

SLEEP
DREAM
&
THE IN-BETWEEN

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Table of Contents

Sleep, Thoughts

White Hours	5
Arms and Hands	6
Know a Girl, She Runs Deep	9
Rosie and Me	10
The Walk	20
And More Casualties	31

Sleep Thoughts

Night Shift	40
Schemas	41
Sister Got Struck by a Car	50
Red Balloon	53
Monkey Square	59
Chin Face	70
My Chocolate Wound	73
Not This Town	78

Slumber Citizens	88
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“For the savage and for the child, dreams are episodes of the waking life; for poets and mystics, it is not impossible for all of the waking life to be a dream.”
- Jorge Luis Borges in “Nightmares”

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on.”
- William Shakespeare

“Have I dreamed my life or is it real?”
- Walter von der Vogelweide

Sleep, Thoughts

Waking sensations culminate in exhaustion, and you desire sleep to quiet the cacophony, to soothe your tired eyes. Rest your body on the bed. Close your eyes over obsessions of the waking world, which repeat in your head like mad mantras. Only then do your thoughts become loosened from ties to analysis, calculation, assumption, and float into a quiet delirium. At the moment you awake, it begins all over again.

White Hours

– Sleep’s rest ends

with the rising of the sun,
out brief Sleep
with the mocking of the
morning birds –
you press on tomorrow
and tomorrow and tomorrow.
Because of you I will not waste
a wink on
a day or night.
You live in this
in open eyes –
the waking life
sans waste,
sans solitude, sans stumbling to
the bathroom in the middle
of the night, Insomnia.

Arms and Hands

Kyle said it was his hand that had pulled the trigger.

I held my boy on my lap, my arms embracing his. “Junior was *this* close to being hit,” I said, failing to gesture with my hands.

“You should have seen the blood guzzle out of his head, like crude oil overflowing from a cracked pipe.”

I covered Junior’s ears. This wasn’t supposed to be about Kyle’s daddy.

“You know, the sensation that part of your body is not your own? There are people who swear by that feeling all their lives.”

Yes, I remembered such a feeling – only once or twice – before realizing that it had just been a dream. That one time when I grabbed one hand with the other and threw it across the bed. It felt like I was grabbing someone else’s hand that at the same time was my hand, so that when I woke up I was surprised to find both hands still there.

I squinted at the walls of our living room, each one equally white and bright. The slits of daylight shining through the vertical blinds added nothing to the uninterrupted glare of the barren walls.

I wanted to escape the memories of Kyle’s past, or the memories of his memories in my mind. He would blurt them out at odd times, generating uninvited images in my head. They did violence to me, so that I could feel the terror of a scream imploding, with no one else to hear, where even shutting my eyes felt unsafe.

“We really ought to hang some pictures up,” I said softly, now rocking Junior with a loosened grip. I thought of family photos, with their eternal grins.

“Maybe you’re right.” Kyle grazed the top of my head with his hand as he passed towards the opposite wall, softly skimming its surface with his fingers. “But when I touch the naked wall like this, it feels so cool.” Not like his daddy’s fury. Daddy used to shout, stop making my blood boil.

I lifted Junior from under his arms, gently placing him on the floor. He held one arm out towards his daddy, stretched out straight, but limp at the wrist. Kyle failed to take his hand, just as he had failed that very morning. “He’s still just a baby,” I whispered, recalling the horror of the screeching tires and my body gripped in terror, as the car just missed him by inches. I thought that Kyle had him by the hand as they crossed the busy street intersection, while I trailed behind. But when I raised my eyes up, Kyle had his arms folded while Junior wobbled ahead.

Kyle stared at Junior’s wrist, gripping his own tightly behind his back. “Wrists can be bent backwards or forward.” He had told me that when his daddy wasn’t around, he would practice on his own, to see how far he could bend them, to get them stronger and ready, for the next time.

“An arm can take on a life of its own.”

And that’s what he had told the court.

I watched Kyle as he stared at Junior arching his shoulders, swinging his arms freely.

He pushed back the black-rimmed glasses from his sweating nose, which failed to keep back the flames that seemed to flash from his eyes.

This was after all, about his daddy. Ignoring the sensation of panic rising within me, I asked. I had to be sure. “I know you’ve told me the story of that awful night before. But when your Aunt testified in detail about what she saw your daddy do that night, was she right? Was it really that bad?” I asked, instantly recognizing the answer in the way Kyle Senior stood several feet away from Kyle Junior, stepping back further as Junior reached for him with his fingertips. I couldn’t remember the last time he had picked up or held his son.

Together, we watched Junior lean forward, swinging his arms around in circles. And in that moment of unrestrained freedom I couldn’t help but remember my own version of that violent night.

A young boy yanked off the bunk bed. Yanked by one arm and slammed into the floor.

One arm yanked. Body slammed against the floor.

Yanked by the arm. Body slammed.

Maybe the little boy saw his arm fly across the room after his face smashed against the hard wood floor. The arm was no longer his.

The movement of Junior’s arms appeared random, prodding him clumsily forward. Kyle grabbed from under one arm, and then the other as my boy’s feet shuffled off the floor. I cried out – from fright or relief – I’m still not sure.

Know a Girl, She Runs Deep

shops without a shopping cart.
jar of marmalade in her hand. pickles in her right. shoves pickles under left
armpit.
scoops cherry tomatoes with free hand. bag hangs from her hand until

she spots sharp cheddar cheese – pound and a half.
snaps cherries with right armpit like the jaws of a crocodile.

underneath her skin everything is heavier.

between genie arms and concave chest, she scoops a bag of round tortilla chips.
still room for more. there's room for more.
celery sticks in her left forearm, carrots.

do you need help ma'am?

no! *everything is heavier under her skin.*

she eyes preserved peas and corn. one can between battered chin and sore
esophagus. bites her tongue.
back to the fresh produce section.

an ear of corn. an ear of corn. by the skin of her teeth.

Rosie and Me

I felt a laugh coming on. When I saw Rosie lying there – not connected to
a plastic tube, chest not rattling, head not shrunken like my mother's – I did not
swallow down tears. My laugh sounded something like, "Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

eh, Ha ha ha ha ha ha eh” with exhalation on the “ha’s” and inhalation on the “eh’s.” It wasn’t forced, or defiant, but felt delightful and outrageous at the same time.

Rosie’s laughter never seemed awkward like mine, but full of life, as at the time we saw the bum cross the street in front of my idling car. He crossed legs first, as if leaning on back crutches – inches at a time, nodding his forehead to the sky, homeless old man with stringy, greasy grey hair and layers of old clothing sagging on his bones, not even halfway across when the walking signal had already turned into a red flashing hand. He moved like a man accepting death. Young and old end up in the same place. Who would have the last laugh?

We laughed at the bum, Rosie and me. Rosie, not me. I’m not one to laugh easily, but I admit, this was truly a sight. Surely the fellow would have laughed too had he watched himself move slowly like the street was his stage. And that was when Rosie decided she would die laughing. The thought occurred to her that *we naturally cry at birth; therefore, it is only natural to laugh at death*. If she could help it, she would die laughing.

I told her death is no laughing matter. She told me as she had often, “Don’t be such a stick in the mud Irene; laugh with me!” I said she was crazy and that she would probably die a boring death – in her sleep. I was the one cursed with bad genes. My mother died of cancer and my father from a heart attack. If she saw the way they suffered, she would not laugh. “Is that why you’re so long-suffering?” she asked. “Because your parents suffered so?” She was right. I had to bear their burdens.

Rosie and I first met during my year of study abroad six years ago. We were late-bloomers, starting the university life at a later age. And we were both free to pursue our latent dreams. She had one daughter leaving home at sixteen, following her boyfriend from San Diego to Los Angeles. I was perpetually single at 38, six years older than Rosie, a schoolteacher, and childless. When we met at the University housing, our new home in Wales, I was not pleased. I avoided meeting Americans; I didn't want to meet any as I was in Europe to meet Europeans. But as luck would have it I met Rosie, and she met me, and we discovered we were both from the same city. And Rosie just wouldn't leave me be.

When I wanted to stay in and study, she'd run up to my room two floors above her, bang on my door and tell me to join her at the Upland's Tavern, the Welsh pub down the street. "We can walk to it," she reminded me. "Isn't that great to get around without need for a car?" She giggled and snorted at the same time, her freckly nose crinkling. I'd say, "Rosie, I've got too much studying to do," and she'd say, "Irene, we've got to soak up everything. This will never be repeated."

By the time we took our trip to Amsterdam together towards the end of our studies, Rosie had really grown on me. Amsterdam was ours – biker-friendly lanes and unreadable Dutch street names. We walked around the rectilinear streets endlessly, admiring the tall, narrow buildings of different shades of brown, reflected in endless canals.

“Do you smell it, Rosie?” I said, referring to the aroma of smoke wafting out of a coffee shop as we passed.

“Yes of course,” Rosie said, laughing. I remembered the same smell drifting from downstairs in Beck House. It came from Alex the hippy from Sheffield. Rosie still enjoyed the stuff once in awhile. And Alex had convinced her it was good for opening up the lungs, besides heightening the mind.

We mutually agreed that we couldn’t leave without visiting the Hash Marihuana Hemp Museum – I, hesitantly. But I didn’t want to be called a stick in the mud again. After learning of the medicinal qualities of hemp, and after being confined in the museum’s sweltering heat, I found myself with an empty space, somewhere caught in the web of hunger and thirst, satisfied by neither food nor drink. It was a longing for something more, beyond basic need.

“Try the stuff, go on,” Rosie suggested as her cheeks turned pink, a striking match to her red hair. Rosie was born with black hair and never understood why her parents named her Rosie. So when she was fifteen, she decided to dye her hair red.

The menu appeared on the screen. “I’m looking for something stimulating, but...”

“Affordable?” the hostess chimed in. I shook my head yes. She recommended the “White Widow.” Very popular she said, and very potent.

Rosie and I sat outside in the patio, and I sniffed at the joint. It was rolled differently than the ones Rosie smoked in Alex’s room, with a funnel-shape rather

than slender and long. I hesitated to light it. I thought of my marijuana virginity. I had smelled, but never touched.

“Just do it,” Rosie laughed, sounding much like a Nike ad.

“What about you?” I asked.

“I’m sitting this one out,” she answered, “someone has to look after you.”

“I don’t need any looking after.”

When I lit the White Widow, I took two puffs. The smell and taste were pungent. Instantly, I felt my legs tingle and I slumped down in my chair. I couldn’t speak. I melted under its potency, and it took several minutes before I realized that Rosie was waving me to get up for a walk.

Every movement was exaggerated. My arms and legs felt stretched. My arms swung like pendulums and my shoes were sponges. We passed through the Monument in the square, and stopped at a park bench for a rest. I rested my arms on my thighs and hung my head. I looked sideways at Rosie and did not like her laugh. It was too loud and her grin too wide. It was not funny. Nothing I saw or felt was funny. I swiveled my head to the other side with extra effort, and with my sunglasses sliding down my sweaty nose, I saw two women on the bench next to me. I nodded at the one closest to me and said, “Hey.” I nodded at her slowly, smiling. Then (everything was a few seconds slower), the young woman turned her head, placed her elbow on her lap, rested her chin on her hand and never looked back. Rosie laughed and said it was time to head back to our hostel.

After the first effects subsided, I felt guilty. Why had I done it? There was no pain to escape from. I was not one to escape from my problems. But getting high for the first time stirred a quiet excitement in my muscles. I wanted that feeling again. So I had more.

The Generator, our hostel, held a big party that night in the lounge, which spilled into the bar and up the stairs into the rooms. An Italian student, maybe ten or more years younger than me, stared across the bar, slowly pushing his way through the stimulated crowd. Abruptly taking my hand, he asked, "Married? Boyfriend?" in his caveman language. Only my eyeballs moved. I could move nothing else, nor could I say anything intelligible. But somehow I found my arms wrapped around him and we stumbled our way up the stairs. Rosie squeezed my arm and tried to stop me, but I whispered in her ear something like, "This is my time."

That night, Rosie was honorable and I was not. She stayed sober the whole night, keeping the hostel door open much to the consternation of our other two roomies. The room the Italian and I occupied was exactly across the way, and Rosie stayed up making sure to look out for me, should I come stumbling back, vomiting or screaming. That didn't happen, but my wild night had ended up not so wild after all. The guy was too drunk to properly perform. I later told Rosie I'd learned a lesson. What lesson, she asked? That next time, if ever again, I'd enjoy the numbing pleasures of pot somewhere alone in my room, reading a book, writing, or listening to music. It would be a totally private affair where I'd be exposed to no one and no one would be exposed to me, except

maybe for Italo Calvino's *Adventure of a Traveler* and Radiohead's *Exit Music (for a film)*.

"Get off it!" Rosie said, laughing so hard again she snorted. "What are you trying to numb?" That laugh started to irritate me, the sound of a happy pig – upturned pink nose and all.

When Rosie and I looked back at that trip later, she reminded me of how funny I looked flirting with the young woman, my purple sunglasses slipping down my nose, and how I had to sleep it all off the next day. I did not laugh, but told her how bold she was to laugh at me on the park bench, how her laughter was out of place. And I reminded her that she had had plenty of wild days of sex and drugs to tip the scale in favor of the good versus the bad, the pleasurable versus the not-so-much. I had just the one and it was not-so-much.

The last time Rosie dyed her hair red was in our home on the Mesa. It was raining that night two years ago, and we stood on the patio overlooking the flooding valley. This Spanish-style house with its red tile roof, shaded by palm trees, bordered with a meticulously trimmed yard. After our study abroad, Rosie showed me the map of the neighborhood. The looping drives and cul-de-sacs caught my eye; they signaled to me something thrilling, nonlinear, a needed change in my life. With both of us free and single, we made our new home together, this home that sits on a dead-end.

Her hair was dripping the color of a rotten pumpkin.

"Your hair will be orange, not red," I said.

“Don’t you know anything, Irene?” She tugged her head away from the black-toothed comb and turned to look at me with her squinting, blinking eyes. “The color it is now is not the color it will be.” She whipped back around and I felt the cold wet dye splatter on my face like paint from a paintbrush. She snickered and I pulled the comb hard through the tangles on the crown of her head. I had never dyed my hair in my life, allowing the gray to grow in naturally, and I found it odd that she would dye her hair again, knowing there probably wouldn’t be any left after the rounds of chemo.

We watched the rain pour sideways and listened to it pound against the awning like a spray of bullets as I tugged through her hair, strands sticking to the sticky comb and clumping together. Her dark roots were sprinkled with white strands here and there. I didn’t tell Rosie about her premature graying.

“Irene,” she said, softly this time, not laughing, “Maybe I’m not really a woman anymore.” I poured more rotten pumpkin onto her head, and smoothed it over the gray with my gloved fingers.

“Rosie. You are a woman, a strong woman. Probably stronger than any woman I know. You live, you love and you laugh.” I felt a tear or two coming on, but I held them at bay. She remained still as I massaged the new color in and said nothing. Perhaps she was thinking she had never really been strong, only appeared to be. That she had always leaned on someone else’s shoulder. I thought of Simone de Beauvoir. I thought of how much my mother looked liked a woman, without her uterus, on her hospital deathbed. I thought of a cold, moist empty cavern.

The rain never stopped that night, after I washed and rinsed Rosie's hair in the kitchen sink. The kitchen sink clogged up, and even the garbage disposal could not swallow down Rosie's fallen hair.

When Rosie found out she had ovarian cancer, the doctors removed both ovaries. She seemed fine with this at first since she didn't expect to have any more children anyway. Then the cancer spread. That was when Rosie decided she would be honorable. She would die an honorable death. She had had an addictive personality – chain smoking, sex, reality T.V.

When Rosie found out her cancer had spread and was incurable, she vowed to face the pain without reliance on drugs or medication. All those wild years of what she called escapism. I disagreed. Maybe living freely wasn't so bad.

She dreamed of facing it all head on, fearlessly. She would die laughing, she said, even in the face of great pain. When the breakthrough pain hit, she tolerated it heroically and with dignity.

"Everything hurts except my eyelashes," she said, attempting a smile. This echoed my mother's feelings, the night before she died, when we rolled her around the house in a wheelchair. I did not like that Rosie was stirring up these painful memories. I did not want her to die a painful death like my mother.

When Rosie could bear it no more, she moaned a very slow, terrifying sound. Her daughter was staying with us, to visit her mother one final time. She trembled uncontrollably, and then left Rosie's bedroom into the kitchen. I followed. She covered her mouth, trying not to let her whimpering be heard by

Rosie. She bit onto her fingernails as she circled the floor. “There’s nothing heroic about this,” she said as I placed my arms around her and squeezed. I drew her back into Rosie’s bedroom with me, and when Rosie saw her shaking, crying softly, she squeezed her eyes shut tight. Tears were streaming down her face, and I imagined what she was thinking. I squeezed her hand and whispered into her ear, “Rosie, you haven’t failed at anything.” I reached for the Percocet I had placed on the dresser table, just in case. I placed one pill on her tongue and she swallowed it down with one sip of lukewarm tap water. Within minutes the pain began to subside. Rosie sighed. I sighed. I sat on the edge of the bed, and looked at her large, brown pupils. She looked like my childhood Raggedy Ann doll. I wanted to hold her, smooth her hair and keep her safe.

The morning I found Rosie, I knew it instantly. She was not just asleep. And that is when I felt that hideous laughter come on. No one was there but Rosie and me. I doubt she died laughing; rather, I imagine she must have drifted peacefully. When I touched the sparse red curls that framed her face, softened by gray strays here and there, I felt my cheeks grow warm. Rosie never lost all of her hair. What remained was red and gray.

The Walk

The twins have been seen walking the neighborhood for several years now – fifteen to be exact. Their route begins each day at 121 Aero Drive, and ends at the same address one hour later. They walk together Monday through Friday, summer and winter, spring and fall. That adds up to approximately 7,200 miles, so far.

They begin at exactly 10:46 a.m. – on the dot. No matter whether the sun is blazing its August heat or the rain begins to pour, their logo-less baseball caps facing forward keep their heads warm and dry on cold rainy days, and absorb trickling sweat on hot days. Paula wears the white sweatshirt with red sweatpants and Paulina the green with black Monday through Wednesday, and then they switch – Paulina the white and red, and Paula the green and black on Thursday and Friday. Then on Sunday they throw the sweats into the 1970's green

Kenmore (that goes knock-knock). Nothing else goes in the wash on Sunday but the two pairs of sweats. All other laundry gets washed two days prior, on Friday before sundown because of the Jewish Sabbath.

Paula and Paulina are not Jewish, but their Uncle Salvador from Oaxaca, Mexico, moved in with the twins and their mother during their early formative years and joined an American-established, Jewish-based church that observes Sabbath from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. The church believes that the modern-day Jews make up the lost ten tribes of Israel – the chosen people of God – and that if you worship as they do, you can gain salvation by association. Paula and Paulina are not members of this church, but Uncle Sal insisted on not being subjected to the sound of the washer's knock-knock during the Holy Sabbath, from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Uncle Sal moved back to Oaxaca, but the twins are creatures of habit and ritual. Therefore, all other laundry must be done on Friday before sundown, no laundry Saturday, sweats washed on Sunday.

Paula and Paulina wait until Sunday to wash their sweats after they've become saturated with their odor. They treat their mingled sweats with a kind of sacredness. They wash them in pure, unadulterated water, without laundry detergent of any kind. You would think that with the advent of environmentally friendly products within the last decade they would use biodegradable liquid wash free of dyes, perfumes or pollutants. But being kind to the environment is not their primary motive. They are identical twins and their body odors must

mingle and mix without any saturation other than the pure and natural element of water.

Their sweats give off a rather unusual smell. Sometimes rainwater and mud, sun and dead-weed, at other times a whiff of something unnatural and manmade such as salsa or soda. But never deodorant, because neither Paula nor Paulina wears deodorant. They enjoy the sensation of sweat trickling down onto their tiny hips and then rubbing their underarms in a circular motion with the soft, cool cotton.

Paula and Paulina have faithfully walked together, five days a week for the past fifteen years, except for one Thursday twelve years ago. It happened to be the third Thursday of April, and for the first time, Paula suffered from severe cramps while Paulina did not.

This was significant because the twins had always been in synch. From birth, they have slept side by side. Their mother's first instinct was to have them sleep in the same bed with her, but these were the 70's and this was America; and American culture said that it was unhealthy for children to sleep with their parents. Pediatricians, including the famous Dr. Spock, said that a sensible rule to follow was not to have a child in the parent's bed for any reason. Perhaps it would create overwhelming sexual tension and anxiety. So their mother Juanita, wanting to fit into American society, placed the twins in their own crib, side by side.

Good thing Paula and Paulina had each other. Each was for the other like a stuffed teddy bear with a simulated heartbeat to regulate each other's sleep

and hunger patterns. Only better, for each was a warm-bodied living human being with a real heart- beat. Juanita placed her twins in their shared crib every night until they were two years old, and then they shared the wooden framed bed bought from a thrift store until they moved on to their mother's Queen-sized bed after she passed.

Good thing they had each other because Juanita choked on her own vomit one day when the twins were out for one of their walks. She had been ill for three days with a stomach virus, and just when it seemed she was improving, the poor twins found her like that – in the bed they now share. They refused to replace the mattress upon which Juanita used to bounce them up and down as infants when they weren't sleeping in their crib. After scraping off the dried vomit, they splashed the mattress with the garden hose in the backyard, dried it in the sun, and then sprayed it with their mother's antique perfume bottle.

On that third Thursday of April, Paulina was faced with a most perplexing decision – take the walk alone without Paula by her side, or remain by Paula's side.

Paula was in so much pain that she had to lie in the fetal position, hugging the electric heating pad tightly to her abdomen. But she made no sound. Instead, the pain distorted her face. For ten full minutes, Paulina lay next to her sister – face-to-face, nose-to-nose. She rubbed Paula's arms. When the clock struck 10:45, Paula spoke only because it was necessary: Go.

Paula's word shocked Paulina. Although Paulina was not experiencing the same cramping pain as her sister, she felt something gnawing and tugging at

her insides. Why did her sister want her to *go*? Could she really make the walk on her own?

Paulina was tempted to join her sister back on the bed and cover herself with the sheets. But Paula had said *go* for a reason and she had to trust her instinct – their shared instinct. And if her sister could endure her cramping pain alone, she could endure the persistent gnawing pain she was now feeling at the thought of tearing herself away from Paula. For one morning walk.

Paulina put on her cap as she thought of vomit and asphyxiation. Paula would not wretch. Paula would not choke on her own vomit. *Go*.

She shut the squeaky wrought iron gate gently, and then tiptoed over the army of ants advancing over the crack in the middle of the driveway, the fire red ones that Paula always did her ‘flatten-the-ants-dance’ upon. Paulina glared a reprimanding look at Paula – Paula who wasn’t there but curled up in bed. If there was one thing they disagreed on, it was on the squashing of ants.

Wiggling her hat until it sat just right over her head, Paulina passed over the driveway and made a sharp left turn, cutting across the grass and hopping over the coverless gutter. She maintained a steady, fast pace, counting 1-2, 1-2 in her mind.

She readily ignored the green and white spray painted graffiti on the sidewalk under her feet, afraid that someone might pop out of the bushes. She raised her eyes to the two flags blowing freely in the wind, atop the house for the mentally disturbed. One of the flags was American – tattered and torn. Beneath

it flew a blue flag: "United States Navy." Two houses beyond flew another newer, fresher flag, on a house with a for sale sign.

As she steadily climbed the hill, she felt the familiar burn in her thighs. Looking to her right, where Paula would be (Paula liked to walk on the street side of the sidewalk, *like a gentleman*, she'd giggle, to her sister in those rare vocal moments), she saw a car speed by. To her left on a patch of community lawn was a sign in yellow and black:

"It's our neighborhood...PLEASE SLOW DOWN! Thank you!"

Paulina speeded up her pace, pushing against the strain on her legs. When she reached the top of the hill, she stood still and took in four breaths, resting her hands on her thighs. Grabbing the street lamp with her left hand, she swung around once, noting the gooey bird poop sticking to the bottom of her shoes.

She was now on the corner of Aero Drive and Del Sol, a main road lined on both sides with the backyards of houses peeking over dilapidated wooden fences and concrete walls. Paulina eyed the cluster of ice plants marking the turn from Aero Drive to Del Sol Lane. Should she pick one off, even without Paula here? She heard a faint whisper in her ear – *pick*. She grabbed a big juicy one and picked off the tip of one end. She bent her skinny legs and crouched on the sidewalk. She thought of Paula and hesitated. Looking around to make sure no one else was around to see, she drew a picture with the ice plant juice. A triangle with ribbons coming out of the narrow end. Ribbons of blood. Paula would understand the symbol – like no one else.

It was Paula who had discovered the usefulness of ice plants. Plagued by boredom at fourteen years old, they snuck out one Saturday afternoon during their mother's daily two-hour nap for a walk up the hill. Juanita refused to let them walk around the neighborhood at that age, afraid of the proliferating Mexican gangs. They stopped on the corner of Aero Drive and Del Sol Lane, mesmerized by the bed of green.

Not sure about the rules of property (was this cluster of ice plants community property, or did it belong to the two houses behind the concrete wall?), they discreetly picked only one ice plant out of the bunch and felt its cold smooth texture with their fingers. Paulina bit the end off and spit it out, and then after licking it, handed it to her sister. Expecting it to taste like the frozen cactus their mother fed them on hot summer days, to their disappointment, it tasted like nothing and left a dry cottony feeling on their tongues. Next, they rubbed the moist end on their hot cheeks. This cooled them down.

Paula broke the tip off the other end, but instead of cooling her cheeks, she began drawing wet pictures on the sidewalk. She drew identical stick figures of herself and Paulina, standing side by side. She handed the plant to Paulina, but Paulina waved her off.

When they turned eighteen, Juanita finally allowed them to walk around the neighborhood alone. This was then they began their ritual, Monday through Friday walk. Paula began creating her own version of hieroglyphics – various shapes with numbers inside. The shapes stood for different feelings, and the numbers represented the intensity. Paulina understood that a half circle meant

her sister was hungry, and that a 3 inside meant she could hold off another 30 minutes. Two squiggly lines next to each other meant she felt nervous, and an 8 or higher between the lines meant that she was in need of a hug.

