

pork.

PORK

I boasted about never getting sick. And then I got sick. I kept smoking like a chimney of course, which didn't help too much with the cough, but the whole thing was over and done with in a few days. Then, I got sick again. Not too much. I would not say I am a hypochondriac. But I swallow in doubles and I have trouble breathing. I used to lift weights heavy, and bang them around and clutter them, and when I try to do so now, my bones creak. Climbing up the stairs of my apartment, I felt my knee almost buckle when trying to take the next step up. I somewhat wanted to let go of the handrail. I am a glass half-empty type. One of those people you'd call a pessimist. They'd prefer to be called realists. I'd prefer to be called a realist. I am of course endowed by several riches, privileges I cannot begin to count, and still one of these types. I know however that I am not alone. I see them, sometimes lurking on the same bus stops I am, then on the bus, numbly hanging from the straps, their feet fastened to the ground. I know because if I walk close behind them or approach them in some way, they'd pull their hood over their heads, or rotate their body, paranoid at the sight of their reflection.

Another pork.

I cannot make any claims. I am certainly not an authority on any subject. Perhaps my proudest achievement is that I am the best example of a self-fulfilling prophecy I know. By fucking up, I mean. By living up to the image, that of my passenger, and that of the spectators. Now that we got that out of the way, and my all my cards are on the table, first page in, let me suggest something:

To fellow passengers, or idle dwellers, junkies or slows:

If your eyes stumble upon your own reflection, take a good look. Not enough is said about our luck to be where we are now. If you are reading this, you probably know what I am talking about. I'm too stoned now, to be philosophical. Try to use Google Maps less, learn the city streets, and shortcuts. See which spots look nice. Where you could go for a stoog' on a rainy morning, returning from a night out. I was lost today and I am, sometimes, too proud to ask for help. But I looked around for candidates. I picked a store clerk, a guy working convenience retail, I thought; better chances than the jeweller. He seemed confused, at first. He was big, and red. He wore glasses and had a brown beard, climbing all the way up to his ears. He sat on his stool, his stomach slipping out of his black work shirt. I asked him for directions. He switched on the company PC. His nails were broken and bruised, and his knuckles looked swollen. It was cold. He typed in the address, looked at it and mumbled something...

"Do you see?"

"You take a right here, and a left there."

I could not see of course, as his fat thumbs were covering the screen.

Someone should probably check his basement.

Notes on Clubs

The ever-bright white light of a blank page is menacing and evil. Sincerely so, as it burns your corneas and disrupts your calmness. I say and write this with the intent of being as honest as humanly possible, and in the process – risking great failure and inevitable insomnia in the small hours of the morning. I say and write this with the intent of being honest, not vulgar but alas, perhaps this honesty to be accurate and true requires vulgarity to a certain extent. All I can

say about the observations I have naively made in the past is that they are inherently incorrect and uneducated. I am faced with a somber feeling, as the curtains roll back, and the veil falls to the floor unexcited and unbothered. There is no greatness ahead of me, no surprise excitement is imminent. As this chapter comes to an end, I have very low hopes for the next one, which will inevitably be duller and lonelier than the current. I also understand the irony of this statement – in ivory towers and with golden spoons the weak cry out for a better life and forgiveness, while those deserving of these demands never see them materialise. This pensive condition, one which I very much would like to reject and dispel as it is merely causing me harm, leads me to the conclusion that if conflict is to escalate: I must join it, bathe in the short-term enjoyment of a sense of purpose, see the horror which I know frighteningly little about and with luck –return.

A club or establishment of the night, use the word you prefer, is unique in its ability to instantaneously entrance and ravish man or woman. Action and feelings shift at a breakneck pace, inside and outside; starkly different. A nightclub reeks of opportunity whether it derives from the opposite sex, mindlessly pacing up and down the floors of the club, or the rampant release of alcohol in a tight space. Both men and women glitter with excitement, as the most archaic and primal competition is instead replaced by a manoeuvring of social cues, confidence, and intoxication. An innate need for ultra-violence resides in the back of the competitor’s brain, as the alcohol passes into the blood stream; the desire violently claws its way out and looks for challengers to the throne. A vital suggestion lies ahead; never attempt to pursue an enjoyable night in such an establishment whilst level-headed - intoxication by whatever substance is a must.

Notes on Cabs

I have a feeling today will be a long day. Perhaps it's the somewhat more than unpleasant temperature, a full five degrees lower than expected which, when combined with the humidity in Thessaloniki, can transform otherwise pleasant weather into a jarring cold. Or perhaps, I could blame it on the small amount of sleep I got yesterday. In reality, it matters very little what the specific reason for my weariness is. What does matter, and what will keep me from recovering, is a thought I can feel lingering in my subconscious, a guilty thought that has kept me from writing. It has not hindered the quality of my work, rather, stagnated it entirely. And so, being true to my word and maintaining a certain level of honesty in these personal notes, I must openly admit why I feel like a special kind of stupid today. One can only assume that putting it in writing will help me verify the validity of my thoughts. These things can get misconstrued fast and misinterpreted even faster, so I tread carefully while writing this and expect you to do the same while reading.

I got in the car in a haste, sitting uncomfortably on the leather seat with one of my shoulders awkwardly positioned higher than the other, slowly retreating as I unwillingly began sliding off. While I had begun recovering from the alcohol, a certain numbness remained, making the thorny hairs of my beard itch. Street-lamps, decorations, and signs had all merged into what can only be described as a blur; one which emitted a faint fog of stillness on the otherwise empty road. The cabby, a forty- something man with slicked-back jet-black hair, must have been in a rush to get home, (that is often the case when shifts occur in the small hours of the morning), as I cannot remember him ever stepping on the brakes or shifting down a gear. The alcohol, which I had consumed a significant amount of just moments ago, started to wear off, and with it, the extra bravado and confidence also took a side-step, returning to my

subconscious and remaining there until the next ingestion of a foreign substance. Still, enhanced by my past demonstrations of intoxicated conviction in my pursuit, I decided to take full advantage of the cramped space in the back of the cab. I tilted my head, ever so slightly, as if that would allow me to listen to my friend's half-drunk ramblings more clearly. I could hear her just fine, standing up straight and looking at the road ahead, but something urged me to move a little closer. Even though I remember strikingly little from what was said, plans rushed into my head, flooding my consciousness with dirty little ideas, which if executed, would probably play out much worse than what I had in my head. It wasn't that I was imagining something outlandish or farfetched, albeit it might be so in terms of probability, it was simply the fact that these thoughts appeared out of thin air. Despite the fact that the emergence of these thoughts was quick and unexpected, I believe they were entirely justified, as for the first time in a while, I felt calm. My heart was not violently fighting to burst out of my chest. I could breathe through my nose and exhale out my mouth with little to no struggle. And, the cramped space, which I would have otherwise been extremely annoyed by – I saw as an opportunity.

The driver nonchalantly sped through shortcuts and vacant alleys, his greasy hair blowing in the wind. Every other second or so, he would look at us in the rear-view mirror, making sure that the back seats were not full of vomit, as I am sure neither of us could hide the fact that we were drunk. I was supposed to get out of the car after her, but it just wouldn't feel right. With no earthly idea of how I would return home (admittedly, it wasn't that far) nor why I would stay longer, I got out of the cab.

We talked for some hours, before returning home.

Notes on Traps

The nature of this work is autobiographical. It began rather unconsciously as I got in the habit of noting down events that stayed with me or thoughts, I pondered over more than expected. Throughout these pieces I've noticed the extent of my honesty being restrained, time and time again. I do not do this consciously but instead fully comprehend that these thoughts will be consumed by people other than me. Still, this is not about honing my skills, this is not about creating a story nor injecting life into a thought. This is about diverting the flow of thoughts into something productive instead of destructive. I sincerely hope I will be at least able to produce a text somewhat readable and interesting. Quite selfishly, If I do not, I will not be able to focus for the entire rest of the day. At times like this, one may consider attributing their faults to an independent variable, uncontrollable. While this may help in stoicism, one cannot expect adopting it successfully when a mere glance into your actions will prove the opposite. This piece, I hope will provide what a mere glance would.

A refreshing summer's breeze caressed the top of my nose while I was slowly coming to. When I rose, I saw the light reflecting off of the shiny tints of the cars parked across from the park. Interestingly enough, breaking in the new bed wasn't as much of a chore as I thought. Maybe the ghosts of insecurities and little fears had trouble getting through the magnetic lock or more realistically, I slept in a place void of memories. However, even after having rested, I felt knots in my stomach and throat, tightening with each move of the muscle, every unconscious twitch, a subconscious nod to think about the night before. I had chosen to sleep in my new bed. Otherwise, I would have seen remnants of last night endure, in the form of ash, and spilt vodka on the wooden table. Outside, the lights would flicker with yellow hues of what could have been. Instead, shallow cracks on the pavement would wait for me to stumble over

them, what actually is. A familiar feeling would have seeped through my nose and into my mouth, one which smelt like regret but not nearly profound enough. Could have and should have, equally debatable in nature, in actuality, unimportant. I always seem to think of the controllable variables, standing a little closer, drinking a little bit more – all valid options but all equally dead in the water. However, even knowing that, a parallel alternative persists. I rushed out the door, flailing a garbage bag in one hand and attempting to clutch both my cigarette and lighter in the other. Despite the fact that I had no idea how long the trip between my new house and the city centre would be, I was unconcerned by the extra minutes I'd have to spend walking as I had done so many times before, either for chore or for pleasure. My phone rang mercilessly as I walked, one caller after another, all with distinct desires and needs. Some of them I wanted to respond to, while others I didn't. I quickly sorted the chores in my head and silenced the annoying electric buzzes, a fact which made my trip that much easier. I was met with a completely different experience from what I had gotten used to. The extra few miles I had been forced to walk allowed me to slowly immerse myself, the crowds of people got denser, the noises became louder, and music played from all directions - with every step I took, I was closer to the people. Closer to the city streets I had fallen in love with on every drunken stroll and afternoon coffee. Truthfully, I had no idea what to expect. My incoherent ramblings by text only somewhat resembled an invitation for drinks, as a part of me was still unsure what a proposal such as this would mean. After having rolled a joint, I poured myself a drink and sat down on the couch across from her. The TV was on - vibrant flashes of movies I wanted to talk to her about, concepts I wanted to discuss and prospects I had. While I usually keep most of these thoughts to myself, an overwhelming urge to share got the better of me as I talked on and on, creating a mental checklist of recommendations. I knew that I would not be bored, not in the slightest, a fear I usually have, and which usually turns out true in other situations. Even so, I decided to keep refilling my glass of alcohol, as I knew from personal experience the magic effect it can have, acting as a social

lubricant. The rift, if it could even be called that, more like a physical barrier which had not yet been broken, was quite bothersome to me. A pebble inside my shoe, an eyelash on my cornea – I could do something about it but in doing so, would risk making it worse. Aside from the fact that I was in a completely calm and almost euphoric state of mind. I cannot recall any one specific detail about the timeline in which events occurred. However, smiles and laughs all blended into one, being able to talk with her as if I was talking with a friend (one with whom I had no intention of sleeping with) was freeing, no games had to be played, no masks worn. To break the physical barrier which had become violently annoying, I fell on the floor with her, sitting next to her as she covered up with a blanket, shielding herself from the unlikely cold one will face in my studio apartment. Still, I understand my situation. I seem to put myself in impossible scenarios which prevent me from succeeding due to one factor or the other. This time, an external influence; even in the form of a text, the past can come knocking on your door. I was immediately showered with a sea of guilt; my voice grew weaker and my hands unstill. What I was previously charmed by; the spilt cherry vodka on the table, the ash on the floor and the image of her cuddling the blanket - I was distraught by. I felt as if I had subconsciously engineered a scenario with the only aim being personal gain, a scenario which I only influenced negatively with my shameful indulgence in the many vices I hold dear to my heart. The guilt assumed full control, the driver's seat, ropes tightening around my neck – a balancing act ensued, one which required me to choose between roles; act and speak. I think I should install magnetic locks in my studio apartment.

Notes on Affirmations

Before I told her, sneakily so, via specific notes I knew she'd read, I expected that getting it out of my system would be freeing. Instead, I felt the exact opposite, I had secured and locked a specific position, a public statement which I could now be held accountable for; not by her necessarily, although that's what I most expected. Even so, I enjoyed a certain comfort in knowing that the thoughts I had were not mine alone, she was there with me, something I failed to see in the moment but deep down, I knew I'd at least try. The cab made a stop, close to her house, a few kilometers away from mine, I got off with her. However, this time, my dismount was a conscious defiance, and as much as I'd otherwise like to defend that it was a spur of the moment decision, that would simply be me lying. Clouds passed and hid the sun, only to reveal it; in all of its might, a few short seconds later. Light penetrated through the faint clouds, casting glowing beams across the vivid blue of the sky; a pretty sight to behold, for sure, but with her next to me, I just could not focus on it. I didn't give much thought to what we talked about, not because I was uninterested, but because no effort was required. Some hours passed, the sun withdrew from its position and the wind grew stronger; brown locks of hair whirled and fluttered against the wind as we breached and turned away in fear of the impending cold. I looked at the time on my phone, the fleeting minutes fuelled her growing impatience as she readjusted her body to fit on the wooden bench. In contrast to what the past hours had been like, I felt unsure, what I wanted to do and what was right: entirely different. This uncertainty creeped its way into my actions as I stumbled and sat while we were walking back towards her place. I took the liberty of sitting down after every five steps, the frequent stops I thought would give me enough mind space to make a concrete decision. Outside of her house, I saw the stairs inviting her, the moment (if such a thing even exists) being lost and the entire day becom-

ing a faint memory. I leaned my head towards hers and clumsily held her, believing she'd either pull away or worse. Before I kissed her, I thought about other moments of my life which I've grossly misunderstood: opportunities lost, days faded, and memories stolen. A hint of vanilla calmed me instantly as I exhaled deeply and surely, reassured.

Notes on Adorations

We walked for what seemed to be hours, the sun raged on; sharing small glimpses of the spring to come. While the leather insulation of my jacket usually protects me from the cold, this time, it worked quite oppositely; trapping the heat in between the seams and pockets of cloth. If it were not for the drops of sweat, I felt slowly dripping down my forehead, I wouldn't have minded walking for another ten, or, even twenty, minutes. I did not care at all. The sun and sky had come to an agreement; for a few hours on that day, I saw the careless bliss of spring and summer rolled into one, the calmness of a quiet neighbourhood and an empty road, I was glad. When we finally arrived home, I was eager to show her around. We saw the house, and my room. The couch that can turn into a double-sized bed, the magnetic lock which has proved extremely useful and my own personal bathroom. I was surprised by the fact that my dog instantly took a liking to her, as it jumped up and down, wagging its tail maniacally. When she had previously insulted the place, calling it a hole (as a joke), I felt bad for doing the same before moving in and wanted to seize the first opportunity to make it better. As I did a tour of the studio apartment right next door, I immediately knew what the opportunity was. This "hole", now my residence, could at least have some good memories, a good start; and we fell on the bed, behind us unopened moving boxes, pillows in

nylon and tools. A hint of strawberry, the smell of fresh paint and wood: an aura of newness, both hers and of the house. I kissed her lips and touched her all over, the walls began opening, the space expanding as the small bed turned king-size. At times, while I was down, I'd see her cover herself; a move which only urged me to kiss her harder, and playfully bite her lips, even though I know that I have no such power: to reassure her with my affirmation. On top, I saw her sink her mouth into her knee – already in her. After, we ate, the backdrop a newly acquired view; the city and its many people, the dock, and the railway station – painted red and yellow, the colours of springs bright. Then, we laid together, an afternoon nap from which I did not want to wake except for the routine check to see if she was still nearby. I know this is unimportant, maybe even routine for some, for her, maybe. I am not a hugger, yesterday I was. Today, I awoke, and I could still smell her on me. I know it sounds vulgar, but I mean it in the sweetest way possible.

