, neither am I.

I follow her back towards the kitchen and ask if she’ll have a cocktail with us.

“Not when I’m on shift.”
“You can’t drink on shift? Can you eat?”

“How’s about you assume I can’t do anything but bring extra coleslaw, and mum’s the word.”

“There’s a good tip in it,” I say, trusting the unknown depths of Mayarkovsky’s pockets. I pull out a twenty to get things going.

“Put that shit away. Are you out of your mind? Do you even know what the goddamn year is? You don’t live in the age of the twenty-dollar lady.”

“That’s not what I mean,” I tell her. “See the old man over there with my grandmother? I’m only trying to lead the two of them through the steps of romance. You and me. It’s like dance lessons. I want to inspire passion.”

“Sir, I suggest you sit down and hope I don’t spit in the meatloaf.”

“His name is Mayarkovsky. He’s trying so hard. He once carried a kidney across an entire city in the thick of winter. He saved a life.”

The woman looks at me like I’ve drooled all over the restaurant’s payphone.

“You going need a cab, hon’? You don’t seem all the way here, and those two aren’t what I’d call roadworthy.”

Our champagne is gone. My grandmother has dropped her shades and pressed herself against the aviary window; she motions at the birds with sweeping carwash strokes. Parakeets ring off the glass
like hot atoms. Mayarkovsky is nosing his way through a second rack of ribs.

“We’ll manage,” I say.

It’s no rally getting to the building. I often suspect Mayarkovsky’s vision, his teary cataract wink, but he guides the Lexus like a tank, or a paper-mâché float. Around the condo, I’ve seen men barely capable of entering their vehicles pull across the median in calamitous loops and disappear against the sky like loose balloons.

Think of orbit and reentry: successful returns are happy accidents.

Mayarkovsky doesn’t break thirty on the freeway. Nana-joon is slumped over the center console, head-to-shoulder with him, and remains so even after we’ve reached the lobby.

“We are heading to my apartment straightaway,” Mayarkovsky says.

“Wait. Tell me who the kidney was for.”

“Now is when you ask? Really?”

“Please,” I say, “You owe me this little.”

“Where I come from, you can shoot someone over the kidney that gets lost. Save, that was not the point. It was smarter not to know. I did not care about the saving.”
He and joona get into the elevator, holding together like a person.

* You turn the box over, then again: it’s like sand moving in an hourglass, soft as far-off rain.

You could bury the ashes. You could mix them into a rich loam and fertilize tomato plants. You could send them weather-ward in a helium balloon, scatter them from a ferry, or load them into shotgun rounds and blast away at pigeons. You could reconstitute them in a cement mold—or, if you were magpie-inclined, crystallize your hurt in a lovely set of synthetic jewels.

I sift my fingers through Sam’s remains and tease out the larger graspable fragments: bits of skull and leg bone, the odd knuckle. Elements of a new anatomy. I fill the pocket of my blue Hawaiians with diamond-colored ash.

The soil beneath us is porous, oolitic limestone—drill twenty feet and you’ll hit water every time.

I think, You cannot stay here long without giving something great to this soft, sad earth.

I think of the lithium tablets in my desk drawer.

Then, I stop thinking.

Tonight is salty; a low chill blows off the ocean. I trundle to the gummy package store down the block, bolt one scotch, another: a
man of steady pace. I road a pony bottle of cheap potato—not what Mayarkovsky drinks, but serviceable enough—and climb the side of the highway overpass.

Look out: it’s a huge yawn of motel pink. A custard stand is so bright it might as well be on fire.

A woman will stop her convertible and beg me, “Get down, for God’s sake. What are you doing?”

I’ll explain to her that I’m a gentleman of this continent.

I’ll say, “Preparing to make the most important delivery of my life.”

We’ll follow the intracoastal, drinking sweetly as we go, then walk the condominium’s slice of beach until the sky turns with daybreak and keen little pieces of light start to shatter over the sand.

This is when I slip two pieces of femur from my pocket—a coin of grace for the lady’s palm, another one for mine—and point to the ocean where we’ll leave my brother.

I am searching my stars for a language of argument.

I am leafing through potential logics:

How could you say no?

