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Claremont McKenna College

The Duality of Gnome

submitted to
Professor James Morrison

by
Koss Klobucher

for
Senior Thesis
Fall 2020-Spring 2021
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Gratitude

Thank you Mom. You are a warm drink, always.

Thank you Dad. You are a welcome giggle.

Thank you Josie. You, of course, are my person.

Thank you John. Writing is nothing without a first draft, and a friendship that survives six first drafts can survive anything.

Thank you to the various writing groups throughout this process.

Thank you family.

Thank you Professor Morrison. You accepted me as your advisee, having met me precisely once four years prior to having begun this project. You have shown me enormous compassion and provided invaluable support and feedback in an incredibly difficult time. I cannot thank you enough.

I have found writing to often be a solitary experience, one shared between myself and the comforting heat of my laptop. I am honored to have written this collection with a team behind me and find myself far better for it. Without those listed, and many, many more, this collection would have neither the depth, the width, nor the breadth it holds today.

Cheers, and happy reading!

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From the Moon

“Fuck me, I almost missed the turn!” called out Adam.

In truth, he hadn't been close to missing the driveway. It was the only one for miles. The whole drive into the canyon had been strange, his creaky Toyota shrouded in fog with ethereal winds pestering his windshield. Heavy fog, in Death Valley? When he approached the house, the fog got shy and dissipated in a misshapen oval, framing the cottage. And what a cottage it framed.

“My god, there's got to be hundreds of gnomes here!” he called out to the hooded man whom he could only assume was his interviewee. “I do have the right place, haven't I? I'm Adam Lambeer, from the Times?”

“They follow me wherever I go.” responded a gruff voice from the top of the wooden stairs. “Come on in now. You've got the right place. I'm John Box. Mind yer step and all. Wouldn't want ta rile 'em up like ole Tommy and I used ta.” He cackled with this remark, turned on his heel, and began to make his way back up onto the porch, patting a gnome here, scratching a gnome there, sharing a conspiratorial smile. The gnomes did not respond. They were, after all, just garden statues.

Beth was right Adam thought to himself as he picked his way through the front yard and to the door. *The astronaut has lost it.*

The yard itself was a mishmash of colors. Pockets of lavender sprung between the hands of the gnomes, brilliant purples against their ashy worn skin. Alongside the far fence lay a massive metal spade carved with the initials J.B. The cottage rested above it all, surveying the battlefield of strewn flower petals, scattered gnome body parts, and gnarled roots. John led Adam up the stairs and through the door, pausing as Adam made his way inside to stare at the fog surrounding them as if expecting to see something, or someone.

“Please son, make yerself at home,” John said.

“Now Dr. Box, I...” Adam began.

“It’s John, son. John will be just fine.”

“John, as I said in our prior correspondence, I wanted to interview you for the upcoming piece about the fiftieth anniversary of the Moon expedition of 1986. Are you ok with me recording this interview for accuracy reasons?”

“Ok with it? That’s the only way I’ll do this talk. The people need ta know what I’ve got ta say!”

“Right, yes sir. And I spoke with your wife on the phone, is she here?”

“No.”

“Oh, will she be joining us?”

“No.”

Adam squirmed and his hands gripped the sides of the chair. The beginning of any interview was the most difficult. You had to become comfortable with the silence, letting the other person fill the void. That’s how you get to the gems, the pieces that made people still read the paper. *Delicious tidbits* Beth would say. He stared at his shoes, mentally willing John to cave first to the awkwardness of it all.

“Can I git ya a drink boy?” John said, finally breaking.

“Oh, no, thank you, sir, I have my own.” and Adam pulled out a water bottle from his backpack.

“Ok, I’ll git and fix myself somethin. Gon’ need som’ liquid for this story, I can tell already.”

John shuffled out the door and into what was presumably the kitchen. Adam glanced around, taking in his surroundings for the first time. They were seated around an

oak coffee table, the plush chairs arranged haphazardly. On one of the walls near the doorway sat a diploma, certifying John's Harvard Ph.D. in astrophysics and biochemistry. Next to it, covered in dust, was a Presidential Medal of Freedom. Beneath that sat a picture of a much younger John. His eyes were gleaming and his arm was entwined with a young blonde woman's. Behind them was a single garden gnome.

“Alright, so... You wan' talk bout the moon, hmm?” John interrupted Adam's mental notes on the eerily lifelike jack-o-lantern resting below the table.

“Yes, whatever you're comfortable with,” Adam said. He set the tape recorder onto the coffee table and pushed down the RECORD button.

“Well...” John trailed off, his eyes looking elsewhere, off into the distant past.

“Let's start with the obvious first,” he addressed the tape recorder and his voice took on a professional air. It was strong, qualified, proper. It was the kind of voice that you'd expect famed space shuttle crash survivor John Box to have.

“This is all true. All of it. There is no fake moon landing. Cut the crap with that stuff. We landed before the Russians and, yes, I really have gone back twice.” He took a deep breath and a slow sip from his drink on the table. “And yes, we lost a member of our crew because of a smuggled corned beef sandwich, a chicken leg, and getting the shuttle door greasy.”

John trailed off. Adam gave him a moment before asking, “So what was the moon like?”

John bristled as he stared daggers into Adam. “Boy, if ya interrupt me one more time or think ya should prompt me, I’ll stop tha interview just like that,” and his fingers reached up and cracked the air.

He took a breath and continued, losing his twang once again as he spoke. “The Moon was different back then. It looked like how a grandparent’s backyard looked. Random rocks and the occasional random bright spot. Expected more to be honest. A lot of open space. A lot blander than some liked. I loved it. Felt like a home away from home. Of course, there were tons of gnome remains fertilizing the ground there.”

He stared at Adam, daring him to say a word. Adam sat perfectly still, entranced by John’s cobra glare, holding his tongue and breath as he waited for John to continue.