Notes on Ships

There'd be times when I would be walking, minding my own business only to suddenly wake up.

In a sea of people, I'd see her across from me; wondering if it was my choices that brought me here or if I was just an inert passenger, a deck-boy, sitting idly by as all my hands

were played for me, my choices made, my actions rinsed of consequence. Some thoughts concealed; others shared – a cloth blindfold I've no way to remove.

In a sea of people, I'd see a stranger; not for lack of familiarity or trust, but a rift instilled so deep that even half-asleep I felt my hands tied to its mast.

And I'd try with words and gestures to remove that fastened rope, only to be safe when that ship decides to go. The hull is breached, some water's in, the ship gives way to the

stiff breeze.

In no ways but one, do I feel as if I haven't met you. When I am awake, is there's a ploy or catch I haven't yet caught up to? Then again, silent driver who made all the choices,

where would I be without you?

We differ, he and I distinctly, for if now he'd have the helm he'd sail in the direction of the winds; waves, krakens, and all. I, instead, will quit while I'm ahead. Withdraw

myself, lower the sails and lay on the deck. The sun can blind me for now, but at least I won't be able to see the storm.

Notes on Slimes

The lights will sometimes flash. A static rings out, interrupted only by the surrounding trees, fluttering in the wind. A rare occurrence. Today, a good day; nearing the end of a chapter, has never felt so freeing and eerie at the same time. Year by year, day by day, little pieces of my persona crack and fall to the ground. Emotions I've otherwise reserved, thoughts conserved, memories preserved. Being resistant to change is one thing, utterly and outright denying it is another. Fighting this, I switch perspectives, glance with the eye of another mind; long-shot, bad aim, and I'm still blind. The lights will sometimes fade, the cobbles on the ground may sharpen and obstruct the path. Walking silently; the strangers, mindless - the tremble of their footsteps, the radio wave. A frequent occurrence. Today, a bad day. The tree which marked the

spot, the church I sneakily ran by. As expected, sentiments and memories decay and grow anew daily; replaced by a blur, an ephemeron slime. The weariness of time, an independent factor - The divergence in sentiments, largely dependent. The third, a controlled variable, but she lacked the will to do so.

Notes on Ends

I looked around the room, barely awake. Clothes on the floor, blood on the sheets, dreams not fully dreamt, thoughts and sentiments underdeveloped. I looked and saw all of these things, unsure of what they meant and why they were there to begin with. I nibbled on the thread of what was real and honest, but it tore in just a few seconds. The others followed it, the sheets seemingly folded and flew outside the window, propelled by a momentary breeze. The blood dissolved, the dreams and thoughts mostly vanished, except for some sly few who managed to creep under my fingernails. But still, I waited.

Long enough to watch that sweet and clear serenade turn surreal and misty. I doubt my thoughts of progress, time spent on the process, fades, inconsequential. Men of clear minds carefully place each grain of sand, dispensed by wands of storage. A meticulous process begins. Colors unite and form an image; grains intertwine and shade the meaning. A beautiful mosaic.

Men of clear minds clean and drop their wands. They brush the mosaic rigorously, in opposite directions. The remnants of a masterpiece, a pretty thing to look at but still, destroyed, void of its original meaning. Their teachings: no matter what - everything is destroyed. A tad dramatic; yes. All real; that too.

Even if nothing can ruin this, something will.



Notes on Departing

Tomorrow I’m off, the city spins unbothered, the gears grind. Saturday. Last in the city. Murmurs and chit-chats inflate the walls blocked off by buildings. Exhausts gurgle, emitted smoke heats up the pit. The constant: the restless-

ness, fuelled by substance, channelled through trial, repressed by error. A minor tumble down the stairs, I lick my wounds and fall back down the rabbit hole. This time, flashlight in hand.

Today I'm off. The sky; an empty canvas, grey for lack of excitement. The crows stay close and fly around. The city spins, barely locomotive. Sunday. Last moments in the city. Do I choose to remember the times spent in my new home? The one I so charmingly filled up with memories or do I, like the sky across from me, step on virgin soil unspoiled. A blank canvas. My stomach tightens as my insides flex. The metal dragon grumbles and grunts as it charges all its might for take-off. Its rubber toes caress the ground ever so slightly, before saying a definite goodbye. The dragon, angry and impatient now, rushes through the field; its white aluminium skin shedding against the force of the wind it combats. Lift off. Weightless on its scales.

I awake but strictly in short bursts as I pull myself from sun-bleached remains and snap out of it, for seconds at a time. The gears of the island are rusty and turn slowly, screeching to a halt whenever the stars are fully visible, the moon is full or the sea glows. **Stopping just for enough time to let you enjoy the scenery; sandy winds and all.**

Notes on Rails

I jumped in the cab. No, sorry. It wasn't a cab. It was a train, or tram. My memory escapes me, like I too have escaped it in the past. A blemish or two more, a bit blonder and a bit shakier; I rocked back and forth on the leather seat. Although my sobriety kept me from folding and overreaching, at least physically, the same thoughts manifested through overdrawn stares, and even sober, my eyes wandered. I don't know if it's genuine, but it makes sense ei-

ther way, I thought. Oh, here comes one of these things, the ones you need to nip in the bud, while they're still loose and flowing. Some meters down the rails, a dimly lit restaurant, and a few glasses of wine later: my jeans ripped at the seams, courtesy of my trembling hands, which found no place to rest during the three-course dinner, the clumsy exit, and the ensuing cab ride. Oh great, my sobriety is blown, I thought, but at least now the burden can be carried by outside influences. I felt a field of force holding me back, my path could sway, and my sobriety remain, to hell with it. I lit the smoke, and it was there. Even my muddled mind could feel, my blurry eyes see; this restlessness and angst, one of suppression, I knew I could keep the façade. I swallowed my thoughts completely and bit down as hard as I could. My jaw wired shut, I could now walk and not fear a spontaneous eruption.

What is the point of writing this, I thought to myself. To excite interest, to hide behind carefully orchestrated words, or to release a burden. Maybe all three, maybe none. I am a long way from home, but I have never had to travel alone. Over my shoulder, behind my retinas, we're two making the decisions. One builds and one destroys. In the morning, one sets in stone. In the night, the other hollers at the demolition crew. Both argue, who did what?

I woke up with a weight, one that I had to sweat off, running in circles. One that could not be attributed to the outside temperature, my geographical status, or any other factor I would, in the past, have invented or assigned superficial value to. I see it all and want no part of it. I kid myself again. What are the odds? Astronomical. Always something to depend on, a sweet leaf, a sweet girl, a sweet liqueur. Cut all that off and you're left with the one thing you're trying so desperately to run away from. There's nothing else besides here, no time like the present and no one, only you. You do not believe me because ripping your head from inside your shoulders will bear different results. I am not alone! Look at all these people here beside me! They're waiting tables, waiting to order, or waiting for nothing at all. Once the music stops and you can hear a pin drop on the ground, that's when you should act. Because I've bottled everything time and time again, only for it to spill at the worst

possible times. I'll convince myself of a million different things before I say or do what I feel. I'll look for water on Mars and have a good time doing it. I'll participate in flat earth rallies and become their head honcho. We will gather money for our cause and tour the world to spread awareness. I'll become their king and they, my subjects. And when I row to the edge of this plane, I'll throw all my cigarette butts off it. And all my writings too. And I'll stare into the void and shout. It will reply, softly. It will reach for the copper wire inside my jaw, years after its installation, oozing of pus and blood, and it will yank it off. Pull it. Released.

Notes on Falling



I woke up with my nose plastered to the dirty mattress; fluids from my decimated sinus had seeped into the sheets. I wondered if my brain had melted the night before and picked my nose soon after. The place was a mess. A knockoff table scratched as hell, loose bud, tobacco all over, wraps

and glasses: shit all around. My senses were still buzzed, and I felt a slight acidic tingle as I floated across the studio, I tossed some quick but heavy coffee and grabbed my pouch. I had burned in hell the night before and needed a second to recover. My charcoal fingers still appeared quite foreign but could calm me down as they rolled my cigarettes. I floated a bit more, hopped in the shower, and stumbled out to clean. Before I could finish tidying, the sun penetrated through the hollow windows, shredding the curtains with yellow rays of light. Maybe it was the red-hot knife I used for my hash that caused the flashback, maybe the strong coffee. I had burned in hell the night before but was standing still. My fingers were brown and my hair was ashen but my knees were stable and my shoulders straight. I experienced the most resounding silence, my rapidly firing neurons slowed to a halt for the first time in a while. A blissful abyss. Then, he spoke.

“Let me take the reins now.”

I looked around. Fuck. That’s my voice but it’s not me, I didn’t speak. I was worried only for seconds. A guardian personality emerged. Maybe it is worn-out and cliché by now, but I had been with him on ships, in clubs, in cabs, and stuck in traps on broken legs. He got me a good glass of water; my fingers rolled me another cigarette and I looked out the balcony. The acid sun remained, and I rejoiced in the concept of a family reunion, partly to cleanse my guilty subconscious. The same guilty subconscious that had decided to bring back cockiness and recall a distorted concept of obscure Chinese philosophy, a passage I had carelessly read in my more formative years. I had magnified a part that was somewhat less ethical but more advantageous for the individual and forgotten another half. If nobody knows, it didn’t happen. Anything goes if nobody knows. That was my concept of “face”. So, it never happened.

So, I ran to the metro. The ride was relatively quick, time was a concept my mind often altered when tingling and floating. Relating to and being everything in one moment, burning in hell the next and remembering the subjective nature of truth as a last hoorah. Now, that’s a trip. And still, recognising

that it's all a façade and remaining an active participant, wearing the mask. I was greeted by family life once again, my uncle made jokes, and my cousins had busy plans. I shut my brain for a little bit and bombarded my stomach with food that no matter what type, tasted like paper. I slept easy that night, on account of my recovering brain. You can be sure that when my consciousness was first flooded, the thought came to me like a lifeboat, and I stretched out to grab it and clutch it securely. I had discovered that I was an island man, yet I had returned to the city. Back to tight shoes and tees, responsibilities, punching in clocks and booking tickets, and wondering eyes. My withering romanticism racked my brain for meaning, tearing up cabinets and cupboards alike, archives of apathy and cowardly retreats swivelled and flew out of the window. I spent some euphoric minutes bathing in a sense of purpose, a muse, and an excuse for my outbursts and consumptions. My optimism faded abruptly as the all too familiar conflict with myself ensued. Reasons why it could not be pierced my nose and ears, I banged my head against the ground. The idea had died at birth. An attraction that cannot be acted on. A thought that must be repressed. No activity was decided early. True to the words I've heard before, repressed thoughts can only multiply. The days after were acidic. Toxic displays of my misplaced romanticism were strewn out: through melting on the floor, punching walls, and muffling my speech, anytime I saw her lips and wanted to move closer. I was jealous with no reasonable foundation, hiding in the corner of my own home. Still, I had confidence in my ability to change these circumstances because, despite being dazed, I remained in close communication with the one holding the reins.

On the next day, I made no effort to wake up. The room was empty and still. I snuck in between the thick white covers and pondered over my short-lived plan. I'd take some distance. Since I had left my place clean and ordered, I decided that my mind was to be put in order as well. I hastily ate some paper for breakfast and boarded a bus headed to the center. The bus veered, the passengers braced, and my restless legs repeatedly stamped on the sterile grey floor. When I got off the bus, I rushed inside the neighbouring

mall to buy cigarettes and caught her and her friend with the corner of my eye. This one eye, however, knew better and ignored them. I smoked a few cigarettes and waited for her to call. When she called and we met, any stoic approach I had imagined instantaneously dissolved and I was back to fighting off signals and biting my tongue to curb any magnetism. This time, with her friend spectating. A few hours passed, the friend left and we went back to my uncle's. My ductile brain found the family setting serene, the dog jumped around, and my uncle and aunt kept making jokes. The cousins were out living their busy plans and she was sitting next to me. I bit my tongue again. When we climbed up the stairs and breezed through the floors of my uncle's spacious family home, my tongue was bleeding still. When she went into the room and sat on the revolving chair, two olive tints reflected, and crimson pulsated, I turned away, in fear of doing something stupid. And then, we went back home, after a long bus ride, accompanied by musky smells and hollow-cheeked robots. The acid had worn off. Orange shadows calmly played and rested on the floors. My heart slowed down once more. I couldn't shake it off then, and, naturally, it made sense. I saw her watch the monitor, a wannabe TV, and puffed on my tightly rolled joint, I couldn't help but just feel warm. I'd move my hand to feel her. The lights go out, the wind gets in, my stomach grumbles and my brain drips slowly on the floor. On days I booze and steal, I repent the next morning. On days I get tangled in urges and rules and outcomes, I swallow it all down.

ASTHMA

Yesterday I tried to write. I instead broke down above the words and letters that could not become sentences, the painful buzz and ring of distractions pierced my eardrums and made me lay still, I clenched my fist and gripped my sweating forehead – the blank page laughed at me. I felt such pain, the kind of which I've never felt before, these thoughts and ideas I knew were pure and unadulterated could just not be demonstrated; no matter how hard I tried. Today I'll consciously devote this time to writing, shut off all distractions, and remain across the blank page, staring into what has now become my enemy, the irony of words and letters hovering above me – I lay speechless but not voiceless.

He lived in a crumbling apartment complex, on the third floor. The halls of the complex were often eerily silent – the only thing breaking that silence: the rhythmic inhalation of his next-door neighbour, an old asthmatic lady. She gasped for air before succumbing to medicine's might and allowing herself to be partially healed, a daily occurrence. The sounds she made while trying not to choke irritated him greatly, causing him to lose his composure. He seemed unconcerned with her health or condition but would frequently remind her to get fresh medicine or replenish her previous supply when running into her in the hall, or in the elevator. "The more inhalers she has, the less she'll gripe and grumble," he reasoned. He worked as a copywriter for a tiny firm in the city center, filling out the same marketing materials and templates day after day. He despised his job but took a certain pleasure in being able to live alone and support himself fully. At times, when the office was almost entirely empty, he would allow his mind to run free and loose; as he lazily pressed the keys on the old keyboard, he imagined himself publishing old pieces and creating an anthology of written works, in his mind, his magnum opus. When he returned home from work, he tried to write. The ideas he tried to put into

words -- violently cut off by the old lady's gasp for air. He could not work in such an environment he thought and would need to get his hands on some more money, either through a promotion or some other way, allowing him to move into the fourth floor; on which there was an empty flat.