How could you turn me away when I need this so badly?
Matador

You wouldn’t think it, but arson involves a healthy waiting game. I suppose this downtime is often obscured by its more romantic elements, such as fire. But fire requires time to grow like anything else, and if you’re the sort of person who approaches a task with purpose—who takes delight in finding studs in drywall, or relishes the use of a furniture buffer—you might end up with a watched-pot situation on your hands the first time you try to burn something for profit.

Matador and I are waiting for a fire of our own to take root when he trots out a familiar line: “When are you going to get a job?”

I say, “A job? And here I am, considering you a customer. I’m a little hurt you’d ask, actually.”

I’m hurt because I sell Matador pot, and it’s never the best thing when your primary client advises you to move out of retail. Sell’s a poor term, anyway: what we’re engaged in is something closer to barter. It’s a process of free exchange. Maybe that’s his point.

Matador played linebacker at Texas in the seventies, and his memory isn’t what it used to be—at least, I hope there was more once—so here’s where I really come into use: I’m an extra set of eyes, a hand hovering above the emergency brake.
I keep Matador functional on a variety of fronts: I supply him with drugs; monitor his driving; help him make home improvements—or, as the case may be, perform feats of small-but-lucrative destruction.

This morning, we rigged up a minor fire job in his backyard—it’s only the tool shed, but we stand to skin his insurance company out of a nice thousand if it works.

“I’m talking about something gainful and consistent. Hell, you could think of it as supplemental income,” Matador says.

“I think a steady wage job would qualify as more than supplemental,” I say.

You know the way you look at a dog whose legs are too short for its body?

“That’s precisely the idea,” Matador says.

“You’re not wrong,” I say. “I’ve been trying. If I was hostile initially, it’s only because I have such a finely cultivated instinct for self-defense.”

You have to zero in on small frontiers of combat; make sure to give yourself credit when it’s due. That’s the secret to surviving the long game.

Sure, I hunger for regular checks, but at present, the local employment racket is something of a fallow field. I’ve stalked the Help-
Wanteds, filled out my apps—and for all that, I have not won a single interview in the last two months.

Now, small criminality? Here’s my niche. Or if not my niche specifically, it’s at least a field without serious entry requirements.

True upward mobility, that’s rare, but have you considered the fringe benefits?

Permit me to elaborate: What do people usually do after they use drugs? Sleep, eat, watch television—and most importantly, purchase more drugs. If you’re providing, you are often included in these activities as a matter of course.

Take Matador and me: the man has to ingest Hydrocodone by the shovelful to stave off back spasms—another old football demon—and as his primary caretaker, I enjoy similarly fine head weather. We stroll the same yolky pastures of brain.

“No hold up,” I say. “You’ve got to consider my extensive list of side projects. Like our miniature bid to bleed your insurance agency.”

We’ve been watching the shed through Matador’s kitchen window. Just a hint of smoke trailing from its vent, that’s what we need. The thinking is that if you run out at the first sight of fire and make enough noise, you can jump beyond all reasonable suspicion of deliberate fault.

My place is next door, and our plan was for Matador to “alert me” once the conflagration took off. We’d passed the afternoon
toasting charcoal in his Webber; once the coals cindered down, we tipped the thing innocently onto the floor of the shed. By Matador’s calculation, twenty minutes of heat should’ve gotten a nice burn started, so either we’ve botched the set up or the damn thing is fire-retardant.

“Not a wisp,” Matador says. “Shit. Let’s check it out.”

You can still smell the coals going, and the Smoky Joe is lying on its side, exactly like we left it. Then Matador notices that the lid’s locked on; it was supposed slip off once we upended the grill, and because it didn’t, the briquettes have yet to make contact with the wood. Thus far, all the Webber has managed to do is inflict some vague, gray smoke damage on the structure’s interior. I was responsible for loosening that hinge.

So at least we know the wood was theoretically vulnerable to attack; blessedly, I am not the guy who tried to burn down a flame-resistant lawnmower home. That poor sap is someone else.

Hobbies, side projects—I’m a student of their peaks and troughs. You need certain expertise to pull these jobs off: a contractor’s acumen; fastidiousness and exactitude when following instructions; a hawk’s eye for structural flaws.