“I went back there with an old captain of mine, Sean C. King, and we made friends with the space shuttle's driver, who took us to the place where the first man to ever step foot on the Moon was buried. Neil Armstrong. You’ve heard of him, right? That whole one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind stuff? He never mentioned all the gnomes when he got back to Earth.

“If Neil were still alive, I like to think he’d be happy about me giving this interview.”

Beth was right, this guy’s batshit Adam again thought to himself. No wonder no other reporter took this job, they must’ve known.

John continued, oblivious to Adam’s inner monologue. “You know, when I got back to Earth I thought the world would accept my word. They’d think, oh this astronaut fella, he probably knows what’s going on up in the heavens.”

Adam nodded along. “Anything for the story.”

“I even thought, perhaps naively, that people would just, believe me. I have the credentials you know. Stanford undergrad, Harvard for my dual Ph.D.’s. I think my issue was the first man I talked to, Norman Vincent Peale. He’s a minister who wrote the best-seller “The Power of Positive Thinking”, and he asked me, “Is that your ambition? To inform the public about the Moon?”

“In a way,” I said. “Yes.”

“You know what I say about aiming for the Moon right?”

“No, what do you say, Mr. Peale?”

“Aim for the stars, if you miss, you’ll land on the Moon.”

“I guess what he meant was that perhaps the Moon wasn’t a big enough surface for the whole world to be interested in, that I should broaden my horizon. Mr. Peale was wrong, of course, he hadn’t seen the gnomes.”

Adam frowned. He knew all about Mr. Peale, who had famously begun peddling moon landing conspiracy theories almost directly after meeting with John. But what was with this gnome obsession of John’s? By all accounts he was brilliant. Maybe interstellar travel had snapped something inside him.

John barrelled on. He was picking up some real steam now.

“You know the first time I saw the gnomes, I was on assignment in the Sea of Tranquility with a fellow American, Tommy Hanson. Tommy was just a kid then, sweet sixteen. Can you imagine a sixteen-year-old standing on the Moon? He looked about as thick as a beanstalk, and as hairy too. Ridiculous, but that was just how it was during that time.”

“Anyway, Tommy and I are scouting out the Sea of Tranquility. It’s this big open valley surrounded by enormous grey mountains that jut out of the ground in strange impossible patterns. The valley itself is peppered with irregular edges and pockmarks due to all the comets that strike it. The soil there is also different. It’s blue. The government says that it’s because of higher metal content. In truth, it’s because of the gnomes. The government won’t like that I’m telling ya that, but a story this big—it must be shared.”

Adam stared. *This man is capital N Nuts. Blue soil? The government?*

“So, Tommy and I are scouting around. We were seasoned veterans at this point, the Moon’s gravity all that we had known for the last one hundred and eighty days or so. We knew all the tips and tricks to get from one place to the next in the least amount of time possible. Looking back on it, you would’ve thought that we were crazy, leaping around like giant tree frogs in our bulky astronaut suits.”

“Out of nowhere, three gnomes came zooming for us out of the depths of the bluest crater. They were small creatures but, because they appeared so quickly, they assumed a huge strategic advantage. Tommy and I were frogging around, we had no way to change direction or defend ourselves. They hurtled towards us and we were disarmed within seconds. The biggest one took my ray gun, took about three steps away from me, and turned, its voice a bare whisper: ‘Do you know the purpose of this human implement?’

“I said nothing.”

‘To kill.’

“And then it pointed the gun and pulled the trigger. Tommy’s leg began to spout blood into the unforgiving lunar air. I’ll never forget his scream. Chilled me to my bones. The gnomes let us go with just the warning shot, that time.”

Adam was riveted. *Screw the Times, I should be writing a novel about this.* His father had always hated the idea of Adam writing and had said that there was no money in it. He was right, of course.

“A common question I get is why Tommy or any of the other crewmates don’t talk about the gnomes. I tried to ask him myself. I searched for Tommy on Facebook after my wife fell asleep. I typed into Google:

“Dear Google,

“I was wondering if you could help me find Mr. Tommy Hankson, he goes by Tom with his good friends, and he’s likely pretty old by now.

Sincerely,

Love,

Me.”

”Google replied, ‘I’m sorry, I can’t answer that question,’ in her strange, robotic voice. But then one night, Google found him.

“Tommy and I face-timed. It’s like a phone call, except you can see the other person’s face. It threw me off, because I like to have over the top reactions to things over the phone but keep my voice moderated. I have overactive eyebrows, as my wife likes to tease. I think that threw Tommy off.”

“I asked him what he remembered about the Moon. I figured he’d have remembered a lot more than myself, on account of how much younger he was, but he seemed to remember even less. In fact, he didn’t even remember our scouting of the Sea of Tranquility. He had total amnesia about the gnomes. How does somebody forget getting shot in the leg 238,900 miles away from the nearest hospital? I thought Tommy was going to be the key to corroborating what I’d seen but he was a dud. Just like everyone else I found on Facebook from my moon days.”

A car door slammed shut outside. Adam jumped in his plush seat, breaking the spell of John’s story. A woman’s voice called out, “John dear, do we have a visitor?” An older version of the woman from the photograph stepped through the doorway. Her face was crinkled with age and the smell of tangerines swirled into the room.

“Oh, hello dearie, and who might you be?” the woman asked Adam.

He stood up and held out his hand, “Hello ma’am, I’m Adam Lambeer, from the Times. We talked on the phone.”

“Oh goodness, I didn’t expect you to actually come. Nobody interviews us anymore. Was John weaving his silly stories again?”

Adam, his hand raised still to shake the woman’s hand, glanced at John. whose fingers were raised as if he were going to snap them again. Adam gulped. “No ma’am, he was just telling me about the Moon.”

Adam inwardly warred between asking to hear the end of John’s story and risking this woman’s wrath. In the end, his common sense won out. “Yes ma’am, I’ll just be on my way.”

“I’ll walk ya ta tha gate,” said John, jumping to his feet, the twang in full effect.

They silently crossed by his wife single-file. She shook her head at her husband, clucking. The two men began the treacherous journey weaving between the gnomes and their various body parts in the yard.

