CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

BLACK HOLE AND OTHER PHENOMENA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English

By

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ABSTRACT
BLACK HOLE AND OTHER PHENOMENA
By
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“Back Hole and Other Phenomena” is a collection of seven short stories all of which deal with, in some manner, an individual whose world undergoes a sudden shift as a result of an extraordinary encounter. Of course, it’s not that the character’s world actually changes; rather, their brush (or perhaps collision) with the fantastic reveals what has been there all along: an utterly bizarre reality camouflaged in familiarity. All of these stories employ techniques designed to contrast the absurd and the mundane, such as the intrusion of the fantastic into a concrete world, a reserved, ironic narration, and a certain humor. After all, what better way to show how strange our world is than to reveal how even the most serious things can become funny with a slight change in perspective. It is my hope that this collection of stories can become a fantastic element itself, one that invites readers to turn a critical gaze upon their own world and reevaluate the practices and traditions we so often take for granted.
Smith

Around midday on Friday, while on his way down to the lobby to pick up his mail, Smith notices an angel floating facedown in the apartment complex swimming pool. Since Smith is an atheist, he pretends not to see it and continues on to collect his mail from box 205. There’s only a single letter waiting for him and it’s a junk offer from a mail order steak company, which is especially pointless as Smith doesn’t care for red meat. Mostly he eats chicken as it’s pretty versatile. Some of Smith’s favorite dishes include chicken curry, chicken tacos, and chicken alfredo (with mustard seeds in the sauce to give it a little extra flavor).

After checking his mail, Smith returns to his room to resume work on his current project. At the moment, he is constructing a one-to-one scale replica of a telephone booth out of wooden toothpicks. He’s not doing it for any special reason; it just seems like a decent way to pass the time when he isn’t working. The booth is tall, almost up to the ceiling, and occupies the center of Smith’s apartment. Three of its sides are already finished, but, so far, it lacks a door, allowing anyone to walk right into it without restriction. Over the last few months, the booth has come to dominate more and more of Smith’s life. For instance, he keeps his hair short after getting glue in it one time and only wears old clothes so that he’s always ready to work on the booth whenever the mood strikes him.

Now that the phone booth is almost finished, Smith is starting to wonder what he should do with it. He lives in a small studio apartment and it takes up far too much room. On the other hand, considering the fortune he spent on toothpicks, getting rid of it seems like a waste. He’s putting the final touches on the change return slot and considering
whether he could convince an art museum to take it off his hands when the phone rings. This strikes him as odd since it’s made of wood and not even connected to a phone line, but he picks up the receiver because that’s what one does when a phone rings.

“Hello?” he says, pausing before adding, “Who is it?”

The voice that responds is clear and loud, with an accent that sounds familiar, though Smith can’t quite place it.

“Hello, Smith. This is the angel floating in the pool downstairs. You saw me earlier. If it is not too much trouble, could you please lend me a hand in getting out?”

“Sure thing,” Smith replies, not because he cares about the angel now, but rather that ignoring a direct request would be rude.

Smith replaces the receiver back on the hook, carefully so he doesn’t break anything, leaves his room, and goes downstairs to the pool. The angel is still in the same facedown position as before, with its white robe swirling like a cloud in the water around it. With its drooping wings, it looks like a dead bird. Once, when he was a child, Smith found a bird that had drowned in his dog’s water bowl. As best as he could tell, the bird had flown into the sliding glass doors at the back of his parents’ house and ricocheted into the bowl, where, with both its wings broken, it had perished. Instructed by his father to dispose of it, Smith had gingerly fished the bird out, using a paper towel so he didn’t have to touch it directly, and then flung it down the dirt bank at the far end of the garden. Unfortunately, the dog, a well-intentioned but not too bright boxer named Rocky, saw this and, thinking it was a game, rushed off to retrieve the bird. Smith had chased Rocky all around the garden, trying to get him to drop the bird that dangled from his jaws by one crooked wing. Eventually, Smith gave up and went inside to play video games until his
father yelled at him for not doing what he had been asked to do.

Since he doesn’t want to get wet, Smith crouches at the side of the pool and grabs the corner of the angel’s robe so he can pull it over. When it’s close enough, Smith lifts the angel out of the water by its shoulders. It's extremely light, like a balloon that threatens to float away into the sky if one relaxes their grip on it for even a second, which makes sense if it is an angel. Smith doesn’t believe in angels though. He sets it down on the ground and, almost immediately, its eyes open and it sits up.

“Thank you for the help. I had faith you would come for me,” it says, sounding genuinely thankful and making eye contact with Smith.

It’s an awkward moment, considering he ignored the angel before, so Smith looks away without saying anything. He finds it difficult to know how to react due to his inability to identify the angel’s sex. Its face is charmingly prepubescent, though it looks almost as tall as Smith himself, and the flowing robe conceals any other physical identifiers. Its voice is melodic and perhaps slightly high pitched, but not enough to make a definitive conclusion.

“Would you mind terribly if I came back to your place to dry off? I am afraid I really cannot go anywhere in this state,” the angel continues, showing no sign of being aware of Smith’s discomfort.

“That’s fine,” says Smith.

He leads the drenched angel up to his room and shows it to the tiny bathroom. Smith provides the angel with a spare towel and is about to leave it and go back to work on the phone booth when the angel realizes it has misplaced its halo. It asks Smith if he could possibly go back down to the pool and see if it’s there. Smith sighs in slight
annoyance, but not loud enough for the angel to hear, and goes downstairs. He checks all around the pool area, including under all the chairs and inside the barbecue placed in the corner, but can’t find it anywhere. He’s about to give up when he spots the halo resting on the bottom of the pool. Typical, he thinks to himself, now he has to get wet after all. There’s no other way of reaching it and so Smith strips down to his underwear and jumps in. Before he started building the phone booth, Smith was a regular swimmer, spending most of his weekday nights swimming lengths down at the YMCA. Despite having a pool right outside his door, Smith preferred to go to the YMCA as it was bigger and organized so the casuals could splash around in their own section without interrupting the serious swimmers.

Though he hasn’t been in the water for months, the short dive down to retrieve the halo is no trouble at all. With the halo in one hand and his dry clothes in the other, Smith returns to his room to find the angel naked and busy examining the phone booth. It turns around on hearing Smith enter. Smith is unable to stop his eyes from glancing downwards to check the angel’s genitalia, expecting some clue as to its sex, but he is unable to make out anything recognizable. As best as he can tell, the angel’s apparatus is comprised of a series of small holes with the heads of several wavy strands sticking out, like a wiffle ball filled with spaghetti.

“Don’t worry about it,” the angel says, noticing Smith’s gaze.

Smith, embarrassed at being caught staring, wordlessly hands over the halo and slinks off to the kitchen area to make some coffee for his guest. He fills a small metal kettle with water and sets it on the stove to boil. In the meantime, the angel has returned to studying the phone booth, with its halo tucked under one arm. It runs a hand around
the outside of the booth before stepping inside it and prodding the keys on the number
pad as if it were trying to call someone.

While the angel is distracted, Smith goes into the bathroom to grab a towel to dry
himself off. The angel’s wings and robe are draped over the curtain rail that runs above
the bath tub. Smith can’t resist checking the status of the toilet seat, but not only is it
down, the lid is too, which tells him nothing. As Smith doesn’t recall ever putting the lid
down, he can only assume the angel did it purposely to confound him and this thought
annoys him. The kettle starts to whistle, distracting Smith from his observations. He turns
the stove off and pours the water into two identical black mugs before adding a couple of
spoonfuls of instant coffee.

“Do you want cream and sugar?” he calls out.

“I am a vegan, so soy milk if it is available, please,” the angel calls back from
inside the booth. “No sugar, thank you.”

As it happens, Smith does have soy milk. Several years ago, a then coworker of
Smith’s advised him to avoid dairy products when attempting to get over a cold. The
explanation involved something about mucus buildup, which wasn’t especially
convincing, but Smith remembered it the next time he got sick. Afterward, he simply fell
into the habit of buying soy over regular milk, although any potential health benefits are
no doubt negated by the large amount of cheese he consumes on a daily basis.

