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Claremont McKenna College

The God Collection:

Submitted to
Professor Kevin Moffett

by Namaste Rosas

for Senior Thesis in Literature
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--- The Girl ---

At 1:15 waves rocked a boat, actually more of a raft, tree trunks and scrap-wood woven together by reeds, vines and industrial strength twine, a sail secured by a spider-web of duct-tape and supported by a few blocks of wood. The little girl heated up a half-can of vegetable broth with a blowtorch which she wielded in one hand, the other hand was covered by a damp, singed oven-mitt. The waves gently rocked the raft toward an outcropping of reeds that sprouted off the river's bank. Picking up a long but light stick that the girl used as a rudder, she pushed her raft back into the center of the river where the current was the strongest. She checked her cracked mickey mouse watch and saw that it was nearly 1:15pm. She would be home by dawn. What lay between her and the morning was the long night, a night which she hated and which seemed to last longer than it should every time. And the coming night meant dreams, long, twisting, murky, hazardous dreams that made her heart race, bolting straight up in bed, choking on her breath, all the while relieved that the night was nearly over. She had been lucky though. She had had many terrifying dreams in the last few weeks: dreams of men with dark voids for eyes holding butcher knives, and of watching family members buried alive in the cold, dark, earth, while she stood by, helpless and tearful. But none of these dreams compared to one dream, or rather nightmare, although she called it a dream. This dream was the reason she sat up till odd hours, crouched in the tall grass, legs bouncing against the banks edge, or laying in her raft, fingers trailing absentmindedly through the dark waters. It was a dream that kept her awake with fear in those few minutes that lie between awake-ness and sleep. Those moments when you can't tell whether what you're seeing are visions, conjured by the imagination, or disordered memories. There was one dream, she called dread.

Dread because dread was all she could feel when returning to the empty parking lot, and then further, into the yellow and brown motel room with butterflies on the peeling wall-paper, the motel room where she would lay on the bed night after night, and hear the knocking. She would answer the door and see a familiar face. She couldn't ever make out the face, but she felt that it was familiar. Knew it. She'd fall back onto the bed and hand the familiar face a bottle that it would hand back to her. But when her back was turned, she'd hear the familiar face lock the door behind it. She'd freeze. And then she'd start to hear strange bone-splintering, skin-tearing sounds. She'd look back. And the familiar face wouldn't be familiar anymore. The dark eyes would be crescent moons turned on their side, the mouth would be gaping, revealing two rows of razor sharp teeth. The lips would be white and pulled tight against stained yellow teeth and gums. And the not-so-familiar face would be laughing, drool dripping from its ravenous grin. Long spindly limbs with long jagged yellow nails would reach for her, pin her to the bed. The girl would cry for help, but no one would be there, only a darkness that grew closer with every passing second. The thing would be on top of her, scraping her with its claws, mauling her with its shark-like-teeth, until the girl would feel her strength waning and her vision blurring. Everything would go black. The last thing the girl would remember would be feeling the hot concrete under her bare feet as she ran as fast as she could, away from the motel she couldn't remember and the dream she couldn't forget. Every night she'd wake up, gasping for air, having visited the motel room again. She'd desperately search her memory to see if her dream wasn't a memory of a dream but a memory of something else. But there was never enough information to put it in its place. And with even the thought of the parking lot giving her shivers, she tried to bury the dream deep. At least, until, she dreamed it again.

Feeling the wind rock the boat, the girl opened her eyes and ventured with resistance, from the warmth of the sleeping bag she had curled up in. The girl then proceeded to make sure everything around the raft was secure. She tied the rudder to the main sail so it would not wobble back and forth as the raft floated down the river, and run her aground. The rudder, another invention of hers, had only been designed for the more violent waters. Now at night, with a calm setting in, she did not need it to navigate or anything for that matter. She just needed to relax and let the waters take her home. She loved making contraptions like the rudder, many of them brutish and half-done, but all effective enough to do what she asked of them. She loved the river too, because it seemed to never end. The dark brilliant snake. She hoped that she could float down the river until she was old and grey. She hoped that the river would become her life and never end. And one day she would see her children and her parents and grandparents all floating down the river, hand in hand, forming one everlasting stream. There and back again, and forever.

— **The Couple** —

“Ding! Ding!” Harold shouted sarcastically and rang the bell. “Hello?! How bout some service please? You fucking idiots!!”

“Harold!!” Dear shouted. “No one’s coming if you keep using that tone. And calling these people idiots... have some decency! They’re probably just a bit slow.”

“I’d have some decency if we got some decent service.” Harold rambled. “We’ve been traveling all day! I’ve been carrying everything while you take photos and now we’ve been waiting at this concierge desk for the last 15-20 minutes. I’d swear this place was abandoned if

you hadn't booked it. Matter of fact, it might just be a ghost town or ghost hotel. I might as well hang myself from the rafters, then we'd get some god damn attention!"

"Oh Harold." Dear snickered.

A plump man and a plumper woman leaned against a dusty rectangular desk. Harold could have guessed that it was made in the 1950's and from the state of it had not been replaced since then. The man rings the bell incessantly until the woman cuffs him over the ear. He then turns and stares menacingly at the woman before she smiles and laughs a hoarse charming laugh. He kisses her on the cheek. The couple are happy to be out of the house.

"Can we help you sir?" Said a tall, thin man, in one breath. The concierge had a curly cue mustache and pale white skin. He was wearing a tuxedo; the tuxedo was a bit dusty. The concierge catches the bickering couple off guard and they spin around in a panic.

"Uhh, yess, yess, we have a reservation for tonight. Last name: Rosas." Harold said.

"Say it again, the concierge laughs, I didn't catch that. Roses was it? Like flowers?"

"No, Rossass" Yells Harold.

"Okay, you got it Mr. Rose-ass. Here you are. Wait. The system isn't telling me anything. What site did you book us through?"

“I don’t know... Expedia...” Harold mutters.

Dear cuts in, “we booked you guys through vacation-of-a-lifetime.com.”

The concierge’s dim grey eyes lit up. “Oh of course...you are one of our lifetime members. We have a special suite, the lover’s lounge, made up just for you. We’re expecting you for a long stay if I recall correctly.” The concierge smiled again. Dear didn’t say anything but looked a bit puzzled, then smiled and nodded. The couple followed the concierge through what looked to Harold like a museum, statues of gargoyles and winged angels were scattered around the room. Dear paused to snap a few pictures of a portrait of an old man sucking the blood out of the neck of a crying baby.

“You’re sick!” Cried Harold.

Dear squeezed his arm. Each room was themed. From the museum, Harold, Dear and the concierge walked into a room that looked to be modeled after an ancient garden. Vines grew around stone pillars that were in each corner of the room. In the center was a fountain surrounded by urinating angels. Right in front of the fountain was a hatch that was slightly ajar, and past it, what seemed to be a stairwell. The concierge motioned the couple toward the hatch and before descending, Harold looked up and saw a chandelier covered with glistening multi-colored glass apples— all lit from within and slowly turning on their stems. The concierge held the hatch open

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and beckoned the two downward, closing the door after them. Torches lit the way down the stairs and Harold turned to see the concierge deadbolt the door to the hatch behind them.