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of time but this message needs to be shared,” John started. “Don’t panic. The threat is real, and the government is trying to cover it up, but there’s still lots of time to prepare. I know you hear about crises all the time: zombies, threats of disease, nuclear war. These things may never happen. But the gnomes, they’re already here. That’s why I have the garden like this, to trick them. Otherwise, they’d

silence me. It's impossible to tell them apart from the statues until it's already too late. That's why it's so important that you tell this story. I need to inform the public. My wife, she's one of them, that's how I know. Because they're coming. They're coming from the Moon."

And with that, John returned inside, patting the heads of the gnomes as he picked his way through.

What a sad man. thought Adam as he waved goodbye to the couple from the front seat of his Toyota. He used to be a cultural icon. Every kid in school wanted to be just like him when they grew up. I wonder if Beth has any other stories for me, I can't use this one for anything.

Adam began to drive away, the fog encasing his car once again. He glanced into his rearview mirror for one last look. It wasn't every day that you go to your childhood hero's home. With a sigh, he turned his attention back to the treacherous road before him.

Behind him, one of the gnomes shivered awake. With one enormous wobbly step for a gnome, and a conversely small step for a man, the gnome turned away from the cottage. In no great hurry, it marched towards the Toyota.

Numb

Tingly and confused. Drugged.

Numb. Very, very uncomfortably numbed—I had been and still was. She stared down at me, searching for the answer to an unasked question.

I moved my head forward, slowly, carefully. The same way I'd imagine a newborn baby would if they possessed the strength to do so. How strange that it takes us a full month to learn to control our own heads. Baby giraffes fall six feet from their mother's body onto the African savanna and can stand—run, even—within minutes. Baby humans come into life coddled and swaddled and doted upon, wrapped up in comfort and excess.

I felt like the baby giraffe. Dropped out of the womb, umbilical cord severed. I couldn't stand up yet, but I sure as hell was ready to run. If only my legs would cooperate.

She hovered over my face. Stared at my eyes. Dared me to move again.

I shivered in the chill, oily breeze that whispered through the room and stepped out of my tube. It wasn't large, just big enough to fit a full adult who isn't claustrophobic, and it leaned diagonally against the wall. The whole hallway was filled with similar tubes

on one side and windows on the other. I slapped the tube and it barely even jiggled—triple-thick glass. To either side of me stretched a metallic walkway marked by windows. I stole a glance through one of them and gasped. Stars dotted the eternal black landscape outside the glass. Space dust swirled from the nearby nebulas and gathered lazily in tendrils as we drifted by.

She stared at me. My head throbbed.

“What is this place?”

“You are in the Voyager Holding Area of the Starship Cronus.”

She spoke each word with the same cadence. Monotone. I glanced back at her face. It hadn't changed from the confusion earlier. Her mouth opened and closed in the shape of a question. She was hesitant to say anything more.

“How did you get out of the tube?”

“I stepped.”

“How did you step?”

“With my legs.”

“I see.”

It was my turn to stare at her. Something wasn't right about this woman. Her face reflected the soft metallic sheen of our steel surroundings. My stomach growled.

“I need food.”

“Follow me.”

She started moving towards the far door. Her feet were hidden beneath the flowing blue robe that hung from her shoulders. Maybe she wasn't walking at all. But I was. The floor was pristine and cold beneath my bare feet. It felt nice, to be cold. I gazed outside the window again. The stars seemed no closer, still twinkling off in the distance.

The far door towered over us, a dark blood-red illuminated by harsh white fluorescents from above. The design reminded me of a bank vault, made to keep people out. There was something terribly familiar about how it towered above us. I shuddered without entirely knowing why.

She reached out for the two handles that protruded from the monstrosity and pulled, putting all her weight into it, until the soft hiss of the pressure releasing could be heard. Then, she spun the handles clockwise as the door slowly swung open, revealing

another walkway with windows on both sides. She snuck a glance at me, then glided across into the next hallway.

We reached an open space and I looked at her questioningly. She answered without expression:

“Food. To fuel you. This is what you asked for.”

I kept moving forward. There was a stack of chairs pushed off to the side next to some tables. Everything was clean. There wasn't a single speck of dust that I'd noticed. No signs of other people. My sense of unease grew.

She glided to one of the long tables and pulled two chairs down from a stack, setting them down beside herself. I reached out to help her and felt her hand brush against mine. It felt like the floor. Ice cold. I shuddered again. She stopped what she was doing and stared at me.

“Come. This way. To the Preparation Area.”

“Preparation?”

“Where the food is prepared.”

I nodded and followed her through another door into the adjoining room. This door wasn't as menacing. Steel again, but this time it was silvery. There were two metal hinges and a single enormous handle. It looked like the door to a walk-in freezer or meat locker. The inside was dark; dim red lighting dripped down the sides of the room and the soft whirring of a cooling system could be heard. The walls were lined, top to bottom, with the tubes. I glanced at them and felt myself grow pale. Another involuntary shudder went through my body. She motioned toward the center of the room, where the tubes were arranged above what looked like a giant toothpaste canister. My unease blossomed even further, and my head pounded even harder.

There was a stack of plates next to the canister. She grabbed one, held it under the canister, and pushed a button. Above her head, the tubes compressed down into the canister. A reddish-gray sludge dripped from the faucet which she held the plate beneath. My headache worsened and my ears began to ring.

“What... What *is* that?”

“Fuel.”

“But *what* is it?”

“Fuel.”

Her expression still hadn't shifted since the confusion had lifted from her eyes. They seemed to blink in the semi-darkness of this "Preparation Area."

"You are hungry?"

I nodded and stepped to the canister and stumbled, falling into her. We both crashed to the floor.

"Sor-sorry!"

"It is not an issue."