Paula's drawings grew refined. The stick figures started off as identical, but they matured. They were no longer identical stick figures, but Paula added clothing – sweats to be exact. At first she drew the sweats on the figures exactly the same, but then depending on the morning's events, she'd add a differentiating feature for each figure. On a day that Paulina soiled her knees, she smudged the knees on the Paulina figure. When sweat marks showed on her own armpits, she filled them in. Eventually, Paula let her imagination flow freely – stripes on Paulina's sweats and heart shapes on hers. But it was a silent pact between the sisters that Paula was the ice plant artist and Paulina was not.

Paulina placed the used ice plant in her pocket and continued her downward descent. She practically ran now and attempted to slow herself down by skidding on the cement. When she came to a stop, her heart beat fast. She pulled out the ice plant and drew two squiggly lines with a 9 in between – this time without hesitation. She nearly turned back up the hill, but instead wrapped her arms around herself – and her thin arms felt just like Paula's.

On the other side of the street, a most unusual sight came into view. A tall skinny man walked alone – a charcoal black mass where his nose should be. Paulina tried not to stare, but curiosity got the best of her. She stole glances as the man trudged up the hill slowly. He walked upright with confidence. Even with a nose partly bitten off, partly burnt to a crisp. If Paula were here, they

would keep right on walking with perfect posture and staring straight forward. Not out of confidence but determination. Paulina slowed her walk to a near halt and rolled her shoulders forward as if to hide her chest. The man turned the corner as she took one last glance to make sure her eyes did not betray her. A battered, burnt nose. He disappeared just beyond the diamond shaped yellow sign that reads: "NOT A THROUGH STREET." She was tempted to cross the street and follow behind him, to mock the shadow of his confident sway.

Keep up a steady pace and don't stop. That's what Paula's eyes would tell her. That was their mantra. No need to stop. We have each other. Arms and legs swinging in perfect synchronization.

But this day the silent wooden fences, brick, and concrete walls commanded attention. The unpainted wooden boards nailed in with the old, dark brown ones whose ends had become stakes. The white brick fence with gray patches of paint covering gang graffiti. Dried grass and weeds growing from cracks in the sidewalk, unattended or ignored. Paulina continued her descent slowly, observing all these details and more.

Big Gulp plastic cups were strewn on the dead yellow grass, a Vons shopping basket, and a Bud Light 6-pack empty carton. She stopped in front of the plastic bus bench at the corner where Del Sol Lane meets Picador Blvd.: "\$15,000 Available for Distressed (all in caps, letters broken up for the "distressed" effect) Homeowners Through Our Exclusive Federal Government Program! 888-6-SAVE-YOU." She smoothed her fingers over the bench and

knocked on it. A man in a car passed by looking at her. Her cheeks burned red, and she crouched behind the bench. *Save me Paula.*

After two minutes Paulina straightened up and the “Church’s Chicken” orange sign across the street on the corner called to her with its red letters: “Drive-Thru.” She imagined walking, not driving through the drive-thru and ordering the greasy chicken strips Paula despised for feeling like raw, hairy skin on the tongue.

Her imagination became real as she crossed the street and stood next to the finger-smeared window. She stared at the specials with her mouth wide open: Six piece chicken strips for \$2.99. *Greasy, raw and fatty* Paula whispered in her ear. She walked toward the lonely Picador Blvd. sidewalk.

She looked at her watch and recognized that thirty minutes had already passed and she was not yet halfway through the walk. Her energy turned into lethargy. She was dispirited. Perhaps it would help to speed up the pace and not allow distractions to slow her down. She returned to her 1-2 count and energized her walk with the determination of two, placing Paula by her side. Conjoined.

With Paulina invisibly by her side, Paula’s walk becomes a marathon race. The section 8 apartments whizzed by, and so did the Mexican Food hole-in-the-wall, 7-11, and 99-cent video store. She was only vaguely aware of their existence as they sped by, references on the surface of her consciousness that she was indeed on the right path, the walk nearly coming to a close. No stopping now as the clock ticked in her brain, and Paula’s invisible force pulled her

forward, looping around past the two-story condos, the gas station and finally back up Del Sol Lane.

At the corner of Del Sole Lane and Aero Drive, she gave the NOT A THROUGH STREET sign one last look, took a deep breath and mocked the sound of a high-pitched bird, ignoring the ill-humored look of her slowly drifting invisible twin. As she descended down her street, she spotted the hills in the distance, above the highway, on the horizon, with new track homes and their identical orange-tiled roofs. Despite the dilapidated fences, gang graffiti, and for sale signs, she felt affection for her neighborhood and its individually designed old homes. Even the two-story, hot pink painted home for the mentally disturbed, flags waving fiercely.

Paulina found Paula still lying in bed, but the look of pain gone from her face. Her honey color had returned and her arms rested peacefully at her sides. Paulina didn't need to confess her ice plant drawings. She didn't need to tell Paula what was *really* written on that bus bench. She didn't even confess her stolen glances of the confident, beautiful man with the burnt nose. And Paula did not ask. Paula would open her eyes to all these things on their next walk, and more. They would continue their walk for years to come, each twin with visions of her own.

And More Casualties

Sunday 16 July. At least 23 Lebanese and 8 Israeli civilian casualties,
and two hipsters enter the Goodwill Thrift Store on 5th and Sunset. One is a
Couch-Surfer and the other a Philosopher.

Couch-Surfer: Male

26 years old

New York, New York

United States

Philosopher: Male

29 years old

Santa Monica, California

United States

The Couch-Surfer strokes a silk shirtsleeve gently, standing in front of
the men's rack. He raises the shirtsleeve up to the Philosopher's face.

About Me: "I am the coolest hipster Socialite in Union Square."

The Philosopher pulls back from the musty, dusty smell. He swipes his
nose with his forefinger and sneezes.

About Me: "Birth was the death of me - paraphrased (Samuel Beckett)."

After untangling the shirt from the hanger the Couch-Surfer holds it in front
of himself. Noting the whirling shapes and bright colors, he wonders who wore
this article of clothing before him, absorbing the sweat and scents of bodies

rubbed against bodies, diner counters and couch cushions. He rubs the collar gently against his nose before placing it back on the rack.

The Philosopher's jet-black hair splashes in every direction like ocean waves. His black and brown-checkered blazer with a collar outlined in black velvet has strands of thread dangling from the elbows and buttons. The Couch-Surfer eyes his friend's black t-shirt. The Philosopher tugs at his black *Sundays* shirt, his left eye twitching. He winks. They give each other a high-five and plod towards the exit as if they have all the time in the world.

As they pass a teenage couple in the narrow aisle between the men's section and the bookshelves – the boy with a freshly shaven head highlighted by a short tuft of blue-black hair in the middle, and the multiply-pierced girl with platinum blond hair highlighted pink – the Couch-Surfer carefully unfolds a pair of gold-rimmed sunglasses from out of the pocket of his white robe. The glasses are unscratched, even after a decade of wear. He slips them on.

The blond, mouth unhinged, tells the Couch-Surfer that he looks like Jesus. Her boyfriend knocks on the rectangular cardboard that hangs on the Couch-Surfer's back: *Will Heal Pain Physical/Emotional Without Touching Reiki Energy Healing*.

When the Philosopher and the Couch-Surfer arrive at the 24-hour coffee shop, Poly-Girl is sitting, waiting at a round, iron-grated table under the red-lit flashing *Le Chateau* sign.

Female

21 years old

Orientation: Undecided

Status: Swinger

She is wagging her crossed leg up and down, the black tip of her saddle shoe kicking casually against the cool air. The Philosopher bends down to kiss her on the cheek as the Couch-Surfer wraps his robe tighter on his slender, long body.

The Philosopher borrows Poly-girl's laptop and does his daily check of the BBC World News. He reads of rockets firing back and forth in Lebanon. He thinks of Iran and Korea. He keeps his fear silently to himself.

The Couch-Surfer folds his arms, observing his friend's drooping eyelids behind the clear lenses framing his face. He nearly asks his friend what he sees on the screen, but reaches down to scratch his ankle instead. He will continue on with couch surfing for longer than anyone else he knows, and will settle down in a small Scandinavian village. Yet he will remain forever a traveler.

The Philosopher thinks of a student in the class he taught last summer – an older man with fuzzy hair and beard, puffy eyelids and scarred skin. He appeared for only the first two lectures asking many questions about Sartre and Being and Nothingness, and then fell out of the picture altogether. No one ever asked after him. After 49 seconds of rumination, the Philosopher gives up these thoughts and lights a cigarette.

Tuesday 18 July. Emotional funerals are taking place for those killed by Hezbollah rockets in the northern city of Haifa. In Northern Israel, residents are becoming used to spending long parts of the day in rocket-proof shelters awaiting Hezbollah attacks.

The Couch-Surfer is washing the dishes piled up from two nights before. The Philosopher and Poly-girl are sitting at their small round kitchen table donated by an old professor, drinking chilled green tea. They tell the Couch-Surfer to set down the dishes, save them for later, and sit down and join them for a vegan dinner.

Poly-girl is a vegan. She insists on no meat in the house, so the Philosopher gives in and has become a vegetarian himself, although he refuses to give up fish. He toys with the idea of being a Compassionate Omnivore, but he loves her, so he doesn't argue with her demands, even though by nature he is an opinionated and aggressive young man. Someday they will break it off but remain unlikely friends.

The Philosopher is reading the latest Lebanon news. The news contains interviews of displaced people trying to flee, people on both sides of the divide who've lost a loved one. He skims the interviews and cannot see the faces. He tries to imagine a Lebanese or Israeli face in place of the words and spaces. Instead, he sees Poly-girl with just a bra on the color of nude, standing in front of the mirror, braiding her hair with her chin resting upon her shoulder. Her skin smells like it is burning the incense of dozens of bodies, heaped one on top of the other. He feels a sadness that he cannot touch.

Poly-girl comes up from behind and rubs his shoulders. She stares ahead in front of her, feeling her fingers becoming warm and moist. She licks the salty skin of her pointer finger, pulls the newspaper out of his grip, feeds it to the

flames of the fireplace, and feels her cheeks on fire – hot like the fire her father said will burn her in hell.

The Philosopher takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose. In the background, Duke Ellington & John Coltrane's *In a Sentimental Mood* is playing, smoothly and gently, not skipping or scratching because it is a newly unwrapped record purchased from a newly opened, privately owned record shop. Most things that he owns are used, but once in awhile he likes to purchase new, unspoiled things. He likes the smell of new books and the feeling of tearing open new wrappers. He won't tell this to the Couch-Surfer who carries around only one frayed, camouflage-colored backpack in his world travels.

This Couch-Surfer is probably the most famous one in the world. All he asks for is a couch to sleep on. He doesn't sit on peoples' couches all day watching cartoons and eating their cereal. He sleeps on their couches during the night, and energy-heals and free-style raps during the day, meeting interesting and unusual people. He has appeared on Blind Date and the Ricki Lake show, and has done naked stand-up comedy. He is recognized by his long, rusty-colored dreadlocks and his white terry-cloth robe. He owns nothing new, and has all that he needs provided by kind-hearted people who allow him to stay on their couches anywhere from one day to two months. He knows that used things start off new somewhere at some point, but does not want to be the first owner.

The Philosopher gets up from his chair, lifts the lever on the vintage style record player, and switches the new record for a used one he took from his mother's collection, the Beatle's *Abbey Road*. He looks at the album cover, with

no written title, the four Beatles walking across the white, wide painted rectangles across the road, their legs forming triangles. The cover looks almost new, as if it had been tucked away in a safe place. His mother died of cancer several years before, and his father gave him permission to take whichever albums he chose. As he places the needle on the record, he remembers visiting home that one winter break, when she was very ill and he took out her old collection of records, cleaned the old dusty record player and its transparent cover, played several records as she tapped her bare foot on the carpet. He told her, listen to this Mama, and she listened. For that night there was peace between them, after many years of painful alienation. She was a Christian and he was not. She looked peaceful, her tired shoulders hunched over, and the smooth unblemished skin of her face relaxed. He remembers her wearing his father's red and white striped pajamas, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and her eyes bright under her sloping eyebrows.

The Philosopher sits back down, rubbing his nose, and then his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Poly-girl asks.

"Oh nothing," he answers without meaning it. She doesn't press him. She believes his mind is immersed in Hegel's Philosophy of Right, as it usually is. They've had enough discussions over it, at home, in the car stuck in Los Angeles traffic, at coffee shops, on strolls at Venice Beach. She'd rather not have him repeat the idea that Hegel's moral and political philosophy has a direct bearing on his dissertation work; the idea that agents work through what they are (in the sense of the ends and values they have) through their concrete engagement with

the world and with other agents. That is, agents do not settle on their ends, values, and sense of their own identities only through reflection/deliberation/reasoning. Concrete action actually shapes what those ends are in a way that is over and above. No, she'd rather not hear this all over again, even though he has a way of talking about old ideas in new and refreshing ways.

Philosophy is not just his field of study. He believes it is the most important discipline in life. He recognizes that his Jehovah's Witness family members would label him a Sodomite of the worse kind if they knew he lived a polyamorous life – that both he and his girlfriend have had sex with someone else other than each other. He keeps wallet-sized photos of his brothers and sisters taped to the door of his bedroom. This is the only way he can remember what they look like.

He turns on the television set and watches the 7:00 evening news on PBS. As the newscaster with the British accent addresses the Lebanon Israel War, he switches the channel just before the footage of a woman wearing a red and white scarf over her head, waving her hands in the air, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks as she waves goodbye to her daughter and grandchild. He catches the first glimpse of it, but changes the channel before he can be fooled by the camera – placing her right before him, in live-action in the warmth of his living room, but without the possibility of reaching out and touching her fleshy, outstretched hand.

The Couch-Surfer offers to give his friend the Philosopher some energy healing, even though he knows he does not believe in such illogical, New Age ideals. Nevertheless, James succumbs to Michael kneeling down in front of him tracing the outline of his body without touching. Feel the Chi flow. James fidgets, struggling to stay still, shutting his eyes. Michael then rises and returns to his warm chair. Mary wants to try this too and says so. James takes a piece of pita-bread, tears it in thirds and hands it to his friends Michael and Mary. Altogether they dip in the same bowl.

On August 14, 2006 a ceasefire will come into force. During five weeks of fighting, hundreds of people will have died and thousands made homeless.

**Note: News items taken from BBC News online, Wed., 19 July 2006 and Thurs., 31 August 2006.*

Sleep Thoughts

If only you could sleep forever. They call that death. You don't really want to die, and so you realize that besides the waking world and the world of sleep, there is something called the in-between. It happens day or night.

Night Shift

Shape the shadow
of a faceless stranger –
all hands hair and bare chest,
moving over the length
of my body,
burrowing into
the crevice of my neck.

Forking fingers through hair,
pulling head down
into darkness,
windless breath heavy
under weight of weary eyelids

Slipping in and out
of my grip,
Dream rips the shadow a face –
friend's brother, sister's mother –
who knows better than I do

where to navigate the

compromises
of the night.

Schemas

Where do I begin? When did this madness begin to envelop me? Was it the antagonistic Denny's waitress, the aggressive bank teller, the dog and cat humping in the park, or catching Billy jacking off on Playboy? Somewhere in the provisional instants of time we call memories, lies the epicenter of the tremulous ripples that sent me over the edge.

Astronomy 101. When I arrived late to class, I chose the metal chair in the back row, scooting it back to make room for my lanky legs. I rested my heavy backpack on my outstretched legs, forcing my battered heels against the floor. When Professor Astronomy flung the door open, sliding across the shiny, waxed floor tat matched the bald spot on the top of his head, he was wearing the same tired t-shirt with the glow-in-the-dark planets and stars. I hated that shirt and the

manner he took in his lectures, holding his skinny frame erect like a drill sergeant, seeing right through us as if we were transparent. He paused to place his briefcase on the table, tied the sparse strands of the tail of his ridiculous gray mullet into a ponytail, and pressed the button to lower the film screen.

The lights dimmed and the chapter on lunar eclipses appeared. I reached down for my study guide, and when I looked up, this is what I saw in glittering PowerPoint letters, appearing sequentially on the screen:

Y-O-U L-I-G-H-T U-P M-Y L-I-F-E

“It’s karaoke time and we’ll begin with my favorite, an oldie for you guys, not for me.” He started belting out lyrics about having the hope to carry on, in a crackly, falsetto voice. I looked around at my classmates; they began blurring in the foreground. I could not see their expressions, only of Fellow Student whose head was tilted back, his mouth hanging wide open. “It breaks the routine, yeah?” I turned away and felt my own face contort into disbelieving expressions.

Professor Astronomy raced up the steps, the nostrils of his long pointed nose flaring like a dragon, and lunged at Fellow Student, knocking him to the ground. “Drop and give me fifty” he ordered. “And you, Young College Student, put this on,” he said to me as he pulled off his tired shirt and handed it to me. The ripples of his ribcage were showing and I shut my eyes, but obeyed. Fellow Student counted, “Uno, dos, tres...” as he clapped his hands in between.

I ran towards the back door exit, not daring to look back. I nearly turned back, hoping to see Professor teaching as usual, pointing to the phases of the moon with his laser pointer – no matter how boring – pausing for questions. It

was the questions that led to thoughtful speculations, and to more questions, which led to answers that at least made sense. But this – none of this belonged to any familiar framework in my head.

But this isn't where it began. Somewhere in these past two weeks, something must have been the trigger. By this time in class, my pasty skin needed washing, white flakes drifting from my itchy scalp, and I was wearing the same white shirt sullied from over-wear. I restlessly rubbed at the stubble growing on my chin. I liked the scratchy feel on my fingertips, but not the hot row of acne bumps rising up my left cheek. I felt dirty. I hadn't slept much, and my life had already taken a turn into uncertainty, I'm certain.

Maybe it was Sunday breakfast at Denny's, the weekend before Astronomy 101.

Everything had begun as usual – the hostess leading me to a comfortable booth by the window, handing me the breakfast menu: "Your waitress will be with you shortly." I tossed the menu aside and ordered my usual – the Grand Slam for \$3.99. A new waitress walked towards my table, sliding into the booth right next to me, setting the iced water down. I looked at her lapel, which read, "Slam me!"

"How's it goin'?" she asked.

"I'm fine I guess," I answered, scooting closer to the wall. "You're new here?" I said, clearing my throat.

"Slammy, slamoo, slam you!" she jingled. "Your hair looks like it's on fire!" She must have noticed the red I had Billy add to the tips of my blazing

black hair. "And what are your plans for the weekend?" she asked as she scooted closer to me, planting me against the wall. I sat in uncomfortable silence, staring down at her apron pocket, hoping she would get up and take my order. Instead, her eyes rolled around, back and forth. "Goshitsbeen-aroundweekforme-I'vebeenonmyfeet-twentyfourseven-andimtiredofallthegripping." After each syncopated phrase, she sucked in air. I whirled around, looking for help. She stood up and lit a cigarette.

"Hey," I whispered, "there's no smoking inside." She swept the cigarette from her lips with two fingers and ground it into my right hand. I yelped in anguish, splashing the cold water onto my hand. Then I splashed the rest in her face as I pushed her aside and made for the exit. Her voice trailed off as she announced, "The pie of the month is..."

I suppose I could've run back in and complained to the manager, but I didn't. Act now, ask questions later. That's my way. So this must've been it. This was the first of the many strange events of the last two weeks, which pulled the rug from under me, and swept me into a world unknown and unfamiliar.

When I left Denny's all I could think of was how I needed more cash. So I drove to the ATM and punched my pin number in: 4, 2, 1, and 6. That didn't work. So I tried, 4, 1, 2, and 6. That wasn't it either. Was it 4, 6, 2, 1? I was blocked out of the machine. It spit out my card, so I went inside the bank.

"Next member please."

"Well, this is embarrassing, but I forgot my pin number and can't get any cash from the ATM. Can I withdraw forty dollars please?"

“Certainly sir,” the male teller answered. I didn’t like being called sir, but I found his tousled brown curls attractive, and his Adam’s apple rippling up and down as he spoke. “It happens more than you would think sir. Just fill out this form.” It was odd that he was calling me sir, as I was still a young college student.

“Yeah, it’s pretty humorous actually,” I said un-sir-like. “This has never happened before.”

“Sir just sign here please,” he continued, annoying me despite the flash of his amazing blue eyes. “If you still can’t remember your code later, just go to the customer relations desk and they will assist you in obtaining a new one.” His manner was cordial, but uptight.

“Thanks, but I’m sure it will come back to me.”

Yank. He pulled me by the collar and stuck his tongue in my mouth. I nearly choked, but the swirling of his tongue enthralled me, and he began sucking on my bottom lip. My heart beat rapidly as I both pulled away and drew in to him. He tightened his grip and I succumbed. But then just as easily he let go, and I collapsed to the floor. I edged backwards like a crab, sweating, and watched the teller as he carried on: “Next member please.”

Managing to hobble back onto my feet, I couldn’t look up, out of shame. I felt for my lower lip but could only feel my fingertips. Trickle of sweat were blinding me as I struggled to the door. In the chaos of my mind, I could not remember where I had parked.

But despite the madness of these events, it was Billy. Billy sent me over the edge. Catching Billy just this afternoon in his bedroom, with the Summer Special Issue of Playboy in his hands. In one hand he held the magazine, and with the other, he was jacking off through the slit of his red-checkered under-shorts. I had gone into the kitchen a few minutes before to heat up rolled tacos in the microwave, and when I shoved the door open with my foot, I saw him yanking, pulling, his face squeezed like a prune. I shut the door without a word, laid the plate of tacos on the coffee table, and walked out the door.

As I sat down in my car, sighing heavily, struggling to catch my breath, I felt a tingling sensation down my legs before they went numb. I felt the urge to climb back into the warmth of Mother's womb, to call out to her for help. But she didn't know about Billy and me. At least I didn't think so. And even if she did, what would she say? Would she be accepting? Instead of comforting me, she'd accuse me of abandoning her just like Dad did years ago. Ever since then, I've been her sense of security, the man of the house...

Maybe she suspected, that night a year ago when Billy and I first started seeing each other. That night we took a drive around downtown to spend some time alone. I kept my cell phone on silent, not even vibrate so I wouldn't feel it like a stun gun in my pocket through the night. Mom would always have some excuse to call, to remind me that we hadn't watched the rented videos yet that were due the next day, or that her home-cooked meal was waiting for me, getting cold. I didn't have a curfew anymore, but she always found some way to make me feel guilty that she was home alone again.

Billy drove that night, and when he dropped me off, he did so one or two houses away from mine, at my urging, just in case Mom was peeking through the blinds again. “Why do you worry so much?” he asked me, “She knows we’re friends. You have friends.” It was true perhaps that I was being paranoid, but I didn’t want to make her suspicious. Billy and I had started off as friends. But then his common, small brown eyes grew uncommon to me. Deep and reassuring, they had a way of smiling at my eternally alarmed wide ones. Maybe Mom would catch on to this, a look passing between us. She’s clairvoyant, Mom, with the uncanny ability to decipher the simplest expressions.

I wanted to spend the night with Billy at his place that night, but I knew that at eighteen years old, a sleepover would seem strange. And as I walked up my driveway, there was Mom, peeking through a small slit through the curtains. “That’s odd,” she said when I unlocked the door, “it’s as if you just suddenly appeared. And your hair is all ruffled.” I glanced at the round mirror hanging behind the door, and my normally perfect side part had indeed disappeared under disheveled tufts of overgrown hair. “You didn’t walk home did you?”

“No Mom, of course not,” I answered. I couldn’t lie to her and told her I had hung out with Billy. “Hmmm,” she said, with a meditative look. I looked away, making sure she couldn’t study my face.

When I left Billy to his Playboy, I was tempted to go back inside, to give him a chance to explain. But my desire for Mom’s warmth took over, and so I drove home.

It was dark, and after passing through the swinging wooden gate, I tried unlocking the door, but it was already unlocked. Strange I thought. The fluorescent light didn't activate as usual, meaning Mom had not switched it on. She wasn't in the kitchen, and no food was on the table, covered and kept warm, waiting for me. The dishes were piled up in the sink. I tiptoed to check if there was any light coming through the slit under her bedroom door. It was dark. I heard mumbling from the living room, the flicker of lights calling to me in the darkness. I saw her sprawled on the couch, dozing in front of the television set. "Mom, it's me. Mom, what's for dinner?" I asked. She flinched and opened her eyes. She gave me a quick look over and turned her eyes back onto the T.V. screen. "That's not your shirt, is it." It was a statement, not a question.

"No Mom, it's not mine."

"Is it Billy's?" My heart beat rapidly again just as it did in the bank. Only it was out of fear rather than desire. Her voice was sleepy, icy and cold. I refused to answer that foreign tone coming from a familiar form. I made my way to the couch she lay upon, and squeezed myself into the corner and against the armrest.

"You're a fag aren't you? You and Billy."

I looked over at her. Her freshly black-dyed hair was pulled back in a tight ponytail, rather than falling loosely onto her shoulders as it usually did. It made her slanted eyes look even narrower. She was wearing her terry white robe, the one I remembered from childhood, still soft and white like lamb's wool. She looked as if she had shrunk. But she wasn't old enough to shrink like old

people do. I wanted to shrink, lie safely on her shoulder or back like I used to when I was a small child, while she watched her favorite shows from the corner of her eye. She hadn't really been watching, those lazy afternoons, but lulled into sleep by the constant streaming sounds. And I was lulled too, by the rise and fall of her breathing. I rode safely into those sweet dreams of flying in a rainbow sky, or floating in the air. I could never remember waking up.

"God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve," she continued. "If everyone were gay, that would mean the end of the human race. Then what about natural selection, survival of the fittest? There would be nothing fit to survive. There's a frozen Hungry Jack in the freezer."

As I sit here, I don't know how many hours have passed. Mom still lies there in the same position, her eyes now shut. The television is no longer hazy, and scenes from the ten-o'clock news are flashing, one after the other. The shadows and colors on the screen palpitate and pulse, mimicking the electrical pulses of my unstable heart.

Mother, you are the center of my madness. But the chill in the room is beginning to settle into my skin, melting into recognizable warmth. The right words will surely form on my tongue, and finally release. Everything that has taken me by surprise will, like all things, become used and familiar. A frozen Hungry Jack doesn't sound so bad after all.