“Normally Suites are the rooms on the top floors of the building, no?” Harold asked.

“Clearly you haven’t been to this part of the area before Mr. Rosass.” Replied the Concierge.

“Humph!” Dear Scoffed.

The stairs seemed to go on for an eternity, the torches growing dimmer the deeper they went. The couple stopped when a rush of cold air from an unknown location hit them in the face, extinguishing all the torches. In complete darkness, the couple huddled together for warmth. The darkness was freezing cold. They shivered while the concierge struggled to relight the torch he was holding. Harold turned to him and struck a match.

Rolling the match between thumb and forefinger and sending sparks into the air, Harold lit a cigar he produced from his jacket pocket and handed the now nearly extinguished match to the concierge. Dear pushed Harold to move forward but Harold didn’t budge. He had saved the cigar since Florence, and now was the perfect time to smoke it. Dear coughed, looking with irritation at Harold and then the cigar. But Harold was too enthralled in his momentary combusive bliss to notice. Neither saw the match go out the second it touched the concierge’s hand. Smoke wafted toward an endless space, and Harold wished he could see the stars. As if on

a timer, all torches were set ablaze. The concierge sighed in relief and motioned the couple forward.

For what seemed like two hours, the couple descended. It felt unreal, impossible that this could be happening. But whether it was the nicotine or the situation, Harold felt his resolve strengthen by the second. He was determined to finish what he had unknowingly started. When they finally reached the end, a flood of endorphins embraced Harold. He dropped the embers of his cigar and lifted his head to see, on either side of him, rows of servants. Like dominos set up by a diligent child, the servants fell and bowed before the couple.

The Concierge turned to them smiling, and explained that these were the Hotel Members, and they were meant to satisfy every need or want the couple could think of. The Concierge enunciated “any need” with a flourish of his slender, pink tongue. The ghostly concierge bayed the couple to examine the members more closely. From a distance, the grey tunics and white smocks looked to be the standard clothing worn by all. But upon closer inspection, Harold made out distinctions in sex and dress. The left was all women, the right, all men. The first two sets of men and women, 4 to a set, wore standard white and grey uniforms that would fit the likes of maids and waiters, but past them, were two sets of chefs in blistering white coats and hats. By torchlight, Harold could not find a smudge on their uniforms, even after examining them for a few minutes.

Further down the line, there were men and women in suits and dresses, the women were wearing bodices. These were the dancers, the concierge explained. He then snapped his fingers. As if brought to life, couples formed and whirled around Harold and Dear. The men threw their female partners into the air and caught them in single moves. The concierge snapped again and the dancers froze in their places. Past the dancers were jugglers, jesters, fire-breathers, who upon

Harold's request, blew torrents of blue fire that transformed into a screeching dragon made of crimson fireworks. After them came giant men and women of 9-ft in height carrying midgets attached to their teats. The midgets momentarily turned from their feeding and squirted milk at the couple through toothless grins. A contortionist that could tie her body into a sad face and a performer that would slit his wrists and draw colorful ribbons from the wounds preceded. Then came the animals, bears wearing pinstripes and riding unicycles, anacondas wound around dark-skinned snake-charmers, albino tigers at the feet of wide-jawed and muscly tamers. The tigers purred softly, stretching their back-legs lazily but with apparent pleasure. And then came...

Harold's heart skipped a beat. Women. So many women. Oh god, so many kinds of women: black, white, fat, skinny, beautiful, ugly, young and old stood unclothed before him. They formed a single row arranged from oldest to youngest, and most beautiful to most ugly. Some looked like the maidens of myth, others were beautiful but not in a feminine way, beautiful in the way that it was impossible to discern a gender. Beautiful like a god. Some looked to be girls of 7 or 8 and yet others lay on their death beds but in line with the others. All of them turned, looked and smiled at Harold. The concierge winked.

"Take your pick." He said.

Harold winced. He had fought temptation in the past. But never like this. He looked at them all quickly, fearing that if he stared too long the women would suck him into the dark void of desire. He walked with his head turned pretending to be blind to them, but he could feel their stairs digging, burrowing, burning into his back. He had almost made it, when like a flash of

lightening, wisps of blonde hair flashed before him. And he turned immediately, standing face to face to with a plain girl.

She was unremarkable. Not exceptionally voluptuous or muscular, not pretty and not ugly either. She was just plain, expressionless, emotionless and incredibly desirable. Perhaps most exceptionally, her eyes were a pale shade of grey. They did not look at Harold but stared through him, with a wicket smile across her lips. Harold realized he knew this woman, but had no idea how. At once, the images of a whooshing speeding school-bus, a cigarette falling in a puddle and a yellow smile flashed before his eyes. Undeterred and dismissive, he kept staring into her hollow eyes until he no longer felt Dear's hand in his and spun around in the dark.

She was gone. Gone, gone, gone! And all Harold could do was stand there, squinting into the darkness, wondering where she had gone. God what have I done, he thought to himself. He had only thought about it. But was that enough? Was the desire to cheat enough? Harold didn't have time to ponder, he had to find his fiancé. He didn't have to look very far, there she was, a few feet away, looking at the opposite row of men.

Harold hurried over to his wife, grabbing her by the hand. "Let's go! Where's the Concierge?" He blurted out.

Dear turned to him. Her eyes were dim and grey. She looked blankly at Harold as if this was the first time she had seen him. "Who are you?" She asked.

Harold was stunned. "It's me. Harold. Your man." He barely managed to say the words the last words still thinking about the plain girl. Harold could not explain it but he instinctively grabbed

his wife by the back of her neck and kissed her. To Harold's relief, Dear slapped Harold across the face. She was back.

"The last thing I remember was walking down the rows..." Dear trailed off.

"Blank?" Harold asked.

"Yeah." Dear said.

"Same for me" Said Harold. "The last thing I remember is..." He trailed off.

Harold couldn't tell Dear about the plain girl. But why? Because Dear couldn't handle it? It happened before. She had caught him ogling other women from afar, she had found file of twisted internet pornography. And then there was Sarah, Harold's ex who he'd continued to text in-spite of Dear. She had found this out in the ugliest possible way. After that, Harold vowed never to be swayed by another woman no matter how gorgeous the physique or seductive the smile and look cast in his direction. But this was all beside the point, because Harold knew the real reason he couldn't tell Dear was because he hadn't decided. Hadn't decided for one thing because he could still see the girl's slight smile in front of his eyes. Try as he might to focus on Dear and the moment, the past pulled him back into its whirlpool. It was a curse, this endless, bottomless lust for more. It was a hunger that brought with it the anxiety of death. What if this was it? He asked himself. All he would get? And then he would die, and never know, feel,

anything else. Maybe he would never feel the true happiness he was yet still capable of feeling. This last thought encircled Harold's mind like a python and squeezed.