Smith pours soy milk into both mugs, adding a pinch of sugar to his, and gives
them a quick stir using a stray toothpick that’s lying about. He carries them over to the
angel, who steps out of the booth to take a cup from Smith’s hand. It takes a sip.
“Yes, this is good,” it says, nodding its head in satisfaction.

The two of them slowly drink their coffee in silence, Smith in his underwear, the angel naked. Smith tries to think of explanations for how the angel ended up in the swimming pool. Though not obvious from his quiet personality, Smith is quite an imaginative person. Consequently, he is able to come up with ten different theories regarding the angel’s presence, although, on reflection, seven of them are obviously implausible. There’s no real point to this mental exercise, other than to distract Smith from the angel’s spaghetti-like genitalia, which he can’t resist sneaking further glances at. The strands seem to be waving back and forth from within their small holes, swaying hypnotically to an unheard rhythm.

“You are most likely wondering by what circumstances I came to be floating in the pool,” the angel’s voice interrupts Smith’s thoughts.

Smith shrugs noncommittally.

“It was a test,” the angel announces, “to discover what kind of person you are.”

“Ah,” says Smith, “I suppose I failed your test then, since I passed you by earlier without helping.”

The angel chuckles, or rather, Smith assumes that’s what it’s attempting to do. What actually happens is that it opens its mouth slightly and emits an eerie humming noise. Outside, several car alarms go off simultaneously.

“You ignore what does not concern you, but help when asked directly. That is a normal response for a human. It was quite reassuring to find out you were not crazy or otherwise ethically impaired, since several of us were worried on account of the phone booth you are constructing,” the angel says.
“By ‘us,’ you’re referring to other angels, right? I should have mentioned this earlier, but I don’t believe in God or any of that stuff. And the booth is just a hobby,” Smith adds the last line out of an unexpected over-protectiveness towards the phone booth.

The angel finishes the last drops of coffee from its mug and cocks its head like an inquisitive dog. Smith can almost picture a dead bird, hanging by one wing from its mouth.

“Please, Smith. You cannot lie to an angel. Do you really expect us to believe that you were not building that phone booth for the sole purpose of contacting God?”

The existence of God is too big a topic to discuss in Smith’s small room and so they decide to go out. As the angel’s wings and robes still aren’t fully dry, Smith lends some of his clothes to the angel. Smith is feeling less than charitable towards the angel at the moment and gives it an old faded T-shirt and a too-big pair of jeans for it to wear. Annoyingly, the jeans fit perfectly, seeming to shrink to the correct size as the angel pulls them up over its spaghetti ball. The old T-shirt ends up looking stylish, the faded print of a long forgotten clothing logo on the front adding a retro charm. Smith is almost certain the shirt had a hole in it too, which must have spontaneously closed up. The angel hangs its halo over its head and pulls a pair of brown sandals out of nowhere to complete its outfit. It’s now better dressed than Smith, who just put on the old clothes he was wearing earlier. He considers changing his outfit, but he doesn’t want the angel to think he cares about looking better than it.
They leave together, Smith locking the door behind them, and go downstairs, passing the swimming pool as they exit onto the street. It’s mid-afternoon, pleasantly warm with an orange tinge to the light. The angel doesn’t know the area and it’s left up to Smith to decide their destination. They go to Intergalactic Space Bowl, a nearby bowling alley. It’s loud and packed full of people. Smith doesn’t think they’ll be able to get a lane, but the angel suggests he ask anyway and it turns out a group is just leaving. Down at their lane, Smith goes to enter their names into the computer to track their scores when he realizes he doesn’t know what to call the angel.

“Hey, what’s your name?” he asks as casually as possible.

“You can identify me as ‘Angel,’” it says, shrugging, “My true divine name does not translate properly into your language and, in addition, it is far too long to fit on the scoreboard. The best approximation of it would be something like this.”

There’s a pause in the generic rock soundtrack that serves as background noise as all the speakers emit a piercing feedback squeal, followed by a storm of trumpets and voiceless chanting. Everyone throwing a ball at that moment ends up getting a strike, even the girl in lane six who was facing a 7-10 split. The trumpets trail off and the music picks back up.

“That’s a nice name,” comments Smith with obvious sarcasm, typing “Angel” and “Smith” into the computer so the names show up on the TV screen hanging above their heads.

The angel goes first and throws a perfect strike, which doesn’t surprise Smith at all at this point. Smith takes his turn, but his first ball is too far to the right and ends up in the gutter. His second attempt is still off to the right, but manages to knock down three
pins on the side. The angel doesn’t gloat or give even a hint of a smirk, which aggravates Smith more than simple mockery would.

“What exactly is the issue with my booth? Why would I want to call God? I told you I don’t even believe in Him.”

“I understand your feelings. Speaking from a personal perspective, I don’t believe He exists either,” the angel replies calmly, walking past Smith to pick up a ball.

Smith raises his eyebrows as high as he can in order to give the angel an extremely incredulous look. His expression is unfortunately wasted as the angel has its back to him, but it seems aware of Smith’s reaction anyway.

“Is that so surprising? Did you think that all angels report directly to God? I am sorry to disappoint you, Smith, but no angel currently existing has actually seen God or spoken with him. We are just told that he is busy with an important task over in another universe and left us to watch over things here. You can naturally see why some of us would have doubts,” the angel delivers the news in an indifferent tone before going on to bowl another strike.

Smith has a few dozen questions to ask, with more coming to mind, but the angel preemptively interrupts him.

“We are not here to talk about me though. This is about you, Smith.”

Despite the angel’s words, they don’t talk about anything for the remainder of the game. The angel wins, throwing a perfect game which entitles it to have its picture put up on the Intergalactic Space Bowl Wall of Fame. A twenty-something employee stops them on the way out to take a photo of the angel, but all the images turn out blurred. The angel
tells the guy not to worry about it and they leave him fiddling with the white balance on the camera’s settings.

On their way down the street, they pass a man searching for his lost phone in a children’s playground. The angel tells the man to try looking in the sandbox and, sure enough, the phone emerges after a little digging. The man is overjoyed to find his phone again and thanks the angel profusely while Smith stands off to the side, acutely aware of his uselessness.

After the man leaves, they continue on to Smith’s next selected destination, a small coffee house which goes by the name Cup of Boast. This place is one of Smith’s favorite haunts and he holds the status of being a regular customer, allowing him the privilege of ordering by simply asking for “the usual.” As Smith and the angel enter, he gives the place a quick scan for any of his fellow regulars, but there are only a few college students present. One student, a kid of about eighteen with a pitiful attempt at a goatee on his chin, looks up from a thick chemistry textbook. Smith sees himself reflected in the student’s thick glasses for a second before the boy returns to studying. Turning to the counter, Smith recognizes the boaster (as the baristas who work there are known) on duty and greets him with a nod. The guy is known as “Moby Dick” by the regulars, due to the fact that it was discovered on a past occasion that he had been an English major in college. There was one other reason for the nickname, such as his real name being similar or that he liked whales or something, but Smith can’t recall exactly what it was.

“Hey, Moby. I’ll get my usual, thanks,” Smith says, emphasizing the word “usual” to make his status clear to the handful of students scattered around the various
tables.

“You want anything?” he asks the angel.

“Just some water will be fine,” the angel replies.

“And some water for my… friend,” Smith relays the order, pausing just long enough as he decides how to refer to the angel that it’s clear they aren’t actually friends.

While they wait for Moby to prepare Smith’s usual, which takes a while as it’s a fairly complex drink, the angel decides to pick up their previous discussion.

“Tell me, why are you building the booth?” the angel asks, its eyes focused not on Smith, but on the kid with the chemistry book.

Smith shrugs.

“What else would I do?” he replies.

The angel nods without saying anything further and continues to stare at the boy.

Smith collects his drink from Moby and pays for it, after making his usual joke about putting it on his tab.

“Are you good to go?” he asks the angel.

“Yes, I believe so,” it says.

Smith wants to ask what the angel finds so interesting about the boy, but he figures it’s none of his business. With drinks in hand, they head back to Smith’s room.

The angel seems distracted and doesn’t attempt to speak to Smith on the way.

Smith unlocks the door of his room and enters with the angel following behind. They both stop and look at the phone booth. Then the angel walks past it towards the bathroom.
“Smith, I believe you had no ill intention in creating the booth. However, I am still required to destroy it just to be safe,” the angel says as it disappears into the bathroom, closing the door behind it with a click.