Sister Got Struck By a Car and No One Woke Me

All of this is possible, and this idea of the savages coincides with that of children, who also cannot distinguish between waking and dream. – Borges, from
Nightmares

Hot Dog's tongue – rough and dry – scrapes against the back of my neck. Saliva sticky cheek stuck to sofa cushion. Hot, heavy air in one nostril, out the other. Arms tucked under, hands pinned down by thighs. Hot Dog pants, licks cheek, and then hair. Back to my back. Hot Dog makes skin raw and hot. No, I sleep whisper to him, but he keeps on licking my back like a bone and my hair like his toes. The weight of his belly and paws heavy on my bones.

Voices drone in my ear, disembodied from distant shuffling feet. Slam goes the door. Vroooom, vroooom goes the engine.

Hot Dog's weight is heavy, and I am heavy like a bed. There's a bed on my head and my body. I try to speak the Lord's name, but the "J" is stuck between the corners of my tongue and the bottom of my teeth and I can't get up.

Thump. I open my eyes. Hot Dog is on the floor, panting, wagging his tail. I wipe my cheek with the back of my hand and smell my saturated hair. It's brittle and dried and smells of metallic mucus. I'm drenched in sweat, but the

back of my neck feels ice fresh, and the fuzzy couch has left tractor marks on my arms and legs.

The patio is quiet. No one is here but Hot Dog at my feet. I wander into the kitchen. A halfway open can of peas, open pot of water on the stove, the fan whirring and the stove light dim. Hello? I say but no one answers. I peek into the living room and there is no one. Hello? I shout again. I drag my sleepy body to the bedrooms, and they are as empty as the kitchen. I wander back into the warmth of the patio. Hot Dog is back on the couch. I push him onto the floor and go back to sleep. This time the Lord keeps me light and safe.

There goes a buzzing in my ear. Vrooom, vrooom. Slam goes the door and wakes me.

“Sister got struck by a car!” No one woke me.

Sister must be made of bouncy stuff. She looked one way as the car came the other. And she bounced. Struck by metal and flew through the sky with not one bone broken. Daddy says, “I want you to use these crutches anyway – just in case,” and Sister complies.

Mommy ran into the street yelling, “My baby, my baby,” when she saw the white sheet. I thought I was the Baby. But Sister was hiding from the bright, dizzy lights, on the silver tray with wheels. Mommy slapped her hands against her face and looked like the screaming face on Sister’s bedroom wall. That’s what Daddy says. Mommy loves Sister even though sometimes she slaps her across the face.

Sister says, "I wasn't dead, but on that street I looked straight up to the Lord." Her eyes are unblinkingly beautiful when she says this.

She wasn't dead – she was asleep. And the weight of the Lord saved her.

Red Balloon

Today, I return to a distant past. I close my eyes and possess my childhood self, whether she likes it or not, tracking memories webbed in shadows.

There is a blond little boy in blue overalls, followed by a floating red balloon. I want that balloon.

I'm holding Mama's hand. I beg her to buy me a bag of balloons, the mixed-assortment kind. This bag has only one red balloon. *No, no, no* my childhood self says, *there's more than one red balloon in this bag*. But a single red balloon flashes in my eye while all the others remain colorless. I press down on it through the crinkling plastic bag. I imagine this one red balloon is mine and suddenly it is.

I grasp a spool of white thread from Mama's sewing basket and unravel just enough to bounce the balloon along next to me. Tying the string onto the balloon, I hold on tight because if I don't, will it carry me away? Secretly I want it to.

I'm wandering around - is it Paris? With window shutters and iron bars hovering, towers with needle tops pointing towards the sky. *You wish you were Pascal, the little French boy don't you?* she says to me, my childhood self. Am I remembering it as it really was or as I had wished it to be?

Now there are simple neighborhood houses, one or two stories high, with large yards and wire fences separating one house from the other, each one with

a face of its own. I am 6 or 7 years old. I tie the red balloon to my wrist now so it will stay with me wherever I go. I feel as if I am drifting, floating by these homes, half separated from my childhood self, half within.

Water sprays my face. It's coming from a snakelike hose pinned down into the ground of a yard with smooth, flat grass that looks like green carpet. There is a diapered baby splashing water in a round, portable pool. As I move along I smell the Oscar Meyer hot dogs and 100-percent beef patties smoldering from a barbeque grill.

There are the dark-chocolate colored girls with their corkscrew curls digging up dirt from their backyard, grime and sparkly mud all over their fingers and hands as they pat down mud pies. Patty and Vanesha, the Guamanian sisters who lived next door – one the same age as me, the other a little younger – with their yellow teeth and soiled white dresses. I remember playing patty cake until sunset, before Mama and Papa would call me back inside for supper. A time when being a kid was all about games – marbles and Legos, Flatsy-Patsies and musical wind up merry-go-rounds. About playing outside a little after dark, before things got all used-up and worn, set in a corner of the garage, old and forgotten in the nervous shadows.

I see Vanesha's dirty white panties as she crouches. She's rolling up potato bugs and flicking them down the gutter. We used to slice the black ticker bugs in half, watching the separated halves wiggle around. I remember walking home from school with her and Patty, stopping by the Mendoza's a few houses away from mine, buying Mexican candy – Tamarindo pops for a quarter, tape

candy for a nickel, and packs of saladitos for ten cents each in their kitchen. I'd pop open my green fish wallet by squeezing the head and tail together, dropping the coins onto Mrs. Mendoza's sweaty, brown palm. Even before we left their porch, I would unwrap the tape candy slowly with my teeth and the sugary and sour taste would make my taste buds go all wild. Vanesha would tap my arm with her sticky finger and offer me one of her Saladitos. (Whatever happened to Patty and Vanesha? They moved away, back to their home in Guam. Slowly they fade from view.)

It will be dark soon, so I must find the best place for take-off.

I am at the beach, digging my toes into the wet sand, the red balloon bouncing in the air as I flap my arms up and down like a bird. I flap them slowly, then wave them in half-circles rapidly until my arms become whirligigs. I'm nearly taken up and away! I open my eyes and find little ripples splashing against my ankles. Squinting at the glare coming from the ocean, there are two bodies bouncing in the waves, one silhouette further than the other, unrecognizable. I don't know how to swim. So I keep digging my toes into the dirt with my red balloon tied to my wrist. I want those strangers to stay out there, far away, whoever they are, even if they may be kids my own age. They will ask me what I'm doing with this red balloon bobbing next to me like an extra head, following me everywhere I go. They might be bullies. They might be envious and pop my red balloon.

Maybe this is where I let it free, above the shallow waters, water up to my ankles as I watch my red balloon blend into the roundness of the sun.

But wait! She says, my childhood self. *This isn't where it happens.* I feel the grainy, warm sand in between my toes and I don't like it. *That's right, it doesn't feel good because you're not used to it.*

I try to remember the last time Mama and Papa took me to the beach, but can't. What I remember is being scolded for dirtying the carpet with my sandy feet, Papa slamming his office door behind him and Mama dropping onto the couch, setting her feet on the coffee table and the volume to the television muted. Her shoulders were thin and bent forward like an old coat hanger, and she asked me to come over and pluck the two white hairs from her scalp. I did, and she smiled with those sad eyes and drooping shoulders. I leave her, shadows forming in the corners of the kitchen, crawling on the hallway walls, and encompassing the emptiness of my room.

She's right. This isn't where it happened.

It's nearly pitch dark, if it weren't for the moonshine. I've left the darkness of my room tiptoeing out here into the backyard. There's just enough moonlight to watch my feet as I step on the crisp, dry grass, and onto the little bank by the next-door neighbor's chain link fence between the Manalangs and us. The fat white lady who screams at her old mother and at her quiet husband. One time I swear I saw her pouring hot water over her mom as I peeked through the blinds in my bedroom. She lifted a tin pail over the old lady's white-haired head and as she poured the water over her the old lady jolted and shook herself like a wet dog. Mama doesn't believe me, but I saw it. We don't talk much to the

neighbors. We don't even know the names of the Mexican family who moved in next door on the other side since Patty and Vanesha moved away.

Odie is barking, pulling at his chain tied in the tool shed. I shush him and he keeps barking, wagging his golden tail. It sparkles, even in the darkness. I scoot myself further up the hill, and hold the balloon string tight. I'm nearly ready, but first I will eat my midnight snack and drink from my green canteen. I feel like I'm on an adventure, my ding-dong wrapped in aluminum foil, and my canteen wrapped around my neck. I tie the balloon back onto my wrist and unwrap the foil – oh so quietly. It crinkles, and Odie stops barking, waiting for me to throw him a scrap. I bite into the hard chocolate crust, into the moist white cream. I wash it down with Sunny Delight. I almost wish there was someone to share this with. No, this is my moment, sending a message off into the world to be caught up and carried away. In my red balloon is the folded up piece of paper bouncing inside. It will travel further than I ever have or ever will. These are the words I printed in silver ink: "Hallo stranger. I have traveled far and seen many places and things. I don't know who you are, but it doesn't much matter because I've found you. This was meant to be. Please read me, then place me somewhere safe – in a chest full of treasures? Yes, to be opened by your grandchildren someday. They will read me and know that two strangers brushed by this day, by chance. I love you." I blush at what I've written.

My childhood self is awfully quiet now. Maybe she is pleased. Yes, *she says. This is it.*

I wipe away the chocolate crumbs from my mouth and untie the string from my wrist. It's breezy, just as I'd hoped. Maybe my balloon message won't go very far, and maybe it will. I close my eyes and make a wish, a wish to the moon. Take me away, far away. I let go of the string, and I keep my eyes shut, for I don't want to jinx it. I wait several minutes, and I feel dizzy as I lean from side to side. At last, I open my eyes to the lamp in the sky. *Oh look at the moon. All shining up there. Oh how she looks like a lamp in the air.* My eyes are moist and sticky, and at once I feel happy and sad as I watch my red balloon, my friend, fly away.

Monkey Square

When I visit home, I don't remember anything of the past. Maybe that's because Dad is still there. Dad is there and alive. He and the house are now.

He opens the door, and I don't notice he has only a few strands of hair left on his balding head, or that his chin is scrunched in more than before or that he's lost a few more teeth. If he were gone, then the dark paneled walls of the living room, the hippie-style beads still hanging from the kitchen doorway, and the sliding closet door loosened from its hinges would invite my memory right there and then to revisit the delights of childhood energy, bursting and anxious.

It's when I'm away from home and the neighborhood of my childhood that I remember things – insignificant and far removed from my adult life. An image, or the image of an object – that's all it takes to spark a memory. A balloon bobbing up and down in the hands of a child, a shiny new penny on the street. A sidewalk like any other.

A round piece of metal in the sidewalk in my new neighborhood. Taking a walk to the grocery store up the street, I saw it, just like the ones I discovered on Chestnut Avenue, where I grew up.

Monkey Square.

I spotted the first one on my walk home from school one day in fourth grade. It looked like a rusted penny from a distance, but when I bent down to pick it up it wouldn't budge; it was lodged in the ground, drilled into the sidewalk – a metal disk in the middle of the cement square. When I realized I couldn't lift it from the sidewalk, I moved on. Then a few feet further, I saw another one. This time the disk wasn't in the middle, but near the crack dividing this square from the next. I had spotted several randomly by the time I arrived home.

That night as I drifted into sleep I dreamed of circles and squares, dancing around one another, different colors and sizes. First they danced, and then they merged, invading one another's space. I woke up in the middle of the night all drenched in sweat.

In fourth grade I walked to and from school alone. My mind was always active and alive, but hardly ever in the moment. I would live in the book I was reading at the time: Hazel Rah of *Watership Down*, his ghost floating away to join the Black Rabbit of Inle. My eyes stinging as I conjure up their shapes in front of me, black and white, gliding and swerving in the air until they disappear into the bushes or the trees. Anne, *Anne of Green Gables* – Carrots! I run after her and her freckles, carrot-colored hair, milk white skin, and tilt up of the chin. I want both Anne and to be Anne.

It took the little metal disks to bring me back into myself and to place my feet back on the ground.

After my first discovery I searched for more. I even went so far as to walk past my house to see if there were more up the street. There were. And I created a game with specific rules: When you spot the little round disk in a cement square, you can't step in it. You jump over the square. If you step in the square or don't jump far enough, you lose. Of course, the best part was spotting the monkey square in time to make the leap. These were the rules I created, and that was the name I gave it: Monkey Square.

At first, I didn't mind playing my game alone, but then it became dull. There was no one to cheer me on when I made it over the square, and no one to

make fun of should they step inside one by mistake. I had no one to walk home from school with, so I continued playing by myself, as a way to quiet my noisy mind.

I could have invited Scottie, a boy in my fourth grade class, to play with me, but he was gross. I caught him a few times in the neighborhood kneeling down on the dirty curb, licking at the water running down the cracks in the sidewalk – water from people watering their lawns or washing their cars. He used to suck on my hair in third grade while we watched Disney movies. The first time it happened, I felt my head pull back, and when I turned around I saw him sucking on my long hair like it was a licorice stick. I was about to tell him to stop, but then he pulled it out of his mouth, smiled real wide with his two front teeth missing and didn't seem at all embarrassed or surprised.

I couldn't ask him to play with me after he asked me to go around. He was walking on the opposite side of the street, but I felt him staring.

"Hey Abigail!"

"It's Abby," I said, glaring over at him. No one called me Abigail except for Mom and Dad. He remained on the other side of the street for a time, but then without my invitation crossed over to my side. I'd been playing Monkey Square on my own as usual, and he interrupted my game. "Hey Abby," he said much softer now, "Wanna go around?" He reached his hand towards me and instantly I tucked my chin in turtle-like. I thought he was going to touch my neck. I had a phobia that left me fearful of necklaces and turtlenecks. My cheeks felt hot, as they did whenever I was the center of attention, but this time I was blazing from

my neck up into my eyelids. No one had ever asked me to go around. Most of the boys called me toothpick, Olive Oil, or beanpole, including Scottie. I looked at his dirty blond shaggy hair covering his eyes and didn't know what to say. He kept walking with me, and I was afraid he could see the safety pin keeping my khaki colored pants from falling off my waist, or the masking tape keeping the hems of my pants from dragging on the ground.

"Well?" he asked.

"I don't think so," I answered without looking up. Scottie said nothing as he walked back across the street, the cuffs of his jeans making a swooshing sound as he walked faster.

When he turned the corner, I searched for the next Monkey Square, but instead I found a dark rectangular hole in the sidewalk where the slab was missing. As I leaped over the hole I feared landing in an endless tunnel, pulling me down, down, down into my dreams – the one of Barbies without their clothes on, on top of shiny new cars. Naked, not naked dolls but naked women – women with curvy bodies. Barbies. Barbie games. Making them kiss, Ken on top of Barbie, mashing their naked bodies against each other –my face and neck heating up. Barbie on top of Ken, but can't make the kissing sounds.

I played Monkey Square regularly and alone until I became distracted with Richard. I discovered Richard the summer right before fifth grade. I don't know how this happened, but it did:

As I prepared to scrub the bathroom down, I stepped onto the bathtub to slide the window open. That's when I spotted Cinda, my next-door neighbor,

swinging in her backyard, talking to herself. I watched her for a few moments, then yelled out, “Hi Cinda, this is Rrrrrrrrichard!” in a high, falsetto voice.

I became Richard beginning at noon when Mom started her daily, hours-long ritual of watching her favorite soap operas, *General Hospital* and *Days of Our Lives*. Cinda would be swinging on her homemade device of plywood and jump ropes, talking to herself. Our backyard was large with two trees, a clothesline and a tool shed, but the wall with the bathroom window was just a few yards away from chain link fence, which separated her yard from mine. I’d step onto the bathtub, slide open the window and start talking to her with my Richard voice. She’d dart her head up quick like a startled feline, but couldn’t see through the frosted glass window that I slid open just enough for her to hear me, but not see me. I’d repeat, “Hi Cinda, this is Richard.” Then she’d ask, “Who’s that?” I’d say, “I’m Richard your friend.” Her eyes would dart back and forth, up and down, while she slowed her swinging to a halt. “Where are you? Why don’t you come out and play?”

Coming out to play with Cinda was not an option. Not only was she my next-door neighbor, we went to the same school. She was an E.D. kid, emotionally disturbed. On the playground, she would turn red, start to shake and snap her teeth like a mad dog, and I never knew why. Her special class was allowed to play with the *normal* kids under the supervision of Ms. Rickenbacker. Ms. Rickenbacker was skinnier than I was, hipbones showing through her polyester pants, her face sunken in like a skull. Sometimes Cinda would ask Ms. Rickenbacker if she could play dodge ball and she’d let her, but only if she

promised not to play too rough. One time she pelted a fifth-grade boy so hard in the face with the red rubber ball that he started to cry. Cinda then turned and gave him one of her great big bear hugs, and wouldn't let go. When Ms. Rickenbacker's male helper managed to pry her away, he had to restrain her from behind as she started kicking her feet against the hot afternoon wind.

Cinda was a stocky kid with long blond hair almost white in the sun. She was neither pretty nor ugly. But her twisted, red face seemed scary when she had her fits. I wondered what made Cinda the way she was. I thought maybe something really bad happened to her, and she needed to let all that rage out somehow.

Maybe she felt like I did when Mom and Dad screamed at each other so loud that it shook the house. I'd scream into my pillow till I nearly suffocated. During one of their worse screaming episodes, I took a pair of scissors and chopped off my hair until I was left with short, uneven bangs. It felt good doing this as I watched the long pieces of black hair fall all over my lap.

I loved our secret game – Cinda's and mine. And it continued on into fifth grade.

It always started off the same way, whether right after school or on the weekend. I'd talk in my high voice and then ask her what she was doing and was she being a good little girl. Cinda told Richard that she didn't like playing alone, and how most of the kids at school didn't like her. I told her I would always be her friend. Richard, not Abby. At school, I secretly wanted to play with her because she was good at wall-ball and kicking the soccer ball real far. But if I

did, I wouldn't hear the end of it from the other kids. I wanted her to teach me how to kick the ball, as I always seemed to miss or at best, kick only a few feet in front of me.

My mind and heart were restless and I realized that if I played with Cinda in my backyard or hers, there would be no one there to see. Still, I couldn't bring myself to knock on her door and ask if she could come out and play. Mom wouldn't have let me anyway. She called Cinda's mom that "white, wild woman," raising her crazy daughter without a husband. But it didn't matter to me what Mom said. I liked how pale Cinda's face and hair looked in the sunshine, as if they were one and the same, compared to my black hair and brown skin. I liked our game the way it was, and I enjoyed being Richard.

One day my Richard game took a turn.

"Come closer," I said to Cinda. I mean Richard said. She came off the swing and stepped closer to the fence, following the sound of the voice but still not finding it. Then after a few moments hesitation, she clung to the fence and stuck her lips between the wires. They were cherry-colored, sparkling like the wet-kiss lip-gloss Mom had bought me for my last birthday. As I stood on the bathtub, my legs began to tire, shaking at the knees.

"Where are you?" she said louder than usual, darting her eyes again. "Remember our rules?" I said. "You can never see me, but I'll call your name often and talk to you often." I peeked through the window, trying to keep my head low, even though I knew she couldn't see me through the frosted glass. Just then, her mother slid their back sliding door open.

“Cinda, what’s going on?” She rushed towards Cinda and unglued her from the fence. She looked suspiciously up towards the window as I crouched down, holding onto the edge of the windowpane. I nearly slipped into the bathtub when I heard rustling of dry grass and the patio door slam shut. I held my breath and snuck back into my bedroom, shutting my door ever so quietly. I was terrified that the doorbell would ring, and that Cinda’s mom would uncover my secret game. I knew what had to be done. I would have to tuck Richard away, somewhere back where he came from.

The next day, I snuck up to the window to see if Cinda was playing in her backyard, and there she was, on the swing. “Richard, are you there?” she said in a strained voice, trying to keep me a secret. When I didn’t answer, she said a little louder, “Richard, where are you? I miss you.” I wanted so badly to answer, but I was scared her mom was waiting inside, peeking out and listening to see if Richard would answer, so I didn’t. Poor Cinda, she looked so sad.

The following week at morning recess Cinda was playing on the swings. I saw her as I hung by my legs from the monkey bars. My long hair hung in front of my face, but I could still see Cinda upside-down, swinging higher and higher. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but some strands of her glowing white hair were loose, waving freely in the breeze. The shoelaces of her soiled white sneakers were untied, and as her swinging slowed, my dizzy head confused her frown for a smile. Then it all became twisted. I spun myself up to the top of the monkey bars and watched her twisting the chains of the swing – twist and untwist – against the rules. The line of kids waiting to use the swing got wildly impatient.

The one next in line shouted, “28, 29, 30, my turn!” Cinda ignored him, pushing herself off the ground with the force of her toes, up into the air. She fiercely kicked as I watched in wonder. “Ms. Rickenbacker, Ms. Rickenbacker,” the line screamed in unison. Ms. Rickenbacker came running towards Cinda and asked her in a gentle voice to come down. Cinda kept spinning and spinning as the chains unwound and then swung again into the air. “Cinda, your turn is over,” Ms. Rickenbacker insisted, louder this time. The swinging slowed, but Cinda twisted herself between the chains like a pretzel, shaking and screaming, kicking one foot against the other. Ms. Rickenbacker came from behind and untwisted Cinda, hugging her arms around her while the male aide grabbed her by the legs. By this time, several more kids had formed a circle around them, some giggling, others whispering into each other’s ears. Me – I felt a pain in my chest as I just sat on top of the bars and didn’t move. I was sure Cinda had a seizure because she missed Richard.

Even before the seasons changed and the air became cooler, Cinda hardly ever came outside anymore. Though I had given up Richard, I still peeked through the window from time to time. When she did get on her swing, she didn’t swing as high. She wasn’t humming or even talking to herself as she usually did. Often she just sat there staring up at my window, waiting.

When the rains came, Mom drove me to school and picked me up. I missed playing Monkey Square. I missed Richard. All I had left was my favorite stuffed animal Monchichi. So when I came home from school I dragged him with me around the house. I held him next to my cheek and created a dreadful smile

on my face. I would wag the monkey at Mom's face. After I did it once too many times, she yelled at me to stop, and threw Monchichi across the hallway into the mirror. When I went to pick up his drooping body from the floor, I saw my own reflection in the mirror, my noodle arms wrapped around him. I knew then that he was my only friend.

Spring came along and I walked to and from school again. Richard had disappeared, but I hadn't forgotten Monkey Square. I started it up again, even memorizing some – the first one just two squares to the left of where the safety patrol kid regularly stood wearing his red wind breaker, holding the large pole forward with the stop sign; another one on the corner where Pickard Avenue turned in to my street, Chestnut Avenue; and another in front of the two-story house painted bright pink where that old Filipino couple ran a home for the mentally disturbed.

I didn't feel too old to play Monkey Square as I now did for other games like hopscotch or Barbies, but I longed for someone to join me. I thought of Cinda – she would have loved leaping over squares – but she wasn't allowed to walk home by herself; her mom dropped her off and picked her up from school every day. The following summer, after fifth grade, Cinda and her mom moved away. I didn't know where they went.

Now that I am so many years removed from my childhood days, I don't dream of naked women as often, and Richard has never returned. As for Cinda, she must be out there somewhere, with all that fierceness. And her crown of shining white hair.

Chin Face

He held the photo, encased in cracked, dusty glass, next to his heart.

“Let it go. It’s yellowed – the couch, the tint of my skin – everything
sallow,” I protested, trying to pry his fingers loose. He held me back.

“How could you?” he wept.

We yanked at the frame back and forth, until I managed to loosen his grip.
I peeked over at my upside-down self. The chin. Chin face. Soft black eyes,
orange lips frowning. My chin transformed into a face, just like it used to do
when I was a kid. My sister and I would paint each other’s chins into faces. It
was my idea. We would take mom’s bright orange lipstick and black coal
eyeliner. Two black circles for the eyes and orange lips for the lips. Then while
one of us sat on the lower bunk bed, the other would hang upside down from the
top and put on a chin show. And then we’d switch. I’d give my face a wig by

wrapping my long dangling black hair underneath my chin. I loved how I could make my chin face grimace with a grin.

“Those sexy cat eyes, look!” he said, pointing at photo me. “Ruined by those bangs,” he said, pointing at flesh and blood me.

I rubbed my own chin, not the smooth flawless chin in the professionally shot photo, and felt the little red bumps. Those bumps used to give my chin face freckles, adding character. When my sister would point out my chin acne, I’d remind her it wasn’t mine but belonged to chin face, and not acne but freckles.

“Don’t do that,” he said, “your chin’s already pimply.” I continued rubbing.

“How could you?”

“You asked me that already.” I forked my bangs with my fingers, fluffing them for effect.

“Please don’t do that.” He set the picture down on the fireplace. I took it one step further and placed it face down.

“Betty Page,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“You’re no Betty Page.”

“I’m not trying to be.” My bangs were not black and blunt like Betty Page. They were blunt but not black.

“Betty Page had a body.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“Well, her bangs accentuated her body, yours don’t. They get in the way.”

“They accentuate my eyes. My cat eyes you so love,” I argued. Not really. He imagined my eyes looked like those of some cat and he imagined that he was in love with these eyes, which were now marred by my newly cut bangs. For me, my eyes were only to see with.

“Those bangs – they make your eyes bulge out like puffer fish.”

What he wanted to see was what he had always seen before the bangs. I didn’t see myself as he saw me. I liked just being, the feeling of an enclosed entity without a face. Enclosed within teeth. I’ve always been hyper-aware of my teeth – bottom row under top row, clenched, chattering, or at rest, cushioned with a warm tongue, hinged with a chin. Yes, teeth, and a chin. I avoid looking at photos of myself – that Other outside of myself. Gazed upon, watched, judged.

“I used to call you Sparky, remember?”

The first time he called me Sparky was in a Valentine’s card. I asked him why he called me that. Because your eyes sparkle, like you’re happy, was his answer. He smiled as he looked into my eyes. I suddenly awakened to my eyes as objects, not just to see with. And I was dumbfounded, because I didn’t feel happy. I was bored of him. I stayed with him because he was there, and he adored me.

My eyes betrayed me.

“So no more Sparky?” I asked.