Harold felt the Concierge's hand on his shoulder, prompting him to move forward. He looked back and saw only a shadow, the flicker of torches lapping against a pale face. The concierge smiled a grizzly smile, barred teeth jutting out in front of him: a massive spectral overbite. Harold felt as if the teeth were reaching for him, so he quickened his pace, throwing a last glance at the girl from the corner of his eye. Soon they stood in front of an enormous red gate with doors within, one black and one white. Dear and Harold turned back to concierge, asking for guidance. He motioned them forward again.

“Take your pick.” He said. “You'll meet in the living room of the suite. It is quite luxurious inside. You'll see. Now go on then. I'll be up...I mean down... shortly to see how you're settling in. But first. Tell me. Should I have someone sent over to make your stay more enjoyable?”

The concierge smiled his grizzly smile again. Harold shuddered at thought of the plain girl. Looking into Dear's big brown eyes, he knew he couldn't say the words to her face. He wanted someone else. Forget it, he was not giving any more energy to his thoughts.

“I'll take the black one.” Harold blurted out, and in a single movement, threw the door open and plunged into darkness.

It was 4:15pm, the girl had just stashed her raft in some underbrush. She tied the left edge of the raft to a giant boulder that looked to have been there for ages. The girl stumbled over the rocks as she tried feverishly to outrun the approaching waves. Her efforts were in vain and the waves lapped against her thin legs, soaking her pink leather boots. She had been so intently working that she had, not for a second, looked in front of her. Looking up now, all she saw was a darkness that stretched over and above her in one continuous wave. The girl had to blink a few times before she could figure out what she was looking at.

It was a wood. An enormous, incomprehensible wood. A wood that she and no one before her could fathom, and of which she knew she must make her way. The girl walked to the wood's edge, straining her eyes to see for some sort of tell, some breadcrumb from the past. But nothing. All she could make out were two darkened earthy paths that diverged, made as easily by the wind as by any force of man. She wondered if it made a difference which path she took, but left it up to chance.

“The left path.” Tails said.

The girl did not have time to hesitate, it would be nightfall soon and the only thing worse than navigating a foreign wood was doing so at night. With a flourish that she performed for her own amusement and no one else, the girl unveiled her latest invention: a translucent teacup fit over a music box. Where a ballerina should be, being instead 6 candles. The girl wound the crank and the music box began to play a haunting melody while the girl lit each candle, the flames sizzling and spraying sparks (a little gun pounder added to the wax mixture made sure of that).

The earth was soft and her shoes sunk in as she walked, each footstep sinking a little deeper. It was pitch black, the giant decayed trees that framed each path blocked out the sun from entering the wood. The sputtering candles were the only thing that illuminated the surroundings and helped calm the girl's nerves as she waded through what seemed more and more like a marsh. She had made it no more than 5 steps when the girl heard something stir to the right of her. Letting out a breath, the girl did not turn to look but wound the crank of the music box again, the music growing louder (another alteration she made to the mechanism that produced the melody). A branch snapped in the distance, and over the roar of the music box an unmistakable snort could be made out. Whatever it was, it was following closely behind her. The path curved again and the girl began picking up her feet before each step to avoid sinking in. Her bags were weighing her down, driving her into the marsh. She was almost knee-deep in muck. The girl did not want to look down to see what things squirmed between her toes and encircled her legs. That would only make things worse she told herself on a loop. So she just kept walking and turning the crank of the music box. Luckily she was nearing the half buried stump of a tree and knew that she could seek higher ground there. As she waded over to the stump, the music box stopped playing its hypnotic melody. And in the silence, the girl heard a low quivering growl. She began to run for the stump, hoping to get away from the thing, but tripped over a root buried in the marsh. Falling flat on her face, the music box fell from the girl's hands and landed with a squish, every candle extinguished. Pulling a flare from her pocket, the girl turned on her back and ripped with her teeth, the covering of the flare. The flare produced a dazzling red blaze at its tip. Sparks flew through the air and landed on a wet and black nose. It took the girl's eyes a moment to become accustomed to the blinding red gleam but when they did, she made out, in the darkness, two glowing yellow eyes.

It was a wolf. Its eyes studied her with curiosity, beads of saliva dripping down and cutting into the moist, dark earth. The wolf towered over her. And to the girl, laying there, it looked as if the wolf was even standing on its hind legs. And that the gaping jaws of the wolf were not an animal snarl but the wolfish grin of a man. The glowing eyes made contact with hers and the girl could hear over the growl, a distinct, guttural laugh, a laugh she had heard many times before.

The man smiled again, revealing two rows of yellow teeth. "There's a lot in a smile, you know." Said the man, and the wolf took a bite out of the girl's right hand.

Pain shot through her body. She screamed. But her scream died out when the wolf tackled her against the stump, knocking the wind out of her and producing a hoarse wheeze instead. The girl fell limp to the ground as the wolf loosened its jaws, only to take another, deeper bite. She could feel it gnawing on her shoulder, its teeth making grooves in the bone. She didn't even feel pain now, only a tingling sensation that rose through her body. The wolf began shaking her back and forth, attempting to shake the life from her. But as it did, the girl's remaining hand caught on something that had fallen out of her swollen pockets: A Swiss Army knife, faded blue, her trusty blade. The girl's fingers were growing numb so she fumbled the blade with one hand and it stabbed into her palm. The girl screamed again as the blade was pushed deeper and deeper into her palm by the wolf's beating of her against the stump. In this moment, white hot rage rushed through her body, and the girl, in a burst of strength, scrambled to her knees, pushing the wolf back, its teeth still lodged in her shoulder. With the blade still stuck half-way through her hand, she smashed her hand against the wolf's face. The wolf howled, releasing the girl's shoulder. It

staggered back, taking with it the blade. The girl bit her tongue as the blade was pulled from her palm. Cradling her left hand, two fingers missing, the girl made a mad, pain-drunk dash into the heart of the woods. The marsh taking with it, her music box, and her shoes.

She stumbled over fallen branches, the limbs of trees tore at her clothes, but the girl did not stop. Blood pumping through her body and seeping out of the wounds in her shoulder and hand, she only ran faster until she could hear the wind whip in her ears. She ran until her legs felt weak and her chest burned, but even then she couldn't stop, wouldn't stop, because to stop meant to die, and the girl had had enough of dying for today.

Not once did the girl look back, not until she stumbled upon a clearing in the dense overgrowth where the high branches of the decaying trees were sparse enough to let beams of light shine through and pierce the darkness. The rays illuminated a small cottage before her and a mossy stone path under-foot. The front yard and the cottage were overgrown, with trees growing inside the house and poking through the shingles of the roof, and legumes running up and down the walls in white bumpy streams of natural braille.