White flakes of freeze baptised the otherwise dull and naked streets, void of any intelligent life. Even while snowing, the sun reigned strong, penetrating through the cracks of lone tree branches, and casting bright rays of yellow on the pale cement. He could see this from his window and felt an easy silence, a consolation for the otherwise mundane day he was having. He hastily grabbed his coat, a black parka that he had bought on sale, and made his way downstairs, skipping every other step while running down the stairs. The entrance to the apartment complex was of particular annoyance to him as one would need to fiddle endlessly with it, pulling it in and out, adjusting pressure and strength as if picking a lock instead of opening a door. However, that day, he was surprised by the fact that the door easily, without any effort on his part, opened. He took a brief moment to enjoy this small victory, smiled, and walked out of the building. He unlocked his small bike, one which looked more like a child's toy than a grown man's transportation and biked to work, grunting with every push of the pedal. Before arriving at his usual workplace at the usual time, he made a stop. He stopped at the neighbouring coffee shop and ordered a large filter coffee with no sugar. He took a glance around his surroundings while waiting for his coffee. A sea of people, mostly young, with their heads buried in their phones or laptops, working, laughing, or staring into the black abyss of their $2 beverage. He noticed a brilliant yellow in the midst of the crowd. He recognized blonde hair strands peeking out the back of a book cover. After a few moments of searching, he turned to the bartender and extended his arm, waiting for the coffee. The bartender dismissed him. He stepped closer to the book he recognized, feeling fairly brave, likely due to the fact that it was snowing in May.

The girl put down the book. She was probably twenty-something, her big lips enhanced the oval shape of her face, her smooth skin orchestrating the rest of her curvy and elegant figure. The red of her lips appeared almost extravagant in color but was somehow fitting to her, not at all foreign as if she was born with it. The girl looked at him, rather arrogantly he thought, and pulled a cigarette out of her purse. She did not light it, instead, she held it in her mouth – adjusting it left and right with the tip of her tongue.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

He stumbled over his words as if he could still hear the disruptive inhaling of his neighbour, the old lady. He felt a knot tightening around his throat, the same knot he felt from the rhythmic wails of the old lady. He pushed through it, pulling down his parka and swallowing the little amount of spit trapped between his gums.

“I know this book,” he said.

“Do you now?”

“Yes, I am pretty sure I do. It’s... a nice read, for sure”

“I know.”

“Okay”

For a second, he felt defeated. He had nothing to add to the conversation and felt rejected by the way the girl rapidly answered his questions, almost bored with the way she played with the unlit cigarette.

“Have you ordered anything yet? Would you like to sit down until it’s ready?”

“**Yes. Thank you. I’ll sit if that’s okay.”**

He sat down uncomfortably, gripping the arms of the small chair, extending his legs, and pushing the balls of his feet towards the ground as if securing his position.

“What did you get?”

Her tone of voice was reassuring. A velvet string caressed his ears, ring no more, sweet man.

“I got a black coffee.”

She carried the conversation for a while more. His wrist sweated as the small and large hands inside his mechanical watch ticked, warning him that he was late for work. He did not care. Not much attention was paid to what she said exactly, all of it was music – he was absolutely enamoured by everything. Her reassuring tone, her playful stare, the way she played with the unlit cigarette. Her openness was something new to him. Something he had only experienced in books, times spent living vicariously through the lives of others. Experiences that did not belong to him but had instead formed his expectations for days such as this. Days where it looks like something interesting might happen. Where the character arc is formed, the main question is posed, and the protagonist goes on an adventure – an expedition either social or actual.

The newfound confidence her openness allowed him, urged him to move closer, relaxing his arms and legs, and settling on the chair. As he moved closer, the walls moved with him. They were decorated with colourful mosaic which turned bleaker by the second, the tiles grew harsher and fell, one by one. He could now see the opening page of the book. The artisan wool carpet pulsated; individual strands of a fleece wrapped around his calves and tightened where his ankles met his feet. His eyes widened and flashed as he stared at the opening page coldly. The knot around his throat tightened and pulled him up, but he was powerless in that he was not able to move. One force was pulling him down while the other was upward. Equally strong forces from both directions tore his parka.

The page wrote:

Yesterday I tried to write. I instead broke down above the words and letters that could not become sentences, the painful buzz and ring of distractions pierced my eardrums and made me lay still, I clenched my fist and gripped my sweating forehead – the blank page laughed at me. I felt such pain, the kind of which I've never felt before, these thoughts and ideas I knew were pure and unadulterated could just not be demonstrated; no matter how hard I tried. Today I'll consciously devote this time to writing, shut off all distractions, and remain across the blank page, staring into what has now become my enemy, the irony of words and letters hovering above me – I lay speechless but not voiceless.

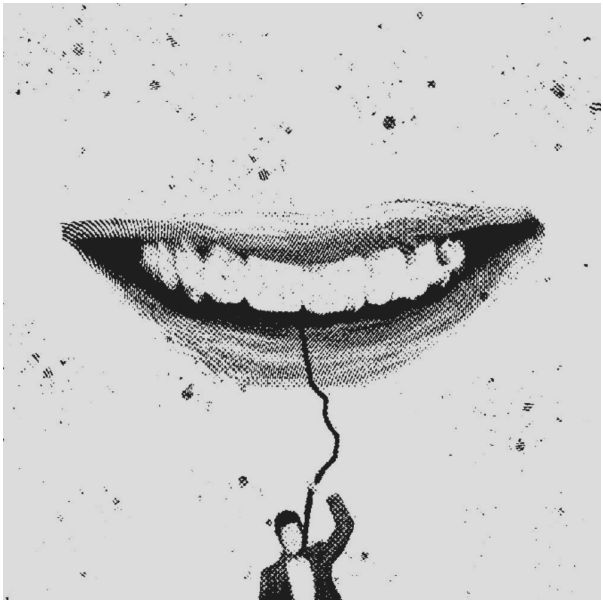
Upon reading the entirety of the page, muddled words, and sentences and all, he stared at her. She smiled and lit her cigarette.

"**Do you like it**?" she said sternly, in stark contrast to the way she previously spoke. She grabbed his arm and violently pulled him closer.

"**There is more. It is actually a compilation. I thought you told me you knew it from somewhere."**

She gawked at the spit dripping from his mouth, wide-open, in horror from what he had read. She turned the book to him and softly swiped at the seams, turning to the flyleaf. The picture of a man of no name or identity, but of that distinct look of calm, a man who was no longer irritated by outside influences or distractions. She pointed to the caption of the picture, the man's name, his name. She puffed on the cigarette and briefly coughed, before reaching into her purse, to pull out her inhaler.

Somnia



And don't forget to log it! An expression turned eternal rule for the endless summer that had just now seemingly run out of gas. The sun found its way through the deteriorated blinds into my small caravan. A smell of rat-shit residue and cleaning chemicals punctured my runny nose and woke me up from my first deep siesta after a season of driving tourists around, lifting crates, and logging useless hotel inventory. It was time to go home and leave the surreal setting behind. I briefly said my goodbyes to the people I had met over the summer, packed my bags swiftly, and vanished soon after. I did not look back before leaving the island as I thought I would end up regretting it. For the remainder of the summer, I pondered over whether I should return or not, struggling to remember my experiences with the people there and attempting to relive them by trailing off into my own

mind, to no avail. I met a lot of people there and ended up lying to most of them. It seemed only fit, new people that I would never see or hear about again. A chance to start anew as the person I wanted to be. I assumed a new persona, one of adventures and impulsivity, of romances and late nights. The Brad Pitt to my Edward Norton. A coward, no more. Confidence oozed out of me and the countless tales I shared. I saw the excitement in the eyes of my peers, they were fascinated by my stories and strived to impress me at every turn. The problem with my lies, besides being unethical and reptilian, was that they were too good for my own sake. I had lived and slept beside them for so many days on end, after drunken stupors and sober dazes. I had started to think I was the persona I had assumed, refusing to face the reality of my being, perhaps because of how starkly different it was. My life was not one of adventure and thrills, but of depression and failures, of failed relationships, moral crimes and frequent breakdowns.

On the island, I had escaped from myself but that had ended. To avoid being dragged back into a helpless state, I made an impulsive decision. Before going home, I stopped in my old town, for what I thought would be just a few days. I slept on the floor of my old art studio downtown. It was spacious enough to be comfortable and the natural light that came in through the windows was spectacular. Enough of a reason to make me nostalgic for the years I had previously spent, no, wasted in my hometown, trying to pursue a career that was obviously not meant for me. I remember inheriting what was once my grandfather's office, all busted up and dusty inside. Even though I was never one to tidy up and organise myself or the things around me, I gave my all for the studio. As if having the perfect workplace would have made me an artist equally perfect. I did not realise then and maybe still do not, that being an artist is not just about being a sad person with self-destructive tendencies, although it is common. Successful artists are both talented and disciplined. I mistakenly thought I was that. During my stay in the studio, I revisited my life of art, not as a pursuit this time, but as a hobby. What I once planned on being 'a few days' had already surpassed two weeks. Throughout the studio

were fragments of my past being sprinkled all around. Used acrylics and old brushes on the floor, torn and tossed paintings, works that had failed to meet my expectations, and cigarette butts all over. At first, it was good. The sunlight woke me up each morning and gave me the drive to start each day like it was my last, my past work inspired many new creations and filled my days with productivity. Then one day the sun stopped shining. It rained cats and dogs and their bodies crashed outside the windows, the floor was flooded endlessly. The rest studio smelt of paint gone bad and old cigarette butts. My past paintings ceased to inspire me and instead reminded me of my dreadful work. I gradually got in worse shape and grew less motivated to paint, write, or do anything. Other than staring at my bland ceiling I also checked my phone for messages, signs of buried romances fighting to reemerge. I slowly watched my tan fade into oblivion and though I firmly denied and fought against it, alongside my tan, my sanity started to decline. This is due to the isolation, I thought to myself. Maybe I missed the people I had met over the summer and longed for these days to be back. I had combined leisure and business, discipline, and relaxation. It was a perfect balance. And it was gone. Then it started. I do not know how to explain this in a logical way that will make sense and not make me sound like a complete and utter fool. I will try my best and hope I'm understood. Everybody dreams, it is a daily occurrence. Humans still don't know why they dream even though it has been around since the beginning. For many, it's perplexing trying to understand the sources of your dreams and to uncover the reasoning behind them. In my case, my dreams are vivid, painful, and upsetting. I thought I had shut off all my emotions regarding my past romances but it only took one dream of her and the rest came naturally. It happened once and then it became a dire routine. We used to be together. She was the only person I would have gladly spent the rest of my life with. Her curly hair, soft as silk, and her amber skin, smooth as polished firewood. I had last seen her ten years ago. That night she was lying beside me. I remember kissing her all over trying my best not to wake her up. After that, I went to sleep again. That was my last memory of her because af-

ter I had woken up, she had vanished. No breakup texts or letters, no information at all. I talked to mutual friends and scoured the city for even the slightest clue. Nothing turned up. After a while, I abandoned all hope. If she had truly cared, she never would have left so abruptly, she never would have abandoned me in the middle of the night. Sure, we had some rough patches, everybody does. But I never knew the magnitude of our shortcomings. Several months later I learned that she had jolted off abroad for reasons unknown. I thought I had gotten over it. I guess being stranded in my studio made me long for something, an emotion of the past. Thus, my obsession came crawling back, fighting tooth and nail to dominate my space of perception. I woke up in the middle of the night. My eyes ached and my mind raced. I opened my eyes and saw my half-naked reflection in the mirror. Gawking at the abyss of my own soul, my mouth foaming as if I were a rabid dog meant to be put down long ago. Whenever I woke up, I tried to keep myself from falling asleep because whatever the circumstance, I always ended up dreaming of her. Whether it was a 20-minute nap or an 8-hour slumber, I was catapulted back deep inside the rabbit hole, chasing Alice. At first, I thought it was a cruel joke, my own psyche trying to play tricks on me. No man can stay sane after being tormented by the same image over and over. It was horrid. Everything I had bottled up for years, came rushing back. I lived through my past every night. Sometimes it was the night she left, with every small detail, down to the scratches on her gold angled loops. Some nights I held her hand while lucid, only for her figure to shatter like glass right before my eyes. Maybe she left because at times I wouldn't know what to say and I'd lie lifeless on the bed beside her, still high off of last night's potent acid. Maybe because occasionally I would not return to bed and she'd hear from a friend or two that my tongue was halfway down another woman's throat. Maybe because apart from the pretty things in our apartment there'd still be the infrequent needle and baggie, behind the counter, under the pillows. Maybe it was the fights and the screaming, the neighbours had been complaining, especially the last weeks. It did not matter then and does not now: why she left. In that

little studio of mine, I would have lost my mind without some company to fend off the bed bugs and fever dreams. After pondering over it for some time, I decided to call of one of my oldest friends. The phone rang exactly three times before she finally decided to reply. I waited a second before speaking, thinking it would be easier if I let her break the ice, but she instead chose to hang up the phone. I called again but did not hesitate to talk this time.

“Hey...It’s me.”

“Back from the dead, I presume?”

“You can say that again…I’m in town.”

“9:00. The usual?”

Several centuries had gone by, friend groups had come apart, innocent relationships had morphed into marriages and internships had become tenures. So many things had changed yet she behaved as though not a day had gone by. No awkwardness, no judgment. A simple phone call, as if though we were still skipping class and living our college heydays. She used to be one of the people I held dearest until we slowly started drifting apart on account of my serious relationship with Daphne. Nevertheless, she did not act in a way that indicated she had kept any old grudges. We met at the usual place, right across from the church downtown. She was sitting on a bench with her hair let loose, her earrings had multiplied since the last time I had seen her. Despite a few new tattoos and the aforementioned piercings, she was unchanged. I was not.

“Jenny?”

“You look terrible re malaka”

The famous calling card of all Greeks, if used properly it is one of the most beautiful words in the language. Her use of the word was masterful, always on cue and with perfect timing.

“Thanks. Wish I could say the same”

“I hate it here. There’s a new place you’d like”

Some parts of the city had remained unchanged throughout the years, graffiti, some mindless nonsensical tags, and others, illustrating the people’s pain and oppression. We went through the square I used to frequent in. People in corners pushing grass and knock-off shops selling off-brand tees everywhere you set your eyes on. We did not talk at all while walking but that was only because Jenny took a steep back, seeing me fall in love with my old city all over again. After a few minutes of walking, we reached the place Jenny was talking about, an old-fashioned bar with a few stools and thankfully, indoor smoking. At first, there were the placeholder questions, the ones you have to ask to be typical and make small talk, boring and pointless. After we both got a few drinks in us the interesting questions started and with that, a painful delve into the past.

“Do you want to talk about Daphne?” she said pulling her body back, as though she immediately wanted to withdraw her question.

“Actually, no. Not at all.”

“I guess that makes sense.”

“I guess it does.”

“I don’t want to be sober now.”

“Really?”

“How much do you think I’ve changed?”

We left without paying, reminiscent of the old days, the all too familiar Dine n Dash. We made our way back to the studio which I had left in a total mess with clothes and paints everywhere you stepped.

“This really is a shit-hole!”

“This shit-hole is home to exquisite weed”

“That’s your only saving grace? Really? ‘Exquisite weed’?”

“Work with what you’ve got, I say.”

It had been three years since I had last smoked with her. It used to be a ritual, a routine. We both grew up, she went one way and I…Well, I went another way. Purely out of nostalgia I decided to find my old vinyl player, I moved some stuff around and found it under a huge pile of clothes. An old vinyl player and Disraeli Gears by Cream, the perfect combination. Jenny sat down and started rolling a joint while I sat in the back patiently grinding more weed, waiting for my turn to roll the next one. After smoking and drinking more than we could handle, like responsible adults, we sat on the couch and listened to the music. It only took thirty minutes for everything to hit me right in the brain, I ceased to hear anything else other than the amazing vocals of Clapton. “In the white room with black curtains”, the only difference is that this place was grey, filled with smoke and reeking of alcohol. I started sinking beneath the cushions. The lights all around me began flickering and the guitar strums that echoed throughout my studio helped me glide, from one outlandish though to another. Jenny was beside me, dozing off in her own bizarro world entirely made out of broken promises and regrets. She’d open her eyes for three seconds then close them again. She innocently, like a hundred times before throughout our benders in college, put her legs on me and let off a long sigh. In that moment, I felt my memories dissolve – my days in college, the nights we scoured the city looking for a nightclub to hit. A slime had consumed and replaced the entirety of my happy memories. I looked to Jenny and saw a shell of her former self. The tattoos and piercings hid her broken spirit, my beard and tan hid mine. Countless days I had spent wondering whether I was good enough, whether I could actually be so lucky to have a girl like Daphne, a friend like Jenny. All unimportant. In the end, all is destroyed. I noticed the paralysis, Jenny remained unchanged, I too, remained the same. In this world, and in this life; I had been paralysed. Nowhere to go, nothing to

do, no one to turn to. On the table, unused pills for nights of partying I'd never go to. flirted with the idea, before popping some into my mouth. I collapsed next to her, hugging her as firmly as possible.