He looked at my bangs. “No more Sparky.”

As he lunged towards the photo, I grabbed it first, and out popped sprouts from the eyes, and they grew and grew like dangling hair until they swallowed up that Other. All but the chin.

My Chocolate Wound

I knew something might be wrong when my skin felt more taut than usual, even after lathering with a thick layer of lotion. It cracked open right at that line of juncture between palm and wrist. Split open at the seams.

I felt the sting of raw air, like the burn of dry ice. And out popped the white rice.

I was tempted to taste it, to be sure my eyes weren't deceiving me, but soft and hot to the touch of my fingertips was confirmation enough. It was indeed rice – freshly boiled, wet and steaming.

The steam burned the edges of the surrounding skin, which peeled and curled back. It stung even more. Would this require a trip to the emergency room? Urgent care? I decided to seek out the advice of a friend.

First, I needed to make a pit stop at the grocery store for some cigarettes. I had only two left, and that wouldn't last me through the weekend. I smoked at least four in one day, and only on the weekends, although weekends now began on Thursdays. I decided to forego the grocery store up the street, where I could never pronounce "Marlboro" quite clearly, and where the over-jolly bag boy never had the keys to the cabinet on hand and so took far too long to procure my "Mar-burrow reds, filtered." I went to the nearby liquor store instead, where the bored-out-of-his-wits manager knew exactly what I was there for, simply tossing the pack into my hungry hands.

I wanted to light one right there and then, to calm my jitters, but the rice began to dry, even without my fluffing it with a fork. I was concerned that the evidence would disappear, so I immediately made my way to the house of my best friend Alice.

"Wow," she said. "I can't say that's ever happened to me before. Does it hurt?"

"Kind of. There's a bit of discomfort. It stings."

"Jasmine or long grain?" she asked, examining my wound up close.

"I don't see how that matters," I said, annoyed. "That's beside the point."

"And what is the point?"

"Something seems a little off here."

"I think so too. Probably."

"Should I go to Urgent Care?"

“Well, first things first. Try to think back to what you might have done wrong.”

“Why? Why does this have to mean I’ve done something wrong?” I thought back to the night before, and how I had been sitting in the corner of my living room, crying, for no reason. But this was not necessarily *wrong*. It had happened so often before that maybe it had become routine. So I didn’t think much of the fact that this time around, my crying spell lasted longer and my unnamable feelings felt more intense.

“Okay, so maybe not *wrong* but different. Was there anything you did differently than you’ve done before?”

“No,” I snapped back, curling my hand inward.

“Let’s show Albert and see what he thinks.”

She dragged him out of his study. I uncurled my hand.

“Is that popcorn?” he asked, squinting his eyes.

“No it’s rice you dope,” Alice scolded.

Albert appeared confounded. He caressed his own line of juncture at the wrist, pointing out the double line.

“Looks like my skin is quite strong – more durable than the average.”

“Maybe, I don’t know. But you’re not the one with the problem.” Alice looked at my ever-protruding wound, the grains still sticking together in one big lump. And then her eyes shifted to my face. I looked away, feeling exposed.

“I better go to Urgent Care. Will you come with me?” I decided. Alice agreed, and carefully took me by my good hand.

We decided to stop for a coffee first. My condition was urgent, but could wait. Besides, I needed my caffeine and nicotine fix.

“You know, you could at least bandage that up, to keep the rice in place,” she said as a couple of grains spilled out. I let them fall to the ground, as there were plenty more.

“Maybe so,” I said, nodding my head, “but if I do that, the wound might start to heal, and I’ll never know what the problem really is.”

Alice rolled her eyes as we took our Chai tea Lattes outside. I asked her to light a cigarette for me. She did, and placed it between my lips.

During the drive to Urgent Care, we passed the local library. “I think I know what the problem is. You’re single, and instead of getting out there, you bury yourself in your books.” I didn’t tell Alice that I had tried online dating, and maybe there were plenty of fish, but I was no worm. “Whenever I call, you’re holed up, watching some movie or reading some book. It’s really not healthy.” I let her go on stating the obvious – that I needed help, and that this rice wound was only a physical symptom of deeper issues. While I tuned her out, the thought occurred to me that the nurse might label my condition an emergency and send me to the ER. And then they would sew me right up before making any kind of proper diagnosis. But then maybe they’d insist on a full-scale physical exam. Even if I insisted that this was no self-inflicted wound, they wouldn’t believe me, once they witnessed me cry at the drop of a pin.

“Maybe this is a bad idea,” I told Alice. She maintained a steady speed and stared straight ahead. “Make up your mind. I don’t care either way.”

I insisted we make one more stop at the thrift store where I remembered my \$5 off coupon on a purchase of \$30 or more. The coupon was expiring that day, and I wanted to buy Alice something for her trouble. We stepped on to the sidewalk and saw a bum playing the harmonica. He was dirty and smelly like every other bum, but this bum was young like Alice and me. And he blew into that harmonica like there was no tomorrow.

“Look Alice,” I said, my eyes widening at the sight of my wound. It was starting to close up. “If we don’t go now, I’ll heal completely and I’ll never know what’s wrong with me!” She grabbed my hand, and indeed the rice was now sinking into the open wound – the skin beginning to smooth over.

“Well this is it then, you’re going to be just fine!” she shouted, over the sound of the insistent ballad. The bum was paying no mind, fully immersed in his tunes, tapping his foot in time, shouting something incomprehensible at the top of his lungs.

I couldn’t let this happen. Before the wound closed up completely, I stuck a finger in and sloshed at the rice, tugging at my perforated skin. Alice covered her eyes and winced. But I didn’t mind the sting. In fact, oddly enough, it felt relieving. When I pulled my finger out, chocolate started oozing from the wound, mixed with the rice, spilling over like oil from a leaking pipe, guzzling down my arm.

I decided to in the corner, next to the bum, and joined him in shouting at the top of our lungs. I lit up my own cigarette with no help. I didn’t need any help

and I didn't need Urgent Care. I took one long drag, crying tears of contentment as I licked and licked and savored my chocolate wound.

Not This Town

The fact that it happened at the town's polar bear research station is irrelevant. A polar bear didn't kill the child. The day shift station janitor just happened to have his pet bear with him that day. He happened to own a bear that he kept as a pet in his basement. One day – the day of the tragedy – Janitor Man's basement flooded and so he had no choice but to take Bear with him to work. Bear remained in the cage in the back of Janitor Man's van while he worked his shift.

But this story isn't really about Janitor Man or Bear, not even about the child who was killed. Child – the victim of the tragedy let's call it – cannot be adequately described because he died before the age of five, before the age of a stable, unique identity. In what psychoanalysts call the imaginary, he was not able to separate himself from Bear or any other object in the world. So we can assume that in a sense, when Bear consumed him, Child was already part of Bear and Bear part of Child.

Are you following? Think about it. It isn't lazy to refrain from offering a detailed description of a toddler who wobbles like all other toddlers and excuse

the nomenclature – 'they all look the same,' eyes too big for their heads, drooling mouths more gums and lips than teeth. Already I go too far.

This story isn't even about the polar bear research station that made the town famous by its advanced research capabilities, or how a simpleton like Janitor Man ended up working there. As hard as it may be to accept as coincidence, the fact that the station researches bears and that Janitor Man owned a bear really is coincidental. One might imagine that what drew him to the station in the first place is the residence of specimen bears, considering that he chose a bear as a pet; he must be drawn to all bears. Such reasoning would be similar to assuming that because I have children of my own, I will choose a place of work involving children in the work place, like a hospital or school, which isn't so. In fact, say I so dislike my job of raising children (I have two of my own), I have chosen (whether subconsciously or unconsciously) a career that for the most part, avoids the presence of any children at all. Say I work in a cubicle set off by twelve other cubicles by foldable walls for the state historical society, as say an assistant editor. My coworkers and I are not allowed to bring their children to work.

This is pure conjecture. I am the all-knowing narrator and thus do not own a stable, identifiable identity.

This story isn't about me either. This mini-narrative is about assumptions, as you might have guessed. The town with the renowned polar bear research station assumed the child was merely missing, rather than consumed. I know what you're thinking. The two are not mutually exclusive. That is, when one, like

Child, is said to have been consumed, eaten and digested, one could also be said to be missing, in that one is simply not there anymore. Forgive me if my words form as grotesque a mental picture in your head as it does in mine, assuming of course that you're imagining Bear tearing in to poor Child's body – head first maybe, then neck and limbs, or another stage in the process, the end of it all where only bits and parts remain, kind of like road kill, only Child wasn't killed on the road. He was killed in the back of Janitor Man's van. Let me explain.

For this story to be complete, we need to return to the acquisition of Bear by Janitor Man. Assuming that this story has all the expected fixings. I the all knowing.

You'll say the notion of a man – or anyone for that matter – owning a pet bear and keeping it in the basement is a stretch of the imagination. If you've wandered around this world enough, you'll know that stranger things have happened.

You're sitting at the hair salon inside Wal Mart, waiting to get 15 foils of blond highlights for the special price of \$39.99. A fella who looks like he might be named Bubba strides in wearing a dirty football jersey and looking for LuLu. He asks D.J., the gal who's appointed to do your hair, where's LuLu? Bubba need a haircut bad. He's playing semi-pros tonight and he's gotta look good. D.J. says LuLu isn't working a shift today on account of being sick. *Shee-it!* says Bubba, who come to find is named Travis after all. Me and LuLu go way back, Travis adds, hell we used to date. I need her to get her ass in here asap! D.J. in her soft-spoken way says, well if you wait just a minute while I get this client going, I'll

go on and give you her number, and you think to yourself, can one not quote a phone number while mixing hair paint? We go way back too, adds D.J. to Travis, known each other since we were 16. Well alright then, Travis says as he plops his big ass in that there chair, staring at you with 5 foils now attached to your hair. You allow your eyes to dwell on the page in your book longer than it takes to read a page of that length. You can feel Travis staring while he twirls around in the chair, kicking up his cowboy-booted feet. D.J. finally quotes LuLu's number, which makes you cringe, not because you care one way or another, but because D.J. ought not to have given her 'we-go-way- back' friend's number away so easily, to the first stranger claiming loyal friendship, the first Bubba or Travis to come storming in. Travis makes a show of it - dialing LuLu's number 949-822-1343. You repeat the number in your head rather than reading the same page you've been on for ten minutes. You wait to hear Travis curse because maybe he's reached Pizza Hut instead, but apparently Lu-Lu has answered the phone and will be there in ten. Wow. So Travis brags, we go way back, she's my gal. She'll be here. Meanwhile, Travis repeats the fact that he plays semi-pro football in Arlington, Texas. Why do you have to say Texas, I know Arlington is in Texas, D.J. smart-assedly says. Well, says Travis, in his mock smart voice, you know there is an Arlington, Virginia. Really? D.J. says, and you're kind of amazed that there's a shade of intelligence in that looks-like-a-peach head. I have a game tonight, he says, either that or me and my buds will go gambling. Way to go Trav. The semi-pros mean so much to you. The stains on his shirt say he's already played. Or maybe he stuck in hand in his behind and wiped it on said shirt. The

way his jeans sag down and show his big ass butt crack tells you that he might have pulled an all-nighter. Travis is loud, and he's scary. He's only waited for like two minutes and he dials LuLu again, get your ass over here girl, asap! Hey, D.J. says with a slightly raised voice, hold your horses. If you really know LuLu like I do, you know she will whip your ass for talking like that. Yeah right, Travis drawls, and you can't believe you're getting your hair cut inside a Wal Mart, with a guy who should be named Bubba staring at your hair, in flesh and blood, like a scene out of trailer-trash TV, too stereotypical or ridiculous to be reality. You're taking mental notes.

In comes LuLu in sweat pants and wet hair. I thought you was sick, says Bubba/ Travis. This won't be pretty. Hell Lu, what took you so damn long? Lu hits Travis upside the head and pinches his ear and tells him not to curse or swear. This is a fine family establishment. D.J. puts you under the dryer and gives you the eye, the one that says these people have issues, and then she says, these people have issues.

In and out of consciousness of the place where you actually are, you learn that this town you live in really is small. You've been living here for only 3 months, and already you know that LuLu and Travis used to be a thing, that LuLu is now single two boyfriends later, the last one having shouted something on a street corner when LuLu ran after him, something like Later Bitch! You put two and two together and surmise that Travis and LuLu are probably not presently sleeping together, and that LuLu puts up with a lot of crap. You reason that D.J. and LuLu are likely better friends. D.J. stays at this lousy minimum wage paying

job for LuLu's sake, who does not want to work here without her best friend. Something about Travis, who says he went and kicked the ass of some fella to a pulp. You don't know for what. You assume it didn't take much to light Travis' fuse. Something about some chick being a bitch because she smokes and drinks while being pregnant, even stalking men, at bars, bitch shouldn't be at bars. Well that ain't no thing, interjects LuLu, after all this is small town Texas. Still, Travis hates that bitch. It occurs to you that one day you will probably run into Lulu, or D.J., or Bubba/Travis by pure coincidence in the town square. And you do. You recognize the bad haircut and jersey, which is now clean.

Stranger things have happened perhaps, yes. The latter story might meet the standard of a little less strange than stranger things, which means we're talking about range, the range of strange things. Janitor Man did not get his pet bear from a circus, which you might assume. He went camping one summer with a couple of buddies when they were attacked by hungry bears. Actually, I all knowing, there was only one bear, and it was a cub that came upon their camp with great hunger. Bear knocked down their sardine and beer cans, which made a ruckus in the dead of night, which woke them from their tents and sleeping bags. Janitor Man's buddies were not about to go and help him take the cub home, knowing it was illegal and all. I all knowing am not lazy. This part of the narrative counts as irrelevant. Let's just jump to the part where Janitor Man felt quite taken with Bear, whom he fed the last can of Black and Tan. They became instant friends, as Bear was as yet Baby Bear and not of the age to make a

killing, of a large human being. Janitor Man named little bear, Bubba. That's how the latter story is relevant. For now on we'll call Bear Bubba.

Admit it. You want to jump to the part about Bubba tearing into Child, who still has no identifiable name. This story isn't about Child; it's about the town and its assumptions. But since I cannot narrate the story of the assuming town without touching on what it is they assumed upon, I will tell you the parts of the Bubba/Child story that will elucidate they and their assumings.

The day was glorious, in the way the sun – once it came up – stayed so sunny in the sky, shining on all those in the town. The breeze coming through the just-enough-of-a-crack in the back of the van windows stirred Bubba in the way only a Bear can be stirred. Bubba happened to also be hungry. As you might have guessed, Child was left unattended by his single-parent mommy who (against the station's rules) brought Child to work in lieu of leaving him at home, as babysitter called in sick with the stomach flu. How did Child get into the van? I all knowing happen not to know that part of the story. However, it's safe to assume that Janitor Man unwittingly left the door unlocked – no – part way open, as Child was too small to understand that the door of the van was unlocked. But hanging partway open –

Say Child managed to get in to the back of the van, and say inadvertently unlatched the door to the cage, which Janitor Man, in his hurriedness that morning left unlocked. Now Bubba is a bear, not a man, and as such must feed his hunger indiscriminately. Maybe Child would have survived if he had pooped his pants, because this species of a bear is not known to eat humans who smell

of human excrement. But as Child was past the diaper stage and fully potty-trained, he smelled just like bacon and eggs, which is what his neglectful mother fed him that morning. The rest, well, I'll leave to your imagination.

Back to the town and its assumptions. Bubba in fact, ate all of Child, leaving not a trace, except for the nipple part of his pacifier. You'll say that earlier I led you to believe that bits of Child remained. Let me remind you that that was what I had imagined, and as you're well aware, we as human beings have the faculty of initiating mental images without any prior facticity. That's what I did, and what I assume you did, imagine the worst-case scenario. Which isn't to say that being completely devoured is worst or better than the other possibility.

Once Child was nowhere to be found, and the allotted time of 24 hours passed, Child's mother and her kin and friends assumed that Child was only missing. That Child was mysteriously missing, from their sight, vicinity, from their very lives. They didn't jump to the latter assumption until much later, something like a year and two weeks.

They and the town assumed the usual suspects - kidnapping, or wandering into the woods, where he'd eventually be found. Maybe the reason the town did not assume the truth, that in fact Child was eaten by Bubba the Bear, is because no one knew that Janitor Man owned a pet bear, which he took to work that tragic day. Even his buddies who watched him capture Bubba as a cub didn't know that Janitor Man made the tragic decision to have Bubba accompany him to the Polar Bear Research station, the only place where bears can legally dwell other than the state zoo. If only Janitor Man had asked his bosses permission to

keep Bubba in a cage in one of the observatory rooms, perhaps Child would be here today, all grown into a fully formed human being with an identifiable name, part of the symbolic order, where bears sometimes represent man's kinship to the animal kingdom so well, depending on the context. This brings us to Janitor Man and his knowing. Relevant or not, you decide, he was the only one who knew that Bubba killed Child. He did not assume, he knew with the lucidity of someone in possession of all his faculties. The remaining pacifier gave it away, yes. But even if the thought crossed his mind that this was mere coincidence, he knew – as well as he knew the workings of a hungry bear, which is why he kept the horrid secret to himself. Why should Bubba pay the price for acting by pure instinct? Janitor Man knew that confessing on the part of Bubba would not bring poor Child back.

Even if the town found out that Janitor Man owned a pet bear, we can assume that the idea of Bubba the adorable brown bear consuming a 4 year old child inside a van on the polar bear research station premises, with no witnesses to speak of, would never cross their minds. All they do in this town is un-reflect. They mingle among one another passively in a state of banality, thinking upon matters not too terribly strange. So that even if the thought of a bear tearing into the body of a small child did in fact cross their minds, it would not remain and blossom there. Not there. Maybe it would in another world much stranger than theirs.

Slumber Citizens

“How then, searching for one’s thoughts, one’s personality, as one searches for a lost object, does one recover one’s own self, rather than any other?” –

(Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Guermantes Way*)

FOREWORD

The recorded events, letters, and observations herein have been arranged at the discretion of the ethnographer, whose hope is that the resulting narrative will add insight to the still burgeoning field of psychology and dreams.

As a roadmap for the reader, key words and terms have been highlighted in red, their definitions and/or equivalents listed in the accompanying Lexicon. In addition, the Afterword contains extended definitions and explanations of key events.

GOLDFISH AND DEMONS

When Julian woke up this morning, like many mornings, he didn't wake up dreamless—he simply could not remember his dream. Interesting that he didn't recall any of the details or the dream as whole, for this one was quite vivid, terrifying even, more the stuff of nightmare rather than dream:

Something grips his shoulders and pins him to the wall, a demonic force of the most terrifying kind—the kind that sends ripples of chills down the spine, heavy, pressing, the massive body pushes his back against the wall and he pushes back, there's nothing there, the nothing there swings his arms up in the air and his chest feels naked without being naked and the nothing-there squeezes his crotch so hard he cries and father is standing in the middle of the room, but Father doesn't hear his cries oh... He feels his lips frozen in the shape of a smile and cold dry air stings his gums. The invisible demon cranks his spaghetti arms up and down and middle-of-the-room FATHER belches aloud...DISGUSTING and laughs the laugh of some crazed monkey. A slap to the right cheek and then to the left, again and again...

Poor Julian, all the symptoms of someone subjected to a genuinely traumatic experience but knowing nothing of the cause: His head pulsed, his crotch ached, sweat trickled down his temples, and the whole of his left arm tingled. He nearly dialed emergency—*must be having a heart attack*—but then the pain in his arm began to dissipate. This wasn't the first time in recent weeks that he could not remember any of his dreams. And when dreams were not remembered, his body often reacted violently. If not immediately, at some point that same day. "I must have woken from one heck of a nightmare," he said to himself. Of late he'd awaken empty, with no stories to tell himself or anyone else. *Did dreams after all tell coherent stories? Or were they simply jumbled, disconnected images, voices, and sounds?*

Julian pulled off the sheet damp with sweat and shook out his hands for circulation. Fed up with what felt like a constant state of anxiousness that certainly no

one could handle for very long, he grabbed a composition book from his drawer. He scribbled the first words that came to mind: *Heroes. Great and Small.*

Nothing. These words meant nothing to him. Jotting down your thoughts right after waking was supposed to capture runaway dreams. Frustrated, he threw up his hands in defeat.

**

The next morning Julian **doesn't remember this dream:**
Goldfish – double its normal size – leaps out of giant fishbowl. Julian-not-Julian reaches, grabs giant fish, and tosses back into bowl. Goldfish leaps out again, somersaulting high into the air. Julian reaches again, Goldfish wriggles and twists and slips out of his grasp. Landing with a thump, Goldfish gulps in air, writhes as it struggles to survive. Julian lifts its body. The body is heavy...

Julian tries to grasp the last trace of dream like the grabbing hands of a blind man, but once again comes up empty. In place of remembrance, he feels a powerful urge to act out, to give shape to something¹, whatever that may be.

Tonight is Samantha night, which means Julian goes to her place rather than her coming to his. “Should I get on top?” she asks Julian. “If you want,” he says. Woman on top is not his favorite position. He enjoys looking up at her bouncing bosom and signs of pleasure in her face, but he hardly ever climaxes in this position, but as long as Samantha’s happy. She sits astride him and takes him in but his penis slips right back out. She tries again as he holds her hips. She rises up and down, pushing down slowly and

¹ When a dream is remembered, it is satiated and so leaves one be. **When a dream is not remembered, it must find release and resolution somehow.**

gently first, and then vigorously. Julian holds her hips. She moans. He can't tell whether this is out of pleasure or pain, so he asks, "Are you okay?" She moans, "Yes, yes." She then lies down on her back and pulls him into the missionary position. She sweats profusely and some of it gets on Julian. He pulls out. She reaches for the sheets and uses them to wipe off the sweat. He gets back on top, trying to slip back in, but instead, his penis slides against her thigh. They try scissoring, 69, and from behind, but Julian keeps slipping out. Finally exhausted, they settle on hand jobs and call it a day.

Julian wakes up first. He watches Samantha, her body, the slow, consistent heaving of her chest. He listens. She sighs like a puppy. He loves this thing about her (does he love *her*? What is it to love someone anyway?). He listens for the almost imperceptible whistle coming from her nose. She is still deep in sleep. Is she dreaming? Certainly he dreamt, though as per usual of late, he can't remember what... Why the failure of last night's lovemaking? An effect of his unremembered dream or hers? What neither he nor she knows is that the dream she had the night before last went something like this:

She's driving a red station wagon. She drives at the speed as all the other cars. Traffic slows but she can't reach the brake. Her leg is too short. The brake pedal is too far. She stretches her leg. She stretches and stretches but it's out of reach. The bumper of the car ahead gets closer. Her car accelerates. Her back slides down the seat and she can't see out the window. She slides further and further down until her body goes full circle, full circle, full circle...

Julian wonders whether their slippery sex had been the manifestation of his dream or hers. **Perhaps it was a combination of both.**

He imagines what Samantha might say in her blasé way: “Please don’t bother asking me if I knew who I was last night, whether or not I came to you remembering my dreams. I don’t bother with such things. **Multiplicity** is fine by me. Just let it be. Let the **dream produce its own meaning and reality.**”

“But if only I could remember all my dreams,” he whispers as the beating of his heart accelerates, readying for yet another unpredictable episode, the whole of his selves.

**

Samantha suffers from Eczema on her cheeks, between her fingers, behind her knees, on the knobby part of her elbows, and especially on the back of her neck, which is why most days she wears her hair up in a ponytail. She treats her skin problem by showering in cool water or by soaking in a lukewarm bath. She opts for the latter, feeling extra filthy from last night’s awkward sex. Caught up in either the past or the future, she thoughtlessly uses the foot towel draped on the bathtub to pat her body dry. *Go for a job*, she decides, straight out of the calming refreshing bath.

She peeks out from the bathroom door and perceives that Julian is in a pensive mood. She asks anyway, “Wanna join me for a jog at the lake?”

“Lake, lake did you say? You know it’s not even a real lake, but manmade.”

“I know it, so what,” Samantha answers, rolling her eyes. “I’ll ask Dagmar instead.”

She dresses in yesterday’s shirt and pair of shorts for her run at the lake. The lake she’s going to is in Dagmar’s neighborhood, and they often meet up for a jog. When she texts Dagmar, she gets a text back that says: “On phone with M, sorry, this is going to take a while.

Though twenty minutes away by car, for Samantha, it's worth it the extra miles to drive to this out-of-the way man-made reservoir park rather than the park in her new suburban community. She went a few times to find just herself on the path, leaving her feeling rather lonely.

Within minutes of into her run this morning, her asthma acts up and she starts wheezing, but she keeps on running, the lavender scent from her bath quickly dissipating. She watches the folks out this fine sunny day, finds amusement in watching strangers go about their business, requiring no investment on her part whatsoever; it is certainly less demanding than the complications of being with lovers and friends. The joggers, walkers, bikers, and runners each have their own look, but are easy enough to categorize: There's the "hunky" runner in his sweat band, running with such confidence, panting yet showing no sign of breaking a sweat. The round red-faced woman breathing heavily and panting even though she's only walking, equally slowly as her droopy-looking dog. There's the "dork" dressed more for the jungle than the reservoir, donning a tan safari hat, with matching shirt and pants. A middle-aged woman speed-walks, her wide hips sashaying as she talks loudly into her device. Speeding past them all is a fit teenage girl in shorts and a tank top, oblivious to everyone and everything except the beats playing in her earplugs. Samantha knows it's neither fair nor accurate to judge by appearances alone, for in her World looks *really are* deceiving, but in her lazy state of mind, she simply can't help herself. So she goes on with the judging (at least for a few minutes longer). Then her thoughts return to Julian. For all she knows, like Julian, these folks, or at least some of them, might have forgotten last night's dreams, so that each one's **Core Self** is not in charge at all. The difference is they're likely okay with it, letting their **Dream Selves** run

the show. So that “hunk” looks “hunky” but is in actuality a loser (at least for today), or that “dork” just appears to be a pushover but is out for revenge (at least for today and if a recurring dream the day after and the day after that). Samantha feels a bit of sympathy, for she’s not so self-deluded as to count herself immune to Dream’s Playground.