The girl sprinted down the cobblestone path, saw no lock on the door, threw the door open, dove inside, slammed the door behind her and pressed the whole of her body weight against the door, scanning the room desperately for something to prop against the door handle. She found a chair and jammed it under the knob with a few quick kicks. She shook the chair to make sure it was secure, then fell to her belly, looking to see the wolf through the slant of light under the door. And sure enough, there it was, it's gnarled black claws inches away from her face. She could hear its heavy panting. It was wounded and exhausted. A faint whimper weaseled its way past the wolf's pink and black gums, and in that instant the girl knew what to do. She reached in her jacket pocket and saw that blood from the bite in her shoulder had pooled. She

quickly removed a rusty pair of scissors from her backpack, kicked the chair from under the door, turned the knob, fell to the side of the door and waited. The knob turned, and the door, with a creek, opened. The girl could hear scratching on the stone floor as the wolf walked in. The girl didn't know why she didn't wait it out, it made more sense, the wolf was wounded, why not just wait for it to leave. But something inside of the girl knew, that if she did not kill the wolf now. It would only be back, stronger, hungrier, more vicious. The other part of the girl was tired. Tired of running from the wolf, worrying about the wolf, fearing the wolf, wondering when the wolf in her life would appear again. So in this moment, in her boating clothes and red raincoat, soaked in blood and caked with mud. Now seemed like a better time than any to deal with the wolf, once and for all.

Lost in her thoughts, the girl did not see a shadowy figure creep down the stairs in complete silence, remove a chipped but clean blade from its boot-heel, grab the wolf before it could make a sound, slit the wolf's throat and move quickly up the stairs, leaving a trail of dark red blood which quickly turned bright red. The sound of music coming from up the stairs pulled the girl down from her hiding place in the rafters. She dropped nimbly to the stone floor, caked mud falling off her clothes in clumps. She kicked some of the excess mud off and felt something sticky underneath her feet. She lifted a foot, ran her fingers across the bottom of her sock and saw the red blood in the light coming in from the holes in the roof and haphazard slants made by the boarded up windows. The house looked to have been abandoned for years. Despite this, the girl could hear the haunting melody calling her upstairs to the master bedroom. The second floor was brighter than the first, un-centered paintings hung on the walls, the tree that had grown through the roof had knocked off enough shingles through which the sunset shone in, falling across the girl's face in brilliant red and yellow rays. It was 6pm and the girl had until dawn to

make it home. She still had some ways to go and her injury would slow her down considerably. Pulled again from her reverie by the music box's melody, the girl turned her head just in time to see a shadow glide down the hall and in through a crack in the bedroom door.

Faceless, and without a distinct shape, the shadow looked to the girl like only that, a shadow, one that could have just as easily danced across the walls of her bedroom while her mother read her a bedtime story. Her mother loved telling her stories, ones she had conjured up on the spot. With those you never know where they're going, until they're there, she had told the girl. It felt to the girl like her life was the same way, a winding dark road that was illuminated only by looking back into the past. The melody slid back into her thoughts and coaxed her onward. She had no choice but to continue following the path it laid out before her, it was the only thing she wanted to do. Find out, for sure what lay beyond the unknown, beyond death and life. The door to the bedroom was slightly ajar and the girl peeked from behind the frame before entering. All she could see was a bed, a king-size mattress on a ebony wood frame. A lace curtain wrapped itself around the frame, creating a kind of tent which hid everything within from view. She walked slowly across the cracked and uneven floorboards, the music growing louder, her boots squeaking and making the boards whine and creek. Her body became more tense the closer she got to the bed. The girl was primed to react at the slightest movement. Parting the lace curtain with both hands, the girl gasped in astonishment. The wolf, or rather its skin, was spread out on the mattress, and in the center of the skinned animal, where it's heart once beat, lay instead a baby wrapped in a red cloth. The girl reached for the baby, but quickly withdrew her hand as the baby opened its eyes and cried.

“Dear! Dear!! Oh Dear!!!” Harold cried out.

Harold was in the dark. Literally, and perhaps figuratively. He had chosen the wrong door, or so he thought. The hallway he walked down was dimly lit, like everything else, and he could see in the distance, a pool of light. But the more he walked, the further he felt from the light. It was almost as if he were standing in place. But that couldn't be, his legs were moving. Oh well, he figured he would stop for another smoke, and eventually something would give and he would be reunited with Dear again. The Cigar smoke trailed like a stream above him, winding into the cosmos. And as if some faraway God were answering his prayers, Harold felt himself moving forward, not the desperate limping pace that he had just been walking at, but a purposeful glide that came from deep within him and felt at odds with who he was. It was as if his body had taken control and let his mind engage in its useless contemplations while his legs did the work. It didn't matter to Harold though, at least he was getting somewhere. And for once, he did not feel hungry, or tired, or sick, he only felt focused on what was to come next. And what did come next was a bright rectangle of light. A window in the darkness, and within it, a time capsule. Something Harold had lost track of in the passing years, a memory half-forgotten that carried with it the solution to inner torments Harold did not even know he had.

Tears welled up in Harold's eyes as he looked at a hospital bed. And on it, a frail woman with silver hair, her head turned to a young curly headed boy who sat awkwardly leaning forward, clutching the woman's hand, tears falling onto the pillow that lay in his lap. A monitor beeps continuously, and the boy looks at an IV bag tagged morphine. He watches the bag slowly drip into a plastic tube that runs into his mother's veins and cries and wishes he wasn't there. But his mother looks at him again, glassy eyed, her amber eyes wide and scared. She mouths the

words “Son, I’m sorry.” And the boy puts his head down, rubbing his cheek against his mother’s hand and cries even more and begs and asks a thousand questions and says a thousand prayers. But no one answers. And eventually his mother turns away from him, a stern and resolved expression on her face. She won’t look at him again and the boy doesn’t know why. And eventually he leaves, unable to fully mouth a goodbye or look at his mother who no longer recognizes him. He blames himself for everything, hates himself and wishes he was dead. That none of this had happened. He’s sorry, sorry that his mother is sick, sorry she is going to die, but mainly sorry for himself, sorry he has to be the son of a dying mother. And that this has to be his life. Harold turns from the window, the fluorescent light burning his eyes, the tears evaporated on his cheeks in long dry streams. He looked into the darkness. “This isn’t my dream” He says. The conveyor belt of reality moves him to yet another rectangle of light.

A bride and a groom, the man in a turquoise suit, the woman in a magenta bridal dress stand before a priest, holding each other's hands and looking into each other's eyes. Another woman eyes the man from the crowd. The man feels her stare dart across the back of his neck. He moves to turn but knows he must continue gazing into his lover’s eyes. This momentary distraction causes him to flub his vows and say “My due” rather than “I do.” The crowd laughs, and all is forgotten except by the groom who can still feel the woman’s eyes burning into him, her jealousy white hot. His heart skips a beat while thinking about her and he can barely concentrate on cutting the cake. But as the dance begins and the drinks flow, his mind loses track of the woman. He begins to smile and pose for pictures with alcohol-induced sincerity. But on the edge of the frame, like a shadow, the blonde haired woman lingers, the woman who will not let him rest until he is hers.

Harold shakes his head; he knows all the people in this memory. But it cannot be. Dear? His wife? They've only been engaged a year. And this woman, whoever she is, invited to the wedding? This could not be. Harold jumps with a start, feeling the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. Spinning around in the darkness, he sees no one there, and the treadmill of reality moves him forward yet again, faster this time.

Harold is looking into the eyes of his dying father. He lies on a hospital bed, wrinkled and decrepit. With tears in his eyes, Harold reaches forward and unplugs the life support system. A furious beeping erupts from the machine and Harold walks past nurses dashing towards his father.