Smith immediately enters the booth and picks up the phone. His hand hovers above the keypad, ready to dial, but he doesn’t know what God’s number would be. 666? No, that’s the devil, he thinks. 777, then? But that’s far too obvious to actually work. 0 for operator? Fitting, but it still doesn’t seem right. Smith decides to use the palm of his hand to press all the keys at once. Holding the receiver to his ear, he hears it ring three times and then a voice speaks.

“The number you have dialed is not available. Please hang up and try again.”

The soothing female voice does nothing to diminish Smith’s disappointment. The angel emerges from the bathroom, clad again in its robe and wings, now dry. It places a hand gently on the side of the phone booth, almost a caress, and it disappears, the receiver vanishing right out of Smith’s hand.

“Farewell,” the angel says as it steps out of Smith’s room into the night.

“Wait,” says Smith.

But the angel is already gone. Smith runs out of his room, frantically trying to catch it before it’s too late. The night is moonless and dark and Smith’s eyes are starting to water from the feeling of having lost something important. With his vision obscured, he takes a wrong turn at the bottom of the stairs and falls into the swimming pool. The water is cold and shocking at first, but after floating there for a few minutes, facedown, it starts to feel pleasant, like resting on a cloud. This must be how the bird felt as it drowned in Rocky’s water bowl, Smith realizes, and he decides it’s not such a bad way to go.
Except, there’s an irritating light shining right in his eyes. He squints through his clouded vision and sees, resting at the bottom of the pool, a halo like the one he retrieved earlier. Smith starts swimming towards the light, down into the cold water. He goes deeper and deeper, until the halo is right before him and he reaches out to grab it. His fingertips brush against the plastic cover of a light set into the base of the pool. The halo, Smith realizes, is no more than a thin ring of light given off by the bulb in the center. The feeling of loss wells up inside of him again. There’s no halo, no phone booth, no angel. All that’s left is a fragile ring of light at the bottom of a pool.

So Smith takes that instead. He wraps his hands around the edges of the light, gently, so that he doesn’t crush it, and carefully starts to turn it like the lid of a jar. It’s stiff at first, having not been moved in a long time, but it becomes easier to turn until it pops free completely. Smith swims back to the surface, clutching the light to his chest, fearing it might disappear into nothingness at any moment.

Smith breaks the surface of the pool and treads water as he catches his breath. Then he kicks his way over to the edge and pulls himself out with one hand, the other still grasping the light. He sits on the side of the pool, not noticing how cold the air is or how his wet clothes cling to his body. He’s too busy thinking of the halo of light in his hands, a light free from any source, a light that could be shaped into anything, like a photo on a bowling alley wall or a reflection in the glasses of a student reading a physics textbook or even a distant person’s voice heard on the telephone. Smith holds the light to his face and slowly presses it against his mouth. It’s warm and soft on his lips and tastes like overcooked spaghetti.
Subject A

There is no reason why I should pay particular attention to any of these people. No matter who they are or what they do, they are all ultimately irrelevant. Take Subject A, for example. There is nothing special about him or his story, and yet, I find myself inexplicably drawn to it. I am compelled to, once again, open the bottom drawer of my desk and pull out that familiar folder at the very front. The file is worn from excessive handling and the nametag is peeling away, though it is forever etched into my mind. Inside the file, the pages are as perfectly crisp and brilliantly white as the first time I saw them. I already know what is written on them, but I can no longer tell whether I am remembering the events as they happened or merely the words of a story I have read too many times. It makes little difference now anyway. I spread the pages out across my desk and begin to read.

Subject A’s Situation

Subject A is not a happy man. He worries about a lot of things and one of those things is money. How, he wonders, will I pay rent this month? Subject A lives in an apartment, though not an especially fancy or expensive one. He could easily pay the rent if he had a job, but Subject A has been unemployed for the last four months and his savings are running low. Subject A checks his bank balance every day, though he knows it will only depress him. A new bill arrives every day. At first, Subject A did not want to open the bills and kept them in a pile on the kitchen counter. He then started to worry about being charged late fees because he missed a due date. Subject A now opens all his bills as soon as they arrive.
In his bedroom closet, Subject A keeps his collection of suits. He calls it a collection, but there are only five of them and none are particularly noteworthy. Subject A is fond of his suits, although he has not been able to buy any recently because they are an unnecessary expense. Late at night, when he cannot sleep, Subject A worries that perhaps he should have saved his money and not bought the suits he has now.

Today, Subject A will be wearing one of his suits to a job interview. It is the third interview he has managed to get since he lost his previous job. Subject A thought he made a favorable impression during his previous interviews, but he never heard from the interviewers afterward and so he assumes he must have done something wrong. Now, he is nervous because he needs this job. More accurately, he needs the money from this job. The position he is interviewing for is nothing special, just the usual sit at a desk and stare at a computer screen sort of thing, and, if he does get the job, Subject A will worry that he is not living up to his potential. But, at the moment, Subject A is only concerned with getting the job. He considers which suit will make the best impression on the interviewers and selects a navy suit with two buttons on the jacket, as it looks smart without being as overly formal as his black one.

Subject A’s Morning Routine

Subject A’s father once warned him about the perils of not taking proper care of himself. The fear of degenerating into a disgusting slob has haunted Subject A ever since and so he maintains a fixed schedule despite being unemployed. He gets up at seven, eight on weekends, and immediately proceeds into the bathroom where he shaves and showers. Afterward, Subject A eats breakfast, which always consists of a bowl of sugarless cereal, two slices of toast, a glass of orange juice, and a multivitamin. He then
returns to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Following that, Subject A selects the clothes he will wear for the day. Though he does like his suits, they are not suitable attire when one is simply sitting at home or going out to the grocery store to buy day-old bread. Subject A usually wears a simple T-shirt and jeans, with a black sweater if it’s chilly.

Once these preliminary steps have been completed, Subject A’s day can truly begin. His usual routine consists of checking the newspaper classified ads for jobs, checking career websites for jobs, and checking with temp agencies for available jobs. This process usually takes from one to two hours. Subject A must then decide how to spend the rest of the day. Sometimes he stays at home and worries that he is wasting his life. Other times, he goes out and worries about spending money when he should be saving it. Last week when he was out, Subject A suffered a pang of guilt after deciding to have a large-sized sandwich instead of the regular-sized one. To make up for spending that extra two dollars, Subject A walked home instead of taking the bus. On occasions when he goes out with friends, Subject A always worries they will want to do something expensive and he will be caught between spending money he does not want to spend or admitting his poverty to them. His friends are, thankfully, fairly conservative with their money, which has caused Subject A to wonder if perhaps they are in the same situation as him. If so, he thinks, they could all get an apartment together as roommates in order to cut down on the rent. Subject A does not mention this to his friends as he would feel awkward bringing it up.

**Subject A’s Method of Transportation**

Subject A owns a car, a black one, but he does not drive much nowadays. This is partly because he is worried about the cost of gas and partly because he is worried about
accidents, but also because Subject A actually enjoys walking when he can. Few things are as pleasant to Subject A as going for a stroll on a warm summer’s day. Lately, however, the pleasure of his walks has been diminished as the deserted daytime streets simply remind him that everyone but him has a job to go to. Despite this, he continues to go out. Often, he goes walking without a destination in mind and simply travels in a circle, arriving back at his apartment.

Today, Subject A has a specific destination. He is going to an office building downtown for a job interview. It is too far to walk and showing up on foot might send the wrong impression, so Subject A will be driving to the interview. In preparation for his journey, Subject A goes online and looks up the route he will need to take. He then prints out an extensive series of maps which show every step of the journey. Although he rarely needs to refer to them, Subject A prints maps every time he goes somewhere new in case he gets lost.