Sometimes one remembers one’s dreams and sometimes one doesn’t, the point being that the power lies with the Dream rather than with the Dreamer. Could she really blame Julian for his increasing obsession of late with the power of Dream? For weren’t they all a menagerie of captives? Their various selves manifestations of forgotten dreams? And taking it even further, what if the believers were deluded to think there even was such a thing as a **Core Self**? With all the possible selves that dream could manifest, how could one tell which was the so-called main anchoring one? Caught in thought gets dizzying and so she tries to refocus on keeping a slow and steady jogging pace so as not to tire out. But she simply can’t stop her thoughts about her fellow citizens, about Julian, or about last night’s bad sex. It happened to everyone at least once, didn’t it? And how long had they been together now in this mostly open relationship? A couple of years? She still liked the way he looked as much as the first day she met him in person: Hair long on top and cropped on the sides, full cheeks, beaver-like. Wavy brown hair, bushy brown eyebrows, light-colored eyes—sometimes hazel sometimes green, probably depending on the self in charge on any given day. As his face hovers in her head, the image morphs from this to that lover until all that remains is Julian. When she met him, something about him—a gesture, the way he walked—something registered as familiar more so than any other, though she couldn’t quite pinpoint exactly what it was. Was that something familiar edging itself forward as his true core?

Someone bumps Samantha's shoulder, snapping her out of her reverie. "Sorry!" She nods, "that's okay," and immediately returns her thoughts to what had been troubling her in the first place.

MOMMY DEAREST

Dagmar doesn't remember last night's dream, but it went something like this:
Running back to class. After the field trip. I run and run and don't look back? Why don't I look back? Are they following? How will I know if they're following? A park with flat, bright green grass and now I'm walking. Huge yellow tractor rumbles and runs over something. The something is very small. Watch and the tractor continues on its path and a flat, slight body pops up on the flat grass. The something very tiny is—what? My star student! No wait, it's tiny me! Try to revive me in the palm of my hand. I'm on a street corner next to a blue mailbox. Look inside and the box is empty.

Today is Sunday, and every Sunday morning Dagmar likes to try on a new outfit that she purchased on Saturday. Today, it's a red pair of high heel shoes and a black sleeveless dress. But on the way to her bedroom she pauses in the living room, scolding herself for leaving everything scattered from the week: Books, pillows, and magazines. One book in particular catches her eye, the one with a yellow "used" sticker attached to the cover. She decides that to keep it in good condition, she ought to cover it with see-through contact paper. As she fumbles through her school materials, the phone rings.

"Hello Dag, guess who?"

"Hi Mom."

"It's your Mother whom you never call."

"Sorry, Mom."

“Why is it always me who picks up the phone? I can’t believe you even answered ...” And thus the scolding—once again—began.

Dagmar’s phone buzzes and as her mother speaks at her, she sees a text from Samantha. The perfect opportunity to cut the conversation short, less a conversation than a one-sided monologue favoring Mother’s, whose clairvoyance is quite off-putting — “What’s that sound Dag, you’re not going to take that are you?”

“It’s a text Mom, not a phone call, from a friend...”

“You never have time for your Mother. Always for your friends. Which friend is it this time?”

Dagmar has her mother on speakerphone the whole time. With her hands free, she can go about her project of protecting the Borges book. She has the volume down to as low as possible where she can still hear well enough to respond yet avoid the grating of her nerves. Her mother talks about herself and her routines: the latest department store sales, her monthly spa visits, how lazy “your father” is, how infuriating when he goes out drinking with his friends as if he’s still a college boy. Dagmar doesn’t say aloud what she’s thinking, that of course with a wife like you... When her mother does think to inquire of Dagmar’s well-being (or lack thereof), she asks the kind of question that gives her opportunity to scold and reprimand, “So are you seeing anyone interesting?” *No mom, I don’t have time for dating.* “Well are you even trying? How about work? I really wish you would have chosen a different occupation, one that could make you more money in less time.” *But I love teaching, Mother...*

By the time Mother finishes the phone call, the conversation isn't really over. With Mother, it never is. Dagmar grabs her calligraphy set and stationary paper and starts writing a letter.

Dear Mother,

It was great talking to you on the phone just now. I'm glad I picked up. No one writes letters anymore, and I want to change that right now. I wish to bring back the lost art of letter-writing. Yes, I think I'll do that.

There's something I need to tell you, and somehow it seems easier to do in writing than face-to-face. I don't feel that I'm being a coward by writing rather than speaking to you in person. No one writes letters anymore.

Mother, the last time I saw you, I wore my finest clothes and still you found fault. In fact, just before you called, I was about to try on my new outfit—you'd approve—red shoes and a little black dress. I remember you saying a woman should have at least one black dress with which to match any color really, but especially a vibrant red.

Why didn't I tell you when we were on the phone just now? Because to be perfectly honest, I can never get a word in edgewise. Sorry, such a cliché. But I'm not going to crumple up this paper and start over, because that would be admitting that I am a failure, which you find so easy to remind me of every time we speak.

What I meant to say is that I never feel quite comfortable enough to be myself with you (whatever or whoever that really is). When I feel like I want to say something real, something true, I become that little girl again, afraid to disappoint you. There. I said it, something sincere, something true. I can imagine you staring at these words, baffled at my insolence. I'm sorry if I sound bitter. Maybe I am...

Dagmar pauses and remembers to finish covering the book of poems—no air bubbles or creases, no signs of unevenness. A job that could make any mother (but her own) proud. The tiny photo of Borges on the bookbinding reflecting a brilliant shine to match his brilliant mind.

By evening, Dagmar is feeling very confident about her obvious skill at letter-writing and decides to write another one, this time to her good friend Samantha, even though the letter to her Mother sinks unfinished, unstamped, between the couch cushions.

EMPTY PAGES

Item checked out to Freemont, Julian J.

TITLE: The Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Knights by John Steinbeck

BARCODE: 1006342612

DUE DATE: 04-16-20

At opening, four customers arrive and sign up for fingerprinting. The fourth customer lingers, so Julian asks, “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Well, maybe.” The fellow rests his elbow on the countertop. Julian sprays Windex up and down, yet the elbow remains in the resting, overly-familiar pose and the fellow says to Julian, “You look like a good listener.” Julian continues wiping in a circular motion to demonstrate his busy-ness, but the fellow continues, “Do you have kids?” Julian nods a definitive no.

“Well just my luck, I’m about to be a dad. That’s why I’m here. Getting processed for a new job. My girlfriend is eight months pregnant. You know what *that* means.” The long hand of the clock reads only ten past eight. Could time go any slower? The customer bites down on his nails and Julian cannot predict what is to come next. “The thing is, I

don't know if I really love Jane – that's my girlfriend. Such a common a name, am I right?"

"Actually, I don't know any Jane's."

"No way! Well anyway, I'm Joe."

Joe holds out a moist hand for a handshake.

Julian wipes his hand on his pants.

"And you're..."

"Julian."

"J's in the house! Well J, have you ever been in love?" Joe's eyebrows wiggle snakelike. Julian doesn't answer. "My girl Jane's about to have a baby... but..."

Julian sets the cleaning tools down. He ruminates. He shuffles a few feet away from the counter and back again.

"You want to opt out. You're about to start a new job, a new life, and this is driving you crazy. You want someone to tell you what to do. I'm just some schmuck who rolls fingers for a living, what do I know? I could be the bartender at your favorite dive bar, or the shoe salesman at your favorite mall. What matters is – I'm someone who follows procedure. I can tell you a number of things: There's love and then there's responsibility. Follow your instincts. Do the right thing. Any advice from me is beside the point. It will go right over your head. You'll shrug your shoulders and walk out that door none the wiser. And you'll do exactly what you were going to do in the first place. Am I right?"

Joe lifts his elbow to scratch his confused head, then without another word slowly backs up until he hits the waiting chair. Julian picks up the rag and gets back to rubbing. He rubs away the elbow stain.

At break, Julian picks up his phone.

Compose message

To Samantha: Hey Sam. I have something on my mind, something to say. Day after day. We live in a world with no use for heroic displays.

Self-help books. Slippery sex. The dream produces its own meaning and reality.

Backspace. Delete.

Julian scrolls through his contacts and calls Fred, whom he met a few weeks ago.

“Hello, Fred? This is Julian.”

“Sorry, who?”

“Julian.”

“We met at the mall.”

“You asked me about my Velcro shoes?”

“Oh yeah, Julian.”

“Now I remember.”

“Right. So how’s it going?”

“Good. And you?”

“Good. Mostly.”

“Good.”

“Except...”

“Yeah?”

Conversation of substance.

“Did you say something?”

“No.”

“I thought you said something just now.”

“No. But anyway, you probably don’t remember this, but I tried explaining to you that there’s a reason why I stick to just one kind of shoe.”

“I don’t remember that part, sorry.”

“Economy.”

“Economics?”

“No, I said economy. There’s a difference. By sticking to just one kind of shoe, I gain efficiency. I know exactly where to go for this particular shoe, so I don’t waste time or gas or energy driving from one shoe store to the next, looking for the latest style in the so-called hottest brands. For another thing, Velcro shoes – and this is no myth, believe me – last far longer than shoe-laced shoes. I own several Velcro pairs, which allows me to switch them off very easily, and I haven’t had to buy another pair in many, many years. You might argue that all these pairs of shoes must have cost a lot of money, just as much as the name brands or whatever else is fashionable these days. Not quite. Velcro shoes are far cheaper, though of quality make...”

“Look Julian, I’d really like to talk to you buddy, but I’m in a bit of a hurry. I’ve got to go run some errands, and then I’ve got a date tonight...”

“No worries Fred. It’s all about economy. Conserving one’s time, sorting out the priorities...”

“Sure thing. See you at the mall shoestore, maybe. Or something.”

When Julian gets home, he goes straight to his reading list:

Heroes ✓

If I can't remember a dream, then maybe I can work with it. What do I want to be tomorrow if I can't be me? Who might I be? Dreams are made of the things upon which we regularly feed. But heroic acts require heroic times. Romance? Tragedy? There's them and there's me. More than me. There's no guarantee.

Next on Reading List: Mystery

*

As time passes ever so slowly as it tends to do, especially when one is dissatisfied with one thing or another, Julian remembers some dreams, but for him it's not enough, for he still experiences every mood from frustration to elation and everything in between. He tries keeping a **dream journal** of the few remembered dreams. He writes by hand because there's something about the feeling of holding a pen as opposed to striking a keyboard, the soothing sensation of hand sliding across the page. Sometimes, he sleeps with the journal under his pillow for quick and easy access. On the front cover is the date he started recording his dreams, followed by a slash and a blank space where he will write the date of the last filled page. At this point, he has only filled two pages. His goal is to fill up this journal in less than a year with hundreds of dreams that he will have remembered because he wrote them down first thing.

Once the journal is full he can throw it away. He doesn't need to go back to these satisfied dreams, for once they are remembered they can be forgotten.

This journal isn't all Julian has in his arsenal to help him remember his dreams. To prod remembrance further, he holds onto the dream in that stage of haziness, in its first stirrings, holding on as tight as a blind man his staff or a toddler its mother's leg for stability.

Dark brown trays descend a conveyor belt: string beans dull green, mountain of mash, slices of meatloaf the size of paper, steam. Little trees. He eats. He holds on – nibble-by-nibble, bite-by-bite. He eats. The trees are rubbery. The beans taste like nothing then something flows out of a hose. He drinks it but he's still thirsty. Spoon full of mash and they need gravy. He's retching but still hungry. He eats and eats and his stomach growls and he locks his mouth onto the hose and his stomach is about to explode...

Julian wakes up. He reaches out. He reaches for his pen and journal, **ready to write down any fragment of memory**². He remembers something – the end. Or is it the beginning? Is the dream chronological? He paces back and forth. A bit. It's not enough for him, and neither is it for the dream.

* * *

Julian has forgotten to pack a lunch for work today. Peering at the bulletin board in the lounge, he spots an ad with a coupon for Italian fine dining. He justifies going to this high-end restaurant for his 45-minute lunch with the fact that it is just a couple of miles away. He takes the ad from the board, folds it, and then stuffs it in his pocket.

When he arrives at *Luigi's Italian Cuisine*, there's no wait and the host dressed in a black vest and bow tie seats him at a round table right smack in the middle. Julian

² Here it appears Julian has become a **dream watcher**.

immediately grabs the menu and briefly scans the restaurant and its scattered guests. The other customers are wearing dresses and suits while he is in his ordinary work clothes. Julian returns to the menu items, which he has trouble seeing, but rather than asking the waiter to draw the dark red curtains open, he moves the one lit candle on his table forward so he can see the little food photos clearly. He pulls the coupon from his pocket. He compares the photo of the angel hair vegetarian plate special to the one with two large sausages drowned in red sauce, to the one below that with steam visibly rising from the white sauce sprinkled with cheese, to the garlic bread dripping with butter on a square plate, and the wine glass next to it. His eyes widen as the waiter comes to his table and he orders this one and that, and don't forget that one too.

By the time Julian gets back to work, his face is flushed and it's half past one, which means he's late by half an hour.

"I'm sorry, I have no excuse really, so I won't try to make one up, even though the ad was staring me right in the face, in the break room. Who would post an ad for a high end restaurant in a place like this anyway?"

His boss raises an eyebrow and says, "Me."

Julian pulls out of his front pocket a tiny spiraled-notebook meant for just such occasions, and as soon as his boss has left the room, he jots this note down:

Mouth of a lion swallow gallons of wine and a dozen stringed sausages. No... Goldfish grows as large as a balloon, larger, and I pop him and barbecue him on a spit... No! What is the face of hunger?

At home, he transfers his hurried notes into another composition book. This one he titles: Possible Forgotten Dreams.

Julian prepares dinner, even though the gourmet meal hasn't completely settled or had time to digest. He holds the notebook with his free hand. What kind of dream would make me hungry for more than my fair share? He jots down a string of possibilities:

Skinny as a noodle...deprived of sex...wrap my noodle body around a giant beef jerky!
Dozens of boxes of M&M's hidden under the bed, meant to sell for the school fundraiser,
all of them torn open and half-eaten...Wait a minute, this is no dream...this really did
happen when I was a kid!

He jots down another, and another, and another possible dream scenario. None of them, all of them could have moved him to be that someone who would throw hard-earned money away at an overpriced gourmet restaurant in the middle of the afternoon on a workday.

Julian crosses out the title and rips out the page. On the next he writes: *No time for imaginary dreams.*

ROOM FOR DREAMS

I see the book lying on the ground, and admire your photo—stiff white collar, slicked back hair, and dark eyes. We never met, yet I know you as a dreamer, a writer of fake essays, library and labyrinth lover all your days. You and Borges and the nothingness of personality. I love the smell of coffee, the style of Jackie Kennedy, and the look of antique locket. For all the other versions of me, these are things merely to accommodate. For me, dear Borges (whoever that me really is), the interior world is – at best – a complicated one.

*

She smiles for a moment (not too long). Any longer and she is not strong. They smile back like one big Cheshire cat.

Her hair is done in a perfectly smooth bun. She's been holding the coffee mug steady since she walked over from the parking lot. Their smiles fade and now they sit in complete silence. By the looks of it, the teacher role seems to come naturally to Dagmar. However, it has never been easy.

Before perfecting her role, she would sometimes rush to school with her hair and mind both out of place, hands and voice shaky, coffee spilling all over the place. Other times she'd be perfectly engaged in teacher mode, only heightened and magnified, apparent in her hair tied, or in a dress suit pressed so crisp she could barely move. Of course, she also vacillated somewhere in between. Regardless, Dagmar loves teaching third grade because for the most part third graders don't whine and complain. In fact, they find variation amusing.

Two years ago almost to the day:
With no typed up lesson plans, she decided to leave things to chance, to go on a whim, two cups of coffee and an energy bar in hand.

She stood thoughtfully in front of the class for several minutes, and then asked everyone to pass their nametags up to the front. After collecting them all, she tossed them into the trashcan, which she then dragged in front of the door. They gasped. Not to fear, she told them. We're going to make brand new ones!

Instructions: 1) Choose a piece of construction paper the color of your choice. 2) Fold the paper in half. 3) On the front of the folded paper, draw yourself today. I mean draw what you feel like today – not what you actually look like, because then you would

need a mirror, and we don't have mirrors to pass out to the entire class. Draw an animal, a heart, a great big moon if you like, if that's what you feel like. A drawing that shows the rest of the class, 'This is me! This is who I am!'

Julie giggled. Josiah looked as if he'd just been told to stick his hand into the jellybean jar.

4) Place your new nametag on the edge of your desk. Don't explain your picture. Just set it at the very edge of your desk – and let it sing!

"But teacher, how can it be called a nametag if it doesn't have my name?" Amber asked.

"We will call them Me Tags instead. How do you like that idea?"

"That's a great idea!" Amber cheered. And the other children ooh-ed and aah-ed in agreement.

As the class completed their new "Me-Tags," Dagmar smiled and then briefly slipped out the door. When she returned, her hair was undone out of its bun. "Teacher, you look beautiful," Rodney said. Thank you, she replied as she moved closer to his desk. She noticed Rodney staring at Jen's Me-Tag and Jen staring at his. Dagmar then whispered something to both Rodney and Jen who sat next to him. They nodded their heads in agreement and immediately switched their tags. Dagmar slipped off her high-heeled, open-toed shoes, rubbed her feet and wandered around the room. When she returned to Rodney and Jen, they both appeared discontent, so she asked, "Do you want to switch your Me-Tags back?" Rodney looked at Jen's drawing that now sat at his desk. It looked like a wad of chewed up gum with a bubble sticking out at one end. Jen looked at Rodney's green eye with long eyelashes staring at her unblinkingly. Yes, they both

agreed, they wanted their own Me's back. "That's absolutely fine," Dagmar answered, continuing to circle the classroom. She showed the children her own drawing of a jagged cut skirt. "Maybe tomorrow you'll really feel like a blown-up bubble gum," she said addressing Rodney, "and maybe you" she said, pointing at Jen, "will feel like a big beautiful eye. Maybe you'll feel like something else. That's okay. We will make new nametags every week, to express the way we feel. A different nametag for each week!"

Using the window next to the door as a mirror, Dagmar forked her fingers through her hair, sweeping her natural curls away from her face. Just then a figure stopped right in front of her reflection. She re-focused her eyes through the dark tint and noticed it was the Principal, straightening his tie and grinning. She waved but he didn't wave back, now patting his hair down and tugging at the back of his pants. She hurried to the door but he got to it first, opening it abruptly and spilling the contents of the trashcan all over the floor. She started scooping the scattered garbage back into the can, including all the children's nametags and he didn't assist. "What's this?" he asked, no longer grinning. She directed him towards the center of the classroom where the desks formed a large circle. "Please, come over and see what we're doing this morning. Say good morning to Principal Duffy, loves!"

"Good morning Principal Duffy," the children chimed. He pulled at his collar and then walked slowly around the outside of the circle first and then the interior. He stopped and picked up a tag that sat the close to the edge of one desk. Holding it at arm's length, trying to make sense, he asked, "What's your name?" The child answered, "Dimitri."

“Dimitri. That’s a fine name. I wouldn’t have known it just looking at this,” he said, waving the tag like a fan. He looked at Dagmar and she looked at him. “What exactly is this supposed to be?”

“It’s a bull’s eye!” Principal Duffy handed the tag back to Dimitri, who eagerly grabbed it and set it back at the edge of his desk.

“Dimitri, son, please write your name on the other side of your nametag, and the rest of you do the same.”

“It’s not a nametag – it’s a Me-Tag,” Fanny blurted out. All the children looked over at Dagmar who nodded her head in agreement. Principal Duffy took Dagmar aside. She agreed to meet him at his office directly after school.

*

Dagmar – about to pull her hair back in a bun – thought better of it. Before heading over to Principal – *Princi-PAL!* Duffy – she emptied out the trash including all the old nametags into the main dumpster by the exit gate. She watched the trashcan as if expecting it to react. Some of the names spilled out and onto the pavement. *Melissa, Robert, Kenny and Jupiter*. Several others were crumpled up so she couldn’t make out their names. She left them lying there.

Principal Duffy asked Dagmar to take a seat. He stared at her. She stared back. Then he asked her to explain. She delineated her lesson, step-by-step, from memory. He asked to see a copy of her lesson plans. He reminded her of the school regulation that each child have a *nametag* – not a picture or art tag – or what did the children call it?

“A Me-Tag. I already know each and every student by their names and so do they.”

“Miss Dagmar, if they didn’t have those nametags, the ones you had them clearly throw away, you wouldn’t have learned their names so readily. There’s a reason for every rule – every regulation.”

He paused and observed the lilt of curls falling across her shoulders. No rule in the books against wearing one’s hair down at school. Yet everyone knew what everyone else thought. In the teacher’s lounge for example, smiles and nods of approval were gestured towards female teachers with hair swept back and the same towards males whose hairline remained above the jaw.

“Can you explain to me what those drawings are for?”

“So the children can explore and express how they feel.”

“When these little ones are older,” Duffy continued, “they will have plenty of time to explore their *feelings*. But school is not the place for *that*. Here they learn discipline. Lord knows they don’t get this at home. Freedom of expression – well, that comes after they’ve learned discipline. Take Dimitri, for instance, the boy who imagined himself as what – a bull’s eye? Easy target? What then? What your little loves need Miss Dagmar, at this tender age is strong discipline, not fanciful ideas.” He straightened up in his plush leather chair. “Now, *we* obviously have our off days,” he said, gesturing his hand in front of her with implication, “but one hopes we’ve arrived at the maturity needed to keep ourselves in check.” Beads of sweat were visible on his receding hairline.

“I believe in discipline too,” Dagmar said. “When children misbehave in my classroom, no matter how they’re feeling, they know that being unjust or cruel is not to be tolerated. But experimenting with how they feel, as I had them do today, as I would

have them do in the future, teaches them that how they feel – even if unkind – never quite remains the same.”

“Remember if you will, the trouble with Kyle Damien,” Duffy said, not in the form of a question, “that tyrant of a child that had to be pulled out of your class two years ago when you taught first grade.” Dagmar remembered very clearly the one everyone at Stark Elementary School labeled ‘the little devil.’ His so-called ‘aberrant behavior’ became apparent early on, in Kindergarten. When he moved on to her first grade class, the Administration – including Principal Duffy – had implied that she was responsible for his continued outrageous behavior. That she had been too lax. And so he was removed from her classroom and placed in The Room³. “Granted, Kyle Damien turned out to be quite an anomaly. But we don’t want to encourage any more *special* behavior now do we.” After a long silence, he finally advised, “I tell you what – why don’t you take the next couple of days off. Just for yourself. Some “me” time. I’ll find a substitute for you right now.”

As Dagmar left Duffy’s office, the ground underneath her seemed to have shifted closer, as if she were wearing a new pair of glasses for the very first time. *We are not born complete. Useful to the Dream. There’s room for many.* She walked the straight path back to her classroom and grabbed her own “Me” tag. She tore it up, and drew another one. She drew a tall figure with its hair done up in a bun, and then drew a big X right through it.

*

³ Instructors with specialized training oversee this class of so-called deviant children. Every method is attempted to control them – from dream suppression to sleep-deprivation. (For a full description, see *Extended Definition of Dream Suppression* in the Afterword).

That night, Dagmar contemplated the exciting possibility of wrestling with her dreams, grabbing a hold of them like Jacob grappled with the angel – merely out of curiosity – to catch a glimpse of the stuff they might be made of. Only she didn't really know how.

And then she had this dream:

Her best friend appears to her, only she looks completely different. Something tells her that this indeed is her best friend, despite the fact that this person looks nothing like her best friend. This one has blond, shoulder-length wavy hair, fair smooth skin and freckles. Her best friend has long, brittle black hair with bangs and pockmarked oily skin. This woman smiles thinly, while her best friend smiles wide and closes her eyes when she laughs. Other human figures hover in the background, and they all accept this blond woman as Dagmar's best friend. Dagmar accepts her too, but when her best friend says she has a boyfriend despite being married, suspicion takes over.

"You have a boyfriend?"

"Well, yes, and my husband a girlfriend."

"Wow, that's strange." Dagmar thinks of how her best friend would not have a boyfriend while being married to her husband.

"You don't look like the friend I know."

"But indeed I am."

Dagmar is troubled. Something tells her that this indeed is her best friend, but at the same time, something tells her that she is not. She decides to ask her best friend's sister in order to verify her identity. She looks everywhere among the hovering figures

but cannot find the sister. She only sees her in her memory. At last, the real best friend appears, who looks and acts exactly like Dagmar's best friend.

"That one – she isn't me."

"I know."

"I vow to discover the true identity of this impersonator."

"Yes I know. I believe you. You are the real thing. And yet, this other one – she seems to be you too. Despite the fact that she looks nothing like you – still, she is somehow you."

Dagmar woke up the next morning not remembering a trace of this dream.

She felt the overwhelming urge to let down her hair after pinning it in a bun. She paused, reflecting on her reflection in the mirror. Let down your hair, she told her Self. You don't have to be in school today. She let down her hair and lilted around the bathroom, bare and light-footed. *Useful to the dream*, she sang, *there's room for many*. There's room for many. Or so it seems. Let the dream roam free. Only, not with the children. Not for the children.

When Dagmar returned to school, (Principal Duffy had hired a substitute to take her place for the rest of the week), she did so with the profound awareness that her model teacher self must be in charge for the school day. If she were to keep this job and continue to enjoy the children she so loved, she would have to swallow Principal Duffy's advice and keep herself (or rather selves) in check, recognize which role to implement when. Although she felt the overwhelming urge to let down her hair, she managed to harness her teacher self and bring it front and center⁴.

⁴ The previous forgotten dream had been so powerful that its residue carried over for days. Without Dagmar knowing it, the dream had generated a powerful ally, one that offered her strength no matter the self in charge for the day. It isn't always this

So here she is, Ms. Dagmar, Third Grade Teacher of Excellence. She slowly sips her coffee and waits. She waits for something to break the silence, even if it's just a request from her loves for a little taste.

THE VIVACITY OF HIS IDEAS

Name: *Kyle*

Origin: *Gaelic*

Meaning: *Strait of Water*

Origin: *English*

Meaning: *Strait of Water*

Name: *Damien*

Origin: *Greek*

Meaning: *Possibly "to tame, subdue," although the Greek root is close to the word for "spirit."*

*

He wore his red cape the first day of school. He didn't cry when his mom left, or when he wet himself while seated in duck-duck-goose. But when Ms. Mackey took away his cape to let it air dry on the playground fence, he accused her of impaling his friend.