“NO STOP” Harold screams. “This can't be happening. I love my father.”

“You didn't love him enough.” His own voice echoes around him. “You hated him. Hated him because he never believed in you. So you killed him. Killed him when he was weak. Coward!”

Harold falls to his knees but the treadmill keeps pushing him forward. “This isn't my dream either.” Harold murmurs.

Harold is at the hospital again but the circumstances aren't as dire. Dear lays heavily breathing on a hospital bed. Her legs outstretched, held up by metal claws. She is sweating profusely but there are tears of joy in her eyes. Red faced, she cradles a baby. The baby lets out a small sound directed at Harold, reaching its tiny hands toward him. Harold holds the soft little hand in his and looks into the baby's serene face, admiring its brilliant blue eyes. Harold feels

perplexed but the conveyor belt jerks him forward again and he stands face to face with his reflection.

Harold's taking a little girl to school. She has blonde hair and blue eyes and looks at Harold curiously. He's let his hair grow out and looks to the girl more like a bear or like the Sasquatch on TV, than a man. But from the way he looks at her and the way his voice sounds when he calls her name, she knows that he's her dad. Harold's taking the girl to school. Her name's Emily. Harold has never loved anything in the world as much as her. From the moment he set eyes on her, he knew he would do anything for her, even sacrifice his own life. The conveyor belt moves forward.

Veins bulging from his neck, spit flying from his contorted mouth, Harold screams into a woman's face. Not dear, the blonde haired woman. He holds a picture in front of her and an opened envelope addressed to his and Dear's residence. The picture is of Harold asleep in the woman's bed. The black haired woman smiles and laughs a cruel laugh. Harold runs from the house, puts the keys in the ignition and drives over the speed limit the whole way to his house. The house is dark. Dear's grey minivan isn't in the driveway. She's taken the kids to their grandmother's. Harold sits at the dinner table and pours himself glass after glass of vodka until he passes out.

Harold is back on the conveyor belt and remembering seeing the plain girl. Something occurred to him but it was too dim to bring to words. The conveyor belt moves him forward. It's a sunny September afternoon. Harold watches the leaves rustling in the breeze and jumps backward as a yellow school-bus whooshes past him. His own hollowed out voice echoes around him again, laughing.

“It can’t touch you, you fool!” The voice echoes.

He was a ghost watching his own life. Right? Harold tried to find himself in the rectangle, but he couldn’t. He was beginning to lose hope when he spotted a shock of bright blonde hair. It was Emily. Done with school. A tingle in the back of his brain struck dread into the heart of ghost Harold. He starts to remember. Em, as Harold liked to call her, walks over the yellow school bus with two of her best friends that Harold remembers her talking about at dinner. He would always make heaping plates of spaghetti and meatballs on Thursdays and Emily would recount the highlights of her day. Her friends Anna and Mary-Beth were frequently the highlights. Emily walks in sync with her two friends. They all line up to get on the school bus. As Em tries to climb the stairs, a volunteering parent grabs her by the shoulder. She points to her clipboard and shakes her head.

“You’re not on here for the bus little lady. Your parents are scheduled to pick you up. You must follow the rules little miss. Or the world would be a terrible place.” Mrs. Butt-Finger said.

Em looks at the woman, she remembers her being the mother of Butt-Finger Jim, as the kids would call him. He picked up the name from PE class when a few of the boys and girls, Emily included, were horrified to see Jim stick a few fingers deep into the creases of his dungarees then pull his hand out, sniff his fingers, then suck on them for the remainder of class. The name wasn’t clever but it stuck, and so did the story, which so far had survived four grades and 3 mental breakdowns from Jim who couldn’t handle the ridicule or not munching his butt-flavored

fingers. For that reason, his mother Barbara had taken to volunteering at the school so she could run him juice in between classes and wipe his forehead with a pink handkerchief which was always in her back pocket. Em could only imagine all the surfaces that kerchief had seen. She thought about this while walking sullenly to the waiting station, where all the kids who didn't take the bus and hadn't been picked up yet, hung out. The kids liked to call it the Rejects but the principal, fuming, had banned calling it that due to how close rejects sounded to projects and since this was a preparatory school there was a certain amount of aplomb that must be kept up. This is what he said over the loud-speaker last Tuesday. But the name persisted, as names do. Only a few kids were left. Johnny Engles, Beatrice Maxaday and Tony Plunk. Johnny and Tony were in a love triangle with Beatrice who had kissed one on the cheek at recess and the other on the forehead at lunch, and for that reason they hung out at opposite ends of the Rejects, occasionally exchanging vengeful looks, while at the same time trying to woo Beatrice with gifts of crab-apples from the nearby orchard and origami swans made out of news-paper and cardboard bags. Beatrice, being the father of real estate tycoon Maximillion Maxaday, was unimpressed. She would sigh and turn her attention back to dutifully removing a mustard stain from her Givenchy Coat.

“It's one of a kind” She had told Emily in the bathroom one day. “Daddy had it made special just for me. It's signed by Mr. Givenchy himself.” Beatrice then pointed to what looked to Emily like a black smudge on the underside of Beatrice's left sleeve. Beatrice didn't notice Emily sit down on the bench next to her and sighed even louder. Emily sighed in Beatrice's direction, adding two short coughs at the end like an exclamation point. This caught Beatrice's attention and she turned to Emily, surprised.

“Oh didn’t see you there, how have you been Emmie?” Emily hated being called Emmie.

“Oh, I’m fine. Just stuck here after school again. I keep telling my parents to put me on the registration for the bus but they never listen to anything I say. Especially nowadays. Now that they’re getting a divorce.”

Emily nearly keeled over as Beatrice tackled her, wrapping her arms around her in a savage hug. Tony and Johnny paused from taking turns spitting closer and closer to each other’s general area and looked at the two girls with a mix of confusion and curiosity.

“Everything alright?” Tony asked.

“Far from right Ton,” Beatrice squealed. “Our little Emily’s parents are getting a D-I-V-O-R-C-E. I can’t believe it! My parents always bring up divorce at dinner, but mother assures me she’d never get one because Daddy is filthy, stinking rich. Are you okay? Do you need anything? Money? A Starbucks? Daddy lets me use his card until I hit the limit!”

Emily looked down. “No, I’m fine. It doesn’t feel any different. Now my dad just picks me up on Mondays and Wednesdays and my mom the rest of the time. Really, I’m fine.” Emily said this while pushing Beatrice back a little. Beatrice immediately began digging in her purse, pulled out a pack of candy cigarettes and threw one at Emily before puffing on one herself.

“Cigarettes are great at a time like this,” Beatrice said and exhaled, showing her perfect teeth in a glossy smile.

Red lipstick dotted her teeth and coated the hard white candy. “It’s Victoria’s” She said pointing to her teeth, but meaning the lipstick which was an almost fluorescent tone of red.

“It makes the boys go mad.” She motioned to Johnny and Tony which were now taking turns giving each other nuggies and wet willies.

“Wha...” Johnny responded.