No doubt, I’m somewhat lacking in exactitude, but I cut a pretty solid hype man: it’s like cold-forged iron, my optimism.
Matador says, “What other side work do you have in the hopper?”

“At the gas station, a few ladies were yapping about a gator they’d seen sunning on the banks of the drainage pond off Rose Lane,” I say. “I told them I could handle the problem for some tidy bucks.”

Matador puts a hand on my shoulder.

“How exactly do you figure you’ll do that?” he says.

I haven’t—not exactly.

I say, “A rake, probably. Or a big shovel. You know, scare the motherfucker.”

“Back into the pond?”

His point is taken. Nolo contendere.

“I think the ladies will be fine. Animal control’s probably not your first calling,” he says.

Sometimes, you’ve got to resign yourself to the lay of things: “I’ll bring the employment listings over with the crossword.”

The grill finally fizzles out for good. We head back into the kitchen.

Matador says, “I picked up a pie at the store today. You want some? Apple. It’s delicious.”
I hate the thought of him driving alone to Ocean Grocery. The pitfalls are numerous: he could forget where he parked, or leave his driver’s license in the produce section. That’s happened before.

“I'll stay with the drinks for now,” I say.

Matador slices himself a wedge of that apple and pours me a beer from the nice, amber growler that lives on his fridge’s bottom shelf.

“Mine is yours, neighbor,” he says.

Charming as a glowing Coca-Cola sign.

Matador has a boxed out frame, and soft, steady hands. He has always paid me with perfectly crisp bills. If you’d shown me this man a year ago, my first thought would’ve been to bust his window in the dark and run off with his car keys. Now he hardly goes anywhere without my company.

*

Matador took the name in '75, back at UT. His coaches had proposed it as a joke, but the misapplied suggestion of grace was lost on him until a Spanish exchange student—some clueless, eager Fulbright who’d sallied brazenly into a team kegger—told him about the torero’s mode of dancing around the bull: waving his flag and dodging the horns until he could deliver a quick and efficient kill stroke.
Matador knew how to find holes in an O-line, and he could run all right, but his technique was momentum-based. Tighten your neck and crunch, golf-swing divots of grass stuck in the cage, knuckles wet and red—that was Matador’s language.

Now we know what that kind of play does to the brain. The frontal cortex goes shredded, then hardens—old Mexican cheese. It’s rare to find an ex-ballplayer who’s not at least somewhat out-of-tune. Matador’s first day here, I watched him loop his old Buick around his half-moon driveway for almost an hour.

* 

When people ask now: I work hospice.

Easy. It’s a word that explains itself and cuts off particulars. Used to be that I dealt petty—cheapies, and all the time. I kept it to college kids willing to drive off campus. As far as they knew, my name was “Shotty”; if they asked what it meant, I only told them, “Guess why,” or, “You figure it out.” The moniker’s got to be like a foreign accent: barely dangerous, slightly exciting—enough to get a dude whispering into his phone. The unseasoned tongue has to work those syllables and think: here is information worth hoarding.

Scoff if you like, but proper flex will get you invited to a sorority house for pizza and old kung fu movies, coeds dressed down to their sweats.

Which is not at all a bad slice.
If the air was right—that is, if I felt wealthy and liberal—I might open up my pharmaceutical stash, the few emergency pills I always kept on hand. We’d share them and I’d watch everyone get pupplied under a duvet. You could pass out and no one would wake you for fear of—I don’t really know, but it worked. Kindly refer to my word on fringe benefits.

Of course, there were situations that called for a greater explanation of myself: namely, any given attempt to secure employment at the miserable pink carcinoma of the downtown Galleria Mall.

To ready for the hunt, I’d put on my clean, cream-colored button-down—a singular article, which I kept pressed and ready in my trunk for these occasions—pick the grit from under my fingernails, and introduce myself as Christopher, “currently working in individualized hospice.”

The hope was that somebody might take me on without demanding formal references, so whenever I mentioned my homecare visits, I refused to name clients on the grounds of confidentiality or personal discretion. Painful and dignified: imagine a statue rippling in its manner, if only for a moment.