I started to help her up and stopped. I couldn't help my shock at her—It—my mouth agape. Her robe had come undone, revealing a ribcage of electrical wiring. Red, blue, and green wires crossed her metal chest, circling around a beating human heart. Her face remained impassive. The ringing in my ears increased and sharpened. It was a shrill warning now that everything around me was wrong.

"What's in the tubes?"

"Fuel."

What's in the tubes? The question rang about in my head. I came from inside the tube. I turned around and began to pace. The headache was unbearable. I paced and gestured more quickly—more vehemently; but the pounding between my ears would not go away and the smell, oh God, the smell.

Why did it smell like iron?

I began to fling about wildly as if I could just distract myself from the evidence that surrounded me, that hung from the very ceiling in the same room that I marched. My arms jerked forwards and backward, a conductor in the throes of a finale to a month-long symphony. I couldn't shake off this question.

I stomped my feet in desperation. My heavy strides masked all of the sounds outside but the smells in my nostrils urged me further, the incessant, constant, metallic tang that coated the air, what the hell was that tang, until, God save me, I knew it to be true, it had to be, but... I didn't want to know. I had to build up to it, you see, I didn't know if I could handle it. I'd start small then. I shouldn't dare look away from those blinking red eyes. I couldn't—wouldn't. But I had to do something, to say something:

“What is this place?”

I waited for a moment. The ringing lessened. No answer. The ringing doubled. I couldn't ask *the* question, not yet. I couldn't face that false heart, the coldness of her body. I needed to build up to it, to build my courage up.

“Where am I?”

Still no answer. My head kept throbbing and I looked down at my arm. P5150N35 was etched in a thick dark black font down my arm. I didn't remember having any tattoos. I felt lost, thrust into an alien situation without any of the coddling, swaddling, or doting that I craved.

Here's the thing about giraffes. When they're born, they're capable, they can run. But the environment they're born into, they aren't the predator. They aren't born, ready to run because they need to be able to catch dinner. They don't need to hunt down the bushes that they eat. They know to run because they're the prey, and when they plop down onto the hot arid savanna, they're somebody's—something's next meal.

I made up my mind. I began to ask her the question, to know what it was on her plate. Fuel for what, for whom? My troubled mind came to a rest, a ship finding safe harbor from the stormy seas. The throbbing and the smell and the aches vanished. I opened my mouth. And then, the words fell asleep on my lips.

A cold pinprick in the back of my neck.

She glanced at me from above my face, answering an unasked question that I did not want to know. I felt myself slipping away.

Numb. Very, very uncomfortably numb.

Bear Territory

In the hottest months of the summer, Kodiak Island's landscape is remarkably beautiful, as the salmon-filled rivers run flush with melted snow from atop the peaks of the surrounding mountains and flash ribbons of golden light reflected from the slowly moving clouds overhead. Encased in a near-permanent pink hue, the whole archipelago is something sprung from Leonardo da Vinci's wildest dreams. Just yesterday, I had spent the day lounging about one of the many streams off shooting from the river, dipping toes, and, as the weather began to heat up in the mid to late afternoon, my whole body into the icy waters. Periodically, my gaze was drawn outwards, towards the snow-capped mountains that the rivers ran down. They jutted out, strong, mysterious, and mighty, their dark shadowy blue a contrast to the pink hue that the rest of the island held. I desperately wanted to explore them.

"You can enjoy in the rivers and explore the trees beyond but turn back as soon as you reach any elevation," the island stewardess had warned, "When you reach the point that the land begins to rise, you are in bear territory. They are bigger than you, stronger than you, and plentiful. They are in charge here."

I nodded and returned to my enjoyment of the river until she cut in once more.

"We are lucky, you know, to not be pink and fishy," she offered with a smile. "They have an immense appetite for salmon. They are like candy to them."

I heeded her warning then, but the call of the mountain had been whispering to me the whole night. I had had dreams of looking out from atop one of the majestic peaks, surveying the entirety of the island's stunning green-gold forestry until my eyes reached the cool navy waters of the North Pacific. When I arose in the morning, the sun had crested the top of the highest summit and was casting a lazy golden glow into the small wooden room I was staying in for the month. I was going to the top of these mountains, with or without the stewardess's blessing.

It wasn't that I lacked a healthy amount of respect for the bears. I knew them well, having been heavily involved in their preservation for the past twelve years or so of my life. I had been an active volunteer in their conservation effort since learning about the California Grizzly's extinction in my 10th-grade biology class. Bears were not creatures to be trifled with, particularly not the wild Kodiak bears that roamed the mountains. The not-too-distant cousin of the mainland grizzly bear, *Ursus Actos*, or affectionately called a Kodiak, is the second-largest bear species alive today. They weigh in at an average of 1200 pounds of fur-lined muscle. Their claws are the size of dinner plates and, when standing on their hind legs, they tower a colossal 10 feet off the ground. They are enormous, carnivorous, sedan-sized beasts that dominate their environment, and not too long ago, they were on the verge of becoming extinct from commercial harvesters. Now, I see them as a symbol of the beauty of Kodiak Island, a natural embodiment of the primal and raw power that emanates from the richness of the habitat.

Benjamin Franklin once said, “By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.” To expand from Ben, until two individuals are of the same skill, preparation comes second. If one of us has superior footspeed, hours spent preparing advanced running techniques won’t change the outcome of a race. If one of us was born with the genetics to rival Hercules while the other one was born with glass bones and paper skin, it matters little if one of us knows Muay Thai and the other is sipping Mai Tais. The fundamental disparity is so great that strategy doesn’t matter.

However, when skill is virtually the same it comes down to technique. In professional sprinting, runners all try to get fractions of a second on each other despite being relatively equal. In 2008, Usain Bolt ran a 9.69 in the 100-meter dash and was crowned the fastest man alive. Michael Frater ran 3 milliseconds slower and history won’t remember him. Sprinters will train on their reaction speeds, attempting to milk whatever minuscule advantage they can accrue. Interestingly, if a sprinter reacts too fast to the starting gun, they can be disqualified. The reason for said penalty is that the average human reaction time is anywhere between 150 to 300 milliseconds. Anything above that is seen not as a reaction but as anticipation, an inhuman reaction time.