“You see.” Beatrice said with a smile and blew a cloud into the wind that whipped around the Rejects.

The weather looked to be turning for the worse. And Emily could feel, with an outstretched hand, the first droplets of rain. She stared into the greying cosmos, and thought she saw a twinkle of light, the shape of a face.

“Dad?” She barely had time to get the words out before the face disappeared into the clouds. She turned back to see Beatrice climbing into a black escalade, a burly man in a black suit held the door open for her.

“Take care darling! Beatrice waved, letting the cigarette fall through her fingers and land with a splash onto the now wet and puddling cement.

Only three left. With Beatrice gone, Johnny and Tony relaxed. They began to play cops and robbers, cavorting around the dry area, holding their hands up in the shape of different guns.

“I’ll get you” Said Tony.

“No, I’ll get you” Said Johnny.

“You’re the bad guy.” Said Tony.

“No, you’re the bad guy.” Said Johnny.

The rain was coming down harder now and Em began to shiver from the cold. Johnny, as if struck by a lightning bolt, stood up straight, removed his flannel coat and handed it to Emily. He then returned to sticking up Tony with a Semi-Automatic Beretta. This made Emily smile. Maybe, guys weren’t all that bad after all. She remembered how her mother wouldn’t let go of her hand while they drove to school this morning, despite how it impaired her driving, causing her to swerve into the fast lane and nearly side swipe a Porsche Cayenne, Beatrice’s mother’s car. With tears in her eyes, her mom said vague things about Em’s father being the devil and how she was going to leave him and take the two of them on vacation. She talked about all the fun they would have and how Em wouldn’t miss him at all. Em doubted this but knew it wasn’t the

time to contradict her mother. So she just sat there, feeling the circulation in her hand slow from how tightly her mother was squeezing her hand and dreamed about Hawaii. She heard from Anne that the ocean was warm. She hoped so, she wanted to see how far out she could swim. She tried this on the Pacific Coast, until her parents, freaked out of their minds, pulled her from the waves, pale and shivering. She had nearly gotten hypothermia, said the doctor. But Em hadn't noticed. She was too focused on reaching the horizon.

Em thought about swimming forever and never looking back over her shoulder no matter who tried to pull her back. She wished this could be her life. But they weren't in Hawaii yet. So all Em could do was fantasize and try to not think about breakfast.

Despite Em's mom enacting divorce proceedings immediately after the incident. The unhappily married couple still shared the same house. Em's father was a writer and did not have the type of salary that he could just get up and leave, or even book a room at the Sheraton for that matter. And due to finances being tight and the couple sharing a bank account, Em's mom couldn't afford him to leave either, at least until they were legally divorced. So what this meant was that Harold slept on the couch while Dear took the upstairs bedroom across from Em's room. After this happened, Em had taken to watching movies very late at night with her dad. They watched action movies, mindless explosive garbage that her dad would gleefully comment on, occasionally erupting into fits of laughter that only got louder when he could see Emily's mother watching from the stairwell. Em hoped this didn't feel like a betrayal to her mom. It wasn't. She just liked watching the movies with her dad. It made her forget about the divorce. And for a few hours, she was lost in an alternate reality where she didn't have to feel anything but entertained. Additionally, movies had been how Em had gotten to know her dad. She learned about his family in Venezuela while watching *Rambo First Blood* and about his idol, philosopher

Krishnamurti, while cheering at the screen during *Die Hard with a Vengeance*. They watched the movies over and over, seeing how many actors they could name and making silly comments. Em missed the nights when his mother would sit between them, and her father would tease her, putting his cold toes on her legs and making her squeal. She loved her family, but it was so different now. Breakfast was a good example.

Oh breakfast. How she used to love breakfast, and how much she hated it now. The separation had made every morning unbearable. She would sit at cramped table that could barely hold three people. Pick at the chair made of strong twine tightly wound around a wood base, and try not to see how things had changed. But they had. And she couldn't help from seeing. Her mother stood with her back to her, frying eggs, the burner on too hot so that smoke spilled into the room. Dad would cough at her mother, making her mistake obvious. He'd sit across from Emily, disheveled and unshaven, his immense brown beard growing thicker and more unwieldy by the second. He'd pick at the half cooked eggs he had prepared for himself, and nibble on a crust of toast. He'd taken to doing everything in an excessively obnoxious and disgusting manner, with the hope of drawing Emily's mother's attention, but she would not turn from the stove until Emily announced that she was ready to be driven to the school up on the hill. Major Price Elementary, named from an old war general who had left an enormous estate to his son with the dying wish that he turns it into a school for special children. And not special in the stigmatized way to describe the mentally handicapped, but special as in truly unique individuals. He had whispered this in his son's ear before falling back into oblivion and growing cold to the touch. This was how the story went, and every year on Recitation day, which the children took to calling Regurgitation day, they would recite the story and Major Price's dying words, one by one, in front of their entire grade. To Emily, the words sounded more like an incantation than

anything else, a spell meant to awaken the dead. The thought of awakening the old general sent shivers down her spine. As if this wasn't enough, Emily had developed a stutter at a young age. Her parents had tried everything, speech therapists, psychologists, hypnotists, medication but nothing had worked. It was only on her 12th Birthday that Emily woke up from a dream and could speak properly again. She had never shared the dream with her parents but she held it close to her heart.

Emily's mother asked her if she was ready to go to school but Emily shook her head no while still picking at her fried eggs. She hoped that buying this extra time would give her dad a chance to summon the courage, as he tried and failed to do on endless mornings, to work things out with her mother. The times that he did muster the courage were always in a drunken stupor that ended in mild physical violence, his tearful retreat to the living room, or both. Now I know what you're thinking. How can physical violence be mild? Any kind of violence is bad bad bad and should get the death penalty. Well, there comes a time when things are past words. When there is no response but to take a plastic, hollow, baseball bat and crack it over someone's shoulder blade. This is what Emily's mom believed, or at least what she believed in a fit of rage. And this was exactly what she did when her father had come to her with endless excuses about why he did what he did. There was no excuse. So a plastic baseball bat felt like the best possible response. Emily, peeking through the blinds of the big window that gave you a view of the garden, saw her mother do it. And at the time, to Emily, it did not seem like that big of a deal. Her father's sulking which lasted for a full week was intended to make her see things as being a bit direr. But it was all just so funny. The whole situation. And how stupid people acted when they were mad at each other. So stupid that they pretend not to like things they actually like, and do things that they don't actually want to do. Emily had never taken the divorce threats seriously

until her mom told her what her father had done. It was Monday. Her mom drove her to school on Mondays and Wednesdays, her Dad on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

While her mother drove her to school, holding Emily's hand the whole way, she explained. She explained that she had caught her father kissing her youngest sister Monica on the couch one night. Her mother had frequently stayed out late working at the Shared Hearts clinic where she treated homeless children that did not have healthcare and avoided hospitals for fear of being taken into welfare programs. One night there had been an especially large intake of people. Children were lined up around the block. When things were like this, she would work overnight and sleep on a cot in one of the spare rooms of the clinic. It seemed crazy to Emily and her father, but her mother loved the work and neither could complain about her getting more overtime hours and added pay. These kind of nights began to occur so frequently, as homelessness in Portland skyrocketed, that the house became a disaster, with Em's father working on his novel and letting things get out of hand, Emily was left with no one to drive her to piano lessons. So, like a guardian angel, Emily's mother's sister Monica had come to town and volunteered to help out in exchange for being able to sleep in the guest room. The guest room was unfinished, with peeling wallpaper, some open wiring, a futon on the floor and a bookshelf in the corner.