Sludge

The news had stated it best: southwest winds of warmth and dust. African zephyrs bringing every particle of sludge and filth across the entire city. It was one of those days where you'd be fooled into going outside in too many layers, only to return, dejected and drenched. The foggy white sky was misinterpreted quite often in my city: a product of the unreliable reports of sleazy meteorologists, the kind you'd otherwise see on late night television, pawning off a Chinese appliance for double its actual value. I had been in the city only for a few days by then, taking care of my family home, attempting to make it presentable enough for a realtor to notice. My two sisters, the only ones in my family able to take my place in fulfilling this boring chore, lived abroad. Because the time gap between us was far too vast and the desire to speak far too small, we rarely talked. When I did seldom communicate, it was primarily with Irene, and it was almost always about financial matters. She had been blessed with good looks and a fiery confidence, factors which I am sure played a role in her landing a big-shot lawyer as a husband, one with a trust fund. I was not particularly ashamed of asking for help when it came to money. Irene and her husband were both oblivious to how wealthy they were, something which, admittedly, I took ample advantage of. I always made sure to mention mom and dad to Irene, tapping into the built-up guilt she had accumulated from all the years living away from home. On that day, I must have cleaned out at least a dozen old photographs, throwing most away. To feel

better about myself and the absence of emotion both for my childhood home and the memories in film, I called my sisters. I called countless times, leaning in to hear the ring - the eventual response, instead I was greeted by their answering machine; an acute reminder that family affection, especially in my family, is not eternal.

After taking care of some basic chores, I went on the outside terrace for a smoke break. The floor of the terrace was covered in gray marble, the centrepieces: a wood burning patio heater and vivid green plants on either side of the ledge. From the terrace, one could see the whole city, partly on account of the building's height but mostly due to the lack of railings. From there, I could see into the neighbouring apartment: the sixth floor of a red building, architecture reminiscent of what you'd see on the cover of Metropolis. The family who lived there, a man, his wife and their dog, were friends of my parents and I had known them since early childhood. On holidays, the wife would bring a luxurious spread of all sorts of snacks and appetizers, always in plastic bags which she presumably flailed endlessly while on the way over; as most of the snacks were already mangled when presented on the dining table. My trip down memory lane was abruptly cut short by a violent ring, coming from the inside of the house. I jolted out of the stool I was sitting on and ran inside to answer. I was secretly hoping that one of my sisters would be on the other end of the line, ready to ease some of my stress and reaffirm the nostalgia I felt for our house, which was about to be sold to a new owner. I let the phone ring two more times, and put my cigarette out right next to the cord; in anticipation, before finally answering.

"Mr. Deslo?" a timid female voice asked.

I cleared my throat quite unconsciously before replying.

"Speaking."

"I am calling you to inform you of your father's current situation.."

I rudely interrupted her, feeling as though I had lost some important event, as something had happened without my knowledge and a stranger has the nerve to vex me about it.

“What situation? Which hospital are you calling from?”

“Your father suffered from a severe heart attack just this morning. He is currently situated in the intensive care unit where he is awake and responding..”

I drifted off, far into my own thoughts. Her voice grew more distant and faint by the second, as she listed off practicalities out of common courtesy. Whatever event I had missed, whatever occurrence I was not there for; I wanted to hear what had happened from my own father, not from some random person I knew nothing about.

The hospital had several entries and about a dozen more procedures before one could enter. Right across from one of the many entrances; a massive flock of gypsies. It was a common occurrence, one I had previously heard of and seen. It was in their culture to reproduce like rabbits. And when they did, they’d bring their entire extended family with them: children ran amok, barefoot on the asphalt. They took short breaks from playing hide and seek; wiping off sweat and crumbs into their dark hair before continuing their game with little regard for the world around them. The women would gossip endlessly, stopping only to scream at the odd young one, presumably the one with the most stamina; the one who could run around in circles for hours. They wore vibrant colors. The men and children, graphic t-shirts and off-brand sneakers. The women, it seemed, were all fitted by the same blind tailor; dirty dresses from which their fat seeped out of. What enraged me the most were the young men, all of whom appeared to have a chip on their shoulder, embedded so deeply that even surgical intervention would not make a noticeable difference. They’d sit there and smoke, gawking at any passerby they did not like the looks of. Once in a while they’d smile or laugh, pestering bystanders, falling back on violence when the average Joe refused to stand idly by while

being made fun of. With the mere sight of them, I harkened back to a time I had witnessed one of these violent houndings. In excruciating detail, I relived every undeserved punch and kick that the lone man received. Against an army of travellers, even a man wary of the reality of violence would hesitate to engage. It was nothing more than a traffic dispute gone wrong, which sent about a dozen of these dogs into a flying frenzy and in the end: left a man bloody and battered. I stuck my head in between my shoulders and looked down, as I was not eager to get into a fight, especially on that day; where I had more important matters to attend to. Matters which required my utmost attention. Violent coughs echoed throughout the hospital hallway, disrupting my every step. The floor appeared as it had been showered with a mix of sweat and alcoholic disinfectant, an odor the doctors had grown accustomed to, running door to door. They walked impervious to the filth, their scrubs and coats dragging on the wet floor. Some anxiously clicked their pens and grasped their clipboards, others I saw staring off into the abyss, their eyes droopy and red as crimson, walking dead. I felt a breeze brush my cheek, a soft and pure hand touched my shoulder. With that, a voice I had heard before, albeit accompanied by buzzes and static. The young nurse escorted me to my father's room, where he was lying half-asleep. He looked down but not beaten. His white beard had grown longer and more yellow. Years of smoking and boozing had caught up to him, which could be seen both by his appearance and his health. Weakly, he turned his head to look at me and slowly lifted his hand, signaling me to come closer.

“I’m probably going to die soon”

“I see.”

“That’s inspiring.”

“I don’t think you’re dying. This is just a bad hangover.”

“Yeah...”

My father and I talked for some minutes before he decided to drop the A-bomb on me.

“I think I have been a good father. I tried. The girls were easier to handle. You were quite a pain. But I think I’ve been good to you, right? To you, the girls, and your mother. Sure, there were

some rough patches…”

I interrupted him.

“I don’t think it’s time for your dying monologue, at least not yet.”

“Fuck Roman, stop kidding around for a second and listen to what I have to say.”

I pulled away.

“Irene is not your mother’s daughter. She was raised this way and she was raised to be your sister; she still is.”

"**What the fuck? On one of your escapades? Shit. I don't need you to tell me she's still my sister. I know. Nothing you say can change that.**"

Ironic. I wondered how long he thought of what he would say to me, if he rehearsed his delivery, if he knew I’d be phoned from the hospital, if that was his plan. I hugged my father for one last time; I felt his body so sickly that I was afraid to break him with my grip. I rationalised it for a little bit. Why did the burden fall on me? Why was I the one to carry his guilt? Irene deserved to know the truth. She deserved to know. She deserved to know that when the neighbours visited; it was the man, the dog, and Irene’s mother. Not, the man, the dog, and the wife. What had been thirty years in the making all came crashing down with my father’s hospitalisation. I would be insane to derail her life, insane to derail her career, insane to tell her that when we were both knees down on the dirt, it wasn’t her

mother that was being buried. The phone rang twice.

“Yes?”

“Roman, how are you? You called before, right? Me and Jake are just getting ready to go now. We have a fancy dinner party to attend. What’s up?”

“It’s good to hear your voice, Irene. Yes. Everything is fine. I just wanted to talk to you.”

“**Do you need help baby? Is everything ok? How is the clean-up going? You think someone’s going to bite?”**

“Most definitely. I think it looks good.”

“Good. Well, how about money? It’s been a long time since I last saw your name on any publishing.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Roman, you know I am not trying to be funny. Do you want me to ask Jake to wire something to you? Just to help you get on your feet.”

“**That would be good Irene.”**

“Good then. Problem solved. Is there anything else?”

“No.”

Irene and I never talked about it. Our dad died soon after. I went to all the dinners and kept smiling all the way to dessert. I had to carry the burden for her. I thought maybe she would find out on her own. It was not my place to share. But then his will came out. I was shocked. Disgusted by the vagrant cheat of a father who had fucked around with children in the mix, I carried the weight and still got

the short end of the stick somewhere in the fine print. Irene will find out soon enough, and I’ve got a good lawyer now, hopefully good enough to secure me a piece of the pie.

DOG ATE DOG

The exhaust on the back of the Ford gurgled and spat out black smoke as he stepped on the brakes and quickly pulled the handbrake. He got out of the car, rolled a cigarette, smoked it, tossed it, and made his way to the apartment. The twin doors which served as an entrance were made with reinforced glass and enveloped by black aluminium, expensive. He smirked at the fact that he had paid for but never got to see it be installed, never once went through it, never once knocked on it or opened it. His Ford had previously stopped on the same driveway before, but these doors were not there. They were new and looked expensive. He rang the bell.

“Who’s that?”

“Buzz me in.”

“Who’s there?”

“It’s Jordan, buzz me in.”

“Get out of here.”

He took a deep breath in, a good step back and reigned a hellfire of short punches and donkey kicks to one of the glass doors. Expensive, he thought, but cheap, as the glass shattered on the floor and landed on his boots. He made his way up the stairs, leaving behind a trail of pus and blood, dripping from his torn knuckles. On the third floor now and out of breath, he leaned against the railing to recover. It was a nice place. A small black rug stood in front of the wooden door, decorated with etchings and ornaments, next to the door, a wide stained-glass panel. A lonesome deer gleefully hovered above grass and vegetation of all colours. Even amidst the turmoil, the rage and fire, the neurons rapidly firing in his brain, he was entranced by the serene setting.

His momentary bliss was violently disrupted by the voices he heard behind the door, the deer turned to face him, its cloven hooves ripped into the grass and flowers, he clobbered on the wooden seam.

"You need to leave."

"Please open the door."

"I am calling the police."

"For what? Trespassing? On my own property?"

I did not respond.

"Just open the door. I want to talk. Please"

"Jordan, please, this is not the right time."

"I've waited long enough" he muttered and stuck his bloody boot in between the door, forcing himself in.

"**What is all this blood? Oh my god Jordan. What did you do?**"

"Calm down. It's mine. You're going to need a new door and this one, this one is on your tab. Now please, sit down."

I covered my stomach with my arms, sat down and crossed my legs, involuntarily retreating into the soft cushions of the couch, as far away from him as possible.

"I've tried to do this in a civilised way. I've tried with lawyers, with shrinks, with police. You just do not get it, do you?

"Get what?"

"You are so full of your-fucking-self. You've buried your head inside your ass for so long that now your view is permanently shit-stained. You just cannot see in front of you. Not normally at least. Not without smidges of shit in front of your eyes."

"Please stop."

“No. You need to hear this. You think I, in my right mind, am going to let you raise my child, without me? It’s my child. My seed you have in there. Mine. Not this sleazy motherfucker’s...” he pointed to a picture hanging on the wall before continuing his rant.

“It’s my child too. My child. Don’t do this to me. Don’t.”

“Jordan, I…”

“What?” he rushed toward me.

I jumped up and behind the couch.

“I am not carrying anything. You have no child. The doctors made sure of that.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. If you don’t believe me, you’ll see. You’ll see when it shows up on your bill.”

“**You bitch.”** He ran towards me and grabbed me by the hair, shaking me.

I AM NOT TRIPPING - YOU ARE

Her house stood deep inside a gated community protected by 24-hour surveillance, on-site security, and guard-dogs. All paid off by Mr. and Mrs. Polenik, class-A socialites who had done a marvellous job raising their daughter. Alia excelled at every class, every school ball and secretly, every party. She’d throw the biggest parties in the mansion and absolutely wreck the place. Still, two months later, we’d get the invite for the “next big thing”. I checked my phone and puffed on my cigarette before throwing it to the ground.

“You’re not supposed to do that.”

“Excuse me?”

“This is private property. You’re not supposed to be littering here.”

“You’re not supposed to be littering on public property either.”

I picked up my spent cigarette and continued to walk towards the mansion. The little man behind the sentry building lifted his finger and extended his torso, I spoke before he could.

“I’m invited. Don’t worry. I’m here to see Alia Polenik”

He sat back down on his chair, mad that he did not get the chance to showcase the kung-fu moves he had undoubtedly spent years mastering. The mansion was exactly as I remembered it, linen curtains on either side of the glass-stained windows and white marble floors which had, in the past, made countless lines vanish from existence. Before I could walk further down the fancy path, I heard a soft voice in the distance. She was on the stairs, her hand pushing, her body leaning against the railing. Her blonde hair stood calmly on her small shoulders which orchestrated the rest of her lean body. Her pierced nose rushed with red as her lips made to speak.

“I think you should come with me.”

As I moved and grunted to painfully climb up the steep stairs, I caught a whiff of her perfume and immediately found solid ground. Unlike the rest of the mansion, her room was less tasteful. The walls were full of torn posters, her desk full of scratches and the ground full of tobacco: enough to roll four or five good cigarettes. I had the feeling it was intentional. She sat down on her bed; I sat down on the floor across from her. My relationship with Alia had always been complicated. Growing up, I had always wanted to impress her. Whether it was by acting like I knew my way around a camera or punching and getting punched, all I wanted was for her to bite. Maybe she had missed me and wanted to get in touch. Maybe she felt bad for using me for drugs, maybe I felt so for using her for sex. For her there was no ice to break. She

could just swipe her finger and it would all go away, no matter how long it had been since we last spoke. We talked for a little bit as I tried to gauge the situation and understand why I was on her floor on a Saturday night. With each word, the bed got a little bit closer and the barrier, a little bit thinner. She playfully bit her lips and raised her eyebrow.

"**I think… I think we should drop some acid."**

I looked at her and smirked.

"**What? You think I don't trip?"**

"Hahaha. I didn't say anything"

"So then? What? You can't find acid right now?"

"When was that even a problem?"

"So what is it then? Does the little baby not want to trip in front of me? Do you want me to not look?"

On her knees she turned her back to me, her heels pushing off of the bed, her jeans flexing. I knew what she was doing but contrary to her, I always bit. I reached into the pocket of my leather jacket, pulled out a small sheet and whistled at her. I raised my left hand and with my right brought the sheet next to my mouth, bit off a little piece and smiled. Blotter in mouth, I motioned to her to do the same. She jumped out of the bed and landed next to me, her knees touching my thighs, she looked at me, before playfully dealing with the rest of the sheet.

"Do I swallow?"

We both laughed. She slowly retreated, lifting herself up to the bed with her arms, crossing her legs.

"So how long do we wait?"

"Is this your first-time doing acid?"

She looked to the left, and to the right, and to the middle.

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”

She looked at me in shock.

“Don’t worry. You will be fine, probably.”