Subject A Meets His Neighbor

As Subject A leaves his apartment building on his way to the interview, he encounters his neighbor. Subject A’s neighbor lives in an apartment two doors down from Subject A and they are acquaintances, although their interaction has not extended beyond small talk while passing each other in the hallway. Subject A’s neighbor is considered to be a very attractive young woman, or at least Subject A believes she is and has subsequently decided that his opinion is shared by the world at large. He is always aware of the danger of one of his imagined rivals making a move on her before he can. Despite this fear, Subject A tells himself finding a job should be his top priority and so he restricts his interactions with her to no more than the occasional superfluous comment.
On this encounter, his neighbor is carrying two white plastic bags. Subject A suspects they are filled with food, though the only item he can accurately identify through the semi-transparent bag is a packet of coffee beans. He wonders if she is one of those people who need a cup of coffee to start each day. The image of a disheveled mass, waking every morning and lurching zombie-like towards the coffee maker in the corner of the kitchen, springs to his mind. Such a state of existence seems awful to Subject A, who views any kind of addiction as inexplicably terrifying.

As they approach each other, Subject A notices that his neighbor is having some difficulty carrying all of her bags as they seem to be quite heavy. He considers offering to help carry them for her, but rejects that thought as it may be too forward of him. He does not want to give the wrong impression after all. Instead, he holds the front door of the apartment building open for her, a gesture which he decides is appropriately friendly for two neighbors. She thanks him and compliments his suit. Subject A tells her that he is on his way to a job interview and she wishes him good luck.

**Subject A Arrives for the Interview**

Subject A gets into his car, after removing his suit jacket and laying it out on the back seat so it doesn’t get wrinkled, and looks over the maps he printed out to make sure he knows the route. He then places the maps on the passenger seat so he can easily refer to them if necessary. Subject A has made sure to allow more than adequate time to get to the interview. Nevertheless, he still taps his fingers on the steering wheel in anxious irritation every time he has to stop at a red light. He relaxes slightly once he reaches the freeway and cruises along at a safe sixty-five miles per hour, keeping to the right-hand lane so he does not miss his exit. His encounter with his neighbor has left Subject A
feeling slightly cheerful and in the mood for some music. He turns on the radio and listens for a minute to a gubernatorial campaign advertisement, wherein the candidate promises to solve all of Subject A’s problems if she is elected. Unsure of whether the candidate is lying or not, Subject A switches off the radio and completes the remainder of his journey in silence.

The traffic is unexpectedly light and Subject A arrives thirty minutes earlier than he had anticipated. Subject A planned for the possibility of getting lost or being forced to take a detour or the car breaking down, and he is surprised that none of these problems materialized. He ponders over whether he should take this as a sign of good fortune and his momentary distraction causes him to drive past his destination. He circles around the block. The office building has its own parking structure, which seems to be the most convenient place for Subject A to leave his car. He is dismayed upon entering to find that there is a charge of fifty cents per minute for parking, up to a daily maximum of thirty-five dollars. This seems inordinately high, especially as his experience suggests the interview is unlikely to be a short affair. There is nothing Subject A can do about it now, other than hope that the interviewer will validate his parking. He takes a ticket, waits for the barrier to rise, and parks his car in the darkest corner of the garage where he is least likely to be noticed.

As he has a few minutes to kill before the interview is scheduled, Subject A decides to read a book in the privacy of his car. It is not unusual for him to arrive early and he always makes sure to have something on hand to pass the time. Currently, he is reading an old favorite of his entitled “Strange Journeys.” This is the third time he has read the book, though some years have passed since his last reading and, as such, he
cannot recall anything of the plot other than the fact that he enjoyed it. The book is still as interesting as it ever was, but on this occasion Subject A is too nervous to properly focus and he keeps reading the same paragraph over and over again. With fifteen minutes to go before the interview, Subject A abandons his futile attempt at reading and exits his car. He retrieves his jacket from the back seat, running a small lint roller over it before putting it on, and makes his way to the elevator at the far side of the parking structure.

Subject A plans to take the elevator all the way up to the eighth floor, but is slowed down when a man of nondescript appearance gets on at the second floor. The man presses the button to take him to the third floor. Subject A wonders why the man does not just use the stairs. He contemplates saying something, but instead just directs an annoyed look at the man, who does not notice and exits on the third floor. The remainder of Subject A’s elevator ride is uneventful.

At the eighth floor, Subject A steps off the elevator and navigates his way through the corridors to suite 860. The interior of the office building is overwhelmingly brown, one of the few colors considered serious enough for business. Pausing outside the door of suite 860, Subject A checks the time on his cell phone and sees he still has ten minutes before the interview. He sets his phone to silent, so he does not have to worry about it interrupting the interview, and decides to use the restroom.

The restroom is located at the opposite end of the hallway and, at first, Subject A fears it might be locked as the handle does not move, but the door opens easily with a push. Subject A is relieved to find he has the restroom to himself. He had dreaded the awkward possibility of running into his interviewer in the restroom prior to the actual interview. Subject A decides to use one of the stalls and is soon thankful he did, as
another man enters the restroom. Since Subject A has no knowledge of who his interviewer will be, he decides to play it safe and hide in the stall until the man is gone. Once he is certain that he is again alone, Subject A exits the stall. He washes his hands thoroughly, using a liberal amount of gelatinous pink soap from the dispenser, and then walks back towards suite 860.

**Subject A Fills Out a Form**

Subject A enters suite 860 and is immediately greeted with a smile by the receptionist, a young blonde woman who bears a passing resemblance to his neighbor. For a moment he wonders if somehow she is his neighbor, transported here ahead of him through some unknown means, but that seems improbable. The smiling receptionist hands him a form and directs him to a chair. After sitting down, Subject A realizes he does not have a pen and has to ask the receptionist for one. The pen he is given has blue ink. Subject A prefers to write in black ink, a habit he picked up in his college years, but it is not something worth making a big fuss about.

The form is apparently mostly for identification as it asks for Subject A’s name, address, and other such trivia. Subject A considers this to be slightly odd, as most of this information was on the resume he sent to the company. Still, he does not want to damage his chances of getting the job and so he dutifully completes the form without complaining. While filling out his address on the line provided, he runs out of space and has to clumsily squash in the last few letters of his street name. The result is an ugly mess and he thinks about asking for a new form, but, as he does not want to be perceived as difficult, he tells himself to ignore it and continue.
Of the thirty questions on the form, there are two on which Subject A hesitates. One of these, number seven, asks for what he was paid at his previous job and Subject A leaves this question blank as he worries it might limit his potential salary. The other question that troubles Subject A is number sixteen, which asks for emergency contact information. Subject A is not sure how this is relevant to the position he is interviewing for, but, in an unusually impulsive move, fills it in using his neighbor’s name and address, omitting her phone number as he does not know it. Aware of his previous mistake with his own address, he takes care to make sure this time the information fits exactly into the available space.

With the exception of question seven, the form is now complete. Subject A returns it to the receptionist, along with the blue ink pen. The receptionist smiles again, although Subject A is not sure she ever stopped. She disappears into the back of the office to deliver the form to the interviewer, after informing Subject A that they will be ready for him in about ten minutes. Subject A sits back down in a chair. There is a small table in front of him on which several magazines have been laid out.

Subject A Reads a Magazine

Subject A has no interest in any of the magazines, all of which are two months old and, regardless of their actual topic, universally feature middle-aged men in suits posing on the covers. Silently, Subject A berates himself for not bringing “Strange Journeys” up with him from the car. A second later he recants, deciding that it is better to not have the book instead of running the risk of it being seen and influencing the interviewer’s opinion of him. It is not a well known book and so he would no doubt be asked to explain the plot
to justify why he is reading it. Given his current inability to recall the plot, Subject A thinks it best to avoid such a situation.

There is a water cooler in the reception area. Subject A’s throat suddenly seems very dry and he cannot resist taking a small white paper cup to fill with water, which he then gulps down. He crushes the empty paper cup in his hand before realizing he is still thirsty and has to get another one. With his sudden thirst quenched, Subject A resumes waiting. His right leg begins to jerk up and down until he exerts a conscious effort to force it to stop. He hums a tune drawn from somewhere within his subconscious mind and then ceases abruptly, worrying he might be overheard. Subject A spots a travel magazine amidst the other periodicals, identifiable by the cover showing a man in a suit posing in a rainforest, and he feels compelled to pick it up. Subject A thinks that he would like to travel the world at some unspecified point in his future, though he has given little thought to where he would go or what he would do there. He flips through the magazine with no particular interest in any of the articles. One advertisement causes him to chuckle quietly. On page fifty-four, there is a picture that captures his attention: a single sunlit palm tree swaying in the wind against a clear blue sky. It is not a particularly significant image and could even be called cliché, however, at this moment, Subject A considers the tree in the picture to represent everything that is beautiful.