You may be wondering how this applies to my travel to the top of the mountain. Kodiaks reside at the crest of the genetic ladder. Compared to a Kodiak, I am a man of glass, waiting to be shattered. I can’t prepare to react faster than a Kodiak. I certainly couldn’t outrun one. By the time I register a threat, it would be far too late. A failure to prepare in this case was equivalent to a preparation to die.

Nonetheless, I was determined to reach the top of this mountain. Kodiaks had attacked humans once before in my lifetime. A solo hunter had been mauled a few years back in his attempt to protect the deer he'd shot from the giant. He had not lived to tell the tale. I had no reason to suspect I would be a similar target; I would not be dragging around a carcass of the bear's primary meal.

I set off at dawn, one day after the tantalizing dream from atop the summit. I followed one of the rivers to start, meandering upwards in the early morning's soft light. It was an overcast day, the sun barely peeking through the clouds that filled the sky. The ground soon grew slick with rain and dirt changed to mud. My progress upwards inevitably slowed. When I settled beneath a low-hanging tree for a quick, soaked lunch, I was struck by the unfamiliar sensation of being watched. All around me was silent save for the soft pitter-patter of raindrops falling. The world appeared still for a moment and I returned to my lunch, never having been one to skip a meal after half a day of activity.

I'd come prepared for the rain, the forecast was reliably wet even during the summer in Kodiak. My rubber-soled boots and bright pink poncho were holding up exceptionally well and I was grateful for the small hand warmers I kept in my pockets. The wind and rain slowly grew more intense and I pulled the poncho's hood tight around my head. Several times I grew disoriented and would shimmy up the trunk of a nearby tree, climbing until I reached a branch thick enough to support me. From this new vantage point, I could make out where the clearing of the camp was and correctly chart a

course. The sun was shining on the camp, the rainstorm having not quite made it that far. It looked like an enormous shining sanctuary from my bird's eye view, a gold-hued oasis.

Only when I climbed to the top of the trees did the sense of unease that I was being watched diminish. I saw nothing to frighten me, and yet, whenever I touched my foot back down to the solid ground, the feeling came back tenfold. Logically, I knew that the trees weren't safe—the stewardess had been careful to educate me on the climbing ability of bears. My sensation of being watched intensified as I drew closer to my goal.

The rain softened for a moment, and I dared a glance through the break of clouds. I was happily surprised to glimpse the top of the mountain peaks in exquisite detail, the dark smudged purples and blues sharpening into the dirty brown colors that surrounded me. Patches of snow were easily discernible, their white glow offsetting the darker colors. Eventually, I reached a clearing of the forest and stood at a riverbank. Nothing stirred alongside it but the river itself was fast-moving and alive, filled with bright pink salmon dancing across the water. I watched it for a few moments before suddenly struck by the same deep sense of unease.

Where were the bears?

I jerked around, unsettled, the tranquil pull of the river gone. I realized, for perhaps the first time during the whole trip, that I was well and truly alone. There was no escape cord for me to pull, nor an emergency button to press. I was standing on the

feeding grounds of one of the most dangerous creatures to ever roam our planet. The mountaintops shimmered in the distance, a few more hours of hiking and I would reach my goal. Yet, I knew I had to turn around. I had pushed my luck enough. Back to camp I would go, the comfort of a log cabin in the rain served as a telos of the day's adventures.

With a sense of relief, I turned around and headed back down the hillside. As I passed back into the trees, I finally heard sounds of other wildlife cut through the rain. A branch cracked in the distance and my heartbeat galloped. A little excitement would do well to appease my disappointment at not reaching the summit. I cautiously struck forward, peering around trees to catch a glimpse of whatever had created the ruckus. Then, I saw it. A Kodiak! It was larger than I had been told, larger than in my books. It stood on its two hind legs, rubbing its enormous brown back against the trunk of a tree. Its rounded shoulders were the size of small boulders and I could hear it breathing from almost 200 yards away. I observed for a few moments, careful to remain calm, and began to back away after the bear retreated to all fours. It began to lumber slowly in my direction, its gigantic skull rocking back and forth like a pendulum.

I continued on my way, happy for the chance encounter. However, despite walking to avoid the bear, our paths seemed to continue to merge. The Kodiak was nearly 100 yards away now, the heavy footsteps steadily plodding along the wet earth. I kept going, hurrying my pace but still not especially afraid. Kodiaks didn't attack people, I reminded myself.

Then, so intent on listening to the Kodiak to my right, I realized I had been drowning out the quavering mewls of the three bear cubs from my left. All at once, the Kodiak's pace turned into a sprint and I screamed. It was overwhelmed by the bear's own war cry, a deep guttural growl that caused the hair on the back of my arm to stand up. I turned tail and ran, only to trip over my boots into a huddled mess. I raised my hands to protect the back of my neck and pushed my head between my legs, curling up into a fetal position. I knew the moment would soon arise but I still was not prepared when the bear slammed into me and I was launched, ragdolling into the air. I stumbled upwards, finding myself only marginally battered and bruised. I looked up and the bear paced. I locked eyes, looking deep into the golden-brown rings that surrounded a tiny black pupil, and shuddered. Maybe I could bluff it, try and scare it off. I thought back to the ways I had scared off black bears in my home state of Wyoming and began to wave my arms, screaming "Fuck off!" The eyes seemed to go red with rage and I tensed, ready to run at the first sign of movement. Then I was seized between its teeth, incisors the size of my forearm gripping down on my thigh and shaking me.

Often when I think back to this moment, I remember it in a kind of dreamlike state. The only way I have been able to come to grips with such a near-death experience is that it wasn't truly happening to me at the moment, it was happening to someone else. "This cannot be happening. Surely I will wake up from this nightmare soon." In my brain's final, unhinged attempt to come to grips with the situation, it offered every possibility except reality: I was going to die.