She let out a big sigh before turning on the vinyl player and laying down. The music played sweetly and caresses my ears as the walls around us began to melt. The red of the posters pulsated and drew me closer, my heart began to beat to the rhythm of the music as I felt myself sink into the floor. Disoriented, she got up and sat down next to me. She looked at me for a second, before looking off into the distance and beginning to mumble. You’re floating, she said. Stop moving. She hugged her knees and crouched, folding her body in half. To snap her out of it, I threw a pillow at her. She took her face off her crotch and stood up. She approached me slowly. I threw another pillow. Annoyed, she moaned and bumped her forehead into my shoulder. Her blonde strands of hair vibrated and fluttered next to me, as if the strings on a guitar. All her decorations were enveloped by her constantly glowing and shifting figure. Her tattoos changed shapes, lines of black trailed from one arm to the other, creating new emblems. Her piercings grew larger and shinier, sharper. Suddenly, I felt a push, and pushed I was, and closer too. I kissed her, bit her bottom lip. It continued the bed. Her naked body melted on mine, she was stuck, unstuck. I felt every tingle on my body and paradoxically, on hers too. After I finished, she went to the bathroom. The posters were unmoving. The music had stopped. I took her purse before catching the night bus home.

PLANE

I remember being on a plane once. I mean, I've flown before and will fly again, but that one time was important. So, I am sitting there, my legs are getting cramped in that awfully tight space, my ears are getting violently pierced by screeching toddlers and my mind, as always, is racing. Anyway, this guy walks in, girlfriend in hand and he's dragging a huge duffel bag on the carpet floor. On the same day I had to pay extra just to get my boss' baggage through security, this guy struts in, red-nosed and cheeky and just dumps his duffel wherever. I groaned and sighed in isolation but paid little attention for the remainder of the flight. Walking out the exit, I saw old Bill; his red bandana still tightly wrapped around his head. He waved, we shook hands, smoked a cigarette, and loaded some bags in the van. Back then, I was working at the resort, and I can swear that once I saw his red nose again, I knew he was our client. The guy walked toward me, dragging his duffel, and stringing his girl all the way throughout. He dropped the bag in front of my feet and without hesitation I tossed it in the van. The guy was a devout prick, but I swallowed my anger down and was consoled by old Bill's witty remarks, who made sure to comment on my strength whenever I made quick and easy work of heavy loads.

"**There you go boy."**

"Now that's it."

"Oof and down the hatch."

And more than that, I enjoyed doing my job. And I enjoyed the responsibilities that came with it.

Pricks will be everywhere, but that shouldn't stop you from doing your job. No matter what it is. We've fallen into the trap of considering a job as solely employment. Scratch that. Your job is your friends and family, your

loved ones, and your lovers. Your job is to wake up and make sure that the day is seized. And on days where you try to seize but fail, when the coffee machine is broken and the coffee turns cold just minutes after – on days like these, reject the absurd dependence you have on your appliances and toss them out the window along with the rest of your possessions. Below and outside your house you should post a wooden sign.

The sign should write:

PLANE

GOOD THINGS ARE COMING

Now your neighbour know you will be dropping stuff left and right. Appliances will bash heads. Blood will spill. Police will come. And when they do, surrender immediately. You've done no crime. Good things came, what you promised. A brand-new dishwasher bashed the head of an old gran walking along the road. Manufactured in Japan. A 3-option coffee machine came crashing down a toddler's head. Manufactured in Italy, a designer product.

And I am a romantic. Or, you know, I try to be. Sometimes a little bit too hard. And before that, I was a pessimist. Little things happen that can put entire dimensions into perspective. Here I am complaining about the duffel and the size of it and the extra fee I'll have to pay. There's my friend, skidding off the road and rag dolled by momentum. A fractured cranium?

Maybe...

I did not ask.

Dead.

No rhyme nor reason.

for salo

TIN-FOIL

The cold seeps through the window cracks and into my room. And so do sounds. I'll be counting sheep in bed when a bus will rumble into the stop, shattering my lovely silence with all its ticks and bops. Being half asleep and dreaming, I used to mistake the bus for an airplane quite frequently. Other times, I'd notice blue lights bouncing off my windows and illuminate the ground below; I assumed they were spaceships. On one such time, when counting sheep had failed in putting me to sleep and blue lights made me restless, I pulled my window open with such force that the screws fell from their hinges. I needed no sign other than the violet blue to know my fall would be trusted. I jumped onto the beast and held on by its mane. And although I felt its living skin against my rugged hands, its eyes appeared still somewhat mechanic. It moved its neck, the cords and wires running underneath its skin flexed and its eyes flashed beams on passing windows. Some neighbours were awoken by the light but stood up only to shut the blinds. I felt no danger on the beast and thus slowly retreated comfortably, lying on its back. After all, the beast somewhat looked like me, I thought. A few miles away and some winks of sleep later, I floated down.

Like any mortal man, I imagined that when I hit the ground, my knees would give way. I once more trusted my fall and landed on the street below. My knees did not feel even the slightest pressure. As I strutted along the road toward the only direction I knew, the dull cobble streets reflected the gaslit crimson of the brick buildings secluding me in the alley. I could already hear

the beast's hooves and saw its path fading, so it had long since vanished. I could not go back now. I had been awakened by the beast, which had brought me here swiftly and securely. But why me? None of my neighbours were awoken, none were vexed by the intrusive lights and violent screeches. Only I.

Before I could succumb to my fatigue and crumble on the ground, the eerie stillness on the path ahead of me was broken by a gray man's frantic dancing. Reserved, and cautiously aware, I approached the man.

"You must be here for the event."

"I'm sorry?"

His crooked finger pointed to the wall behind him, on which a metal poster materialised out of thin air.

"You're here to see the greatest lie."

Well, I was already awake and am quite the light sleeper. The night buses never come on time. I've nowhere else to be.

"I am here to see the greatest lie."

"Why didn't you start with that?"

The gray man picked his red nose and ran his fingers over the poster behind him. It melted into the wall, melding with the crimson bricks as obsidian lumps fell and the space expanded.

"Right through here."

"Aren't you coming with me?"

I bid the gray man with the red nose farewell and walked into the hole in the wall.

The amphitheater was quite large and exactly how I had pictured it. The rows could be full with an ocean of thousands but were entirely empty. I was alone, and in the center. I climbed up the red curtains and perched on the royal

balcony.

The play begun. A man which looked like me took to center stage.

"**Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to inform you that today's performance has been cancelled."**

Boos and groans echoed throughout the amphitheater but I looked back and saw no one. Before I could even think about it, the gray man, whom I thought had stayed outside, pounced on me and began clawing away at my face. I punched him with all my might and was back in my bed, fighting with the pillows.

Now, I am not one to believe in ghost stories. I am not one to shout out conspiracies and hunker down in my flat, sheltered from the aliens outside, wearing my tin-foil hat upside down. I never saw the beast again. And it never saw me. My neighbours continue to ignore the sounds and I always made sure to sleep with the curtains closed after that.

RAMBLE

It's been a while since I last stepped out on to the balcony. I light my fuses mechanically, one after the other. Some by ingestion, by arousal, others by sobriety. I tend to these fuses quite instrumentally and scratch my any itch by splattering paint on the wall or scribbling muddled symbols on paper. When I cannot scratch the itch, I am pulled, and with no way to pilot this pull, I fold. The itch then, becomes tremendous. So much so that the stained walls and scribbled papers become mere spectators to the violent conflict I initiate with myself. Halfway in the hole or my head halfway over my heels. I'd very much like to not be disturbed by the sounds of the neighbouring room. I'd very much like to drink my coffee strong and not watered down. I'm one to

speak. Today I woke up and decided that I govern my mind, outside influences are dispelled, desires pushed down. I woke up today and decided that my newfound clarity is set in stone. Anxiety manifests itself as a knot, deja-vu as a daze, if you let it. I stumble and fall out of bed; the essence is as ephemeral as it is ambiguous; still, it pulls me. I claw my way out of the sheets, they fight back. My muscles spasm. I feel the same, still. My paragraphs are all the same and I would know, I wrote them. My words are overused at times, misused at others. I repurpose my old writings, botch ideas and stick together unfit pieces. Sometimes when those pieces fall, I stare at them and bawl my eyes out. I should have known they wouldn't stick, but I always hope to be surprised. The cold is easy to get used to, the cold people too: expected. I strut down the road and count the days, the hours, the seconds. I've walked backward, zigzagged while moving, and scaled walls with my eyes closed. I've written, eaten, stolen, and robbed friends and lovers alike. I've been guilty and innocent, and I've convinced myself of both at different times. I have punched, been punched, lied, and been lied to. I've cheated and I've been cheated on. I've been known to fall in love in the past, then run and hide even more. I have profusely banged my head against the wall, pulled my hair, and cursed my mind. All this and being born again and shedding my old sinful skin and rejecting any feeling. I've been on rails, in cabs and clubs, and still, my vision swayed. I've convinced myself of things that weren't true and things that were, I have ignored. I've looked at that vanilla curl and that slight curve and hypothesised an outcome, I've reached out with my shaking hand and hit a wall. I've stumbled over my loose and untied laces, my head has gone over my heels, and I've gone back on things I've said and have otherwise twisted them to get a grip. I've canceled dates, consoled them, tossed keys out of windows, and melted in between my sheets. I've seen the lights go grey, the music fade, the shadows play on wooden floors, my mind would burst from wanting more. I've seen the sun reflect two olive tints: the type of which can daze you to surrender. I've been objective and subjective and inhabited all spaces in between. I've taken one step for-

ward and three back to look at this condition. I've woken up and thought about it first thing in the morning; to dispel rendition without warning. I ran it in my head, the rental contract's end: kicked out of the bed, an empty lens and awkward silence.

If I wasn't paranoid, I wouldn't write. If I didn't write, I would be paranoid.

QUIT SMOKING WHILE YOUNG

I'm young. I smoke. I remember when I first lit that sweet cancer stick, took a drag, and let out a cloud of grey smoke. Cute. My first vice. My attempts to quit; numbered two. Both were halfhearted. One was on account of my then girlfriend, I lasted for about five days, but it was not the nicotine that made me run back. On my second attempt, I bought a pack of nicotine chewing gum which was as tasteful as it was useful: not at all. I spat it out and threw the rest away.

When I first started smoking, I remember referencing all the greats: the singers, the actors, the charlatans. People who were smoking long before me and would smoke long after me, if for circumstances that would allow it. My first vice seeped into my persona as I unwittingly began tearing packs open, one after the other, a king in a kingdom of ash which although pale, was somewhat romantic. A dead poet and his crooked words. And I too would be a charlatan. Claiming to have lived a life before my time, constructing false accounts and bending reality for benefit. There's a restlessness then, that you begin to cherish. Every matchstick used, the oral tick, the snapping of the fin-

gers and the kindling of the stone. The stooges could solve all problems they caused, besides the bloody spit on white ceramic, which needed to be cleaned with extra care.

Today, I, the proximity academic was greeted at the bedside with a new report. Confirming a previously controversial finding: quit smoking while young.

CHINASKI'S REIGN REMAINS

Walking to work, where my energy would be drained for a very reasonable amount of money, I stepped into a puddle. I raised my head and noticed a bright white sign with bulging neon letters.

THIS IS THE NEW BEAUTY.

I looked around to see this new beauty, my foot submerged in dirty rainwater. Grey sludge trickled from the roads to the canals and near the wooden boats. Students spilled out from the university and into the streets, their heads down and umbrellas up, huddling and running from the rain. Different groups of people walked by, what could easily be mistaken for an individual slime. Their oversized coats dragging on the ground, they shared their bland cigarettes and held their extra-large macchiatos. The women were often dressed as if going to a gala, even during the morning lecture, you'd see the makeup slowly dissolve on their cheeks. The men, if they could be called that, were all narrow-shouldered and short-sighted; they chased and flocked behind the perfume. It was abundantly clear. There was no new beauty. There was no new motivation or purpose. I'd look hard into the mirage but never through it. The

stories I had read all urged me against it, my experiences too. I'd wake up, hop in the shower, punch myself a couple of times and dry off with the morning brew. My bruised eye was seldom enough to tell a meaningful story. I looked for it in others and myself, in lone walks and group expeditions. I had been dammed or cursed by some witch when doing bumps in the old town. Or some sense of karmic justice existed and was determined to lock me out of my writing. My foot and shoe and sock were drenched. I was late to work. I saw a bench near me and immediately sat down. I bent down to take my shoe off to dry when an older man bumped into me. He looked worn and grey. His hair was slicked back and oily, his plaid shirt was covered in yellow stains and reeked of cheap alcohol. After bumping into me, he tossed his rolled cigarette on the ground and turned to face me. There was a special kind of energy around him. He was, probably, one of these people who even dead-drunk and flat-broke had something to say. Maybe he'd looked through the mirage and enjoyed no bits of it.

He spat on the floor.

"What are you doing here, kid?"

"What?"

"Speak." He coughed and stumbled toward me.

"What are you talking about?"

"You're a kid."

The man laughed, burped, and swallowed some of his vomit before continuing.

"These women you've had are shit, the drugs, and drinks too. The nights you raged or raved you weren't there. You haven't seen it. You do not know it."

I felt his palm crash down on my nose.

I put my head down and flicked a cigarette in my mouth, the old man's words rang out. I had seen his face before but could not remember where. I saw him walk away, his coat dragging on the floor, the slime on his hair glinting - pus oozing from his ears - that even from far away, I could see.

I sneakily jolted towards him and punched him on the back of the neck. He was still for a moment, then fell to the ground, heavily, like a sack of potatoes. The sound his body made when hitting the ground sounded rude. Powerful. I thought an old man like him would break like glass. Inside his pockets, I found some writings, scribbled on tissues and stained with old coffee. I ran back home, washed my hands and transcribed the writings to my computer. I sent a story to a friend of mine, and she called me back crying. She recommended that I get in touch with an agent, and live off “my” work. Who knew an old bum could ever write so well?



YOUNGER, MAN

“Have a good night.”

“You too man.”

I nodded and stuck my chin in between my leather jacket. But really, how in hell was I to have a good night? He knew. Of course, I am not his first repeat customer. Maybe the first to knowingly fall for the “large or medium pop-corn” trick, time and time again. A few hits in, before the high had crept up on me, I coughed. I took another hit and immediately wanted to cough again. And no matter the day-long fight I had put up, I couldn’t hold it anymore. See, this guy, the weed clerk, he really knew I wasn’t going to have a good night. I pulled my shirt from under my pants and stood against a traffic light.

“Now I really must take a shit.”

I looked at my phone.

12:30.

I still had thirty minutes. I bolted into the first coffee shop I found. The place was decorated with colourful little flags, a large chalkboard stood idle in the middle; inspirational quotes were scribbled on it with a pink crayon. A ponytail with glasses and short stubble stopped me at the counter. I spoke before he could.

“Can I use your toilet?”

“Of course. What is your code?”

“What code?”

“The one on your receipt”

“Listen, man...”

I thought about it for a few seconds. I am not really the type of guy to get into my head too much. But what was this phony doing gatekeeping a dollar-store toilet? Was it the culture; Were they so stuck up that even doing your business had to be a financial exchange? Are the other customers not making the store enough money for a random vagabond to pop in, once or twice, and use the toilet sparingly? Where had the world come to? And more importantly, was I so foolish as to remain idle in such a derogatory exchange?

I groaned and raised my hand.

The ponytail tried to speak again.

I moved past him and run to the toilet upstairs.