**Subject A Encounters a Door**

Subject A is startled out of his contemplation of the picture by the realization that more than ten minutes have passed. He checks the clock on his cell phone and finds that, in fact, fifteen minutes have passed since the receptionist left. Subject A curses himself silently, worrying that his distraction will cost him the job. There is no sign of the
receptionist, or, for that matter, anyone else. Subject A wonders if he was supposed to follow the receptionist into the back of the office, but he cannot recall her exact words to him. He decides to go look for someone.

As he makes his way into the back of the office, Subject A is struck by the fact that every desk is devoid of a human presence, though they remain littered with paperclips and notepads, as if everyone except for him abruptly vanished. On one desk, he notices a yellow note stuck to a computer screen, but the writing on it is an illegible scrawl. The office appears to be laid out in a circular fashion, Subject A notes, with a large conference room at the center. As the rest of the office is utterly empty, Subject A concludes that everyone must be in the conference room. He wonders if he should enter, hesitant to interrupt what might be an important meeting, but also concerned that perhaps everyone is in there waiting for him so they can start the interview.

The conference room is enclosed by glass walls, all of which are blocked by closed blinds which prevent Subject A from seeing in. He presses his face to the glass and experiences a moment of shock at seeing an eye staring back at him, before realizing that it is his own reflection. There is a single door to the conference room, which Subject A now approaches. His worry over missing the interview combined with his curiosity is enough to cause him to decide to open the door. There is, however, a problem. Subject A finds that the door has no handle and does not budge when he pushes on it. Even when exerting his full strength on the door, he cannot move it an inch. There are some buttons on a panel next to the door, one of which is labeled with the word “open.” Subject A presses the button, but nothing happens. He then tries pressing all of the different buttons
in turn, which similarly fails to yield a reaction. He is therefore forced to conclude that there is no way to open the door.

There are several options for Subject A at this point. To delay the moment when he must make a decision, Subject A takes another look around the office in a hopeless attempt to find someone to help him. He does not find anyone. The office is still deserted and the receptionist still has not yet returned. Subject A’s thoughts turn to his neighbor, who he now remembers is his emergency contact. Unfortunately, while this is clearly an emergency, he does not know her phone number and so is unable to contact her. Calling anyone else would be pointless, he reasons, as there is no way they could understand his situation and he would merely be opening himself up to ridicule.

At this point, Subject A decides he might as well try knocking on the door. He knocks twice, simultaneously afraid of interrupting someone and that there is no one to interrupt. He waits thirty seconds in silence for a reply that never comes. By now, he is convinced of the pointlessness of his efforts, but he knocks again anyway as a final formality. There is, as expected, no response.

Defeated, Subject A turns to leave, but something changes within him at this moment. All of the frustrations and failures that he has been carrying with him rise up at once and explode in a fit of anger. He begins to knock on the door again, but this time he does not stop. Everything that is wrong in his life, all of his problems, they are all, he now realizes, the fault of this door that will not open. It is the door’s fault that he lies awake at night worrying about money, that he is never able to have a proper conversation with his neighbor, that he is here, alone in an abandoned office, banging on a door to get a job he does not want. He slams his fist against the door, not trying to open it anymore,
but to destroy it, to break it into a thousand pieces. He slams his fist against the door and it swings open with a click.

**Subject A is Interviewed**

There is no one inside the conference room, except for Subject A himself. His rage cools quickly and is soon swept from his mind, with only the redness of his hand where it struck the door to prove it even happened. This is what he came for, his goal, but it feels anticlimactic. The room is mostly bare, apart from a small metal table with a chair on either side in the center of the room. A single light bulb hangs over the table, providing the only source of light in the room. The blinds over the windows to the outer office give the impression of solid walls and Subject A is compelled to close the door behind him to maintain the illusion. He is briefly struck by the thought that the room is set up for an interrogation, but the idea is uncomfortable and he dismisses it. As he does not know what else to do, Subject A approaches the table and sits down in the chair closest to the door. He now notices that the table is not bare and there are two distinct objects present. The first of these is a black pen. The second is the form that Subject A filled out on his arrival at the office, though it takes him a minute to recognize it as the form has been placed so that it must be read from the other side of the table.

The position of the form is reassuring to Subject A; it indicates the expected arrival of the interviewer. Subject A sits in silence, waiting, but the relief provided by the presence of the form is short-lived. At last he is forced to admit to himself what he has suspected for a while now. No one is coming. He is alone here in this room, a room which exists for one purpose only, just as he has only one purpose for being here. He gets
up from his chair, moves around the table and takes a seat on the opposite side. Clearly, he will have to interview himself.

Subject A has no issues with the first few questions on the form; he is familiar enough with his own background. He notices the awkward error on the address line, but does not hold it against himself. He makes some lighthearted conversation and asks himself where he sees himself in five years. Subject A recalls the palm tree and talks of traveling and seeing the world. It is an honest and unrehearsed answer, though he has to admit that it is not relevant to the position he is interviewing for. Subject A makes a few notes on the form using the black pen.

Question seven and the issue of his salary prove to be difficult to resolve. Subject A does not want to come across as evasive, but he knows he must be careful not to undervalue himself. Of course, if he asks for too much, he will, for the company’s sake, have to reject himself. Beyond that, there are other questions regarding past employment, useful skills, and his references. The receptionist reappears with a cup of coffee. She sets it down and wishes him good luck before leaving. The discussion goes back and forth for a while; various notes are made on the form and then crossed out, until, finally, there is only one question left to ask: will he get the job?

Subject A thinks long and hard about this question. He reads over his notes. It’s true that he needs the money, but personal concerns cannot affect his decision. By the time he reaches his answer, night has long since fallen. The receptionist has locked up and gone home, leaving Subject A alone in the office. He gathers his notes and closes the conference room door behind him. On his way out, he stops by the reception area, where he picks up the travel magazine and tears out the picture of the palm tree. He folds the
picture in half twice and places it in the inside pocket of his suit jacket. Before leaving, Subject A decides he is justified in validating his own parking.

**Subject A’s Decision**

Subject A arrives back at his apartment building. He drove back but does not remember doing so. He stops by the mailboxes at the front desk and picks up the single letter that is waiting for him, making a note that it is another bill, before slipping it into his pocket next to the folded picture. Subject A walks down the hall towards his apartment, but finds himself pausing in front of his neighbor’s door. Although he passes this door every day, it feels like he is noticing it for the first time. He knocks and she opens immediately. Hi, she says, leaning against the doorframe with a cup of coffee in her hand, and asks him if he got the job. Subject A smiles without knowing why.

“Yes,” he says.

*I place the papers back in the file, close it, and slip it back into the desk’s bottom drawer. While I was engrossed in reading, a cup of coffee has appeared on my desk without my noticing. It has long since gone cold, and I have never enjoyed the bitter taste anyway, but I drink it just to have something to do, just so that I can delay the inevitable for a few moments more. I take a look around my office, hoping for something to catch my eye, but, as always, there is nothing there. Maybe I should get some decorations, a plant for the desk or a clock for the wall, anything to break up this nothingness. Something, anything, that would distract me from that file at the very front of the bottom drawer of my desk. I do not know why I should pay even the slightest bit of attention to it.*
I should just forget about it, leave it here and go home. Instead, once again, I find myself opening the bottom drawer and removing the folder entitled “Subject A.”
Black Hole

My first clue that something was amiss was the fact that the train arrived on time. Exactly on time, no less, as the clocks hanging from the ceiling of the station all reached twenty-one minutes past nine just as the southbound express pulled to a stop and the doors opened with a soft exhale. A dozen or so people stepped out onto the platform. Aside from the clerk in the ticket office, these were the first people I had seen that morning and their presence was mystifying. I couldn’t figure out why anyone would get up so early on a Saturday morning just to come to Chelmsford of all places. If one were headed to somewhere like London, as I myself was on my way to visit my younger brother, then I could understand making an effort to catch the early train. It made no sense to come here, however, where there wasn’t much to do except browse the shops along the high street or catch a film at the ODEON, neither of which was worth giving up a lie-in.