Few have been caught between a Kodiak's jaws and lived to tell the tale. It is, brutally, an experience past fear. I remember losing all sense of gravity, my whole body tossed back and forth in the bear's mouth. I felt her breath on my neck, the dinner plate-sized claws pressing down against my spine. Each bite felt like a sledgehammer with teeth, ripping into my shoulders. One bite went through my arm. I could hear a crunch. My nostrils were filled with the terrible, rotting smell of its breath. It smelled like salmon gone bad. After what felt like hours, but may have only been minutes, I opened my eyes and realized it, alongside the cubs, was gone.

Trembling, I felt the various puncture wounds along my body with my right arm. My left was useless, any attempt to move it sent a deep chill down the length of my body. However, escaping the bear was the least of my struggles in survival now. I trudged slowly down in the direction I thought the camp was, discombobulated from the attack and unable to climb a tree to chart my course. After several hours of this slow meandering pace, I slowed down and finally realized just how serious my wounds were. I didn't dare remove my clothing to fully assess the damage to my arm. What I could see was nightmarish enough. The bottom part of my bicep hung loose with bits of tendon and muscle showing. A sick, numbing chill swept through my entire body. I slowly tore a piece of the poncho off and bound my wounds, creating a tourniquet for my bleeding arm.

It took me some more time before, after riding the survivor's high for so long, I finally collapsed into the mud. Without knowing I was heading in any direction except

down, off the mountain, and slowly bleeding out, I realized my best chances of survival lay in the stewardess's hands. After several hours of agonizing progress downhill, black spots began to cloud my vision. I crawled for a little longer until settling in the dusk. With the oncoming darkness came a halt to the wind and rain and the world grew still around me. I hoped that I would pass out, but still, my body persisted. I knew I would be an easy target for any predator but I had no more energy for fear. All that was left to me was the soft drone of insects in the night and the warmth of blood trickling down my limbs until eventually, I lost consciousness.

In the end, I was found in time. The stewardess had been closing camp for the night and noticed that the light in my cabin hadn't been on. She sent for a search party and in the early hours of the waning moon, I had been found, curled up in a ball, cradling my arm. They transported me via helicopter where I was worked on and stitched together for nearly 9 hours. The warm glow of surviving the experience lent itself to color the rest of my life. I felt thankful for every moment, although to who, or what, I was unsure. I knew that the gift came from that moment, caught between those blazingly hot teeth and smelling that awful rot, where I wished to wake up from a nightmare. Someday, I hope that I'll meet that Kodiak again, to tell her I don't blame her for protecting her kids. It's what any good mom would do.

Unlikely

On Friday mornings, Thomas readies himself for the battle to leave his bed. It's a physical thing at the start: his body slowly warms up like the 1990 Porsche 911 that his mother used to drive, a sleek tiger of a car that would purr up and down the freeway until, as all cats eventually do, it used up its ninth life and died with one last puff of carbon dioxide burning through its exhaust pipe and out into the unknown. The likelihood that it would break down so quickly was minuscule, but still. These things happen.

He reaches for the ceiling above him, stretching his arms the same way he reached for Laura after she told him that she slept with a random man at the bar (one in twenty-two men at the bar that night) and, as the blood drains from his fingertips, his tear ducts activate.

A harsh reminder that he's still alive.

Finally, he brings his legs upright and lifts his knees to his chest, hugging himself close. His body rocks back and forth, the sea turning and frothing in his mind until the squall dissipates, his face dries, and the turbulent storm passes. With boating technology these days, the odds of making it through a storm like that were high but still — there's a chance.

Thomas reaches toward his bedside table, his fingers sneaking past the two worn teddy-bears that his mother gave to him, near the long-necked black desk light that shone brightest when the rest of the world was still asleep, until he finally alights upon the glossy red handle. It was a deep red, like Laura's lips. Not that gaudy, carnival red which so many women believe seduce men the way a snake's movements hypnotize a rat. No, it was a red that smelled of power. Thomas pushes a deep breath out and puts his lips to this red that was Laura, breathing in, as if in prayer.

The odds that a gun owner takes his own life are exceptionally low, only one in 13,000.

He starts his trip to work. He doesn't skate, although he still owns the skateboard that served him well through his college years. His friend Paul shattered an eye socket when his board snapped in half going down a hill. It was a bumpy hill, could've been anything. Total fluke. One in seven million? Even still.

He walks with one arm loose and swinging by his side, the other arm holding up his umbrella. The little bit of "potential" left by the gun in his pocket distracts him from the fact that it is raining, and that at any moment there is an approximately one in 700,000 chance of being struck by lightning. Not very high.

As if in confirmation of the odds themselves, Thomas hears the high-pitched squeal of burning rubber and that dreadful hissing noise of steam as wheels burn the wet

asphalt one block away. There's a crash, then a momentary silence —though it feels like an eternity— cut by a woman's scream.

“Help me, please! Anybody, help!”

Thomas rushes now, his white umbrella a stark contrast to the grey dismal surroundings. Smoke tendrils around him, billowing and swirling across the ground, making shapes in the air as if it were a sick mirage. The scent of acrid iron fills his nostrils and the familiar taste of swallowed ozone fills his mouth the same way as when his brother left the car running in the garage for two hours. Car alarms squeal and the ground quakes. It wasn't likely that an earthquake happened right at that moment—and yet. For just a moment, the world decided to hustle into entropy and accept chaos as its lord and savior.

He reaches into his pocket, feels that comfortable red weight in the palm of his hands. His galloping heart slows to a canter, to a trot. Thomas turns the corner tensed, ready to flee, till he sees the woman who screamed for help. With one last squeeze of the hand in the pocket and the comforting red tinting his vision, he rushes over to her and starts pulling her broken, sobbing body out of the car. More and more bystanders rush in to help, grabbing him by the waist, collectively pulling and pushing and grunting and groaning until the woman finally slips out, her exit aided by the slick blood, although it wasn't the nice color of red, it wasn't Laura red. The odds of that were quite slim, one in 7.8 billion. Still had to check.