But any good manager—like the esteemed heads over at Galleria Bell, or Redfruit, even the damn Mac D’s—could deglaze that
grief. This was before they’d gotten to my resume, which, when subjected to anything more than the gentlest of autopsies, unraveled into a heap of disconnected phone numbers and fabricated corporations.

The franchise manager is a surgical, hateful breed. Or maybe I just wasn’t selling it. I stuck to small bags. It wasn’t so hard.

Most nights, I spent the raw profits on dollar movie rentals, gas station hot food, such like. My parents had long ago paid off my place. This was Florida after all, and originally, the house was their idea of a winter rental.

It’s not that the idea itself was irredeemably bad; they just picked the wrong Florida. Sunny enough, but hardly vacation country. Golfing, grapefruit—those are law down here. We’re about ten miles off the ocean, and the closest you can get to a natural miracle is the borealis of the highway. Strip malls crop the roadsides with venereal frequency. My parents came down once or twice, hacked up a few local fairways, and promptly decided they hated golf.

My suspicion? They figured it’d be like living in one of those towering condominiums that dot the shoreline.

I’d been planning to castle up in New Jersey after school—yes, couch and basement treatment. I wanted to reconstitute myself in native airs; I needed some retox. I would drug-up, melt into the shag of the den, chew my way through the family’s cereal.
Once a week we’d enjoy lobster at the Italian place that
overlooks the shipyards.

For a carpet breeder like myself? Straight beautiful.

The imperial vision didn’t fruit. My parents had tasted full,
unbroken retirement. Retirement tasted like orange juice and
champagne and maraschino. It looked like movies in the nude. I
understood that they wanted their slice. Who wouldn’t?

My brother Martin was only twenty-three, and already working
up the chain of an electrical repairs company. He made good
payments on a small apartment in Jersey City. Could hit Manhattan
with a slingshot if he wanted.

What was my grand excuse?

I convinced my parents that the easiest course for us to split
ways was for me to take the deed to the Florida house.

Sure, we negotiate on utilities now and again, but I’ve otherwise
disappeared from their expenses. I learned how to go under-the-radar
on my neighbor’s cable box. I started to shop easy and lean.

Getting paid to go away, that hurts, but it’s by no means
indigestible.

*

It’s about six, so I hop across the fence to Matador’s and check
the medicine cabinet for an evening favor. We’re down to his last
tablets of Vicodin; in light of the poverty, I don’t pop one myself. His doses have to come first.

“You’ve got to grab more pills,” I say.

If I’m honest, I’ve probably been reaching for the horn of plenty a bit more than is advisable.

Matador says, “They’re being real cold down at Grove City. I’ve got no help.”

For the most part, we can get by on the fruits of the old man’s clinic—a small, Medicare-thirsty outfit called Grove City Clinical. They dispense on the cheap, but we’ve known them to skimp.

Take last week: we queue up at Grove for almost an hour. At the front of the line, I say, “My friend here’s getting drilled in the joints, losing feeling in his toes. It’s making him crazy. Yesterday, he put his wallet in the toaster before he went running.”

Matador’s never really so bad, but it’s not implausible. A few years of rough ball will fry your spine decades down the road.

Try juicing yourself on a car battery—that’s what Matador tells me, so that’s what I tell the people at Grove City. The show works better when he stands by silently, pretending not to understand where we are or what we’re doing.

The receptionist balks. It’s Cassie, our devil, the least lenient of the litter. I’ve taken to calling her “Na-Ga-Da,” for her peculiar habit of enunciating denial. Like get-out-of-my-face. That’s how she sounds.
I offer to double our co-pay in exchange for an extra fill, but she doesn’t budge an inch. Not her problem, right?

This means we’ve got to see Buddy Cap, whose groove is bringing in cheap prescriptions from Canada. That’s the entire seaboard, Montreal to Florida. I never ask how he does it, because how isn’t my business. If we should run short on trees or killers, I’ll fish Cap from the barrio and re-stock like there’s plague on.

“We could head to the south side tomorrow for some Vics,” I say. “If you think you can do a night without them.”