Well, it’s not like other people’s motives were any of my concern. I walked down the platform to the second to last carriage. From experience, I knew this tended to be fairly empty as most passengers preferred to sit towards the front of the train, while any secondary school louts would congregate in the very last carriage, taking the rear position as some sort of status symbol. Not that I was particularly anti-social or disliked people, but I preferred to spend the half hour ride into London in undisturbed contemplation of the newspaper I’d brought with me. Besides, the chill of the autumn morning air, with just a hint at warmth later in the day, made it clear to anyone with even the smallest degree of refinement that it was a time for silence.
As I boarded my chosen carriage, I was pleased to see that I was correct in my assumption and that I had it all to myself. My pleasure at the emptiness prevented me from recognizing what should have been the second indicator of my impending trouble. It was, after all, a Saturday morning train into London and for an entire carriage to be empty was a rare event. At the time, however, I thought nothing of it and took a seat near the rear door facing forward. There was a crunching sound as I sat down. Since I had to get up early and walk to the station that morning, I had neglected breakfast and instead purchased a bag of prawn cocktail crisps from the WHSmith in the station to eat while waiting for the train. With the train’s early arrival, I had refrained from opening the bag and placed it in my coat pocket, only to have now carelessly sat on it. I gingerly pulled the crushed bag from my pocket. Fortunately, the bag itself was still intact and there were no crumbs scattered inside my coat. On opening the bag, I found all the crisps had been reduced to crumbs, which was annoying but didn’t make them any less edible. To avoid getting bits stuck to my fingers, I lifted the bag up and poured it straight into my mouth. Admittedly, this was not proper etiquette, but there was no one around to observe it anyway.

The doors whooshed shut and the train started to move. I finished the crisps, folded the empty bag over on itself, and put it back into my pocket to dispose of later. Outside the window, the scenery started to move by faster as the train picked up speed. Scenery was a generous term, as there wasn’t much to see other than long rows of identical houses or brick walls smeared with phrases of illegible graffiti. I was, of course, prepared for this and had purchased a copy of the Telegraph along with the crisps at the station. Since there was nothing of interest in the dreary world outside the window, I
settled in to study the paper until my arrival at Liverpool Street. I was halfway through some nonsense article about the prime minister’s latest political gaffe when the sound of a sudden cough caused me to start in surprise. There was someone else in the carriage.

Instinctively, I crouched down behind the seat in front to conceal myself from view. I folded the newspaper in half and set it down on the seat beside me, taking care not to create any noise by ruffling the pages, and slowly leaned out into the aisle. In a seat facing me on the opposite side, near the center of the carriage, was a young girl. I was surprised I hadn’t noticed her when I got on and, though it was difficult as I could only partially see her without fully exposing myself, I took this chance to examine my fellow passenger. She looked fairly young, maybe about fifteen or sixteen, though I’ve never been good at estimating people’s ages. Her black hair, cut short and unevenly, hung over her face as she looked down at something in her lap. The state of her hair, combined with the fact she was traveling alone, was worrisome as it indicated to me that she was possibly some kind of ill-kempt ragamuffin. What a poor choice I had made for a traveling companion. I stretched out further to get a better view and, as I shifted my body, the crisp packet in my pocket betrayed me with a crackle.

The girl looked up and our eyes met. Or rather, my eyes met her eye, as she only had one visible. A large white bandage was pressed over the right side of her face, concealing the other one from view. I observed this in only a fraction of a second, since, as soon as I realized she had seen me staring at her, I retreated back into my seat and buried my face in a fascinating article about declining bee populations on page six of the paper. One expert claimed that global warming was the chief cause of the drop in
numbers among bees, though there was also evidence suggesting that the increased use of pesticides was to blame.

There was the sound of movement as the girl got up from her seat. I heard her footsteps drawing closer and I focused all of my attention on the article. I was deep in a consideration of the development of sustainable beekeeping practices when she reached my seat.

“Hello,” she said.

I aligned my face into an expression of extreme nonchalance and glanced up from my paper.

“Hello,” I replied, making it clear by my tone that I was very busy reading about bees and could only spare a few moments for idle chatter, “Can I help you?”

“Can I sit here?” she asked, indicating the empty seat next to mine.

All I had wanted to do was enjoy a nice relaxing train ride by myself. The chances of that happening now were slim as, no doubt, this girl would want to talk and probably inquire as to why I was looking over at her. Though I was silently lamenting the loss of my solitude, it would have been inexcusably rude to refuse her and I was therefore forced to at least give a positive response, if not an encouraging one.

“Go ahead,” I told her.

She sat down next to me. I steeled my nerves as I prepared to deliver an account of my watching her that would entirely exonerate me and show I had no sinister intentions, but she merely opened up the book she had with her and read in silence. That was fine by me. If she was simply going to read, then I would follow suit. I picked up the bee article where I had left off, but it wasn’t quite the same. It was difficult to concentrate
on the subject of projected crop shortages due to a decrease in pollination and I ended up reading the same paragraph over several times. It occurred to me that the article really was not very clear or well written at all.

The girl on the other hand seemed to have no such problem. She stared at the book in her hands with such intensity that I thought it might burn her remaining eye out. Maybe it was that same severe concentration that had injured her bandaged eye. At any rate, judging by the speed at which she turned the pages, the loss of an eye was no hindrance to her reading. As she held the book so that it was angled away from me, I couldn’t see the contents for myself, but the cover was recognizable as that of a student’s composition book, its beige colour familiar from my own school days. Was it something she had written herself? At least it proved she was young enough to still be in school. Although, then again, it might not be hers and even if it was, it might be from years ago and she was reading it now out of nostalgia.

I couldn’t stop myself from an undignified snort of laughter, the sound my classmates in grammar school had referred to as a “trough laugh” because it sounded like a pig, at the thought of a sixteen year old feeling nostalgic. This outburst drew the girl’s attention and I quickly decided to prevent any embarrassing questions by going on the offensive myself.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

She turned the composition book around and, just as she said, there was nothing there. The pages were completely blank. I couldn’t help but think that this girl was possibly insane. Not only had I chosen a carriage with a scruffy ruffian, but an utterly
ment one at that. I reassured myself that, if she were to suddenly lunge for my throat, I could probably take her in a fight. There was a considerable difference in our sizes, though without a third person for comparison I can’t say whether she was particularly short or if I was very tall. As ignoring her wasn’t an option at this point, it seemed prudent to ingratiate myself with her to ward off any approaching violence.

“What’s your name?” I asked, striking a friendly tone.

“What’s yours?” she countered.

I had never been fond of my name. For some unknown reason, my parents had chosen to saddle me a bizarrely unique moniker and, as a result, I had spent most of my time in school being teased horribly. I was an adult now and there was no reason for me to be afraid of such childish things, but I still made her promise not to laugh before I told her. She laughed anyway. Then she told me her name was Claire and we shook hands.

Since we seemed to have reached some level of familiarity through this exchange, I was content to let us drift back into a prolonged, yet comfortable silence. I abandoned the bees and turned to the last page of the newspaper in order to study the crossword. As it was a Saturday, the puzzle was exceptionally difficult. The clue for thirteen across caught my eye, “Arrested, perhaps, and recovered tyres.” I couldn’t even begin to fathom what that meant. Fortunately, the clue for two down was more coherent and I was reasonably sure that the answer was “ointment.” As I lacked a pen, I couldn’t write it in, so I tried to picture the letters on the page in front of me instead. That meant the second letter in ten across was “n.” Did that help me in any way?

My musings were interrupted as the train leaned around a bend in the tracks and the girl fell against me. I waited patiently for her to remove her head from my shoulder,
acting as though I was unaware of the whole thing, but when she failed to do so I was forced to look up from the crossword. The girl was fast asleep, her body splayed out diagonally with one leg hooked over the arm rest and sticking out into the aisle. I was amazed that such a small person could take up so much space and that she was able to remain asleep in that awkwardly contorted position. The bottom of her shirt had gotten pulled up, exposing an inch of the pale skin of her stomach and I pulled it down in case any inquisitive strangers happened to pass through our carriage.