The stairs were steep, but it was something I had gotten used to, only a few months after moving to the flatlands. When I got to the toilet, I was again greeted by slimy attempts at novelty. As I said, I do not overthink things. Perhaps I just unwittingly find myself in peculiar scenarios where I have no choice in how to act. Where I somewhere else, this would not be happening. The black cats, looming around the corner, the scaffolding and the blue nets around it, the rain, flooding the streets. This is a wacky place. For the male toilets, it was a triangle. For the women, a circle. I kicked my way into a stall and perched on top of the stained ceramic. I heard the outside door creak.

“I think you should text him” she squeaked.

Shit.

It didn’t really make sense to me. How could a triangle be for man, for penis maybe. Two at the base and a tip. I guess I really am stoned, I thought. I flushed and got out to wash my hands. The girl stumbled back and nervously giggled before straightening her shoulders.

“Sorry, why are you here?”

“I am sorry. I don’t really get symbols.”



I laughed and thought it was funny. She looked at me, silent. I guess she didn’t. I washed my hands with hot water and made my way downstairs. I gave some filthy change to the ponytail, as a peace gesture, before jumping on the bus. Back then I couldn’t sleep with the windows open. I don’t know why that is. Day or night. I needed to pull on that knob and let all the fresh air come in. And it was as fresh as it was cold. When it got just a little bit cold, my nostrils opened, and I could breathe. And then the heavy covers became useful, instead of suffocating me to sleep. Windows were never open in the

buses here, but I didn't mind. I was much too high to sleep and instead laid back on the chair. It's funny but I always thought people in the flatlands stare too much. Maybe they did at first, and it would make sense. My unkempt beard, long hair and loose clothes vexed them. Probably not. It was me loudly speaking into my phone; a language they didn't understand. Where they scooted away and whispered into their earphone, robotic hums.

I first applied for the job online, in a panicked binge of blotters: I and two other rodents had holed up in my small apartment, chewing on the carpet and hiding from the chemical fog outside. My senses came to me momentarily, puffing on my stooge. I can be dazed and functioning at the same time but what on earth is my function? I looked down at the carpet I had been gnawing on and the two rats next to me began giggling and choking on the strings. I too can giggle and smile at this chemical rebirth, but I shall not remain stale.

'I am a functioning rat!'

Oops!

I said that out loud. The tall rat stood up and ran to the windows, swiftly switching off the lights.

The room was moved by darkness as a black veil hovered above us. The veil! No lights in the room anymore. The rat pulled on the little cord and a light switched on. The light again! The veil no more! I fell to the ground and began laughing uncontrollably, before picking up my limp body and running my cold fingers over the mechanical keyboard.

Name. Surname. Experience. Political affiliation.

Wait, that too?

After a dreadful phone interview, where I fumbled the girl's attempts to question me and repeatedly cut her off, I was invited for an in-person interview. I stood in front of my mirror for some hours, pacing back and forth. I wore a soft but slick sweater. Gray cardigan. I took it off. An old designer shirt, a family heirloom. Too relaxed? A tie around it then. Too formal. Thankfully, I followed my gut instinct and donned a suit and tie. I doubt I

would have been let in were I to have chosen my uncle's old shirt. To get to the hotel you'd cross a shallow bridge, unlit and desolate to keep off unwanted strays. Somehow, however, freshly trimmed and resume in hand, a stray got through. I slapped myself in the face a few times, took a sip from a water bottle at the friendly price of three euro fifty, and stepped inside the building. I waited for some minutes before I was escorted to the lounge. I heard her overpriced crystal hooves swiping on the marble floor.

"Would you like something to drink before we start?"

"No. It's ok."

"I really think you should have something to drink."

Emily signalled to an older man wiping the tap behind the bar. Her lips moved but she made no audible sound. A water, she clicked. I sat down and mechanically sipped on the glass. Immediately I was bombarded by meaningless questions, dull words eternally conjoined. We're flowing, I thought. In return, I fired back the subtext of her own statements, only slightly twisted. I saw her shoes and the way she smiled at specific bullet-points; all this time to get here and on autopilot. I felt like a little kid again, on the podium, we are all winners; despite none of my kicks landing. I bounced back. She was enjoying the conversation, auto to auto. And then Henry came.

"This is Henry, the general director of our chain."

"Nice to meet you, Henry, I am Paul."

I stood up and shook his hand. Wait. That sounds too American. He agreed. My name is Gus then, I said. He sat down on the couch and melted on one of the yellow cushions Okay Gus, he muttered, he continued, but I heard only grunts. He grunted again and extended his slimy index finger. He pushed on the cheap frame of his glasses to readjust them on his soft nose. After a few back-and-forth mumbles, I snapped back to life.

“What is the most important thing that you believe you’ll gain working here?”

Money. I said, something about experiencing the weight of a more rigid schedule and using it as a stepping stone to discipline. Money. I got too confident and mentioned how loose things really were back at the resort and how I expected it to be entirely different here. Henry didn’t like that.

“We are a fun team.” He patted Emily’s shoulder.

“We maintain professionalism, but we are loose and easy-going.”

I nodded.

I get it, man. You’re fun. He kept going. I took a big sip of water and some of it trailed off into my beard. I wiped it with the collar of my shirt and interrupted him.



Alright. Truly the beginnings of a functioning rat. Inside the wheel and ready to get after it, to chase. A new place is always an opportunity to start anew, the fact it was flat only meant I could run faster. On days when I couldn't work, I'd take long walks inside my mind and vandalise everything in my wake. Other times I was dragged down just by a filthy mirage. Two olive tints I had seen reflected one too many times and a curve that froze my gaze without suspicion or effort. I had gone mad before of course and punched the walls and fought with mirrors. But that time it was different. I was looking at a painting,

trying my best to be pretentious. She walked by and only slightly grazed my shoulder; that stalked my mind for hours. I looked and saw her body and maybe stupidly entrapped myself with lame romantics. And then what was reflected was not mutual. Zero. I walked away from the idea. I have gone mad before, of course. Two screws; blunt and in the eyes. I'd keep only my third eye open. My one eye guided me correctly as I stumbled towards a bar. Two beers, please. One for me and one for after. I sat down with a redhead after catching her eyelash glistening with the corner of my eye. I was surprised by the novelty. The place was evenly lit, yellow candles on the stalls and a red carpet covering the floor. The tables and the chairs were all wooden and old, antique. The bar was on the ground floor and if you walked a little further there was a cinema. They played the soundtracks of the movies. The redhead talked. Their largest speaker was on my left and I could hear just fine but I was breaking my head, trying to figure out where I knew the song from.

"Have you been here long?"

Oh right. We're supposed to be talking, flirting even. What was that song, and when did I come here?

"2 or 3 months. Give or take."

"Are you excited about going back home for the holidays?"

"I am not going back."

She was stunned for a second. Then she continued to blurt out questions, statements, and observations. When she waited for me to speak, I was almost annoyed by her silence and waiting. Alright. I am no artist. Interrupt me! Go! She didn't. And then she talked about herself. She knew all the people I knew. The works I read, the films I saw, she knew. I like that too, she said. Me too! That was irritating. I guess when you're fixed to be vexed it happens no matter the circumstance. Okay. She gave me more space to speak. Maybe in my mother tongue, I'd be less philosophical. I blurted out my own nonsense. Two more beers, please. One for me and one for red. We went outside. She and I

could have everything in common and still it would make no difference. My relationship with mirrors was a tumultuous one, after all. I moved closer and pulled her tiny waist towards me. My hands hovered over her hips; my electrons were repulsed by hers. She put her cold lips over mine. And then to the apartment. It was cold there, but she was tight. The room was small, the bed was big enough, and the blinds shut. Nothing special. As I said, I have gone mad before. But I saw nothing there worth losing my mind over. It's not like I had spent little time picking up after my passenger. The brain fluids oozing from my nostrils and to the cobble, I followed the slimy residue and scooped it up. Before I left, I anxiously stuffed my bag and nozzle. Ten pairs of white socks, ten lines; important. Fold it, stuff it, sort it and snort up. A few notebooks and maybe some pens. I opened my phone only to check my flight number, it smirked at me and showed me pictures of the past. You could go mad a million times and it wouldn't matter. I looked around the flat, the one I'd leave to fate. I remember what happened on that couch and where her purse fell underneath the crevice. How I kneeled to get it and how we fell on the cushions after. My finger hovered over the pictures. Then, as I was leaving, it came to me. That's a mistake most make, not committing to the truth. Bite that red pill and let it dissolve in your mouth, numb your jaw. After, you'll feel like shit. But at least you know. It's not brunettes or redheads or Marias or Jennies. Half is fugazi energies. The other half is a mirror you're holding up. If you're fixing to bleed you will bleed all over, no matter the place, no matter the person. What hasn't even entered your head once can trample it underfoot when you least expect it. Because that pull isn't real, it is intangible. Free-flowing and loose. Drawn to a mirage; a brief shift toward calmer living. When the noise stops, you notice all the blood that's gone into your arm, as it falls limp and betrays you- the mirror drops and crashes into shards. People who wear glasses don't see the frame despite it protruding from their noses. You get one bad spot on your sight and if it doesn't change,

you adapt and get used to this slightly different lens. Some pixels die. At least then you know where you're standing. You can relax your arm back into its socket, drop that mirror and just let it happen.

The blotters turned out too powerful to be a sustainable ritual. A few drops and even the most stable man lost control in a matter of hours. Although morphing into an animal appeared a somewhat attractive social activity, the weight on my conscience was far too great to ignore. I tried to dismiss it, but it stalked me around like a chemical burn, oozing puss and painful to the touch. That either occupies your mind or you pour alcohol on it and disinfect it. Maybe pick away at it after, to get a nice scar. I got tired of my restlessness going to waste and started working night shifts.

"You are responsible for the safety of this entire building and its residents."

"**What are the dangers?"** I said.

Emily laughed and swiped at her nose before pushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"When you put it like that...It's mostly strays. Maybe a few drunks. Breaking up a commotion, a party, someone smoking in the room.."

"So, nothing too crazy."

The lobbies were completely emptied out at around 12:00 every night. I'd close the tabs, do the final check-ins, wire up the CCTV, and lay on the chair. Emily's shift was during the day, being manager, so she always clocked out hours before midnight. After knocking out the basic nightly tasks, there wasn't much more to do. I bought a few books, chose one at random each night, and read a few pages. For every five pages I read, I dropped down on the marble floor and pumped up my arms doing push-ups. It was enough to keep me occupied, that and a few fungi I had made a habit of snacking on when ogling away at the surveillance monitors. Soon after, the green eyes which had so doomed me to a deadlocked state became insignificant as I saw

them less and less every day. I'd come back home at seven and she'd be gone by eight. Besides that, I was back to worrying about real issues instead of made-up flings. I was making upwards of 100 a day and was putting most of it aside for my rent, excluding miscellaneous activities; free-diving, day-long trips, and excursions with other winos. Still, what had happened back at the resort, what I had done, had left a few loose ends. Possibly the biggest being that l owed the equivalent of a year's worth of night shifts to a few pricks from back home. But from what I had seen and my dealings with them, they were island chumps. Not overly bright and socially isolated. Geographically, I had gotten off clean; many miles away. At one point, I fully intended to return to the island and pay them back. But this thought vanished as soon as it appeared. They did not have the resources or the time to come to me, and realistically, it wasn't worth it.

I got paid weekly and it was all in cash; weird for a hotel in the flatlands but of no burden whatsoever to me. Payday was on Friday. I always put the envelope straight into my wallet, and then in my pants. I wore that bulge with pride on the metro back, and after, relieved myself of the weight, tossing paper to bets, dives, and shit. I was ogling away at the monitor when she walked in. She looked like a fallen angel. Me and Elvis, a stocky middle-aged Croatian, were both staring. While Elvis bore no resemblance to the King excluding namesake, his small talk late at night was a good time waster. And his first thought upon seeing her was quite like mine.

"She looks devastated, no?"

"She does." I poked his shoulder and warned him of the other guests coming.

Thankfully, I was not the only one who noticed. Of course, they knew. She stood limp, leaning against her metal briefcase and letting out exasperated sighs seconds at a time. Her big brown eyes had completely melted into the rest of her face as dark circles enveloped her tired skin. Normally, she would

be the prettiest girl in the room. Long dark hair, a beautiful body, and a smile, which although I didn't see, I was sure was pristine. She silently approached the counter and calmly rested her fingers on top of my desk.

"Hi, how can I help you?"

"Hello." she sighed.

"Checking in?"

"Yes."

She tossed me her wrinkly passport and I typed her data into our system. Mara. Big brother surveillance: personal data, credit data, and whereabouts for prestigious clients and guests accessible in two seconds and three computer clicks. Mara from Spain. And she was the most prestigious client. Not at first, no; but appearances often trick us into believing we met a different person than who truly was there. After I painstakingly filled out the form, I tried to follow guidelines and sell her our services and the attractions in the city, but she cut me off before I could flood her with my marketing flair.

"No, thank you. I've been here before."

"Well then, great to have you back, and enjoy your stay"

"Your hair looks nice by the way."

"Thank you."

I sensed she gave me such a compliment only to make up for her deadpan silence and brief answers as my hair looked more like a blonde skunk had fallen dead on top of my head. I handed her the keys and she faded away in the background. A few hours passed and more clients walked in and mindlessly rolled their expensive luggage on the marble floor and came up to the counter and barked orders. Most wanted their accommodation to be accompanied by an extra flair, which separated them from the peasants. Rose bou-

quets, chocolate cookies, and sparkling water. I eloquently dumped everything in the trolley and dragged it to the heavy-duty elevator, up to the 12th floor. I knocked on the door only once so as to not startle the pig inside.

“What?” he groaned.

“Your luggage, Sir” I whispered.

I put the bags in his room, one by one. He wanted the one a little bit to the left, another one a bit to the right. After the trolley was empty, he looked at me and smiled before extending his hand to give me a tip. He flicked the bill between his thumb and index finger, and I grabbed it quickly before he could change his mind. I left the trolley in the lobby and walked along the hall, there were cameras everywhere and I did not want to flex my tip, especially because I was supposed to share it with the rest of the crew. I anxiously reached into my cramped pocket and took out the paper. He had given me a dollar and was it any other day, I would have greatly appreciated it. On that day, I didn’t. A dollar? For about fifty kilograms of baggage being brought up twelve floors. From an American, nonetheless. I checked the time and saw my shift had ended. I thought about going home. Back to those green eyes. Only to somehow be passively pestered, only by a look or graze, entirely on my own accord. I thought back to the woman who checked in. For some reason, I felt like we had a lot of things in common. It’s weird and hard to explain but I saw her. I could look through and see the truth, because it was on my mind. Because I wondered why people could not see it in me. All the running about and raging and crying and smashing and drinking but in the end, remaining still. She held a tight grip on her suitcase and made sure it didn’t move. What is powerful and virile enough to render a person light dim. The most resounding silence, the one of isolation. I had to talk to her. I went to her room and shyly knocked on her door. She opened it and spoke immediately.

“**I am sorry about before.”**

“Please, no reason to apologise Ms. Mara. I just came to see if the room is to your liking.”

“Can you drop the shtick?”

“Excuse me?”

“These pre-thought-out niceties.”

“It’s either hotel shtick or lousy jokes. And it’s my second week working here so...”

“So, hotel shtick?”

“Yes ma’am.”

She slowly sipped on a tall glass of wine, wetting her cracked lips.

“I am sorry if I am overstepping. But Elvis and I were both somewhat distraught by you.”

“Elvis?” she snickered

“Oh, Elvis is the other guy behind the counter. He and I agreed that you looked devastated.”