During Round Robin, Kyle Damien closed his eyes. He closed his eyes tight like a prayer so that his eyelids quivered and his eyebrows dipped inward. One time, Ms. Mackey mistook Kyle's shut his eyes for defiance (naptime wasn't until after morning snack.) Another time, she mistook them for boredom and so sent him to time out, adding,

convenient. While appearing regularly and in various guises, this friendly dream will disappear randomly and often recklessly, leaving her to fend for herself.

“Kyle, if you’re going to be a bad little boy and waste class time, then you lose playtime.” He stomped into the corner, shouting, “I’m Kyle Damien, Kyle Damien!”

A penchant for imaginary friends, for shouting, and for defiance – Ms. Mackey noted all this in her classroom log. When Kyle Damien entered first grade, these records followed him. As his new teacher, Dagmar, was instructed by the Administration to keep a weekly log as well.

Friday, April 1st: *Kyle hid under table during Daily Calendar. I left him alone, hoping that his curiosity would get the best of him. Instead, he placed his hands over his ears and stayed under table all through Daily Counting, XYZ, and Song of My Kitten. And so, I briefly left the circle, crouched under the table, and gave him some crayons and a drawing pad to at least keep him occupied. The result? He drew a picture of what I presume is himself with 3 heads. (Kyle knows nothing of April Fools).*

Monday, April 4th: *Kyle taped his 3-headed self on the community fridge. I allowed him to. None of the other children are aware that the drawing is of him.*

Friday, Nov. 7th: *After school, Kyle popped his head into classroom, said, “I’m sorry about your grandfather,” and then popped back out. (Apparently, Kyle found out that my grandpa had passed away. He apparently wrote in his journal at the after school program that he was sorry for Ms. Dagmar who no longer has a papap).*

Monday, Nov. 10th: *Came into class with the number 01666 written in marker on back of left hand. Asked Kyle to wash it off, but he refused. Said that for now on he wants to be*

called 01666 rather than Kyle. I said, “Kyle Damien, your name, Kyle Damien, is so lovely. Why do you want to be called a number?” He said, “I don’t want to be called a number, I want to be called 01666.” When prodded further, he wouldn’t explain. I allowed him to keep the number written on his hand. What was I to do?⁵

Before the school year was up, Kyle was evaluated, and it was decided that his defiant nature could benefit from a year (or more) in The Room. Certainly other children in Dagmar’s class misbehaved, but the range of Kyle’s aberrant behavior spanned from one end of the (troubled) spectrum to the other, leading the school Administration to the conclusion that perhaps Kyle Damien’s troubles stemmed from a core schizophrenic nature⁶.

Endnotes:

Kyle Damien’s parents probably meant no harm in naming him Kyle Damien. Perhaps they named him after a favorite uncle, or ancestor traced back generations ago in their family tree. Whatever the case, what are the odds of choosing both a first and middle name that both signal trouble? It isn’t clear when and how this happened, but the characteristics attributed to individuals named Kyle or Damien, usually of the male gender, are far from favorable. A close examination of Stark School records reveal that out of some fifty Kyles and twenty Damiens that have graced the school grounds since its establishment in 1992, nearly 98% have had some type of personality disorder (and it

⁵ It appears, in retrospect, that Kyle Damien (even if on the subconscious level) was onto something quite profound. See this chapter’s endnotes for a full explanation.

⁶ Dagmar was not consulted. Surely, she would have given her input, or translated her log notes in a manner accepting of Kyle’s colorful personality. A further psychological study would reveal that, though not immediately apparent, Kyle Damien was not deviant or schizophrenic but for the most part melancholic – his mind almost entirely pre-occupied with the vivacity of his own ideas.

goes without saying, had spent a good portion of their school years in The Room). Further, studies from several other schools reveal that only one or two out of dozens of Kyles and Damiens have gone on to brilliance – or at least a relatively ‘normal’ adult path. Whatever the reason for these names veering far from their original meanings (one does not think of tranquil straits of water or spirits tamed when hearing the names Kyle or Damien), the point is that like it or not, these names now connote tragedy or deviance.

Kyle Damien may have been onto something: Assigning names arbitrarily at birth makes no logical sense. Cultures have existed where parents waited until their child began to display recognizable character and personality traits before giving him or her a so-called ‘proper’ name, one full of meaning. And yet, it must be recognized – *Saintly Maria*, *Bookish Betsy*, *Harsh Hedwig*, *Shy Carl* – no single person is always saintly or harsh or shy. Even when one is naturally shy, an alternate feature or characteristic can temporarily steal the limelight. Giving birth names then, does no one justice. Why not assign each individual a serial number instead? One may argue that neither would numbers do justice, as, say the number 01122⁷, which really does not connote anything; however, that is precisely the point. An assigned number such as this would – at the very least – provide each person a fresh beginning.

⁷ Such a random, neutral, number as 01122 would be the perfect candidate. Parents would do well to refrain from assigning their child a serial number taken from literature or pop culture that has already been corrupted with meaning, such as 666 (that is if they want their child to start off with a fresh slate). Interestingly, Kyle Damien chose a number that included 666 as the suffix. It isn’t clear just why or how he came up with this particular number. It’s unlikely his parents allowed him access to anything associated with Devils or Demons (see the section, “The Flavor of a Dream.”)

NO SLEEP, NO DREAM

Samantha lies in the hammock, while Julian, too tall to fit the one adjacent to her, leans against the wall on the wooden bench. They lounge in his backyard in the coolness of early spring, sipping on lemonade.

Julian takes out a handkerchief from his pocket and reaches over to hand it to her. She dabs the wetness under her eyes. It could be her allergies, but she's been lying there for the last hour neither sneezing nor coughing. She's been staring straight up into the sky. He sets the book down that he's been reading and says, "It's not the world that's too much with us, but our dreams."

He watches as Samantha tucks the handkerchief away in her sweater pocket. She will toss it in the laundry along with a handful of other handkerchiefs, and then give him clean ones to carry in his pocket – just in case.

He continues, "When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, and reason like a child. When I became a man, I did away with childish things."⁸

"So now that you're a man, you're giving up on childish dreams?"

"Samantha, imagine the repeat of one dream, and one dream only," Julian says eagerly. "It would make life so much easier."

"For you maybe, not necessarily for me."

He flips through his dream journal and looks at all the empty pages, at all those dreams he had forgotten. "If we could have only one dream repeat over and over again,

⁸ Julian takes this Bible verse to refer to the nature of children, which includes the nature of their dreams – wild and free. However, they are made to suppress their **dream selves** for so long that by the time they reach adulthood, they will have forgotten what it's like to dream freely. Many of them (like Julian) find it extremely difficult to be in tune with their **multiplicity**.

chances are we would remember it by the sheer act of repetition. Then I wouldn't need to keep a dream journal at all." Random pages of writing haphazardly appear here and there among the blank ones – dreams that were remembered, and then abandoned. "If I could remember that one dream every time I wake up, then I could always count on the return of *me*," he says, patting his chest lightly with one hand.

"I couldn't live on just one dream," Samantha says as Julian places the journal between his legs, as if to protect his most prized possession.

As the sun slowly sets late in the evening and it's time for bed, they do not go to bed. They stay up until early dawn – he reading, she watching the classic movie channel, witnessing people live out impossible dreams within a matter of hours.

Before bed, they make love and still do not fall asleep.

Samantha whispers in his ear, "Now that we haven't slept, there are no dreams to remember."

Samantha goes home, and Julian can't get to sleep. He experiences waking dream. He sees a man dozing in the bliss of slumber, his body melting into the ground. A woman with eyes taped open lies next to the dozing-man. A baby snores with its eyes and mouth open while sucking on a lollipop between the couple.

Julian's night dreams rebound with a vengeance. Unfortunately, he doesn't remember them the next morning⁹.

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⁹ *Possible Reasons Why Julian's Dreams Rebound with a Vengeance*

According to dream experts, **the richer, more compelling, or just plain odd dreams** seem to occur during the REM cycle, and it is this stage of sleep that the body seems to seek. Add to this the fact that if you lose a half hour of REM sleep one night, you'll likely make up for it with 35% more REM time the next night, a phenomenon known as REM rebound.

“These walking shoes have two sets of shoe laces – black and white, so you can choose to switch them whenever you like.”

As the shoe salesman laces the black shoelace onto Julian’s right foot, Julian stares at the Velcro shoe that encases his left foot. He pulls the strap up and then tightens it. He repeats the obsessive action – pull strap up, tighten.

“The satisfaction of the strap? Or the wonder of the weave?” the salesman jokes. As he ties the knot tight on Julian’s foot, Julian gets up and examines both feet in the bench mirror. He walks toward the mirror and back, and then walks parallel to the mirror, comparing the feel and look of the new shoe to the old. The shoes look almost identical except for the color and the fact that one has a strap and the other a shoelace. The shoelace has been tied so tight, tighter than the strap that Julian feels something new in the way the shoe cradles his foot. It grips his foot so tight in a way that the Velcro shoe never has, the way a baby might be held tight by its mother to shelter it from the attack of a rabid dog. If his foot were a bundle of baby it would asphyxiate. This feeling is new.

“Give me this one,” Julian says with conviction pointing to his right foot. He then pulls off the Velcro shoe from his left foot and throws the pair into the vacated spot in the shoebox.¹⁰

¹⁰ Julian’s affinity for Velcro takes a back seat today. The *selves produced by dreams* do not normally incarnate proclivities of their own, since they must manifest through *a primary self with established tastes*; these dream selves *tend to accommodate and acclimate* to the primary interests; however, anomalous selves in situations of high anxiety or excitement will often develop tastes of their own, particularly powerful and persistent.

REMNANTS OF A DRESS

Summary of note: situational anxiety/depression

Chief Complaint: anxiety attacks

Subjective: Pt is 30 y/o female who comes in today because of a panic attack 1 day ago.

Pt states that she was taking a shower and started feeling that something was wrong. She subsequently had palpitations, tingling of extremities, SOB and weakness. Felt better after she called a friend and smoked a few cigarettes. Took a nap and felt better. Had a slightly different episode 1 month ago while watching a slightly disturbing movie. Started feeling anxious and nauseated. Felt better after she vomited. Overall, she feels like she has some depression over the past few months. Cries too easily and seems to over react when most people would not. Feels that she often retreats to sleep. Appetite is decreased and she lost a few pounds.

SH: Pt has never married and is in an open relationship by choice.

Assessment:

1)ANXIETY DISORDER, NOS – 300.00

2)DEPRESSIVE DISORDER, NOS – 311

PLAN:

RX: Celexa 20mg Tab Take ½ tablet daily for 6 days, then increase to 1 tablet daily if no S/Es Qty 30.

Klonopin 0.5 mg Tab take 1 tablet tid prn anxiety Qty 20.

*

The wedding dress swirls down the toilet. She catches the tail end of it and pulls it out just in time. Part of the dress is left in the toilet. It's not clear what part is floating there, but she has got to pee right now and so she pees on what's left of the dress.

This is all Samantha remembers of her dream, but she does not like the feeling it gives her.

She tries to remember a time before Julian when a lover said I Love You. It's okay that none of them did. Julian – he has said it. But Love after all, is just a word. Nothing's wrong, she repeats to herself doubtfully. An open relationship is so freeing, offers variety, but then don't relationships between two people offer the same thing? Variety in Multiplicity?

She thinks of the bottle of Klonopin sitting in the medicine cabinet, next to the anti-depressants, and immediately feels guilty for even thinking of it. She could just take half, so that it's only half of half a milligram. They were, after all, prescribed for emergencies, those just in case moments of anxiety, which is right about now.

She elevates her feet on the sofa armrest and tries to rest.

What on earth would make me dream of flushing a dress down the toilet? Or was it me who did the flushing? It wasn't even my dress. Whose was it? I don't know. That's a moot point. Or is it? Down it went, whirling so quickly, and yet I rescued it. Off-white if I remember right. Everything was off-white, even the porcelain of the toilet, the floors and the walls. What could that indicate? I don't want to get married, and yet maybe I really do because I salvaged the dress? And yet I pissed on what was left.

The doorbell rings. When she opens the door a box is shoved in her face. It's Julian. She notices his new shoe-laced shoes.

“What has gotten into you?” she says excitedly, forgetting all about her remembered dream. Opening the box, she finds a pair of Velcro shoes. She can’t tell which pair this is, because each one he owns looks the same. “And what am I supposed to do with these?”

“I don’t know. Keep them here, just in case.”

“Just in case – like a spare toothbrush?”

“Something like that.”

“I like your new pair of shoes. Red looks good on you.”

“I just bought these yesterday. Strangest purchase I’ve ever made,” he says as he struggles to pull off the new shoes without untying them. “I even slept in them,” he adds. He rushes to use her bathroom. When he comes out minutes later, he’s holding a bottle in his hand.

“What’s this?”

“Julian, what are you doing? Rummaging through my medicine cabinet? Give me that. That’s mine,” she says, instantly blushing. Julian shakes the bottle of Celexa, which is still full.

“So then you don’t use these?” he says, unfolding the warning label taped to the outside of the bottle. He scans the lengthy page.

“I used to – a long time ago. I kept the prescription, just in case.”

“Interesting. It says here in very tiny fine print, may cause lucid-dreaming.”

“You bet it does. And it’s more than interesting,” Samantha says, reaching to grab the bottle away from Julian, with no success. “It’s being stuck in a dream and not being able to do a single thing about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“I almost called you one night, after it happened a long while back. But then that wouldn’t have done any good because it was over by then.”

“What was over?”

“The lucid dream. It was a bad one. Those anti-depressants in your hand – they gave me lucid dreams many times before, but then they increase in both number and intensity. That one night, shadows surrounded my bed, just like ghosts you see in the movies. They pawed at me, and all I could do was talk to myself: *When I wake up, I’m going to tell the doctor to take me off the pills. I’ve got to get off these pills.* Somehow, I was aware that it was a dream, but that didn’t prevent me from feeling completely frightened. The ghosts were real, and they wanted me. I can’t explain it. I somehow knew the pills were doing this to me, and so I was determined that when I woke up I would give them back. I was totally defenseless, immobile. Do you get me?”

“Yes, I think I do. But don’t you see Samantha? This may be the answer I’ve been searching for,” Julian says while shaking the bottle.

“You mean the one dream? Having lucid dreams doesn’t necessarily mean the *same* dream.”

“No, but the fact that you remember your dream, even though it happened a long time ago, that means something doesn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s true. But the feelings these drugs stir up, it just isn’t worth it. Besides, even if you have lucid dreams, how do you know you’ll remember all of them?”

“I don’t know that I will. But I’ve got to try.”

Samantha sighs. “I see there’s no convincing you,” she says as Julian slips the bottle in his jacket pocket. “But please do be careful with them, babe. They’re really for depression, not some crazy experiment with dreams.” She thinks of the bottle of Klonopin still sitting in the medicine cabinet, grateful that Julian didn’t grab them too. Keep the Klonopin in case of those emergencies. **Just in case you can’t handle another day of your self**¹¹.

WHAT WE WOMEN DO

Dear Dagmar,

I kind of like the idea of snail mail. In an age of technology and the need for immediacy, the patient exchange of letters is quite gratifying.

So what has been happening for me lately? For one thing, my Eczema has been getting really bad; I get itchy all over, mostly in the crease of my forearm and in the back of my neck. This is quite embarrassing—but lately I’ve been getting rashes in my butt crack. I am so glad we’re close enough for me to tell you things like this. I suffer so much, but add to that the fact that I get even itchier when I can’t express myself clearly or find the right words (like right now). I don’t like this part of myself, but I’ve learned to live with it¹².

What else? Well of course there’s Julian. He’s really having trouble living with himself. Lately, he’s been complaining more and more about his dreams. I think what’s

¹¹ This may be mere speculation, but what if Samantha had awoken completely dream empty of her flushed-wedding-dress-dream? How would she have responded to Julian arriving at her door unexpectedly? Leaving his pair of shoes in her living room as if he lives there and then taking her prescription pills for himself?

¹² It is true that Samantha’s affliction with Eczema is only one of many maladies she suffers from. However, it is of value to recognize this point: Historical records indicate that skin disorders such as Eczema can bring an end to or prevent attacks of madness. Apparently, Samantha has never been driven to the point of madness – despite her afflictions – because corruption leaves her body through the surface of her skin.

really happening is that he's struggling with mood swings. In that, he's not alone. The difference is in the way we see and handle it. Sometimes I think he takes himself far too seriously. You know what else? He found my anti-depressants a week ago and insisted on keeping them for himself, asked me not to contact him until he contacts me, and I haven't heard from him since. He seems to think that lucid dreaming will give him more control of his life. Maybe. What do you think?

Can I call you now?

Yours Always,

Samantha

*

Samantha normally does not worry about dreams the way Julian does, but today, she wakes up **dream empty**—probably because of Julian's influence on her. She decides to contact Dagmar. She would like to do something together that they both like – shopping for antiques.

Samantha prepares herself by taking allergy pills. In addition, she wears two layers of cotton t-shirts and comfortable jeans.

Dagmar – despite feeling far from her self today – puts her hair up in a ponytail and paints her toenails a bright brick red. She stands four inches taller with her favorite pair of pumps. She is drawn to the lockets located in the backroom of one of the antique shops in the neighborhood, while Samantha browses the throw rugs hoping they won't make her sneeze. She breathes carefully so as not to inhale the dust and admires the faded designs of one rug in particular, decorated with a serpent in a genie bottle with a

genie floating by its side¹³. Even if Julian hadn't skipped out, she still wouldn't have invited him on this little excursion because he has no appreciation for old things¹⁴.

"Take a look at this," Dagmar says with a locket in hand. "The chain is missing and the loop is broken, but it's beautiful, isn't it?" Golden and oval-shaped, the antique locket is studded with an array of vines flowering outward from the center. A white background peeks through the vines. Dagmar clicks the locket open and finds two tiny pictures,, one of a baby and the other a little girl with crooked pigtails. "I can't tell if this is the same child, can you?" Taking the locket from Dagmar's hand, Samantha peers closely at the two little photos. It isn't clear whether the baby is a boy or a girl. The baby is neither smiling nor crying, but its tongue sticks out like a cat licking itself. The baby's cheeks are speckled with little red bumps. The little girl on the opposite side of the locket does not have red cheeks. Her ivory skin appears perfectly smooth. "Well, most babies outgrow these kinds of skin conditions," Samantha assumes. The little girl's eyes are opened wide and she is neither smiling nor laughing. It looks like she's just about to grin. "It's probably the same kid," Samantha decides, handing the locket back to Dagmar, who looks at the two photos again. She decides that there is no way of telling for sure whether these two people on display are the same person. Maybe they are related, brother and sister, or sister and sister. Probably the same person, as most people look very different from the way they did as a baby. "I was a fat baby," she says aloud. "You'd never guess looking at me now." Samantha considers her own baby pictures. "I

¹³ No matter what her mood, Samantha's habit is to stop at the antique rugs and to tolerate the dust and mold. Her taste in antique rugs dominates because it reflects an even deeper longing at her core – one for sturdy, useful things.

¹⁴ Julian's father kept every old tool, shoe, dog bone, and newspaper stacked up in the old shed in the backyard. He refused to ever buy Julian anything new, whether clothes for school, a pair of shoes, or the most popular lunchbox. Everything had to be handed down from his older brother or the neighbor next door, or taken down from the attic, where his father kept an old trunk handed down from Julian's grandfather, with old navy coats, khaki pants, and shoehorns. So when Velcro shoes became the fad, Julian begged his mother to buy them for his first day of junior high school.

was just average, like I am now.” Dagmar continues browsing the lockets while holding onto to this in her clenched fist.

She thinks of Borges. The young Borges looked different from the old Borges. Young Borges’ hair was shiny, his eyes large and dark, compared to the thin hair and sleepy eyes of old Borges. Yet, the same “I” referred to both Borges’s. Borges young and Borges old. All in one. Rosy cheeks. Ivory skin. Borges knew. He knew.

Dagmar wants to buy the broken locket with the photos of strangers: the rosy-baby and the pig-tailed girl. She buys the locket and keeps the photos inside; she will mount it on her bulletin board in her bedroom, the one where she puts her favorite items on display. She buys another locket, a new one with placeholders for two photos. In it, she places a photo of herself at ten years old – freckles and Indian braids, and on the other side her most recent picture with her hair undone.

Samantha purchases the antique rug imprinted with the genie and snake, but immediately regrets it the next day because of the caked on dust and dirt that age both the snake and the genie. Once she pug-pugs the rug and scrubs it clean, all the while wearing a surgeon’s mask on her face, she hangs the rug on the wall like an art piece rather than on the floor where it ought to be. She strips down to her underwear, drapes herself with an oversized scarf, and starts taking photos of herself. She straddles the computer chair, the back of which faces the camera, and poses with her arms crossed in front of her chest with just a peek of her right nipple showing through. She sets the self-timer at 10 seconds and takes several shots in variations: chair faced sideways, faced forward, left nipple peeking through, black and white, and then sepia, and lastly vibrant colors that make her skin look like Indian clay. She feels sexy. But something seems to be missing.

She calls up Dagmar. “Let’s have some girly fun, and bring along that brand new locket, would you?”

After taking several photos together – arms around each other, gleeful smiles, cameos, Dagmar stares at the rug hanging on the wall. “That exotic thing should be part of the next photo,” she suggests.

Samantha takes the rug down from the wall, undrapes herself and Dagmar doesn’t look away. Samantha then asks Dagmar to film her in movie mode as she rolls herself inside the rug, right across the living room hardwood floor. “Wow, this is crazy cool,” Dagmar says as she films Samantha for 30 seconds.

Samantha remains on the floor bundled in the rug, while Dagmar fiddles with the locket hanging around her neck. “I suggest,” Samantha says with heavy breath, “that you do something interesting with that locket.” Looking at Samantha’s bare shoulders just outside of the rug, Dagmar strips down to her underwear and bra and the locket hanging between her breasts. She poses against the wall with her hands behind her back, clasped. Samantha, now unwrapped from the rug, sets the camera to continuous shooting mode and takes shots of Dagmar as she slowly moves away from the wall and moves her arms towards her chest, finally grasping the locket and bringing it close to the camera lens. The final shot is of the locket open to the photos of Dagmar’s two selves¹⁵.

Soon enough, Samantha scratches the nape of her neck, and then her forearms and chest. The more she rubs and scratches, the more she trembles. She asks Dagmar to help apply her prescription antiseptic cream to spots on her body hard to reach. She can

¹⁵ It must be obvious by now that a phrase such as “two selves” is too reductionist. Consider the fact that the adult Dagmar carries a number of latent dreams, lying in wait for the opportunity to incarnate into several selves; however, for the sake of continuity, it is sufficient at this point to relate this scene at its most elemental.

always get more she says, as Dagmar empties the tube onto Samantha's excessively itchy red skin¹⁶.

*

Samantha doesn't remember getting the pull out bed ready for Dagmar or when she fell asleep. She remembers the shakes, even after Dagmar applied all of the cream, and scratching so hard that her neck nearly bled. Now that she's awake, she sighs with relief. What she isn't aware of is that she is still in the clutches of last night's dream, which she cannot remember: *Admiring the skull of a dead man. Whose skull is this? Let's play hangman. Two parts water, one part skull powder. Bottle of Gatorade sits unopened. Shake the skull water bottle and drink fast. Every remedy needs a sacrifice.*

She is stuck in an **after-dream**¹⁷.

¹⁶ The itch rarely reaches this extreme state, but when it does, more often than not, it's when Samantha is her **core self** for the day, when she has done everything in her power to cope. Those moments, when at her wit's end, she has nearly scratched off her skin, at the very least making it bleed. Most of the time, the itch is accommodated, appeased, or even prevented. For example, one of her latest hobbies is to remove tags from clothing without ruining the thread. She goes through her clothing and does this routinely now, no matter the self, as they all share the same itchy, Eczema-ridden body. Unfortunately, removing these tags means also removing most laundering directions. As a result, she has to guess at what temperature to wash fabrics. Often, the whites come out a pale pink or pastel, and the more vibrant colors spotted or washed out.

¹⁷ *The effect of her convulsion*

Common knowledge says you often dream about someone or something that happened during the day. This appears to be the case here with Samantha – the contents of this odd, highly symbolic dream, seem to be a direct result of her convulsions. Further, this dream offers its residue as a kind of waking day remedy.

INTOXICATION

Dearest Samantha,

I know it seems silly to write snail mail considering we've just seen each other very recently (by the way, I had the most amazing time with you). But let me emphasize once again, I write because no one writes letters anymore, and I want very much to change that.

In your last letter, you mentioned Julian's latest struggles. Considering that you've turned to me, you must believe (please let me know if I'm assuming far too much here) that I live with self-acceptance. Perhaps. I think it is more a matter of self-discipline. Let me to explain.

I practice a kind of ritual almost every morning. It goes something like this: I wake up very early every weekday morning and when I wake up, first thing I do is shut the blinds tight so that no light can filter in. Before the night's dream can overtake me, I take a seat on the floor and take the shape of a lotus flower. I repeat my mantra silently, *I am my model teacher self. I am my model teacher self.* Until the words flow like an unperturbed stream. Multiple figures shuffle in my mind like magic cards. One is a hand in the shape of a fist. Another—an ear that bends to hear me. Another ear appears but it's plugged with a finger. Capital letter A, then B, now lowercase Z. A man with the head of an elephant. A pig in the shape of a figure 8. A bottle of beer. A glass of wine. None of this has to do with teaching! Except for the A B Z! I grab at one image that might work and then another, try to piece them together, but now they change rapidly and flash out of memory. Who will it be? I plead – come together model teacher self, model teacher self. I am my teacher self. *Oh-ma-te-cha-see.*

I've never shared this with anyone. But this is what it's like my dearest friend, my meditation, nearly every day of the week (but not the weekends when I can be totally free). Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. Whatever the case, my efforts at pulling together my model teacher self has finally become completely overwhelming and exhausting. It's all there inside of me, I sense it – one part **core self**, one part dream – or maybe two or three. My point is that I'm tired. This is as much as I can say for now. Perhaps someday soon, I can tell you more.