Monica loved reading and would read Emily Harry Potter while Emily sat in her lap. She would braid Emily's long golden curls, telling her how pretty she was and telling her stories about her mother's childhood. Some of the stories were exciting, and some sad enough to make Emily bury her face in Monica's chest, but almost all of them ended with Emily's mother being the butt of the joke. There was one story in which her mother had saved up and bought a motorcycle. She was always the bad girl of the four sisters and this purchase fell in line with her

rebellion. Besides, she bought the cycle so she could drive to the other side of the parish and visit one of the farm hands that lived there. He was black, and in Virginia during this time it was seen as low class to have any kind of relations with a black person, if you were white. Some things outlast Jim Crow and in Jamestown, Virginia Anti-black sentiment outlasted them all. But Emily's mother did not care. She had always been the black sheep, no pun intended, of the family, so it seemed almost fitting to fall in love with someone society had turned their back on. She would visit Huck in the dead of night, but as she did this more often and as her love for Huck grew, she became more brazen, and her visits more frequent. She began to leave in the middle of the day, even skip school to smoke cigarettes and dance under the moonlight with Huck. With each visit, she fell more in love with Huck. He was a strong man. He carried bales of hay, five at a time, pinned to his back. His skin was dark, almost purple, and when he worked his skin would glisten, making him look to her mother like a Greek god and not like any man she had seen before. She had no interest in the scruffy white tradesmen that populated the neighboring parishes. She only wanted Huck. And this made her father furious. Initially, she had kept Huck a secret. But as she grew older and wiser, as she read more, she realized that it was wrong to keep Huck a secret. Because for him to be a secret was to say that she was ashamed of dating a black man. That she thought what she was doing was wrong, and she didn't. So she began to talk about him freely at the dinner table. Her mother, frozen, holding one hand against her forehead, not daring to look at Emily's mother's father, would ask over and over if anyone needed anything attempting avoiding the topic. Her father would sit there, head down, face to his plate, but with every word the veins on his neck and around his temple would become more visible. His face would grow redder as well. She pushed it to the point that her father, losing his temper at last, spat food at his daughter and bellowed that she would stop seeing that boy or else.

This only made Emily's mother's spirit stronger and her chosen rebellion, riskier. She skipped school and kissed Huck with more relish than she ever had before hearing from her father. It was hubris that was her mother's downfall, instructed Auntie Monica to Emily. One morning she decided that she would go see Huck, and this morning, she would give herself to him completely. She knew her father had drunk the night before, and on mornings like these he did not wake up early to feed the chickens. Instead, he slept like a log while her feeble mother struggled to carry the 40 pound something bags of feed out the door. It was 6am and her mother knew she had only 10 minutes to get dressed and take the motorcycle out before her mother would be awake and possible wake up WM. She did everything quickly, her feet dancing and her cheeks blushing at the thought of Huck and his big strong arms that he'd use to sweep her off her feet and carry her into the forest. They'd make out under a tree, this was the typical routine. But this time, he'd take her virginity. Emily's mother had been contemplating it for a long time, and after turning 16 she decided that it would be to Huck. He was good looking enough. And for as little as they spoke to each other, she loved him and knew that he loved her just as much. It's funny how you can just know something like that she thought to herself. But really, the love was in the way he looked at her, the way he ran his fingers through her sun-bleached hair, the way he kissed her and the way he held her hands with a tenderness only afforded to babies and other small animals. Emily's mother was elated, over the moon, everything was shining and beautiful. She took the stairs two at a time, careful to avoid the creaky step that lay in the center of the stairwell. She grabbed a few apples and a bottle of fresh milk she had gathered just yesterday. She flung the door open and just as she stepped onto the porch, a voice, slow and deliberate, sounded from behind her.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” Said her father WM, which stood for William Madison. There was WM, sitting at the table, a glass of whisky in his hand. Emily’s mother wondered if he had been there the whole night.

“To get some feed for the chickens.” She responded.

“The chickens have enough feed. Checked this morning.” Said WM.

“The Pickup needs an oil change, ben holloran somethin awful.” Continued Emily’s mother.

“Changed it too.” Retorted WM with the same slow somber tone.

“You know where I’m going daddy. And there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” Emily’s mother spat out. She then proceeded to take the pooch steps two at a time, not letting the screen door hit her on the way out. Emily’s mother had made it to the bottom of the porch when she heard a click. She turned around and stared down the barrel of a gun.

“The hell I caint.” Growled WM, his hand on the trigger of a double barrel shotgun.

“Yu go see that boy and yur no daughter of mine” He added, pulling down the hammer of the gun.

Emily's mother was stunned. Never in her life would she have thought her father would have gone this far. He had been violent with her mother but never a gun. Tears began to stream down Emily's mother's face.

“You're not my father.” She said from between shaking lips.

And with that, she turned and began to walk slowly toward the motorcycle. Laughter followed her but she would not turn around. WM began to yell after her about how it was a joke and how the gun was not even loaded. But Emily's mother never turned around. And from that day on she vowed to get out of Virginia and find a better life with a man that would never point a gun at her. Well, she found Emily's Dad, and he wasn't the type to point a gun, but he was the type to kiss her sister.

— **The End** —

— **Rough** —

I can't bear it.

It all don't make sense.

I don't know it.

I don't know anythin'.

My mind is fractured,

fractured into a million bits.

It doesn't matter,

doesn't matter if it don't make sense.

I'm all strung out on Klonopins in the drug store trying to pay for Advil but my card keeps getting rejected. And the pharmacist lady is looking at me like I just took a dump on the counter. I always get nervous when I'm trying to pay for drugs and my card won't go through because I spent all my money on booze the night before. But I have 30 dollars coming in from a side job any minute now so now it's all about guessing when I can use my card again. Third time's the charm so I slide the plastic and the lady behind the counter tells me again that I need to insert the chip. I look at my card and can barely make out the little metal chip but I insert it anyway and it doesn't go through. Goddammit! My palms are sweating now and the stress is making my heart race and my vision go in and out so I take a seat walking past the long line of old people that you'll typically see at the Pharmacist. My heart's really racing now and I know it must be the half a gram of coke I snorted off the top of the urinal at Sassy's Strip Club. I always waste money when I'm drunk and do coke too. It's fucking crazy how messed up I get when I'm drunk. And then I'll wake up in the morning hating being awake but I can't help it. I always wake