“Really? I mean, I am but fuck. I just hoped it wouldn’t be so visible.”

“Well...”

Her face lit up when she felt her phone vibrate in her pocket.

“**Good luck!”** I said, before taking another sip of water

This never happened. I put the crumpled up dollar I got from the American tourist in my pocket, and went back down. I joked with Elvis about our guest’s generosity, how he’s probably more generous with the money he spends on food. My chatter with Elvis was interrupted by a screeching guest behind the revolving doors. She bolted inside and collapsed against the wall. Elvis talked and tried to calm her down but she kept screaming. I walked outside and saw “Mara” stretched out on the floor, squashed by the weight of her own fall. My phone rang, and I couldn’t bear the silence, so I answered right away. It was my roommate, asking what time I got off work. I hang up almost immediately. Energies can flow through cellular; I know that now. And how

I'd like to not be so violently steered by simple thoughts and sentiments, minute actions that are insignificant in the grand scheme of things. The woman was in such unbearable pain that only turning herself into pulp seemed like a feasible solution. I was melting and flirted with the blender, and only saved by the perspective. The reminder of fleeting romantics, which however heavy, are the essence of day to day. I called my friends, but they didn't stay on the line. Some remain eternally drenched in pessimism – as life strengthens their sentiments, compounding their grey positions. A steel baton to the head, oversteering on rainy road - an angel splattered on the dirty ground – they'll need convincing.

But I can try to make them understand. I can talk of love and life, and of the bipolar spectrum which we all inhabit – our highs and lows, the struggles, our capacity to open up or brace and close down. I see that woman, her head mangled, and her curly hair made graphic by the bits of brain stuck in between the strands. Just like them, like me. I thanked Elvis for remaining calm and managing to contain the situation. He nodded, knowing that something significant had just happened.

"At least that's not you down there." he said, before reaching out to light my cigarette.

TO ALL GODS AVAILABLE

A few weeks before I moved, I heard my upstairs neighbours gossiping about a girl, supposedly coming in and out of the building. They would always ramble endlessly, either stupidly not knowing I could hear them or, dickishly not caring. The girl in question was a friend of mine. I had met her on the island, where she visited the resort to present "novel methods of sustainable

tourism". For the training I received under her, I got a certification and a treatable case of mononucleosis. She had been telling me about the company that employed her, a members-only club operating in most financial capitals of the world. She had been working with them, mainly on the L & D department, training newcomers in the ways of luxurious service. It sounded like complete and utter bullshit, enough so to entail good money. I packed light, mostly because I was eager for a wardrobe change but really because I woke up at 9:30 for a flight at 11:00 and, scrambling to pick up the pieces and make it to the airport, I could not find my duffel bag. I was in downtown Amsterdam by 12:00 and picked up some gas and coffee to start the day. I was to go to the club for my 'induction'.

Inside, the place was dimly light by canvas bulbs fastened on the walls, and the walls themselves were decorated with tiles, some with dark blue details and golden accents, and others, lighter in hue. I introduced myself to the clerk and sat down in one of the leather chairs. On the coffee table beside me I noticed a few wrinkled-up newspapers around a much newer, heavier leather pamphlet.

The page inside wrote:

WELCOME,

YOU ARE EXACTLY WHERE YOU NEED TO BE

My initial thought was to deflect but I couldn't shake off a feeling of warmth. Maybe it was the texture of the leather against my fingers coupled with the chair on my back, or maybe I was disoriented after the flight, and wondering what series of events had led me there, only to be reminded– at least for now, I am exactly where I need to be. After a few minutes of staring at the leather pamphlet, I took the elevator to the fourth floor. I pushed on the brass revolving door and saw Jesse there, greeting people and inviting them to sit down.

The room was neatly prepped with jugs of coffee, juices, and an assortment of pastries on the table. I nodded and awkwardly smiled for a fraction of a second, before sitting down. I noticed a girl sitting in front of me and saw her tattoo, stretching from her neck to her forearm and thought to myself how ironic it was that I was worried, nervously pulling down on my polo shirt in the waiting room. Jesse wasn't exactly the fastest or most efficient presenter and before, that had not been a problem as it was summer on the island, where time flows differently. But here we were, some months later in Amsterdam, learning and developing, and I closed my eyes for a second, jetlagged and I opened them the next -

- smoking a cigarette on lunch break, working the bar to cap off two sleepless weeks, deep in the weeds. I made my way to the main bar where Gianni was cutting grapefruit slices for the mise-en-place. I saw the muscles on his nose flutter slightly and slightly pushed my elbow into his stomach. He moved back a few centimetres and put his hand in my pocket. It was a Friday night and while we weren't expecting it to be incredibly busy, fate was offended by our expectation and got bitchy, moaning in our ears in the form of hundreds of people, long queues, and 'special' runners. We still had a few minutes before service and that was time enough for a bathroom visit. I powdered my nose and fixed my hair before going to the roof for a cigarette. Hyper, and wanting to talk, my fingers hovered over my phone, as I swiped through my contacts looking for a friend to share the cigarette with. I jumped as my phone began to vibrate, its loud letters on the screen displaying -

FATHER

I put my phone in my pocket and headed back down in time for service. The stairs were always the best to take, especially going down the building, as it was almost certain you would not run into anybody. Most of the orders would come in through a small printer tightly holstered down to the stand, next to the speed rail. That meant that I did not really have to look at any members, speak to them, or really assist them in any away aside from mixing their drink. Exactly what I needed on a day like that. Gianni was much faster than me and especially skiing, there was no comparison. He'd line up five or six different glasses, hold a shaker in one hand, begin pouring straight down the line while shaking, open the shaker in some showy way like elbowing it as he flips the bottle and then serve effortlessly. I would wonder seeing him, why I was there – only to be reminded when service would work perfect, and cooperation with Gianni made his and my job faster, where we'd dispense ten drinks a minute. When there were people to talk to or tend to, I would flutter up, use some filler words for lousy sentences and control the crowd. Time was going by quite fast, and that is often the case when an eight-hour shift is broken up into smaller thirty-minute intervals of bathroom breaks. I had seen Jesse only two or three hours before, when she had warned me that I would have to be "extra careful today" as despite it being my last shift before leave, it was still an "important and core" event for the club. I nodded and rushed through as I had other things to do; really, I was just going for a smoke with Gianni and some of the kitchen hands. Outside, Gianni proudly showed off his new apartment, and although I could not see much on account of his broken screen, I noticed the euro sign glaring, displaying a price low enough for a scamp like him. The others congratulated him and made jokes about him not being able to hold down a roommate or broken heating in his new place, it was all good fun and delivered in a mixture of Italian and broken English, borrowing words, and talking hands. I felt a slight nudge on my shoulder and looked back to see her, her sleeves rolled up to show the snake's tail smoothly leading to her neck where the patterns on its tongue gleamed with charcoal ink. Working there I had come to learn that appearances can be deceiving but

in most cases they were not. I met Athena after having met all the staff, including Europe management, and that is why I was quite startled when she caught me smoking a spliff on the roof, with probably the same idea in mind. She approached calmly and made no audible sound as she walked over the tiles. We smoked and closed the club, but only after she dragged me to the bakery to divide the last doughballs and show me her latest rendition of "club lemon-pie." She took my hand and made me crouch to see the dish under the light.

"They're not okay with a smooth mess dumped on the plate. Even if it's delicious." she said.

"So, what do we do?" she added, looking at me, eager for a reply.

"What do you do?" I spoke, letting out a nervous chuckle.

"I take the same exact ingredients. I prepare them the same exact way and present them differently. The crumbs nest the meringue, its protected. Sourness is isolation, the lemon bites are distanced from the crackers."

"I can see it."

"You're an idiot.

But you're probably not seeing what I'm seeing.

It is deconstruction, it is the creating of new meaning through old things.

Re-framing."

She said, before pointing to her head.

"I can see it."

"You cannot see it. You didn't even notice my underwear in your pocket."

I put my hand in my back pocket and felt the patterns on the linen. I was surprised by her. Excited even. By her wearing linen panties, but most importantly, because they were now in my pocket.

That night, I went back to hers where I made my best attempts to not step on her roommate's paintings, meticulously drying on the floor. In her room, before the door could close back on her, she rushed toward me, frantically clawing away through the layers of my clothing before exposing me to what I can only describe as an enlightening experience, both physically and spiritually. I would see her before or after work, and on the rare occasions we had a shift overlap, we would share a roach on the roof, each complaining about our own piece of the shit cake. When Jesse found out, she made sure I knew she was upset, not because I was seeing Athena but because our situation was in direct breach of company guidelines and our failure to report it was an offense. I tried to speak to her, calling her multiple times before eventually going to her office where I found Athena with an HR rep ready to declare our "relationship". Her decision ensured that nothing boiled over and our jobs were left intact, with Jesse getting a slap on the wrist for involving herself in people management, a department not under her domain. Outside, on break, I felt a slight nudge on my shoulder and looked back to see her, her sleeves rolled up to show the snake's tail smoothly leading to her neck, where the patterns on its tongue gleamed with charcoal ink.

Athena reached out to me, smirking, and put her hand in my back pocket.

"Underwear?" I asked, jokingly.

"**Something better.**

Gianni has some as well." She added.

"Oh... It's going to be a fun service."

Athena nodded and walked back through the staff entrance, her oversized trousers dragging on the floor. I looked back to see Gianni smiling and winking at me, before gesturing for me to go back inside.

On the fourth floor, a girl managing the event informed me of eight hundred people in the waiting list and another four hundred on the main floor. I went to the back of house to ensure that everything was ready and by ready, I mean pre-mixed. Nobody wanted to spend time flinging shakers around on a

busy Saturday night with 400 of these shmucks leaning against the bar, tripping over the stools, and waiting to order. When Gianni came back up, I was already in the shit, having to hear a waitress nag about the trolleys of plates blocking the hall, while trying to take an order from a drunk German with a heavy accent.

“Hey man.” Gianni said, appearing out of the blue

“Where have you been?”

“The dishwasher is broken.” He replied.

“Great, talk to her.” I said and pointed him to the waitress.

Apparently, the German was told by his tour manager that “for the club there is a special currency of coins that you use to access services.” I reassured him that “such a thing is not the case” and thought to myself how he was likely being scammed, before biting my tongue to muffle my chuckle.

He looked at me, quite disturbed, before extending his hand to show me a dozen black coins. They were made of wood and of quite good quality but a scam, nonetheless. I felt Gianni’s hand frantically tapping my shoulder and turned my back to face him, but he went to the front, took the German’s order, and swiftly served him, albeit it with no payment. He then turned back to me.

“We’ll get him later.”

“I don’t mind.” I said.

“Neither do I, but I do need my boost.”

I put my hand in my back pocket and dropped it on the ground along with the strainer on my hand and pointed at it. He crouched to pick it up.

“2 minutes tops.” He said.

The place was big. Big enough to get lost. Especially for a first timer. The rooms and halls all had a distinct spin to them but remained coherent, centred around art-deco architecture. Most furniture was leather with brass details but there was also plenty of exotic wood for chairs and tables and the armoires, where we kept the wine. I served a few more people, smelling the beer that

dripped from the gold keg on the brass drain and wishing I could down my drinks with all these people, enjoying the party with them, vacationing and "living in the moment". Of course, in my case, work is what allows for that. The momentary stress, the reward after, the calmness of it. At least you're not a bum. I thought, "I need to get a bump". It was often like this, under "high stress" scenarios, where the number of people spread out to the street below. And once I got skiing and got in the groove, it was fun.

I turned my back on the crowd to check on the counter, where I had left the cutting board and some grapefruits, because while we had remembered to pre-mix the cocktail, we had forgotten to prep the garnishes and, for clients like the ones we had, presentation is key.

Before I could lift the knife off the plastic, I saw Gianni again peak out from the corner, this time slower and more heavily. He put his hand on the wall and leaned against it.

"Que paso maricón?" I spoke.

"**That's Spanish, man."** He grunted.

I heard him but did not pay much attention as I was trying to get the perfect slice of grapefruit, not too thick but not too light as it could get stringy, mixed with the ice, or flopped around with the straw.

"What bag was this?"

"**What?"** I replied, holding the top of the fruit on one hand and the slicing knife in the other

"This is not good brother."

"What are you saying bro?" I spoke, now slightly worried.

I turned to look at him and saw him standing on shaky legs, his body weight fiddling back and forth, entirely sure that he was not skiing, nor "in the groove".

"That wasn't snow, right?" he asked, wobbly and pale.

The bag wasn't mine. It was Athena's. But we had a busy service in front of us. And by we, with Gianni rendered a cripple, I mean me. I had shit to do. I called in the same waitress that was nagging in my ear before and gave her a real job to dump her passion on.

"He's had a terrible food allergy." I shouted.

"Get him downstairs and make sure he gets in a cab, please"

I grabbed the nearby floor manager and ensured him that I will be reporting this to HR, as my colleague, despite having reported his allergies to kitchen faculty has been

"Poisoned on duty by his staff dinner!"

I thought the extra flair would take attention away from the fact that I had involuntarily and outside my knowledge, given the wrong substance to my colleague, which instead of awakening his work horse, rendered him to a limp paraplegic. I thought about telling Gianni that it wasn't his bag, but it was not mine either, and Athena had just been fucking around, like she usually does, just on the wrong day. But I finished that shift knee-deep in the mud, rewarded with a migraine that felt like it had a red bulge on my forehead growing with it and a mind that was silently floating on account of my skiing accident. Despite that, before clocking out, I wanted to make some time for my daily smoke on the roof. We had closed the roof as it was one of the halls operating only seasonally but really, it was the best part of the entire establishment. From there, you could see the whole city, which, due to the lack of tall buildings and flat geography, stretched as far as the eye could see, even in the dark. I would always go there, sneak under the canvas and make myself a drink, or coffee – enjoy some music and puff for a little bit. I took the stairs and when I finally reached the roof, all I could think of was a drink for a proper nightcap, and, wondered if the bottle of spiced rum I had wedged under the barroom stand was still there.

On the roof, I snuck under the canvas once more and retrieved my favourite bottle. It wasn't so much that I wanted a drink for alcohol's sake, but that spice, mixed with some coke, was like a pat on the back – especially after a shift like that. Behind the canvas, I heard some voices which was peculiar in December, as the roof was off access, even to members. It was a man, and a girl, which I immediately perceived by her annoying giggle. I heard a splash, the man raise his voice, and the girl laugh, and realized that they had jumped in the pool, before crouching under the canvas to see what was happening. I saw her hair, wet, and stuck to her back. I walked a little bit closer to the pool, still on the side, and saw her neck glistening in the blue light of the pool, the snake screeching, its tongue out and it hissing at me, taunting me. I turned my head to see the man, a 40-year-old something failed DJ, the one that had been playing in my part of the bar. I turned to see her again, and saw her thighs, her legs coming in and out of the water, her body flowing in the blue, and her swimming towards him. His body looked like one of a geriatric turtle, even waist-deep in the water, I saw his hunched back, his loose and narrow shoulders, his slimy arms. I thought to dramatically drag him to the pool's steps, to the outer edge, and stomp his face over the curb. Or better yet, to dive into the pool, like a raging bull, and drown him in the chlorine water, but no, I never was a good swimmer. After a few seconds of looking at them going to town, my vision began to get blurry and with that, I immediately ran to the elevator to avoid any life-altering mistake.