For now, please be assured that I can very much relate to what Julian is going through. Even if it may be for reasons different than his, out of a sense of duty, I often **suppress those various parts of myself that are only trying to help me**. For that I often dislike – even loathe—myself for being weak. But alas, this is not about me.

Back to Julian. I'm sure you already tried to convince him that he can deal with his issues without the help of the drugs. Certainly, you've come a long way yourself, weaning off of them, learning to appreciate your **multiplicity** as a good thing, even a way of healing. But you know very well Julian is going to do what he's going to do. And this game (assuming it's a game) he plays may only serve to further repress his true identity. But please have faith. Though I still don't know him that well, from what you tell me, Julian possesses noteworthy traits that will help get him through. Fingers crossed that he will eventually behave in a way that would utilize these in the healthiest of ways.

Love Always,

Dagmar

*

It's the end of a very difficult workday, and so Julian tries to convince his boss that he needs time off. "I know it's asking a lot," he admits, "But I really need my vacation now. Yes, the whole thing. I promise – I will come back completely refreshed and back to my very best."

When he took Samantha's bottle of Celexa home, he took one pill and went directly to bed. The drug took no time to take effect. Here is a description of the drug-induced dream:

Rollerblading down sidewalk. Legs wobbly. Home. Home. No place like home. Home on the corner of Nalanek and Edacram Drive. Wait – that ain't right. This ain't right – me saying ain't. Why am I on rollerblades? I hate skates. Take me off these skates! I'm too tall. Like that time I slipped, and... Wait! Don't have time. About to crash. I don't. Don't live there I mean. Nanacram. Absurd. This hill stretches as long as the eye – my eye can see. Where am I? Must get to the corner. What? Turn left at the big oak tree? Right at the corner full of fleas? Right. How will I see the fleas? On the corner of Smith and Rollins. Rolling Stones. On the corner of Jones and Jiz. Gee Wiz! Aha! Rolling hills. Dreaming of riding a road bike. Dreaming while in a dream. Someone has stolen my bike. That tall, big man around the corner can help me. What? You'll lead me home? Yes. Top of narrow shaft. Metal wheels and gears. Turning and churning. Ingrained in the walls. Pressed tight against each other. Ooh tall man, why do you rub your body up against mine? Gentle's the rub. I'm protecting you. Heat of front against hot behind. Stay like this, like a man-sandwich. Or jump off shaft to infinity hell a well abyss. Jump.

When Julian woke up, he was drenched in sweat. He remembered the dream clearly, as lucid as the waking life. Unlike most dream recall that comes in flashes or

fragments, he remembered this dream in vivid detail, even the sensation while in the dream of wishing he could escape or wake. Instead of savoring these moments of dream remembrance, he obsessed.

Once he realized someone had stolen his bike, why didn't he stop, take off his rollerblades and go searching for it? Instead, he stood there staring blankly at the empty space where his bike used to be. When asking for directions and arriving at the wrong street corner, why didn't he go back to the raunchy teen who gave him bad directions and pop him in the jaw? When rollerblading up and down those rolling hills, why didn't he try to simply enjoy the ride? Finally, he could have shoved the tall, shady man down the shaft instead of jumping off himself.

He took a pill for two more nights, and already its lucid-dream-inducing effects began to taper off. Another couple of days, and Julian forgot his dreams, and so he decided to increase the dosage to two. The extra potency worked. In the process of yet another, terrifying dream, he looked at its lucidity through clear, unfettered eyes and said, "Look here, I am not afraid of you!" He concentrated on these words deeply and with conviction, and without wavering. And this morning, while getting ready for work, he remembered it all, without fear or trembling.

In effect, Celexa has become his best friend, but with powerful side effects.

Julian tried to capture the fingerprints of one last client for the day – for a third time. The customer, noticeably agitated, said, "Look, I've really got to get home. Can you get it right this time?" Julian told him in as controlled a tone as possible to get bent. After all, it was *his* hands that were dirty the first time, and the second time, his thumb had behaved disagreeably. Yet Julian sensed that there was something terribly wrong

with his own hands. They felt numb – the way one’s cheeks and lips feel after given a shot of Novocain. His lower limbs tingled. His feet sweat, and as a result they sloshed in his shoes as he walked across the office to the bathroom. He had to urinate something like half a dozen times throughout the day, having drunk plenty of fluids at home in an effort to flush out the drugs from his system. He felt certain that his stomach, liver, and lungs were drowning in concentrated levels of toxins. Breathing was a struggle. At his last trip to the bathroom, with one hand he held his penis in an attempt to shoot straight, and with the other he leaned against the wall.

Foregoing the washing of his hands since he couldn’t feel them anyway, he returned to his post, where this last customer waited, tapping his foot impatiently. He slowly made his way to the computer screen, which seemed impossibly far away. By the time he reached his workspace, the customer was attempting to fingerprint himself, leaving sweaty smudges on the glass. “Hey don’t do that!” Julian shouted. Yet his face remained relaxed. His shout apparently had no effect, because the young man simply shrugged. Julian looked over at his boss’s large oval office window. His boss was peeking through the blinds, he was almost certain. Something was watching, lurking, something with eyes. After finally getting the fingerprinting right, Julian shoed the customer away like a pesky pet dog, who then sneered and left.

And now Julian waits for his boss to reply, who stands there for a painfully long time, rubbing his chin. Let’s face it – we are an artificial version of we today, Julian thinks and then repeats his request, “I need some time away now, that’s what I’m saying.”

In Julian's drug-dazed state, he sees what appears to be a nasty finger, wagging in his face. His boss says, "You don't look altogether well Julian, but I have to say, this isn't exactly the best time to request for time off, considering its peak season."

Julian pictures himself the way his boss sees him, the way he must appear; what he feels inside seeps out into his physical appearance. And so he tries amplifying his exhausted condition by drooping his eyes and slumping his shoulders. Further, he insists, "As you know sir, for the past several years I've been fairly consistent, on time and reliable. It's just lately, I've been under great stress, personal matters I'd really rather not get into. But I promise, you can count on me. I will return from this rest in good health, fully refreshed and myself." Julian means it; he is being genuine. It hits him why he sticks to this job even with its banality. Each person has a unique fingerprint, like no one else's, his or her own identity. He longs for this ideal of a singular identity. He wants to be just himself and no one else. To his relief, and at his behest and backed by an overall stellar record, his boss acquiesces and approves Julian's two-week paid vacation to begin Monday.

*

Julian drinks an 8-oz. glass of water. He finishes it in six gulps, and then pours himself another glass. He's read somewhere that one can actually drink enough to drown oneself, the phenomena is called water intoxication. But how could this happen if one relieves oneself by going to the bathroom, as he is about to do right now? Perhaps one can keep drinking gallons of water every day, training the bladder to hold more and more water. It may take weeks – even months – until finally the body can retain more and more water, and more and more. On the way to the bathroom, he grabs the bottle of anti-

depressants and then flushes them down the toilet. Just like that, they whirl down in sanitizing blue water. How many gallons of water does it take to flush? He believes he read somewhere that it takes about three to five. If you hold your water longer, you will save water because then you will let it all out in one big piss, instead of running to the bathroom, pissing and flushing with each piss. Or you can piss and not flush and just try to remember to flush the next time you piss.

Two pills pop back up with the new toilet water, and for a moment, Julian sees what looks like a reflection of Samantha. The hazy face speaks to him: Tisk, tisk, tisk - I told you so. The drugs are an ill replacement for the magic of the dream.

Magic of the dream. Magic pills. Julian grabs the two pills out of the toilet water, rinses them in the sink and returns them to the bottle.

Just be. And the dream will create its own reality.

Water – stream of life. Our bodies contain 60% water, the brain contains 70%.
Brain on water.

In the bedroom, Julian pulls a rolling backpack from the closet, stuffs it with clothes for one day, throws in a mini-toothbrush, toothpaste and aftershave. He takes the bag to his car and takes a drive up the coast.

*

The sound of car doors slamming and children screeching awakes him. This has to be the first time in a dozen years or so that he's slept straight through the night in a car. Or has he ever done so? He can't remember exactly, but feels certain he must have out of defiance against the unwritten family rule that one should never sleep overnight in one's car (or any vehicle for that matter) anywhere, not even in one's driveway. Especially not

in one's driveway, because what would the neighbors think? Why is that young man sleeping in his car in his driveway when he has a perfectly decent home in which to sleep?

The water splashes against the shore in the daylight. He closes his eyes and lets the sound soothe him. He can't remember anything after pulling up in this parking spot near the shore, nothing visible in the blue-black night but the moonlit, shallow waves. What if one was to drink in as much salt water as possible? One would not last very long. But spring fresh water. I have plenty of that at home¹⁸.

Julian takes awhile to fully awaken, first moving the lever to straighten up his seat, and then letting the windows down and stretching his long arms.

After absorbing the warmth from the mid-morning sun, he pulls his backpack from the trunk and looks for a restroom. He finds it with the help of the signs and arrows, looking more like a log cabin than a bathroom. Next to the door of the men's bathroom stands a soda machine. Julian pulls out two quarters from his pocket and presses the button for soda. He guzzles it down and notices that there's a snack machine next to the women's room. Not since he was a kid has he had soda and candy for breakfast. Back then he got smacked across the face by his father who caught his "foolish boy, spending – by God – my hard earned money – see you got me using the Lord's name in vain!" Reaching for the candy bar from the vendor, he hears the sound of flip-flops and then sees the feet, the legs and finally the full-length of the body wearing them. The woman

¹⁸ It's interesting to pause at this juncture and note that Julian is still fixated on the topic of water, even after having a long night's sleep. Could it be that the same aqua-obsessed self of yesterday has returned today? Or is he experiencing a self similar to yesterday's? The exact same dream does not often return two nights in a row; however, such a thing is not impossible.

wearing a sky-blue bikini pauses by his side. “Here, do you mind?” the woman says, handing Julian three quarters. “I’ll take chocolate covered peanuts.”

THESE ARE THEIR DYNAMICS

Julian met Samantha two and a half years ago during lunch break. He had forgotten to bring his sack lunch of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and carton of low fat milk. So he took the elevator downstairs and made the short walk to the deli around the corner. She got in line just ahead of him. She wore a salamander-colored scarf double-twisted around her neck in a loose knot with the stringy fringes cascading over her shoulders. It looked as if she’d arranged her hair in a hurry without looking into a mirror. Julian examined the large menu behind the counter, arrayed with food descriptions color-coded in chalk, and then shifted his eyes to complete the picture: bronze hair loosely bound with a barrette, large handbag made of upholstery material, resembling a carpetbag. He admired her stance, the way she allowed one handle of the bag to hang off her shoulder, her right hand holding the other in place, left hand resting on her waist. He caught a whiff of newly washed hair, sweet and clean.

When it was his turn to order he watched as she took her sandwich to the nearest table, the one right next to the display rack of chips. He observed the pointed tip of her nose, and the general landscape of her face. Beads of sweat accumulated under his collar as he tried to decide what to order from the dozens of looming choices, undecipherable in his muddled head.

“The Greek is delicious.” She kicked her right foot back and forth as she licked her fingers.

“Yeah?” The items on the menu finally came into focus: The Greek handwritten in green. He turned back and saw unblinking grey eyes staring at him. “What’s all in it?” he asked dumbly, “I mean in the sandwich special – the Greek?”

Placing the remains of her sandwich on the plate, she gestured for him to come over and have a look. Hesitantly, he ducked as if the ceiling was too low and obliged. She opened up her sandwich and displayed the meats, cheese and lettuce, half eaten. “Ah,” he answered, “looks good,” and returned to the counter, placing his order for the same.

She offered to share her small round table in the corner with him. He accepted. She rattled off about each ingredient in the sandwich, the exact arrangement of the meats, vegetables and the type of bread. He couldn’t believe her pure enthusiasm, her insistence on this specific arrangement contributing to the delicious taste. He had never studied his food this closely before. Her description worked up his appetite. She sipped her root beer in between bites and snippets, as he took long swigs of orange juice. She told him that she worked part time at the grocery store down the street. See you again, maybe, she said as she placed the last morsel in her mouth. And he agreed.

During the evening that seemed to stretch on indefinitely, all of Julian got trapped inside of his mouth:

Top teeth mounted over bottom with tongue trapped in between. Top teeth overbear bottom teeth so must push chin forward for relief. Push forward. Breathe consciously. Warm air from one nostril breathed onto upper lip, zipped to bottom lip. All of me trapped inside this contraption. All of me concentrated in jaw. I can hear me breathe.

Stretch mouth. Open wide. Wider. Must shut. Still stuck. I'll never escape. I can never be free¹⁹.

Julian didn't stop to think that this madness could somehow be tied to meeting Samantha. He couldn't stop to reason because everything was trapped inside his mouth, not his head. Nor did he contemplate anything having to do with slumber or sleep, for this took place before he became hyper aware of his dreams²⁰.

After a few hours, the concentrated pressure began to subside, and so Julian decided it was time to go grocery shopping where Samantha worked.

They developed a friendship, which soon enough turned passionate. They enjoyed a special compatibility. She expressed her desire to keep the relationship open, and though uncomfortable with the idea, he wanted to be with her enough to agree. The more time they spent together, the more their peculiarities began to manifest themselves: the twitching under her left eye, the almost constant scratching of her forearms; his exuberant humming during long showers, his repeated reaching down to adjust the Velcro strap on his shoe. These habits along with the various other aspects of themselves have made their relationship a challenge.

Here is how their relationship functions on the most fundamental level: Julian's **core self** is especially drawn to Samantha, since his **core self** is who he was when he met and fell for her. True, she had been carefree that day they met, which he found most appealing, but she could have manifested any other self and most likely he would have still fallen for her; above all he was taken with that image of her standing at the deli

¹⁹ These are the waking day symptoms of nightmare – the kind you don't share with anyone else because everyone else stands outside the structure of your disease.

²⁰ Perhaps this sensation or its seedlings already existed in some form within his core, an accumulation of hereditary traits and environment. Only now, in the secrecy of solitude, it finds the courage to emerge.

counter, her countenance, the face that belongs to no other. His core self for the most part sees things this way. What about the others?

Julian's other selves more or less comply for after all, they are all Julian too. There are some selves that commit to Julian's tastes in a begrudging way, as with his interest in Samantha, since it can be said they were never properly introduced. On that day at the deli, none of his dream selves appeared. They hibernate inside of him like light bulbs that are shut off until someone hits the switch. That **switch is in the hands of the dream.**

As for Samantha, her carefree self is most powerfully drawn to Julian's **core self**, for this was the **dream self** in charge when she met and instantly felt attracted to him. Although this carefree self appears infrequently, its powerful traits dominate so that every other of her selves, including her core, acquiesces to this attraction; however, they pay attention with slight indifference, so slight that Julian can't really tell (nor can she).

And so these are their dynamics.

Often their dreams combine and fornicate²¹.

AN APPARITION

Two old women swim together in the deepest part of a vast ocean. The women are lovers. One leaves. Where did she go? Where is she? The other shouts across the waves, "Dave – don't leave me Dave!" Grandma – this old woman is Grandma – and she's about to jump in the ocean after Dave. I shout, "Grandma! Don't! Please don't!" She jumps into

²¹ For yet another interesting example of **dream fornication**, see *Shared Dream* in the Afterword.

the ocean. She's sinking. I try to save her but I can't swim. I try, chopping the waters with my arms.

Grandma's lying on a bench on the wharf. Her hair is short and gray and the sight of it makes me tremble. Underneath bottle-cap glasses I see kind, gentle eyes. Someone's holding Grandma in their lap and I weep and weep, for she is alive but nearly died for her lover Dave.

Julian remembers just this much of the dream, enough to bring him to tears. He wonders why Grandma's female lover was named Dave. Why Grandma looked nothing like Grandma. Who was that someone who held Grandma in his lap? Her lap? If his father saw him weep like this he'd call him a sissy. That someone must not have been Dad.

Grandma's lover could have had any name. But why Dave? Regardless, Grandma was willing to drown for the love of this woman.

After adding this scene to his dream journal, Julian wonders what would have happened if he hadn't remembered any of it. Would he obsess over what kind of dream could make him cry? Probably, even without a clue as to the cause.

This is what it must be like for Samantha.

She used to try hiding it: I think I've caught a cold. Darn these new contacts. It must be allergies. But then she stopped making up stories to explain her crying spells, maybe because she was just plain tired, or because she couldn't herself understand what triggered them; now she just lets them happen – after eating her favorite dessert, while editing a paper, or waxing the furniture. Julian has learned to adapt to these awkward moments. What Samantha is doing at these moments when she suddenly cries are not odd

in themselves. They happen to be in the process of being accomplished when some invisible force triggers her emotions. Her actions at that very moment are therefore mere casualties. She doesn't target these particular moments inappropriately, they just happen to be.

Her crying spells have become a permanent fixture – like the twitch under her eye or his humming in the shower. He makes sure never to ask her why she's crying just as she never asks him what makes him sing, but rather keeps a handkerchief or two in his pocket just for her.

He reaches into the pockets of his soiled jeans and finds no handkerchief there, just lint and some loose change.

He feels certain he had at least one of her handkerchiefs in his pocket when he left for his trip. Did he lose it when changing into his swimming trunks? Or were they in the pocket of those trunks and floated out when he went for a swim with Marsha in the ocean two days ago? Now he's at home, thinking of Samantha when he obviously didn't think of her at all while in the ocean with Marsha in her skimpy bikini. Of course not. He hadn't been himself.

Julian's eyes sting, and when he checks himself in the mirror, they're filled with tears streaming down his ruddy face. They blur and so he rubs them to see more clearly. He remembers the way Marsha grabbed him by the foot and how he laughed and grabbed back. What he ended up grabbing was not her foot. The way he couldn't feel the wetness of her tongue in his mouth because they kissed while under water. It was just a kiss, only a kiss. And his relationship with Samantha is open, so he ought not feel any guilt whatsoever. Still...

Julian fills his tub with hot water. He keeps the faucet running as he submerges for as long as he can hold his breath. While underwater, he fantasizes about binding that dream journal with a jumbo rubber band. What good is it anyway, he thinks, to write down remembered dreams when they are only remembered randomly? If I had been myself at the wharf I wouldn't, I wouldn't have acted contrary to my feelings. I'm sure I wouldn't have.

THE FLAVOR OF A DREAM

Dear Ms. Dagmar,

We are Kyle Damien's parents. We hope that you remember him. He was one of your students a few years ago. He is now in the fifth grade, but he hasn't forgotten you. He begged us to display his drawing of you—though forgive the image (a monster with its hair in a bun) on our refrigerator. When we asked, "Is this Ms. Samantha, Damien? His answer was, "Don't call me that, I'm 01666! And that's not Ms. Samantha. That's 7!"

Please forgive us for troubling you, but our son is oppressed by nightmares. His screams wake us up in the middle of the night. We run to him, only to find him shivering and sweating, and when we ask him what he's dreamed about, sometimes he remembers and sometimes he does not. Regardless, his Instructors are at their wit's end, calling his behavior monstrous. Imagine? Calling our only, most beautiful boy, a monstrosity! Now we've only just recently discovered that Kyle appears to be soothed by either us reading or his reading books of all sorts. The Instructors, while well trained in disciplinary measures, are not very imaginative. They insist on reading only fairy tales in class, even though that seems quite childish for 5th grade. As a result, Kyle often throws tantrums because the characters – he insists – are interchangeable and therefore disposable. So it

seems that exposing our dear Kyle Damien to various literary characters has been making his personality more, what would we call it—bearable. Perhaps these literary individuals become so real to his imagination that he can no longer distinguish between them and himself. Problem is—we’ve hit a brick wall. We’ve exhausted our literary knowledge. This is where you come in.

We would love it if you would agree to being Kyle Damien’s private tutor. His behavior had been more tolerable, in our opinion, regardless of what *they* say, when you were his teacher. And when the authorities removed him from your class and put him in that...Room...he threw fits and tantrums the likes of which were terrifying. We will of course pay you amply for your troubles. Would you be so kind as to do us this tremendous favor? Oh and one more thing, please do whatever it takes to help our son, only don’t include anything to do with devils or demons. Other than that, the world of literature is yours.

Kindest Regards,

Mr. & Mrs. Moffat

*

Dagmar remembers Kyle Damien – troubled behavior and all – with fondness. And so she decides to accept his tutorship and schedules to meet with him for at least three hours every weekend. Well-versed and well-read in various genres of literature, she begins with her favorite author – Jorge Luis Borges.

The challenge with Borges is that he is an author of ideas more so than of character. Where there are characters in his stories, they are ultimately ideas. Dagmar

decides to go with her gut feeling. She starts by introducing Kyle Damien to Borges' "Nightmares."

She doesn't confess this decision to his parents, for they would wonder, why not begin with a character-driven story since there are so many of them? Yet, after spending a good amount of time with Kyle, Dagmar soon discovers that his issue is not so much that he is bombarded by nightmares as that he cannot really distinguish between waking and dream²².

When awake he often believes he is dreaming. During one of their tutoring sessions he behaves like a perfect gentleman, handling his book, pencil and paper delicately. He says please and thank you and you're welcome, and even pulls Dagmar's chair out for her. But such manners are so different than what he's used to that he pinches himself in an effort to wake from this nightmare – which is really a waking reality.

On the other hand, Dagmar discovers that for Kyle Damien, his nightmares often seem so real that when he really wakes up, it feels like he hasn't slept at all. Like most children, he then arrives at the day's duties with lethargy and the desire to return to sleep²³.

Now, it would seem that such an effect, particularly in Kyle Damien's case, would be considered ideal – a sleepy, therefore docile and controllable self. Not so. After a very brief period of time, he is re-energized more than ever to terrorize.

²² *Relative Quotes from Borges' "Nightmares":*

"All of this is possible, and this idea of the savages coincides with that of children, who also cannot distinguish between waking and dream."

"...for poets and mystics, **it is not impossible for all of the waking life to be a dream.**"

²³ In general, one usually remembers dreams that seem real, and in turn, the more tired one feels from all that remembering; therefore, one doesn't have the energy to be anyone but oneself.

What if, rather than taking on the formidable task of distinguishing between dream and reality or crushing nightmares out of existence, Dagmar and Damien could, together, confront these nightmares, diffuse or even revert them? (After all, Kyle's parents did say *do whatever it takes to help our son*). And so (based on a loose interpretation of Borges), Dagmar comes up with a unique concoction to approach Kyle Damien's nightmares. She approaches each one (remembered or not) as a flavor²⁴.

As soon as he gets up from his afternoon nap sweating and trembling –

“What does this nightmare taste like?”

“Um, I think, uh, a burp?”

“And do you like this taste?”

(Kyle pauses and licks his lips).

“Yes.”

(Dagmar presumes this dream will become a recurring one, as children tend to hold on to likeable nightmares and dreams.)

“What about this one?”

“Like mildew and vanilla crème.”

“Do you like this taste?”

“No. Yes. No and yes.”

(With a mixed response such as this, its recurrence is uncertain and therefore any further exploration set-aside for the time being).

“What does this dream taste like?”

²⁴ *Relative Quotes from Borges' "Nightmares," cont.*

“What matters, as Coleridge said, is **the impression produced by the dreams.**”

“I have come to the conclusion, though it may not be scientific, that dreams are the most ancient aesthetic activity.”

‘Duality is part of the horror of dream. And nightmare has a flavor.’ (Paraphrased)

“Blah.”

“Bleh.”

It dawns on Dagmar to take this negative response a step further; she insists that Kyle Damien explore the taste of this repulsive flavor further and deeper. Try it again, she suggests after having him wash it down with his favorite drink (cucumber water), hoping this approach will lead to a watered down version of the taste – less dominating and even verging on appealing.

(Kyle gulps the water down.)

“Now?”

“I don’t know yet.”

This last dream was a nightmare of an axe murderer chasing his pet dog down into the bushes, before whacking it into a million different pieces.

A few nights later Kyle Damien dreams about a woodsman discovering a dead deer on the highway and cutting it into several pieces to feed his family. His nightmare has indeed turned into a more friendly, helpful dream.

Now at this juncture, it may appear that Dagmar’s efforts at curing Kyle Damien of his nightmares are off the beaten path, if not in defiance of his parents’ original wishes. Remember that they implied the need for a squelching of nightmares, not a befriending. They wanted Dagmar to read and explore literature with their son in order to heal him and help turn him into someone more socially acceptable. It could even be argued that he has become more or less an experiment in psychology rather than a patient to be cured. Shouldn’t she be exposing him to the true character of Borges himself – both his private and public persona, overall likeable – rather than to his nearly blasphemous interpretation

of dreams? Whatever the case, the results of her tutorship have turned out to be quite impressive.

Treating each nightmare as a flavor has turned into a kind of game. She has given Kyle Damien the freedom to taste a variety of nightmare flavors as he would various flavors of food, and the end result has been – equivalent to giving even the most repulsive of tastes a chance – the exploration of nightmares as approachable as dreams. In turn, releasing him from the fear of nightmares results in the promotion of selves that are not to be feared.

Kyle Damien's parents are beginning to notice minor changes. Kyle Damien still wakes up sometimes sweating in the middle of the night, but not screaming. At school, he throws fewer tantrums and doesn't hide under tables as often. He draws more than goblins and monsters and the stuff of horror. When he does, they are far more nuanced.

LETTER OF RESIGNATION

Stark Elementary School

P.O. Box 063112

To Whom It May Concern,

I hereby resign my position as elementary school teacher at Stark Elementary School effective at the end of the current fiscal year.

There are two main reasons for this decision. One – I can no longer continue supporting a system that is designed to suppress the thriving of dream. Two – I have discovered that my strengths will best serve the children (whom I so love) elsewhere. Allow me to elaborate. Although members of the Administration will most likely argue the contrary, Stark Elementary School does indeed participate in the overarching design

of the public school system to suppress the dream. As we are all well aware, dreams are born every day. Unfortunately, the system takes over in the early life stages and seeks to stunt the growth of the dream in hopes of keeping it, for as long as possible, under lock and key. In fact, the force of such suppression only strengthens the resolve of the dream to dominate the waking day – often with a vengeance. An example of this is the case of Kyle Damien, who since his very early years has been labeled a deviant. The administration of this school overstepped my authority and removed him from my class and placed – *no, incarcerated him* – in the infamous Room, where all forms of manipulation and intimidation are used to suppress the children and their dreams. You may wonder how I am aware of this to the level that I am. This leads me to my second reason for resigning.