Meantime, we fill a pitcher with ice tea and vodka and lounge out in the kitchen. There’s a nice wash of football noise in the living room—play-by-play, flag reviews, the roar of truck commercials. Usually, I bring over the weekend crossword, something to work during halftime. We’ve gotten pretty sharp, as weekenders are concerned; our last completion clocked in at four hours. The puzzle work is to shore up Matador’s defenses, keep his neurons hot. When it’s not crosswords, we go through the classifieds and try to hunt down easy money.

Today, the money doesn’t look easy. I spread the job section out across his kitchen table: it’s a bingo board of mall careers.

“I can’t mess with Galleria again,” I say.

Matador scans the listings.

“You’re shit out of luck, then. You’ve hit all of these?”
“Not Lenny’s.”

Lenny’s is the mall’s big department warehouse. I don’t mention it to Matador, but that’s where I stole my button-down.

“You’re going to call them for an interview, and I’m going to watch you do it.”

I pick up the cordless, tap a few digits.

“What about my resume?” I say. “That’s not going to look any better this time around.”

“You won’t need one. I’ll be there with you. You’re my caregiver, after all.”

Times like these remind me that I rarely give Matador enough credit. When the old man’s checked in, he displays a much better head for small-time criminality than I do.

*

I text Cap about picking up pills and he responds: *Yeah, I got you subsidized. That Super-Sour is in, too. My brother-in-law’s doing. He’s up from Miami. You’ll meet him. Don’t fuck around, don’t bring anybody with you. Man bugs.*

I figure I can get some minor deals in the works—old clientele, nothing special—and while Cap tends to label his strains with a certain poetic extremity, anything called “Super Sour” is good in my book.
Before we head south, we’ve got to stop at Galleria.

Matador and I hit Lenny’s and head straight for the staff offices in back. My interviewer is a young woman named Jess. She has Pillsbury skin, like she hasn’t seen the sun in a few weeks.

I might as well prerecord it: “I’m Chris, currently working in elderly assistance.”

As in, working at this very moment. Jess and I takes seats by her desk. Matador flops onto an ergonomic roller and commences a cautious orbit of the office.

“Hey Jess, I hope you’ll excuse us. Here’s Gary. I’ve been waiting on Gary for a year. His family’s seeking alternate treatment avenues.”

“Very nice to meet you, Gary,” Jess says.

Matador keeps his eyes wandering.

“Don’t worry about it. He doesn’t take too much in,” I say.

Jess skims my resume, frowns, puts it aside. She watches closely as Matador takes uncertain hold of my arm—barely touching it, as though he doesn’t trust fingertips.

“You haven’t done much in the way of retail work, but I think I can approve a conditional hire,” she says. “Monday’s our next trainee orientation.”

*
Cap’s building is chalk-orange, a true scrape. All over are unkempt palmettos and hot-looking flowers. There is salsa carrying in the wind; radios around here never go off. Thirty minutes of highway and you can forget where you live.

“You’ve got to stay outside today, I think.”

Matador usually prefers to watch me buy, and his presence is often somewhat reassuring: all that ready muscle with nothing much to do. But Cap’s been blowing heat in my ear all morning, and I’m not looking to get Matador bulldogged. It’s never pretty to see softness breaking in the old man’s face.

“He’s got some paranoid friend in there, that’s all,” I say.

I duck around back. Cap is slinked along his fence, eyeballing the street.

“Not one time,” he says. “Not once can you cut your dead slack.”

“Hospice,” I say, grinning.

“Whatever. Get in. My boy Macaro’s got something for you.”

He grabs a few canisters of pills from the kitchen and leads me into the living room. Nothing is ever different: it’s always mountains of takeout containers, rice and beans, tobacco guts littering the rug.

On the couch, Macaro is smoking a long, thin joint; his eyes follow the ceiling fan with interest, as though he’s trying to will its breeze into a downward stream. He’s cut, much cleaner than Cap, and lacks his sallow, butter-pat complexion. There are small tattoos
on his forearms—shields, or something military. The Navy does heavy recruiting around here.

Cap slaps him on the shoulder.

“Let’s pass that, cousin.”

“I’m not your fucking cousin,” Macaro says.

The el makes it round to me, and Cap puts on a Neanderthal mug: his nobody-said-shit-about-you face. I Bogart it anyway—a laborious hit, then a slow, controlled release.