Downstairs, I made a coffee for myself, having to painstakingly put together the coffee machine again but simultaneously doing a favour to the morning shift. What I couldn't fathom is that Athena, the wild girl, the one to do such things - decided to not only poison my colleague with an unwanted substance on rush hour, but also give that burden of dosing him to me. And if that wasn't that enough, on the same day I was fucked because of her, she cheated on me. With the DJ. I couldn't kill the DJ. I wouldn't touch Athena, not like that, but I also wouldn't let it go.

I broke a few glasses before deciding to call Jesse.

The phone rang two times before she replied.

I made sure to not sound angry, as things between us had been rocky before, given her finding me the job and then Athena happening and all that.

“What do you want?”

“I’m sorry.

First, I’m sorry.”

“Not good enough.”

“I know.”

“You don’t know shit. Why did you call me?’

“This is work-related.”

“The fuck it is. Do you need some learning and development? Some teaching? Some manners maybe?”

“I am being 100% serious, as much as I can be.”

“Go on then.”

“Today, Athena dosed Gianni.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“What can I mean? She administered narcotics to him, without his permission, in the workplace, during working hours.”

“Gus.

This is serious. This is not a joke.”

“This is why I called you.”

“It is serious. It is also not my department. Remember?”

“Yes, but you can report it.”

“You also can.”

“I cannot. I took ten bathroom breaks just tonight for the big show.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Do not use the lord’s name in vain.” I spoke, before realizing I should be serious.

“Listen, I’ll call them, okay.”

“You can’t call them for something like this.

You must go there.”

Surprisingly, Jesse did just that. In two weeks time, time I spent looking at the wall and smoking cigarettes with the windows closed, Jesse had reported the incident to HR, which then followed up, and not surprisingly, found a large amount of Ketamine in powder form in Athena’s locker. Not the best ingredient a pastry chef can bring to work.

Gianni had of course not pressed any charges against Athena, seeing that, we were all “friends”. He believed I had gotten back together with Jesse, and in effort to oust Athena, had given up on her completely. I had done just that, minus the dating Jesse again part. But I saw it fit, what I did. Moreso, I was annoyed by Gianni not being annoyed, by him not caring that we were literally sabotaged on one of our most important nights. I do not say this to be a company man. We have boots on the ground. Money to make. Commission to earn. I did not reply to any of Athena’s calls of course, I knew better.

I took the first morning shift in a while, wanting to spend a little less time prowling around at night, like a wicked curse. Outside, in the smoking area, someone approached me from behind and poked me in the back. I was surprised to see Gianni who had also only been working nightshifts, allegedly since he was fourteen years old, puffing on a tightly rolled cigarette under the light of day.

“What’s up?”

“Hey brother.” He spoke, exhaling some smoke.

“You know what happened?” he added, ashing his cigarette on the floor.

I smiled, before seeing his serious face and reverting to my normal, mostly un-emotive mask.

“I know exactly what happened.” I said, decisively.

“I told you about the cameras fucker.” Gianni said and flapped his arms up and down, frantically.

“They’ve got one exactly above the bar, where we’re mixing cocktails –

And dropping bags.”

He added.

“It’s not about the cameras. The incident was reported.” I told him.

“That Nina? What’s her name? The short one? The one that put me in a cab after that K-hole.”

“I don’t know.” I lied.

“Then it’s fucking Jesse, porco Dio.”

“It’s not Jesse.”

“How do you know?”

“Jesse’s never here at night. She wouldn’t know. She’d have no idea.”

Working morning shifts was especially more difficult for me. On one side, it is lighter work; an Americano is easier on the soul than a neat whiskey. Some people came just for a coffee and computer work and due to the relaxing aesthetics of the place, were quite successful in doing so. The weather was not great often, and winter was heavy, but the seldom times the sun did shine; it would illuminate the whole room and reflect off the gold details in the furniture. On days like this, a certain tranquillity would embrace the entire building and most complaints and hiccups seemed and sounded inconsequential in the grand scheme of a weekend day. The bad side of working in the morning, at least for me, was being consistent with the latte art. I had spent most sum-

mers shaking espresso shots in ice to serve the Mediterranean favourite but had not yet been accustomed to the European way of milk and foam of all different types of milk-like liquids. A friend on the island had told me that oat and the rest of these "fake" milks were a lot harder to froth and steam. To me, it mattered little, as I ended up burning the milk almost always, soy or not. I stood at the front of the counter for a little bit while seeing the printer apparently spaz out and begin printing orders by the second. I remember hearing that annoying sound of confirmation, after the trail had just ended, the paper stopping just short of the small blades. I tapped Gianni in and took a step back, refilling some of the glasses and taking others to the washers. When I went back to the bar, I saw Gianni, frothing milk in one hand, and texting on his phone with the other. I saw a ticket for iced coffee coming and promptly revelled in the fact I could shine again, before preparing a shot, next to Gianni. I heard his phone buzz and it vibrate, along with the caps on the table. Instinctually, my head turned, and I saw it. I cannot be exactly sure what I saw, as it is oftentimes difficult to remember in situations like this. It was maybe a colour pattern, some specific pixels on the screen that I had gotten far too used to and could recognize instantly. Her picture. Or, it was the number, nine eats eight, it's bigger, that's what I learned at school. Her number was eerily easy to remember. 6981089889

I heard the buzzing sound, that of the phone, the printer screeching in the distance – shouting for more paper.

I saw Nina, or whatever her name is, the short cocktail waitress, run and balance a tray but it looked as if she was running on the moon, in slow-motion. Most importantly, I heard the espresso grounds pop, the coffee burn, as I had not pressed the button. I turned to see Gianni, on the other side of the machine, frothing milk and signing along while doing it. I cannot attach sense to what I did. I cannot be exactly sure of what happened.

I only remember, the smell of burnt coffee, and it being intoxicating. I now finally believed that the coffee grounds from Ethiopia were significantly superior than to their European counterparts.

More and more tickets came, the waitress began tapping on the desk and Gianni was still singing. I looked around what I thought could very well be my chance. A solid platform for what my future could be. A real life in the flatlands, with a real job, with real opportunities, a real career in which I could manage from making drinks to managing teams. I hate the bar. I gave it up. I couldn't even froth milk correctly. I remember wanting to be an artist, living a bohemian life. Instead, I was in Europe, living off allowances and shitty pay-checks, making coffees and mopping the floor. I thought I was ready for it. I wasn't. I'd like to think I grew up with class. My father would play jazz for us on Sundays. I went to a good school. My parents never separated, not voluntarily. I was writing all the way through high-school to college. But here I was, not writing, making drinks alongside a bum. An Italian bum with a nice accent, but a bum nonetheless. A bum who had made an example of me on my first days there, who had used the authority he had over me, the "knowledge". What knowledge was that?

That of bartending, barista-art, latte-art. Japanese teas and Irish coffees, and a hundred different types of milk that aren't milk. He whistled as he frothed the milk, played with the coffee-machine and replied to Athena's text with his free-hand. That was enough for me to muster up the courage, it was enough for me to throw it all away. And to be honest, maybe I was looking for an excuse ever since he first busted my balls. I unbuckled the portafilter out of the espresso machine and swung it diagonally across his nose. He dropped the hot milk all over his turquoise shirt as his arms flailed in the air, looking to somehow defend himself. I did not think. I just did. I crashed my forehead against his nose and grabbed him by the back of the neck. The machine has an extension, one Gianni was using seconds ago, to steam milk. I thought of using it, before realizing I was holding his limp, unconscious body and anything more, would be too much.

I thought I had a few seconds before Nina began screaming, and explaining blood and milk, and a presumably concussed Gianni would prove a little more challenging. I dropped my company card on the floor and quickly

jogged to the back of house, something quite common on rush-hour, nobody batted an eye. I was at my studio apartment by 12:00 and after drinking the hottest coffee I've probably ever boiled, jolted to the airport and was there by 1:20.

By the time I was at the gates, past-checkout and still travelling light, my phone had been ringing inside my pocket so much, that my fingernails began to bleed, as I painstakingly tried to mute it, over my jeans. Some calls were Athena and Gianni, but most were from the club and the manager. I didn't really check my phone in that time, but I knew. Gianni, specifically, I knew, as I had a different ringtone, given the times he'd call for me to cover him, or handle some other dipshit line. Even as I was boarding the plane, I could feel my ears ringing still – the printer going off, and the texts on his phone glinting.

When I finally arrived on the island, I immediately felt a sense of security, one exaggerated by the sound of the waves smashing against the anchored boats, and the sound of seagulls, bolting through the air. I checked my phone only for a second, only to remember I had no urge whatsoever to come into contact with reality, and tossing it in the sea. I must have waited for less than ten minutes when my brother arrived with his old Wrangler, meticulous and on time as always. He opened the door for me and passed me the reigns of the radio, allowing me to play music. It was a welcome change of pace, after the chaos that was my shift, and the blender that was the flight. But it was rare we had times like this, with me being abroad and him staying home, to see my brother, listen to music together while he drifts through dirt-roads, looking at me whilst doing so, as to say;

Where is your licence, little brother?

I was too stoned to get it. He'd say. But not today. Today, we're listening to music in the car. My music, in my brother's car. How great. He took his right hand off the steering wheel and propped up a small drawer with an ashtray, before offering me one of his cigarettes.

"Golds?" I spoke, for the first time in the car.

"Like grandma." He laughed.

“Yeah, nice, like grandma.”

“All others are getting too expensive now.

Doesn’t matter.

I need to quit anyway.” He spoke.

“You and me both brother.

How’s things with Irene?”

“Good. Good. Good.” He spoke, stringing the words together.

“How long have you two been together anyway?”

“3.

No, 4, four years.”

He said, looking off in the distance.

“That’s good man.”

“You know I know about what happened, right?”

“What?” I spoke, thinking the stench from the city had worn off.

“Me and Jesse speak regularly. She’s doing some work for Dad, remember?”

“Oh.” I sighed.

“Oh’s right bro. What the fuck happened?”

“This guy I was working with, was seeing this girl as I was seeing.”

He looked at me, and then over his shoulder, before pulling over.

He tapped his wristwatch on his thigh, in tune with the song we were listening to, before he spoke.

“Well, he’s in the hospital now, I don’t know where you were aiming at bro, or what you were thinking, because now, his nose in his skull.”

“Shit.”

“Shit’s right. These things fly over borders bro.”

“Not if he doesn’t press charges.” I said, mostly to reassure myself.

“He’s going to press charges. You fucked up.

Again.”

My brother was right. I didn’t think to argue. I had fucked up. And it was a fuck-up after all these other smaller fuck-ups, the fuck-up to fuck everything up.

At home, the front door was slightly open as the locked gates downstairs were enough to keep away strays. I stepped inside and was immediately showered by a warm light, which led to me just melting on the couch in front of me. My father came into the room, and I got up to greet him, but he sat down across from me, almost immediately. I tried to swallow the knot in my throat and speak. He did not let me.

“Ah. I know already.” He said, his voicing echoing throughout the room.

“Here’s what is going to happen. You are going to take the money I give you,

I tried to speak

‘**And buy a ticket back. A single ticket. A one-way ticket. You are going to meet with the lawyers or whoever it is they want you to meet with. Even if that’s in a detention centre. You**

are going to jump through the hoops they put up and you’re going to thank them after.

And you will be serious. As it is once again, “your life” and not mine, we’re dealing with here.”

I thought about interrupting him. It would be a proper interruption. One years in the making. The last time I talked to my father candidly was the funeral. And even then, that was after an excruciating process of trying to break the ice. I thought of talking to him about Athena. He had felt like this before. It would be arbitrary. What I'd talk to him about. But he'd get it. If I went back, I'd look at the blue in her eyes, and put her back on the pedestal, almost immediately. I'd be head over heels, running amok over some picturesque scenario. Or, I could talk to my brother. But with Irene, it was always, good, good and then "good" some more. Nothing less, nothing more. That can't be the only part of the puzzle, I must be missing something, I thought.

NAME

RANK

AFFILIATION

STATUS

WORKS:

I never knew the gauge. The score we use. I wanted to write something that makes people bow down in front of me. A work that I can point out to. Everything else is broken, but this, this works. I'd get points for that, right? To be an artist? I could never be a doctor. A lawyer, for sure not. Maybe you get points for not being a lonely creep, lurking around midnight jobs and

tramps. More if you treat people kindly, extra if you treat your body as a temple. I did that. Some of my family did. Mom did. That made no difference. She'd understand. She'd stop counting. Right about now, she'd reset the points to zero.

I took a big swig from the glass of water in front of me and sprinted out of the room. My brother was downstairs, his feet on the porch table, his keys a few meters away from him. I run downstairs, breaking through to the other side, jokingly gesturing obscenities to my brother, before stealing his car keys.

I guess if I hadn't stuck that old Wrangler into the tree a few meters away from my childhood home, I'd have gotten that license, sooner or later.

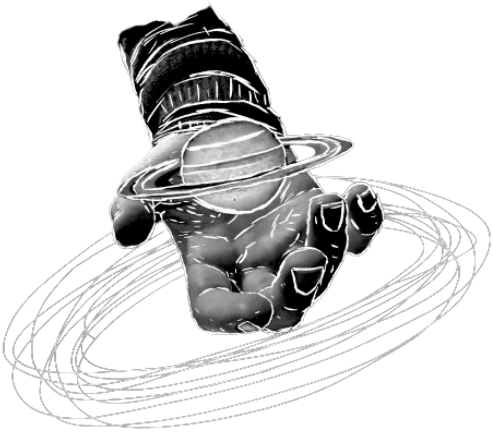
P.S

Were I to be writing all this now, I'd be a little more honest. I'd set aside the persona, the veil inhibiting the truth, what started all of this - and make some clear points. This is the first; in all the tumbles I've taken, I've gotten some bruises worth mentioning. To mention them; were we riding in the tram right now, mechanically accelerating over the wires, looking through the windows and into the city, I'd just go for it. I'd press the stop button on the tram with all my might, perhaps angering our fellow passengers, and walk out immediately. You'd probably stay inside saying something about how the rain will ruin your hair, or that you haven't dressed for it and how you'd rather not walk whilst its raining cats and dogs. Were this to happen now, I'd hear no word of it. I'd walk out and drag you out too, by force even. In the flatlands, there's little cover from the rain, perhaps because the robots have adjusted to carrying their umbrellas. Even still, I'd try to find some measly shelter, even

to cover us only slightly, even to win some more minutes. You'd find it strange, and it would break the continuity, maybe even change the story slightly. Before, the way I had imagined it; my words ring out romantically and true, all previous sentiments are washed to zilch and you understand then, what my actions couldn't show.

Were I there now; I'd use this shelter from the rain to hug you, and actually wrap my arms around you this time, instead of awkwardly hovering them above you. I'd tell you that: you helped me, perhaps unknowingly, so much. I'd tell you that all that wretched slimy mulch I spat around you was nothing but projecting. I'd thank you for leaving a few days later. For not telling me until the very end. Were you here now it'd be more of that and this, the slime would still be on the walls, I'd be the same and we'd have a chemical reaction - the house reduced to ash.

The stories before that, really, meant nothing. I know now that whatever I thought would happen, happened, all because I thought it would. I know not to fulfil any self-proclaimed prophecy, of chasing a muse down an endless hole. I know that whatever I do now, matters now and can change, now. I'd thank you for that.



bake, she did it for us. And out of all her sweetest treats, the best one was a cake, a cake called 'Gus'. One day, had no butter, the other had no cream, the same day she forgot the key. Memories swept away, day by day. Then was a scream because of the missing cream. Cream missing for the cake 'Gus', the one for us. Then was black, no fear, not even a tear. But inside, even she knew. Before that, she had cried, cried for us who knew we would do the same

THANK YOU

being there