up at 8am when I get wasted the night before. I wake up at 8am and can't get back to sleep till midnight. That means 8-10 hours of rehearsing a dark spotted memory and all my mistakes and regrets from the night before. God I love drinking. I hate it though. All the bitter feelings that I have to swallow the day after. All the shame that coats my body like my own personal lubricant making me harder to grab. All the ducking and dodging eye contact when I'm around the club because I can't remember what I did and don't want to either. I'm pretty fucked up at least that's what my ex girlfriend says. She says other things too like how I'm a liar and how I have bad taste and I'm short and how my dick's not that big and how I don't like sex enough and how I'm dumb dumb dumb a fucking moron she'll say when she's mad. Oh well better than the one before her. Briana the one who cheated on me with an Armenian dude in Germany. I save up all the money my Dad gives me for 6 months to take that bitch to Poland and after a couple days of sight-seeing she announces in the middle of the night while I'm lying awake in bed trying drunkenly to pay attention to some Japanese reality dating show that she's going to Germany and I can come if I want to but she's leaving in 10 minutes. I'd say that's the shit that fucked me up the most. We get to Berlin and she immediately finds a hostel and tells me not to follow her. I stay for a day have a few drinks go to an art museum which is kind of sweet snap some pictures buy some cigarettes and instantly regret doing it. But the lighter has a cartoon alligator on it so not all is lost. I grab one of foods unique to Berlin and Poland which is a hot dog in a pocket of dough with ketchup. It's like a mix between a hot dog and a hot pocket and I eat at least three of them every day that I'm in Europe. To say that a jumbo pig in a blanket with ketchup and a European twist was the best part of my trip would be tragic if they weren't so god damn good. After eating one after spending a single night in Berlin I took the overnight bus back to Poland and the Airbnb my dad in an eternal state of crisis rents for me after hearing my sob story. It was

nice of him. And I must admit that at 24 I should already have a steady job with a 6-figure income and a bombshell blonde by my side like him and TV always promised I would have. But no I'm 24 still living off my dad and relying on the kindness of strangers. Oh well it's all bullshit anyway. And we're all going to die anyway. Anyway I try to not to worry too much about it. God I'm so fucking pathetic. I really hate myself sometimes. And that begets the drinking which begets hating myself. It's a vicious cycle. And I know it. But when has self-awareness ever altered someone's behavior? I don't know. But it doesn't happen often I'll tell you that. I'm going to hell if there is one and I'm scared as shit if there isn't. But anyway I get back to Krakow Poland in the middle of the night having drunk my way through the 9-hour bus ride. While I'm discreetly sipping from a tall can in the backseat a bald fat German guy round 35 sits across from me. He's pretty drunk and whistles at women that walk through the aisle. It doesn't matter that one is a mom with kids and a husband and that the other is pregnant. He whistles loudly at them and makes to grab their asses. But his hands are weak so he only mimes the action. And I watch all this while sipping my tall can feeling lower by the second. I saw myself in that man. And as disgusting as it was I wished I was him. He didn't give a fuck. And I liked that. So I get back to Poland at around 3 am and come home to an absolute mess. I forget that we left it this way. Plates are everywhere some food still rotting on them. Bags of trash are piled on the terrace clothes are strewn everywhere. Even though I'm drunk and hungover heart broken and on zero hours of sleep I clean everything. Wipe down the sticky counters take out the trash wash the dishes detail the toilet everything. After I do this I fall into a sleep full of nervous dreams crowded with faceless figures and shadow shapes. It could be delirium tremens who knows but it's not because I'm alive and I wake up and immediately call my dad to come comfort me. He arrives with groceries dressed like a gap model. An overcoat that is too big for his small figure

and the old-school golfer's hat that his dad used to wear. He looks cute. He's a cute little man with long black and silver hair and dark brown eyes that glisten with joy and laughter. He's a tango dancer and a former ND. I love my dad. We go out to eat. But first I convince him to see *Beautiful Boy* with me for what will be my second time watching it. He likes the movie. It doesn't help me though. All I can think about while I watch this kid struggle to get clean is Briana and wonder what she is doing over in Berlin. I wonder if she's sleeping around but the thought doesn't seem possible to me. Her need to leave at all hours of the night and not come back till day break should have clued me in but I was naive and couldn't imagine that she would find someone better than me. Hilarious right?? The irony is almost too much for me to take. I thought she was in this with me and I never thought that someone could do something to someone who had given her all the money he had everything they had. Well me I did that I gave her everything I booked the ticket I took her Poland I loved her and I got cheated on the same trip. What a trip! More like what a gip. That's what she was a gip. And I'll never forget that no matter how old or stupid I get because I'm not that stupid. Not stupid enough to buy her more jewelry the following summer. Not stupid enough to sleep with her again. Not stupid enough to let her wash her clothes at my apartment and my other girlfriend in California finds out and uses my face for target practice. Not feeling as bad for me now? Are ya? Hahaha. Ha. Ha.

Anyway

My guiltless asking of money from my dad should have clued me in that people will do shitty stuff to the people they say they love just because they know they'll get what they want. But in those moments I was happy enough eating shrimp and drinking beer with my dad to not do more than send her Facebook messages trying to convince her to come back. Around 5 days later she messages me saying she'll come back if I pay for her bus ticket home. It's 60 dollars or 240

Zlote. I ask my dad and he finally gives in and pays. She extends her return date 3 times and finally comes back on Sunday. I can't sleep. I can't imagine what is going to happen. I do everything I can to hold onto Briana but she still let's go. After everything after she maliciously tells me that she hooked up with someone else that she did coke and acid and went out dancing every night dancing with different dudes and doing drugs in vacant rooms of the hostel. She must have lied to me about how much money she actually had. Wanted to save it for herself. What a fucking bitch. I was just a tool for her someone she could use to get where she wanted to be so she could do whatever the fuck she wanted to do. I hate that woman. I should have killed that woman. But when I stood over her pressing her against the bed wanting to rip off that mop of red curls on the top of her head looking into her stunned expressionless face I couldn't. Because I knew that if I hit her hurt her bad there was no coming back. Or maybe there was and I should have done it. At least I'd have happier memories from the trip than the hot dogs.

--Dedication--

If I could, I'd line all my exes up in a row. Give one of them a handgun, and the other ones each a bullet, and video tape what happens. Yeah, I'm an angry guy. Life hasn't been kind to me. Either that, or I haven't been kind to myself. But I'd rather believe the former. You see, I'm a pretty regular guy. I like movies, mashed potatoes, masochism. I like shrimp, salmon, sadism. All the isms tend to have something good in them. You know, I was watching this one documentary about a yoga Guru that used his power to make a hell of a lot of money first, then used it to take advantage of his female students second. And I thought to myself. What a life. Where shit like this happens. You're in a yoga class and

then some guy is pressing his junk into your side and telling you to open wider in your splits. It's a world where people like this have the power for no other reason than people are stupid and they'll, I mean, we'll believe anything to get us out of believing in nothing. Because to believe in nothing is too damn scary. So anyway, this guru guy goes to trial for his crimes. And when this guy is facing the judge and jury on that little wooden stand, you know what name this man invokes?? You know who this guy brings to bat for him? God! So in light of that, I dedicate this collection to you, God. God bless you. Keep up the good work!