When I put my hundred-wad on the table, Macaro says, “That’s real nerve for someone who doesn’t listen. Because you didn’t listen, right? Bringing some Dad-ass around.”

“Just give me our herb, and I’ll bounce.”

Macaro isn’t sold. “My beef isn’t about that. I don’t appreciate your freshness.”

“Appreciate your damn money,” I say. “I’m not about to spend the afternoon getting sticky with you boys.”

Matador hasn’t had anything today but aspirin, and I know that won’t do it. I start watching a palm leaf flutter in and out of the window frame, intermittent and pleasant, and barely notice Macaro pull out his switch.

A two-inch butterfly—little, but still, a serious breach.

“What the fuck is all this?”
Macaro says, “Throw another fifty on top of that. You don’t want to listen to Cap, that’s your business. But I said not to bring anyone else. That was me who said that, feel?”

Macaro taps the blade against his cheekbone. Looks like a showboater’s move, but I’m not interested in testing that theory.

“Just get some more cash from your pal out there,” Cap says. “You brought him, might as well use him.”

Macaro gestures to the door. “You better walk his ass out there and make sure there’s no play.”

Cap takes Macaro’s knife and starts slow-dancing me outside, one hand on my shoulder, the other leveling the ox with my ribs. I can feel the point coming through my t-shirt.

“Mary and fucking Joseph,” I say. “You’re bubbling in the cut.”

Matador’s already striding across the lawn.

“What’s he doing with that knife?” he says.

“Braniac, you two going are to give us an extra fifty, and we’re not going to fuck anyone up. It’s easy. That’s all the math you need to do.”

Cap shoves me forward, and it seems like we’ve got room to slip out of this—a second, two steps, and we could be driving. Then Matador takes Cap off his feet, head-to-chin: it’s faster than I’ve ever seen him move. The knife pinwheels into the front begonias like a silver hummingbird.
“Let’s go, hombre.”

I pull Matador into the Buick and we thunderbolt towards the highway.

“I lost some of your cash back there,” I say. “We won’t try Cap again.”

Matador’s hands are trembling, and there’s a trickle of blood in the corner of his mouth.

“Jesus, man. You’d better take something.”

I shake a Vicodin from the pharmacy bottle and give it to him. Matador looks at me with the eager confusion of a goldfish.

“Who are you?” he says.

* 

Serious calculus: the ER or Grove City?

I settle on the clinic because we’ll get in faster. Matador has started slurring—it’s like fridge hum, wordless—and by the time we reach the parking lot, he can’t even stand.

Cassie sees me running up to the desk, starts clicking her teeth.

“I need a stretcher, or a wheelchair,” I say, and her nasty smile comes off in pieces. She’s an iceberg melting into the ocean.

There’s a stream of bilious texts from Cap, thug bullshit. I devote off some eyelid time to hammering Cap in the face: I wish a
wicked concussion on him, a broken jaw. Eventually I power down the cell and pass out with my nose under a copy of *National Geographic*.

After they do a full physical, the attending clinician tells me Matador can’t remember his own name. If not for his wallet, they wouldn’t have known the first thing about him. He’s up on an exam table in nothing but scrubs. His head moves fretfully, without purpose—it’s like watching a pigeon. What can they do here? Flash a penlight in Matador’s eyes. They recommend taking him to the hospital, or at least somewhere with a radiology staff.

Plain stupid. I promise to drive Matador to the ER and stay with him once he’s home, but already I know that isn’t good enough.

“And you’re who, exactly? Family? A care worker?”

“I just live next door,” I say.

Are there family members I can call?

“Probably.”

There will be someone—a daughter, has to be. I will call her and she will roar into action. I’ve still got the keys to Matador’s house. I’ll find a phonebook.

The doctor says, “So you don’t know him that well, then?”

I know him as well as I’ve ever intended.

We spend several futile hours at the county general. It’s a weekend evening, high traffic, and without a pressing physical emergency, we end up slotted between some liquor cases—a whole
bus of upended frat—and a man who burned his hand on a chicken rotisserie.

They scan Matador. Our radio tech calls it light concussion, sends us home.

“Try to keep Mr. Alvarez awake for another few hours, just to be safe.”