She looked liked she could use a nap and, since it saved me the trouble of worrying about what she might do, I decided to let her sleep. Besides, we had to be close to London by now and, as that was the end of the line, she would have to wake up then regardless. I wondered about exactly how much time we had left and reached into my pocket for my phone. Luckily, I always kept my phone in my right trouser pocket (since I put my keys in my left pocket and if I put the phone in the same pocket it would get scratched), which meant I was able to extract it without disturbing Claire. The screen was blank. I pressed the power button a couple of times, but nothing happened. Apparently, the battery had run out. That was annoying, not just because I couldn’t find out the current time, but it would also make contacting my brother difficult. Well, I would have to use a pay phone at the station when I arrived. They probably had a few of them still around, despite being outdated. The more urgent matter was finding out the time, which, having conceived a desire to know, I now felt was a matter of utmost importance.

There was no clock inside the carriage and I relied exclusively on my phone, so I needed to get the time from someone else. Claire was the obvious first choice. Her wrists were bare, so there was no watch I could sneak a glance at. She was a teenage girl though,
which meant she must have a phone somewhere. There was no bag with her and, therefore, I guessed it was probably in a pocket. The thought of rummaging through a sleeping girl’s pockets was a bit much, however, and I decided to find someone else. I removed Claire’s head from my shoulder, taking care not to wake her, and set it down on the seat. Then I squeezed past her out into the aisle and made my way to the door connecting our carriage to the rear one.

I was expecting to be greeted by a bunch of yobs, but, to my surprise, the rear carriage was empty. That one carriage should be empty on a Saturday morning was odd, but for two to be devoid of people was unthinkable. I looked out of a window at the unbroken brick wall that continued to pass by to the rhythmic beat of the train wheels on the track. Ten-te-tun, ten-te-tun, ten-te-tun. It seemed advisable to check the forward carriages for people. However, as I turned to leave, I noticed a foot hanging out into the aisle at the far end. I made my way towards the foot, which turned out to be attached to a young girl, fast asleep and stretched across the seats. Somewhat unnervingly, she appeared absolutely identical to Claire, right down to the bandage across her right eye. In fact, I would have said she was Claire, except that was impossible since I had left her behind in the other carriage. There was even a folded up newspaper lying next to her, showing a blank crossword puzzle, though that didn’t mean anything. Lots of people read the Telegraph, after all. Still, the similarity combined with the solitude was enough to make even a person as normally clear-headed as myself feel a little spooked.

Quickly, I devised a simple way to dispel any notion of supernatural matters. I withdrew the prawn cocktail crisp packet from my pocket and placed it on the sleeping girl’s chest. Then, without looking back, I returned through the connecting doors to my
own carriage and my own seat. Claire was lying there just as I had left her, except for, to my dismay, the addition of a small pink foil bag rising and falling with each breath of her slumber. Well, OK then. The carriages were separated by two doors with a gap in between, making it impossible to open both doors simultaneously and look from one carriage into another. I was, therefore, required to physically enter and check the forward carriages to confirm my growing suspicions and, sure enough, each one was empty except for a sleeping girl whose face was becoming increasingly familiar. As there was no way to tell if I was walking through the same carriage in a loop or instead passing through a series of identical copies, I thought it prudent to keep track of how far I went and was thus able to return with certainty to my original starting point.

It appeared that there was no way to leave my carriage, at least as long as I was keeping to the inside of the train. Perhaps I could have escaped by leaving the train itself, by pulling the red emergency release lever and climbing out the window, but I wasn’t all that anxious to try it at the speed at which we were moving. There was Claire to consider too as I couldn’t just save myself and leave her behind. She was still asleep, oblivious to the net in which we were caught. As I had no solution, there was no reason to wake her up just so she could panic. It was actually quite calming to watch her sleep and it helped me organize my thoughts with regard to our situation.

By this point, it was clear that more than a half hour had elapsed and, judging by the familiar sight of a graffitied brick wall outside, we were not likely to arrive at London any time soon. It seemed safe to assume that the train was caught in a loop just as we were. I can’t say that I found the thought to be scary or anything. It was like a guy wearing a monster mask; you might find it terrifying to encounter him in the middle of
the night, but the same guy would look ridiculous if you ran into him around lunchtime. Likewise, I was mostly thinking what a bother this unnatural occurrence was. There was no way to tell when we would be able to escape and the lack of any food was a problem, although there was a water fountain near the door so thirst was not an issue.

I recalled the various tales of people stranded in remote areas who were forced to resort to cannibalism in order to survive, like in that film about a rugby team whose plane crashed in the mountains. While there was no telling how desperate things might become, I resolved that I would absolutely refuse to eat my companion under any circumstances. Even though we had not known each other long, I felt an attachment to her. Admittedly, that feeling might have been because she was an attractive girl, despite desperately needing a trip to a decent hairdresser. Regardless, I was committed to not eating her no matter what came our way.

As I pondered over these concerns, I had been watching Claire’s sleeping face and my gaze became concentrated on the white bandage that hid the right side. The fact that I couldn’t see underneath it bothered me immensely. What exactly was she hiding? Most likely it was nothing, maybe just a slight injury, a tiny scar or a black eye, but under these unusual circumstances it seemed to me that I should explore every aspect of my surroundings. There was no need to awaken her for such a minor thing; I would take a quick peek to make sure there was nothing strange going on underneath the bandage and that would be that.

I maneuvered myself over her sleeping form and lifted her head up so I could loosen the bandage wrapped around it. Once there was a fair amount of give, I lifted the wrapping away from her face just enough for me to peer underneath. At first it seemed as
if the bandage, only partially removed, was obscuring the light such that I couldn’t make out anything in the shadow. However, after a few seconds, I realized that, in fact, there was nothing there to make out. I was looking into a hole. Not the kind of hole that signified something missing or that something had once been there and was now lost, but rather a hole that by itself occupied a physical space. The kind of hole you could hold in your hands. Furthermore, although it was situated in her head, the hole did not seem to lead inside her and instead appeared to open out into an endless space. It was like looking into an impossibly deep well. I felt that if I were to drop a rock into it, I could wait for hours and never hear the clatter of the rock hitting the bottom.

Even as I was staring into this pitch black tunnel, I became aware of a light glistening in its depths. Given that I could only view the hole from an angle instead of looking straight down into it, along with the lack of any reference point in the darkness, I had no way of telling whether the light was close by or not. The more I looked at it, however, the more I felt a compelling desire to touch it. As the hole wasn’t big enough for my entire hand, I started to work my index finger under the bandage. I began exploring the edges of the hole with the tip of my finger and was about to start my probe towards the light when Claire’s body shifted underneath me. As I retracted my gaze from the hole, I noticed her left eye was now open.

“What,” she asked, “are you doing?”

I climbed off her in the most dignified manner possible under the circumstances and stood in the aisle while she sat up and adjusted the bandage. It was easy to see how my actions could be misconstrued as something indecent and I quickly offered an explanation.
“We are trapped in this carriage,” I said.

Instead of responding, she got up and walked towards the door leading to the rear carriage. She exited, closing the door behind her, and reappeared a moment later from the door at the far end. Then she turned around and repeated the process, returning through the rear door.

“Hmm,” she said, looking outside at the brick wall.

Despite her looks, it appeared that she possessed a degree of level-headedness comparable to my own. Her apparent lack of concern was reassuring, especially as I had no escape plan to offer if she started panicking. Perhaps I could leave it to her to come up with a way out of our predicament. I suddenly felt a lot better with someone else able to shoulder the responsibility. Claire showed no sign of being aware that she had been passed the baton of leadership and her eye remained fixed on the view outside.

“You saw it right?” she asked without turning in my direction, “What did you think?”

Obviously, she was referring to the hole. The usual adjectives that came to mind for describing a hole, things like “dark” or “deep,” didn’t seem all that appropriate. I decided to offer a generic compliment instead.

“It’s very interesting,” I said.

“You should see it properly,” she continued as if I hadn’t spoken.

Slowly, she unwrapped the bandage from around her head, the depths beneath becoming ever more visible as each layer was stripped away. Then, when it had been completely removed, she turned to face me. I had previously looked into the hole from a restricted perspective. Now, as I faced it head on, I had the uncomfortable sensation that I
might pitch forward and fall in and I gripped the back of a chair for support. From this viewpoint I could see that the light I noticed before was only one of hundreds floating in the vast void. They appeared as tiny pinpricks, glistening for a moment before being swallowed up by the darkness.