Even as Thomas dashes to the other car to help the rest of the victims, he feels a sense of hatred, a deep dark loathing for these wounded people. There's some shame about how he feels, but still, he leans into his distaste. As he pulls the man's arm, it helps shield him from the fact that it isn't quite facing the correct direction and the man's eye socket is shattered, just like Paul's after his skateboarding accident. Thomas's distaste helps him stay active, sharp, rather than be shell-shocked by the mess before him, the mismatched limbs and telescoped lives.

Shouldn't they have known better? Driving, and in the torrential rain of all times? The odds of an accident are tiny. That means that it's bound to happen at some point.

"When are you gonna quit that thing?" Laura had once asked him.

"What's the point?"

"The point is that it's killing you."

"Never stopped me from doing things before."

"But you're going to die from it."

"7,708 people die each day in the U.S. That means it'll happen at some point."

"Thomas! You can't just generalize like that, you can't just do...whatever."

That last part dripped from her lips the same way that the fountain on 21st Street gave one last feeble attempt at a spurt before it was permanently closed for maintenance.

She was not a woman of many words, but she was doing her best to offer him something to hold on to.

Once, late at night, Laura asked Thomas if he had something to believe in.

“D’ya know how people say that something would be their hell? I think that each person would have their heaven and that each version of heaven is specific to them. What would be in yours?”

Thomas was terrified to answer her question because he knew that it was important, important enough to not mess up, important enough to know not to tell Laura that he didn’t think he had one. But all she did was nod as if that answer had unlocked some deep probing suspicion that she had always held. It was enough to offer up something to believe in to this broken man, her nod seemed to suggest.

Laura’s heaven was simple: one bowl of Frosted Flakes (to which she’d, of course, say “it’s greeeeeat” in a way that Tony the Tiger could be proud of), a glass of orange juice, and a piece of toast with jam on only half, because she had teeth softer than Charmin. Heaven had the TV set to volume twenty-two in the background playing those god-awful Telenovelas that she loved so much and the birds outside always whistled at exactly 10 A.M. because she couldn’t stand waking up any earlier.

He sprints to the other car and opens the passenger door. A woman is slumped over the glovebox, her limp arms splayed out as if Satan had just been summoned. Her body is cold, lifeless, and red. Laura red. Thomas winces. Her face is turned away and for a moment he believes it is her he is saving. Then he lifts her onto his shoulders in a fireman carry (odds that would help her: one in seventeen) and pauses to see if he can hear her breath.

No sound.

His anger at these people for driving is back and he races to the other side. The rest of the bystanders are still helping the people in the other car. Thomas knows, the odds of survival in a car crash of this speed in the rain are slim, but still.

You have to help everyone.

He reaches down and pushes on the man's arm, preparing to pull him from the burning vehicle — until his face catches Thomas's eye and he stops.

The rest of the good Samaritans stream around him now, a solitary stone in the middle of a roaring river. Thomas doesn't notice. The man's face is pale, but it has that warm, golden tan look, the kind of chiseled features that help a woman cheat at a bar. The odds are one in 15.6 billion.

His heart is galloping again and he reaches down deep into his pocket, searching for the red, Laura red. His fingers squirm and reach until they grasp the cool comforting handle of the pistol and quiver.

The odds that he would pull it out and shoot the man are one in 3,400. The odds that he could run away from all these bystanders: one in 2,490. The odds that he could get away from them all without them being able to recognize his face: one in 1,200. The odds that a sketch artist would be able to accurately depict him: one in 249. The odds weren't high, but still.

Thomas pulls out the comforting red, that Laura red, the same Laura red that he had pulled lifeless out of the car, his car, that man's car, and pulls the trigger.

He's not sure what his heaven is, but it's not this one. He's 100% certain of that.

Nice Note

This isn't a story about how one day I woke up and gained superpowers, or how I met a girl and fell in love, or anything like that. This is a story about my you and your favorite platitude.

"You've got to do something," you tell me.

The words dribbled out of your mouth like a leaky faucet. You're not a man of many words but you did your darndest to give me these:

"You've got to do something."

I know what you meant. You meant that whatever I end up doing, I had to do it fully. I could not afford to be careless, to go through life flittering about with the wind and bouncing about from place to place. I had to draw in my sail, settle down, grow roots, and figure *it* out.

"You've got to do something."

The phrase dripped from your voice like syrup onto a pancake. Messy. Religion wasn't an easy topic between you and I. You grew up in Fresno, two doors down from

the Hebrew school you attended every Sunday. I grew up in Santa Barbara, and God knows how many doors away I was from a Hebrew school.

Often, you asked me if I believed.

“Believe what?” I responded.

“In what comes next.” You said it with expectation filling your eyes, as if a 12-year-old boy had put thought into the afterlife. And when I said, “Not really, no,” you just nodded, as if in confirmation that my mother had robbed me of that chance when I was first brought into the world.

You told me that you thought everyone’s afterlife would be different and specific to them, and especially different if you were good. “So be good,” is how you’d always end your phone calls. My father would threaten me with coal on Christmas but Grandpa’s threat of eternity in Hell was worse.

I like to think about what your afterlife would be. Your afterlife would be all things football, every day, all the time. It would be a morning workout, a nap, and another nap because the first one took so much out of you. It would be a backyard that always needed a little touching up. A full array of pills labeled by day, time, and size, because once you started a habit, you never wanted to stop it.

Your afterlife would include a casino where you were only dealt good hands and could always tell when the other ghosts were bluffing. I remember the first time we played poker, you got mad at me because I bet on every hand and still won. Your afterlife would have infinite ice cream jars that never ran out instead of those old-fashioned ones where you could peek into them and see how much was left. You used to secretly open them so Grandma wouldn't yell at you for cheating on your diet. You would heat up a knife on the open flame of our old gas stove, slice open the bottom of the ice cream carton, and spoon out the contents to your stomach's desire, taking care not to reach the very top of the container where the peeky hole is.