Alvarez—that catches me off guard.

*

See, I just wanted to be better at a few things. A nine-to-fiver? That was what you might call, in the long-forgotten parlance of your salad days, a dope-ass prospect. Health insurance. An employee discount—God, to say I had that sweet employee discount.

Of all things? Aim higher, you say.

Well, I say: Eat a microwave burrito. Then another. Then another.

You keep that going, and we’ll end up on similar wavelengths soon enough.

The first time I solo a night shift at Lenny’s, I spend an hour stuck in front of a full-length mirror.

The worst has already occurred to me: that if I work fast enough, I can make off with a whole new closet of pinstripes, a pair of calfskin loafers—things I will never otherwise own.
Show me you’re worth slightly more than that, I say. Over and over. Show me something else.

Eventually, I give the glass a serious punch—whole hook, all that back-foot weight coming down against the pane. Not a damn thing. It doesn’t even crack, which is lucky.

My hand is swollen for a week. I feed the coworkers some riff about a new boxing gym opening on Sunset: “Free trials. Thirty-days, twenty-four seven.”

My boy Jim can smell better than most. We haven’t known each other long, but he can already tell when I’m blowing smoke.

“Let’s go some Saturday,” he says. “I want to see you sweat on the bag, man.”

*

In the end, could you feed him? In the end, would you bathe him? Run a wet sponge around his face?

The end turned out to be an intensive-care nursing facility. The orderlies were strong, muscle-bound. They could hold Matador if he became unruly. The sheets were clean and starched and tucked down. The food was unchallenging. The lobby televisions were closed-captioned.

Sometimes, I pretend Matador didn’t make it past his first three weeks in the home—that’s the story I tell most people.
But I visit him when I can spare an hour. I pin up completed crossword puzzles in his room. I bring tangerines or caramel chews, the leftovers I get free from the home goods section at Lenny’s. I rail about the job, the perils of retail; how you’ve got to play it safe with your discount.

“It pays to be conservative,” I say.

I tell him I haven’t touched Buddha in a few weeks.

No shit: you can catch me getting regular with the other cashiers. We grab burgers and clown out in the parking lot. I shed the khakis on Friday nights and hit Atlantic Cabana for drinks. I’ve started to put on weight, real comfortable. Fat of the salary. I show Matador my growing gut like it’s the badge of adulthood I’ve been missing for a decade.

I let myself believe he’s a little better every time.

I sort through Matador’s mail, answer his letters—something from a granddaughter, a UT buddy. Yeah, we’re doing fine. I make liberal use the word “betcha.” I sign them Mark Alvarez.

*

One day I’m lurking in menswear—security grind, the shift nobody wants—and I spot some punk blood trying to stuff his pants with Italian ties. That racket? I’m too savvy. I take him back to the storeroom.
Now, you’ve really got to fuck up for us to go lawman on you—as in, botch multiple snatches in the same department. You’ve got to be so dumb that you don’t vary your targets, and if that’s the case, you might just deserve a few months in the tank. But I wouldn’t call security if they paid me extra for it, and they don’t.

We’ve got a stock rundown, trained and tested: What makes you so special? What makes you think you’re not getting by? Ask enough of those questions, and you can scare off the young ones for good.

But that’s not the way I’ve been thinking lately.

Maybe today I don’t stick to the script.

Maybe today it’s: You’re right. Maybe you really have always had less than the others. How would I know?

More to the point: What do I want to know for?

So here’s a proposition.

Tell me about your mother’s wig sliding in the autumn sun. Tell me about lymphoma. Tell me you’ve caught her throwing up every morning this week. Tell me about the cosmetics she still buys; how she wants so badly to make herself beautiful. Tell me your clinic’s drugs are nothing. Tell me about your father’s heart swelling large and bursting at the city aquarium. Tell me you can only find relief from the heat by pressing your face against cold bathroom tiles. Tell me that your brother left you alone, and that he was the last one. Show me the Army marks on your forearm; tell me AWOL.
There’s no way it’s true, any of it.

But me? I’ll believe you the first chance I get.

I’ll hand you a staff shirt, right off the rack.

I’ll say, “When can you start?”