I have been serving as Kyle Damien’s private tutor for some time now and have discovered not only his remarkable intellect and abilities, but that the unnecessary squelching, squashing, whatever you want to call it of his dreams (most notably in the Room) has been a key cause of his so-called aberrant behavior. You see, in working closely with Kyle Damien, I have discovered him to be a fine case study of what can happen when children are kept from exploring their **multiplicity**. I have spoken of this issue at great length with Principal Duffy, who agrees that individuals should explore their many selves, just not the children. Why not? I find no valid reason for children not to. After working with Kyle Damien in facing the fear of his dreams, we have together turned them into something – rather than feared – to be explored and nurtured. Granted, you may argue that Kyle Damien’s **core self** has always been trouble – his inappropriate outbursts and tantrums. Perhaps. We do not and cannot ever know all of the elements that

have influenced who he is. But who's to say what is truly normal and what's not? Maybe Kyle Damien has such an advanced intellect (for this he's never been tested) so that the level of schooling forced upon him by no means meets his needs. And so out of frustration, he acts out in this way. But let's not get sidetracked here by issues having to do with psychology. My point is, I am discovering the marvelous other selves that Kyle has within him and up to this point in time have not been encouraged to manifest. They've only needed a bit of nurturing and attention. Allow me to use one more example to help illustrate what I'm saying. I have a friend (who at this time will remain anonymous). Let it be enough to say that he appears to be an adult version of Kyle Damien. Sadly, his hypersensitive self has been so repressed since childhood from discovering his other friends/selves to the point that as an adult he is displaying signs of neurosis. Most of us are neurotic to some extent, yes. But this individual seems at the point where he can hardly function at all with his **multiplicity**. He is doing everything he can to remember all of his dreams (which we know is quite impossible) so that he can just be his **core self** every day and always. He's causing not only misery for himself but for a very close friend of mine who deeply cares for him. I believe that if children were allowed freedom to explore their **multiplicity** from the very beginning, psychological issues like that of my friend and of Kyle Damien would not even be an issue.

Please don't misunderstand me. I am grateful for all these years I've been privileged to teach at Stark Elementary. While here, I've made friends and have learned much about myself as a teacher and person. I will always be grateful for this opportunity to work with children of various backgrounds. If in the future you feel the need for more advanced educational resources, please don't hesitate to contact me. In the meantime, I

am exploring self-employment in the role of private tutor. I am also considering doing further independent psychological studies in the field of dreams.

And so let this brief letter serve as my formal resignation.

As Ever,

Ms. Dagmar

DREAM LOG

Somehow experimenting with different sleeping positions seems to improve dream recall. The more comfortable a dream is made to feel, the more likely it will reveal itself, confess its deepest secrets without any need for prodding. I changed positions in the middle of the night, to one more comfortable for me and for the dream – arms wrapped around knees. It worked! I woke up remembering the dream! I won't bother logging the dream down here. The remembered dreams go in Dream Journal. Sorry Dream Log.

*

I changed positions again last night. This time, I added another technique – holding still when waking up. (Samantha, this is for you). The theory is that moving too quickly or changing positions is like slapping the dream hard in the face, waking it up. You don't want to snap it out of its hypnotic state. So I stayed still, opened my eyes, and allowed the dream to drift into wakeful memory.

*

I repeated aloud: "I shall remember my dream. I shall remember my dream," before falling asleep. I guess this was just wishful thinking.

*

Followed the next dream by the tail into the deep night and it transformed into a lucid dream. “Pay attention – I will remember you!” I told it with a voice so real I could feel it in my chest. And I did.

*

Soon I’ll be able to call you again, Samantha. Let’s forget this ever happened. Wait. I haven’t told you what happened. You don’t need to know. You would say it’s fine, that it doesn’t bother you. But frankly, it bothers me. I shouldn’t, but I feel guilty. I’m ashamed to admit it, but I’m beginning to have random crying spells like you. You already have enough to deal with, so I won’t bother you with my childish issues. Besides, this log is for me, not you.

*

I’m getting good at recognizing the dream as a dream – true lucid-dreaming – so that last night’s dream-delusion screeched to a halt like the sudden freezing of a movie frame. Keep that reel going! I shouted, which made the already dissolving dream even more transparent to me and to itself. The result? With nothing left to dream, there’s nothing left to remember. What does this mean? Is there still a part of this dream that will turn into me today? Or with nothing really to remember, do I then have nothing to worry about?

*

I have an idea. I want to try and stand on the sidelines, merely as a neutral observer of the dream without seeking to control or command it in any way. Can you do that Julian? Sure you can! Use your lucid-dreaming power to watch for signs, for clues of what the dream will incarnate in the waking day, so that even if you should forget it, on some subconscious level you may recognize the self that is attempting to take charge for the

day, outwit it at its own game, tear off the masterful mask and conquer and overcome its audaciousness!

*

After crossing myself in front of the statue of Christ, I felt the urge to urinate and so walked quietly to the men's room. I urinated in the stall, and then took out a black permanent marker from my suit jacket pocket. I drew a demon with horns on the door and then ex-ed it out. I hummed a little tune. The hum was so loud, it could be heard by the other person in the bathroom. Someone's in a good mood, the voice said. I feel strange, I answered, as I drew another demon and crossed it out. I normally don't hum in public, I added, as I listened to the other tinkle. But today I feel so alive!

Wait a minute! You're only a dream! I shouted at the dream – or was it me? I shouted at me, I mean. It – I was only a dream – and yet I recognized. When? Where? Something like this happened before and now it's happening again, and so I know this me – overenthusiastic, me on speed! No effort to remember this dream because as you can see, I've awoken remembering it just so, even the parts I addressed openly. Something, some time ago. Which is which? I wish I had thought of telling the dream (or me) in the face, “I know what you're up to, but the waking world is mine and yours is the world of sleep!” But so caught up in this ecstatic feeling was I that nothing else mattered. Now that I'm awake remembering this dream and so have an idea (or do I?) of what I will *not* be today for the rest of the day – but wait! I felt elated while demolishing demons, but does that mean that my dream self (if I were my dream self today) would feel the same way? Would my dream-self have the courage to hum in public? Oh my head!

I will be my **core self** today, for the rest of the day. Just what I've wanted all this time.

Yet why is it I feel so unsatisfied?

A VARIATION ON THE SHOE

Dear Julian,

This is Dagmar. I know we don't know each other very well, only through our connection to Samantha, but that's why I write to you. This letter is about Samantha, who speaks of you often (mostly fondly). Sorry for being so candid, but I believe that people no longer reach out like they used to, and I want to change that, starting with me.

Allow me to get to the point.

Samantha misses you. You may wonder why she hasn't called or texted you. I think you know why. She's feeling vulnerable and sensitive, and doesn't want to be a bother to anyone. To get even more to the point – it's quite insensitive that you've disappeared for all this time without contacting her. Forgive me for being so bold, but I believe you have crossed the line from your pursuit of an authentic self to an imposition of oneself. I assume, of course, that you must understand the difference I am referring to. Samantha has come to me in confidentiality, but as her closest friend, I feel I must now speak for her (since she won't do so herself).

With reference to seeking an authentic self (whatever that really means), I speak from experience – believe me. Further, when it comes to dreams, I too am hypersensitive. I used to think of this as a strength, but now, I see it more as the power to create collateral damage for ourselves and those we care about. Let me re-phrase that: it depends on what about dreams you are hypersensitive about. But I've gotten off track. Back to Samantha.

From knowing her on an intimate level, I can say she has come a long way, from cowering in the face of her anxieties to making friends with her – what do people nowadays call it? – inner demons. And so should you.

You may ask, who am I to take it upon myself to address you in this overly familiar manner? I don't mean to offend – we are acquainted with each other only distantly, from a slight remove. But again, this letter is about Samantha, and our mutual concern for her. I'm certain that you care for her very much, from what Samantha tells me. If you are willing, I think you know what you need to do. Please make the needed adjustments for our dear Samantha. This is all I can think of to say for now. More soon.

Yours in Kindred Spirit,

Dagmar

P.S. Sorry to leave you hanging like this. I haven't figured out exactly what I think should be your next move. Even if I had, it all comes down to who you really are and what you want to do. I have quite a bit on my own plate right now. I'm sure you'll figure it out. Just know that Samantha really misses you.

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Julian's father is dead. But from time to time his father creeps up in the form of dream:

Father cradles grandma in his arms and tells her a story. He tells her a story from memory. She is shrunken, wrinkled, hair all white. I look at her and realize she will die soon. I look at Father and realize he is old too – not shrunken or wrinkled – but old. I begin to cry because I can imagine grandma dying, but I can't imagine father. Not yet. He is larger than life. Don't die. Don't die.

Julian wakes now, stretches and yawns. The dream is slow of decision today. It is a dream like no other he's had in recent memory – not lucid, nor entirely remembered or forgotten.

He gets out of bed and feeds Goldfish. He drinks a tall glass of milk for breakfast, and decides to read the Times on his computer, which is routinely delivered to his inbox at midnight. The article he reads comes under the heading, "On this Day." Julian scratches his head as he reads the words "drew out an old pistol from his drawer." He stops reading and rather than getting into the shower, goes into his walk-in closet. Draped with the tail ends of pants and coats is a heavy trunk.

In the trunk are old and stowed away things, including clothing that had belonged to his father. Julian pulls the trunk out from the closet, wipes off the dust with his hand and unlocks it. He removes the rubber band binding the old postcards that have been neatly stacked on top. Some postcards have no writing, souvenirs. Those with writing are labeled with names he doesn't recognize. Setting the postcards on the floor, he reaches for a shoehorn stuffed inside an old pair of penny loafers that belonged to his father. He uses the shoehorn to guide his right foot into one of the shoes. It fits loose. He slides his left foot into the other shoe without the shoehorn, and clumps around his bedroom. He moves into the hallway to examine how the shoes look in the full-length mirror. He goes back to his bedroom, slips the shoes off and tries on a pair of khaki pants. He puts the shoes back on, and returns to the mirror, observing the way the pants – like the shoes – fit a little too loosely. He is a tall man, but his father was even taller. The shoes and pants make him feel small. He imagines his father in place of himself, wagging a finger disapprovingly.

As he goes through the rest of the trunk, he notices that there are none of his father's notebooks, the ones that clasped with a strap. Julian removes everything from the trunk to make sure he hasn't missed anything. When he finds none of those notebooks, he reaches for the Velcro shoe lying by his bed. He pulls the strap. He sets the strap in place and pulls again. What had father written in those notebooks? Family memories maybe, like eating at McDonald's right after Sunday church, letting Julian play with the old Ronald McDonald plush doll for five minutes and then tossing the doll in the back of the truck. What happened to Ronald?

Julian can't picture his father writing anything of real significance. Father was a man of the spoken word, not the written. Sometimes he was a man of long silences and many moods. Sometimes he would throw little Julian in the air and catch him, all the while laughing hysterically. Julian trusted that he wouldn't drop him. And he never did. Julian would sneak onto his father's lap when he was very little and before he could see anything in the notebook, his father would place him back down on the floor. He kept the notebooks locked in his desk drawer. Maybe he drew pictures in those notebooks instead, containing some secret, hidden talent he kept all to himself. Those notebooks probably old and withered by now, or buried in someone else's junkyard or old garage²⁵.

Julian gets into the shower. While lathering, he begins to remember portions of last night's dream like the sudden flashes of a camera rather than the playing back of a film: Father's lips move. Grandma's baby doll head. Dentures slip out. Whose? Father's

²⁵ Julian's obsession with Velcro is significant in understanding the development of both the **core self** and **dream selves**. His obsession apparently stems from memories of his Father's Velcro notebooks, memories voluntary and involuntary. These memories continue to influence his **core self**, someone who desperately longs for his Father's attention. **Dreams selves**, on the other hand, can only be manifestations of involuntary memories that arise in dreams, or distortions of memories and real events. Therefore, dreams produce selves that are often contorted versions of the **core self**.

or Grandma's? Father cradles grandma like a baby doll. Why don't you tell me one of your stories too, Father?

Irritated at the slowness of the dream coming to remembrance, Julian decides to fit back into the khaki pants and penny loafers. The loafers remind him of Velcro shoes, which do not require shoelaces or the ability to tie them. He sports his father's clothing around the house and then has himself a second breakfast. He then takes his daily walk.

After having difficulty walking for half an hour, he decides to go for a foot massage. The masseuse notices that his shoes are too big as she takes them off his feet, and doesn't hold back from advising him not to harm them this way. "You might think it's only bad to wear shoes too tight. Shoes too big are also bad for your feet." Julian listens and nods in agreement. Time for yet another visit with his friend Sam the shoe salesman.

"So what's with the penny loafers?"

Julian admires the rack of new walking shoes, in various styles, and then stares at his penny loafer feet.

"What do you think it really means to go off the deep end?"

"Julian. You didn't answer my question."

"I don't take risks, Sam. I mean, more often than not, I choose to walk in the same pair of shoes."

"That's not true. After all, if I recall right, the last pair you bought had shoelaces. And look at what you're wearing today," Sam adds with a grin.

"I don't mean literally."

Julian breaks into a sweat. He thinks of water – ocean water. And Marsha. The

kiss. It was only just a kiss. And yet...

“Do you think I’m a good person?” he asks Sam.

“What? Of course I do. You come in. You buy my shoes. You do more than that. You buy shoes and you stay a little longer to visit with me.”

“Do I seem different than the last time I saw you?”

“Different? You mean besides your shoes? Well, yes. I guess. What about me? Am I different?”

Julian has to stop and think long and hard. He hadn’t thought of Sam as anyone besides the nice shoe salesman who treats him so nicely. Sam, the pleasant shoe salesman. How was it Sam seemed so even-keeled all the time? But then again, he saw Sam very infrequently.

“You’re Sam.”

“Good. So what else is new?”

“Tell me something Sam. I’m really sorry to bother you. But considering you know all about shoes and feet, your shoe size, can it change even after you’ve an adult?”

“No, unless you’re old. Old people shrink. You know, that’s what old people do.”

“Good. Good to know I mean. Thanks Sam.”

This time, Julian requests the pair of shoes with both straps and laces in his size²⁶.

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It belongs at the end. Julian slips Dagmar’s letter into his Dream Log.

²⁶ Today’s slowly developing self is proving to be somewhat mischievous in choosing to depart even further from Julian’s normal choice of shoe.

Samantha. To be with her just as himself at the core, the one who loves her like no other.

He doesn't need to look yet again in the mirror. He knows who he is. I am Julian, he whispers to himself. Always have been. Little, big for his age, Julian, sign the cross, shining his shoes Julian. Julian – lover of Samantha no matter what. Julian. He takes a deep breath and before all of him gets trapped again, he calls her. He doesn't speak.

“Julian?”

He holds his breath.

“Julian, this is you isn't it? I can hear you breathing.”

“No you can't, I wasn't breathing. I mean, yes, this is Julian.”

“Where have you been?”

Good question. Where have I been? All this time trying so hard to be me, I've failed to hold you, to dab dry your eyes and toss the handkerchiefs in the wash for you.

“I'm sorry Samantha. I needed a vacation. I haven't been feeling myself. Well, that's not really true. I guess I have been myself for the most part. But truthfully, that's the most disappointing part.”

“What do I say to that Julian? I don't know anymore. I'm tired.”

“Do you remember your dream from last night?”

“No Julian, I don't. Let it go. Let go of the dream. If this is going to work, let it go. Please.”

“Can I come over now?”

They stay in for the evening and watch Chaplin movies. They watch and listen to the background music. They crunch on popcorn and cookies and sit a pillow apart.

Samantha anticipates Julian wrapping his arms around her, especially after not having seen each other for a long time, or moving his hand to stroke her leg. Fixated on Chaplin's silent gestures, he doesn't take notice of Samantha scooting closer to him, nudging her knee ever so slightly against his.

City Lights is over, and they get ready for bed. She gives him a long moist kiss on his cheek. They lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling. He turns his face toward her, pulling her body over his. When their lovemaking is over, they hold each other. He kisses her forehead. Now it's more silent than the silent films. Still, there's a kind of hum in the air, barely perceptible, as if either or both of them speak under their breath. And yet, no one is speaking. He slips out of bed.

"Where are you going?" She asks sleepily even though she senses that he'll be back.

"I can't sleep with you next to me – not tonight," he says gently. "I could really use a good night's sleep. So can you."

When she hears the front door close she still thinks of Julian – that something about him that she already misses.

He lays swaddled in the sheets of his own bed. He misses her too. Her body lying next to his, her hair nestled next to his cheek – even if it makes him itch. He's grown accustomed to her. All of him.

Looking for Kitty. It's raining heavily outside, but I must find her. Two cats crouch under the tree for shelter, but neither of them are Kitty. A puppy runs and it is white with gray patches, like Kitty, but it is not Kitty. There's mud everywhere, on my feet, on my clothes. I hear a bark, heavy and deep. It's coming from the direction of the thicket. One

of the bushes moves toward me. With purpose. The bush snarls, displaying sharp teeth. It is some kind of dog beast, a breed not known to me. It moves slowly, flat to the ground predatorily. Maybe it ate Kitty, and in the core of its tangles I'll find her. Give her back to me! I want Kitty!

Back inside the house, I search for Kitty. I tell father she is missing and it must be my fault because I didn't pay attention to her for days. I don't know why. He says nothing.

I search alone. I go into the garage where she often plays and hear a meow that sounds like her meow. A cat comes bounding from behind the washing machine. It is orange and striped. It halts right in front of me and keeps on meowing sweetly and softly. I miss Kitty with her sweet, soft meows and her fluffy white fur with patches, her blue eyes. She's the only cat for me.

Now there are pets of all kinds everywhere. I go into the kitchen and a white cat with black spots jumps out at me. Another puppy runs across the kitchen like the one in the backyard. I think it's the same dog. They are all pets, but not Kitty.

When Julian wakes up, it is already early afternoon. For the rest of the day, he remembers this dream only partially²⁷. He has the urge to share this dream with someone, but decides against it as it comes only in fragmented thoughts and impressions.

A grown man and yet I still fear the rain. The way it sometimes surprises you.

Comes down slanted, or all at once as from a bucket and blinds you.

Must have had a kitten when I was very little – but I don't remember it.

Don't get a pet that you'll fall in love with.

²⁷ Yes, some dreams are hybrid – partially remembered and partially forgotten. Julian had been so obsessed with remembering all of his dreams that he hadn't even wondered about the **hybrid dreams** – the hesitant ones.

Too many choices are frustrating.

Father's face makes me feel silly.

Mud makes me feel dirty.

And guilty.

Samantha – so many things to tell you.

Julian puts on his newest pair of shoes with both straps and shoelaces. He exchanges the dark brown laces for the light brown that came with the shoes. Goldfish is blowing bubbles. Goldfish is bored. Only the lonely blow bubbles. Julian remembers blowing bubbles with his bubblegum alone in the front yard. Blowing bubbles alone in the backyard. Goldfish needs a companion.

He heads over to Samantha's. He pauses in her driveway. What she will be like today? Will she forgive me? Will she slam the door on me because I left her during the night? Or will she have put this behind her and give in to possibility?

When Samantha opens the door, Julian observes that endearing twitch under her left eye. It's her. It's Samantha.

"Will you help me find a goldfish for Goldfish?"

She doesn't answer right away. When she does, she says, "Maybe. I guess. Only if you'll you take me to the antique shop afterwards. Oh wait. Never mind. That's not your thing."

Tightening the straps of his shoes and then rising to kiss her, Julian says, "You don't know me. Not really."

"Well go ahead then," she says. "Surprise me."

AFTERWORD

*Extended Definition of **Dream Suppression***

In The Room at Stark Elementary School, the Instructors have been trained to suppress dreams in a number of ways. They are ignorant (willingly or not – it isn't clear) of the fact that *stimulating* dreams rather than dream remembrance would better serve their interests in disciplining poorly behaved children (detailed thoroughly in the section *Dagmar Promotes Dreams*). They subscribe to the notion that deviant children are deviant in their core and that nothing can really be done to change this. Further, they conclude that all manifestations of these children are fated to be aberrant in some fashion by association. In other words, they are deviant through and through. The first line of attack then is the enforced early morning nap. As soon as the students wake up, they are told to draw exactly what they dreamed rather than creating their own art from pure imagination. The purpose of course is to encourage remembrance of their dreams as often as possible so that they will be only their core selves for the rest of the school day (better to deal with the expected, they reason, rather than with the 'frightening' unknown). If a child's behavior becomes radically more aberrant than normal, they are sent to Time-Out and are not allowed to speak for the rest of the day (thereby avoiding any kind of dealings with dream, period). Another tactic is sleep deprivation. This is the latest experimentation in disciplinary measures and also the cruelest (this had been used on Kyle Damien). One

or two days of the week, these children will be deprived of any kind of sleep (naps) – no sleep, no dreams. In extreme cases, the school psychologist will meet with the child’s parents and recommend a prescription of medicine that prevents any kind of sleep (the encouragement offered is “one can sleep all one wants when one is dead”). This is obviously a dangerous experiment and thus can only be attempted for brief stretches, say one or two weeks at a time.

Shared Dream

Julian shares a remembered dream with Samantha: *He’s driving down a street. It is his street. He spots a dead dog up the road. As he drives by very slowly, he sees only a torso. The dog has no legs. How did you get here doggie-do? He gets out of the car and searches for the lost legs on the street. No sign of any. Just the torso of the dog lies there flat on the concrete.*

Samantha gasps. She can hardly speak. Finally, she tells Julian her dream from the previous night: I dreamed of a shovel – all by itself, with no human hands – scooping up road kill off the street. It scooped up what was left of a puppy dog before it got washed down the drain.

Julian and Samantha decide to do something with their spare time. They volunteer with the local Animal Control to pick up dead animals²⁸.

Dagmar Promotes Dreams

After Dagmar’s important discovery of **Dream Flavors** in her work with Kyle Damien, she moves on to further important discoveries in child dream development.

²⁸ Whether Julian or Samantha are conscious of it or not, it is apparent from this shared dream experience that one can take willful action with remembered dreams, even though these dreams leave one be. Julian and Samantha have given this remembered dream meaning beyond symbolization or ideology.

Rather than focusing on helping children remember the dreams they already have, she has implemented a way to stimulate dreams for possible variations in personality. For example, she will ask the child, what would you like to dream about tonight? Draw it. If the child is not apt to drawing, sing it. Play it on the piano, on the keyboard, even the trumpet. She asks the child to repeat the chosen dream-stimulation activity (sometimes in variations) several times during the day until it is so firmly imbedded it is certain to evoke the wished dream in some form or another (certainly we've all experienced the validity behind this kind of experiment – what you think about most during the day often comes out in your dreams and vice-versa). Further, she has taken her Me-Tag activity from her time at Stark Elementary and tailored it to the need of each child that comes under her tutelage. She asks the child what he or she feels like today – create a Me-Tag made out of whatever material available to represent that feeling. She refrains from the conventional classroom set-up (for their sake as well as hers – she wants no stimulation of memories with the Institution) when tutoring more than one child at a time. She has filled her private office with beanbags and mats for pleasant afternoon naps.

Dagmar's Adventures after Resignation

With extra time on her hands, Dagmar finds herself pondering dream matters whether at home, at the coffee shop, or during those long commercials prior to a movie in the theater. Recently, she thought about this fact: Most people who sleep straight through the night, have more than one dream – four, maybe even five – per night, and will only remember the last dream they had upon waking. This is because the other dreams occurred too far back. This phenomenon got Dagmar to probe deeper into what happens to latent dreams. During her musings, she stumbled upon this paradox – at once mind-

boggling but also very likely: The dreams prior to the most recent one are buried so deep underneath the most recent that they can never be raised to the surface. This means that they are victims of a double conundrum: 1 – They can never gain the satisfaction of being remembered, and thus gain some recognition. 2 – They can never make it to the surface to get the chance (as the most recent dream does) at instantly being forgotten, and thus at incarnating in the waking day. Neither remembered nor forgotten. In essence, they make up undiscoverable selves. Being dreams as much as the most recent dream, shouldn't they at the very least, get an equal shot at the light of day?

Dagmar questioned what other dream selves may be hidden and buried, what selves she and others were being denied. She wondered if these hidden dreams do in fact, when they get the chance, grab onto the shirttails of the lucky one and incarnate along with it somehow.

At first, she thought of ways to pull them to the surface, push them forward to the front of the line – equal opportunity dreams. But these efforts seemed too abstract: How best to coax latent dreams? She refused to lose any sleep. Besides, waking up in the middle of the night worrying about it would only serve to lessen the number of possible dreams. And then she remembered something Borges had theorized: *dreams are multiple and simultaneous*. The 'multiple' part was a given. But simultaneous! It doesn't matter how many dreams one has during slumber – the one remembered or forgotten upon waking...is all of them! All in one. One in all.

Final Endnote: Dagmar awakes. Something happened. She feels this. No images remain, only a sense of something real. What is this dream? She asks. She has all of the waking day to find out

LEXICON

doesn't remember this dream = **Dream Empty**

When a dream is not remembered, it must find release and resolution somehow = **Dream**

Incarnation

Perhaps it was a combination of both = **Dream Fornication**

Multiplicity = **Multiplicity**

dream produce its own meaning and reality = **Dream Reality**

Core Self = primary self among a **Multiplicity**

Dream Selves = selves produced by dreams

dream journal/ready to write down any fragment of memory = **Dream Watcher**

We are not born complete = **Infinite Being**

the richer, more compelling, or just plain odd dreams = **Dream Anomalies**

primary self with established tastes = **Core Self**

tend to accommodate and acclimate = **Dream Acclimation**

Just in case you can't handle another day of yourself = **Core-Self-Loathing**

after-dream = **Dream Side-Effects**

suppress those various parts of myself that are only trying to help me = **Dream**

Suppression (for a further definition and other examples, see the *Extended Definition of Dream Suppression* in the Afterword)

switch is in the hands of the dream = **Dream Switch**

it is not impossible for all of the waking life to be a dream = **Dream Reality**

the impression produced by the dreams = **Dream Flavor**

remembers this dream only partially = **Hybrid Dreams**