Your afterlife would have a glass of diet coke and problems you could fix without having to use the "Damn Interwebs." Problems you could fix with your hands. You used to try to fix everything with your hands. Like the time you helped me build a baking soda and vinegar volcano for my 3rd grade presentation and ended up hammering together a full wooden table for it to be mounted on. I remember the nights when you would come out from the garage with grease slicking back everything but your hair. Your hands looked like a bird stuck in an oil spill.

I knew you liked to act like a "man's" man. You had what my mother would call a... complex.

But you loved a good joke. Particularly if it was played on you. Something that would break open your ribs and let the sunlight tickle your heart for just a little while.

Just enough to make you slip into your booming laugh that made the walls shake like they owed you money. You didn't always laugh though. Sometimes you didn't even crack a smile.

You weren't laughing when your Jewish poker pal David Echt paid up \$200 worth of pennies. When he filled your car with popcorn kernels and called you "King Kettle" for the next year and a half, you didn't smile. You told me, David just made the "write a nice note" list.

I thought that the "write a nice note" list meant that you appreciated the joke and would tell them about it later when the embarrassment wore off. I figured out the truth when you picked me up from school with a black eye and told me that Grandma had made the list after she had filled your office telephone with coins over the last two months and had taken all the coins out, causing you to thwack your face. I asked, "because you liked the joke so much?" and you said, "because I'm going to murder her."

Weeks later, on Grandma's first day teaching Thermodynamics and Statistical Mechanics 101, you came into class disguised with a fake bushy mustache and wide-rimmed glasses and proceeded to quiz her in front of 400 students about Shakespeare, whom Grandma detests. She did not laugh, and managed to twist your smirk into a frown when she told the rest of the faculty that she had to keep the fan on the highest setting and pointed towards the door due to your "excessive flatulence" while you slept.

You asked me *if* I did believe in the afterlife, what would it be like? I didn't know. And again, you nodded as if this was another confirmation of yet another of your suspicions, a bluff you had called long, long ago. I wish I would've told you that I did know, if it would've made it easier for you to go.

I would've said that my afterlife was like here, if I was good. If I was good, it would've had you, and Grandma, and Auntie Karen and Uncle George. The food was always served a little too cold. The heat was always turned up a little too high and the bedroom always smelled like old people's farts. The walls would've never stopped shaking because you never would've stopped laughing. My afterlife would've made you laugh a lot, because I get the feeling you could've done that more. I would've murdered to have made your "write a nice note" list.

My afterlife would have a post office instead of emails, because I know you don't like using the internet. And my post office would connect straight to yours and I could write to you anything I wanted.

I'd send you a nice note first.

Island Living

It's easy enough to start. Kiss your mother goodbye, have your father stand next to you, gangly and skinny, to tell you he's proud of you, and tightly wedge your suitcase between your legs, somewhere where your tail used to be. He used to not be so skinny, your father, but the time on his island has started to wear on him, and sometimes late at night he thinks about leaving. At some point, the plane lands and you'll have to decide if you're going to keep going with your suitcase wedged between your legs or if you'll wheel it alongside you. What I'm saying is, it'll be uncomfortable at first, but sometimes you roll with it.

Congratulations, you've arrived on the island.

The initial choices you make are the most important ones. Don't hesitate. Commit. This will be the hardest part. Do you know how hard it is to live on an island? They'll say, "*I don't know.*" They'll say, "*This is weird.*" They'll say, "*I still love you. Remember making out in front of the old bicycle shop? How we hiked all the way to the top of a mountain named after a potato? That weekend at the top of the bluffs where we went to the nude beach side accidentally and couldn't stop laughing together about old men's wrinkly balls?*" That's the island's echo; a siren's song it puts on to drag unsuspecting sailors off the island. Nothing's worse than a siren. Be strong - a song half-sung leaves you unfinished and dazed, so go for the head. It'll help if you drink some beforehand to block out the taste of the mountaintop liquor. Slip someone else's name

between the siren and you. Deflect, blame, don't accept responsibility. Take a text named I love you and rename it "habit", believe that in a week's time it'll sound normal. Take the way its voice wraps around your ears and keep it by your bedside table as a gentle reminder not to call at 3 A.M.

Next: Food.

Island food isn't easy. It's gutting a bison on a cold winter's night, airing out what's decayed in secret for everyone to see. Bison have four stomachs. They take their time to digest. Cut open their middle and a lifetime pops out: ice cream from your first date lodged deeply in the first stomach, innards filled with cilantro pizza that tastes like soap, the to-go box of a night long ago where you stuck your mouth against something warm and soft and slick and swallowed the pleasure all for yourself. Look through the bowels for the last sushi you had together. A single fried egg, floating lonely in the middle of the pan without its eleven other brothers and sisters. Once you've cleaned all these things out, the meat is sweet and tender, but it'll always hold the sickly-sweet stench of what might've been.

Harvest the worthwhile scrap: the heart.

By now, you've probably gotten thirsty. The front side of the island is just designed to distract you from your goal of water, so cut to the chase and ask for what you've been craving. *"Do you wanna get a drink?"* Forget the gifts, the beanie they

asked for and you could never find, the kombucha you never asked for and loved regardless. Blot out the memory of the way their eyes shone up at you like two perfect oceans and look instead at the ocean surrounding you. There's only the sweet, tangy taste of water, what you've been craving. Something savory you haven't had in six months. Let your lips purse, give a peck, then take a full-bodied swig. You deserve this. Let your tongue run over the spring, mouth tender with need, salivating. Swallow all the water and then retreat to your bedroom where the sheets smell like half-lit cigarettes and the blinds don't close.

Readjust.

Island life isn't easy. Drape your accomplishments across your skin, whistle it into song air, and breathe the new life you've carved for yourself out of this island home. Feel for the sudden changes in the breeze, prepare for the shifts in weather. You've made it through a storm before. Know that whatever you do stays within you, waiting to be gutted out and feasted on.