“It’s a black hole,” Claire said quietly. “The little lights you see are the final gasps of dying stars.”

I watched the end of the universe play itself out through the small portal in her head. It was the strangest thing I had ever seen, absolutely terrifying and yet so beautiful it was impossible to look away. A sudden thought occurred to me.

“Is this connected to the declining bee populations?”

The left side of her face furrowed in confusion.

“I don’t know anything about that. It does tend to warp time and space if you get too close, though. And if you’re stupid enough to touch it, you’ll lose an arm. Or worse,” she said in what I felt was an unnecessarily sharp tone.

Regardless, it was clear that the hole was the source of our problems. Claire, having confirmed our situation for herself, retrieved her composition book from where it had fallen to the floor and sat down to stare pointedly at it. I attempted to inquire as to exactly what she was doing and received a rather terse reply asserting that if she ignored the hole and focused on something else for a while, time and space would sort themselves out on their own. As she was more experienced in these matters, I left her to get on with it and took to pacing up and down the aisle while waiting for her to save us. After a few minutes of me passing back and forth, she threw the book down and glared in my direction.
“How am I supposed to concentrate if you keep shuffling around like that?”

“Perhaps,” I said, “It might work better if you actually write in the book instead of merely looking at blank pages.”

“I don’t have a pen.”

“Me neither.”

It seemed her plan had hit a bit of a snag. I was about to suggest she cut herself and use blood to write with, when a better idea occurred to me. All we really needed to do was find a way to distract her for a while and there was an obvious way to do that. I told her to close her eye (there was no way to close the hole, but I don’t think she could see out of it) and then slowly leaned over her. My hand reached out to retrieve the newspaper I had left on my seat and dropped it in her lap with the crossword puzzle facing up.

“What’s this?” she asked, her eye opening.

“Thirteen across. Try and solve it.”

She studied the impossible clue for a moment. I didn’t expect her to solve it, but I figured it would hold her attention for a while.

“Set-to,” she said, “Fourteen down.”

She was attempting to figure out the intersecting words for hints. Not a bad strategy, though it could only help so much. Quickly, she identified four down as “Sparta,” while I suggested that three down could be “property room.” I also offered “ointment” for two down, but that wasn’t an intersecting word and not particularly helpful. Even though we were technically working together on the puzzle, there was a
competitive atmosphere which made me feel that I needed to have two answers to match her.

We now had three letters for thirteen across. It was eight letters total, so it looked something like “_ _ _ r _ a _ s” although, of course, we had no pen and were picturing it in our heads. As we had both solved two clues each, this was the tie-breaker. It was a matter of pride and I certainly wasn’t going to admit defeat to this much younger girl who had probably never even read a newspaper before. I should be able to solve this, I told myself. I didn’t know what the “arrested” part of the hint meant, but “recovered tyres” I could work with. Although, “arrested” was an eight letter word too. Since this was the Telegraph Saturday crossword, I doubted this was mere coincidence. An equal number of letters suggested an anagram, and if it was related to tyres and including the letters already there, then the answer had to be… what? I felt like I knew the answer, but couldn’t quite grasp it.

“I have no idea,” she said.

“Same here,” I admitted.

The train lurched violently and came to an abrupt stop. As I was standing in the aisle, I would have been thrown on my face, but for Claire who quickly grabbed my arm to keep me upright. A friendly voice crackled over the loudspeaker to inform us that we had arrived safely at London Liverpool Street. Outside, the brick wall had been replaced by the sight of passengers disembarking and milling about on the platform.

We stepped off the train together, after Claire had finished reapplying her bandage and I had made sure to recover the empty crisp packet. Despite our adventure, I was not so out of it that I would commit the uncouth error of leaving my rubbish behind.
We passed through the gate from the platform into the station proper. Across the way, between the masses of people swarming around, I could see the stairway leading down to the underground. I was supposed to meet my brother in Mile End, although I needed to call him first to let him know I had been delayed. Then again, according to the various clocks visible around the station, we had actually arrived exactly on time.

“Time distortion,” said Claire, guessing at my thoughts. “As long as you get where you’re going, it’s best not to think too much about it.”

“Well then,” I wasn’t sure what to say. Nothing that came to mind seemed suitable to say to a girl who could bend time and space with her eye, so I went with a simple “Bye.”

“Goodbye,” she said, giving a little wave as she started to walk away, “Maybe I’ll see you again.”

I turned and began walking in the direction of the underground. There was no direct line from Liverpool Street to Mile End, so I would need to switch lines at least once. Was there any money left on my Oyster Card from my last visit to London? As I reached into my pocket to retrieve my wallet, my fingers come into contact with something hard and unexpected. I withdrew it from my jacket and found that it was the small composition book Claire had been reading earlier. I suppose that at some point, possibly while I was engrossed in the crossword puzzle, she had surreptitiously slipped it into my pocket. This seemed like an odd thing to do considering how fixated on the book she had been when I first saw her, although, come to think of it, she had kept my newspaper and this might be her idea of an even trade. As I stared down at the bland cover, it occurred to me that she might have written a message for me, some final word to
commemorate our adventure. I opened the book, curious to see what she had left inside. The first page was blank, as was the second and every page after it. Even so, I made sure to check each one, ignoring the glances of the people buzzing through the station while I stared at the empty space before me.
The Story of the Robot

I.

The town of Weedon was a rather remote place, located about two hours by car away from the nearest city. Despite the distance, this old-fashioned town full of brick cottages with anachronistic thatched roofs received more than its fair share of visitors. The main attraction for those people who made the journey was the locally grown vegetables, primarily tomatoes and carrots, for which the town had gained some measure of fame in the surrounding counties. Consequently, most tourists came on Sunday for the weekly farmers market and spent the day slowly navigating among the stalls placed around the edges of the square at the heart of town. They moved carefully between piles of produce, intently studying an onion here, dubiously prodding a potato there, focusing on a task as important as any they might go back to on the following Monday. Sometimes, the visitors looked up from the crates of vegetables and spoke a word or two to the person behind the stall, usually a farmer’s wife or an older child. The men rarely appeared at the market. They spent Sundays at the town pub in accordance with old traditions, forgetting the troubles of the week past and the week ahead.

When the visitors were done examining every item and picking out only the firmest and most flawless pieces, they loaded up their cars and began the long journey home. Few people felt the need to stay and explore the town. To be honest, there was not much to see beyond the market. The oldest building in town, used as the town hall, was constantly under repair and buried under blue plastic sheets. There was a library, but it was closed on Sundays. Sometimes, however, people wandered off the main streets into the maze-like back alleys that twisted through the town. Though the town was small, it
was easy to get lost among the winding roads that went past endless rows of fields, all filled with the same few vegetables, all surrounded by bushes on which the same red poisonous berries grew. The problem was compounded by the fact that there were no longer any street names visible. The signs had long since become illegible due to the constant exposure to wind and rain or had simply never been there to begin with. Visitors had no way to tell where they were and, confronted by unchanging scenery, felt like they were walking in a continuous loop. It was on these endless roads that the visitors occasionally encountered the robot. They stopped in shock on seeing her approach and watched in silence as she walked past, the only sound the clinking of her metal feet on the granite road. Then they raced back to town, sprinting along the back alleys and bursting into the pub, looking for a local to explain what it was that they had seen.

The robot had been present in the town for longer than most of the inhabitants could remember and few of them had any interest in talking with an outsider about her. An old man, Luis Feynham, a more-or-less permanent fixture at the pub, was usually the one who, for the price of a beer or two, would tell visitors the story behind her. Feynham claimed to have heard the robot’s origin (he didn’t remember from whom) which he told to anyone who inquired in the manner of letting them in on a privileged secret. As Feynham told it, there had once been a scientist, a man who was usually Russian, but sometimes German. This scientist had a beautiful young daughter whom he loved more than anything in the world. However, the daughter fell ill from a terrible disease for which there was no cure and passed away, leaving the scientist consumed by grief. The Russian or perhaps German scientist, in his desperation to bring back the beloved daughter he had lost, constructed a mechanical replica of her in his workshop. To his
dismay, he discovered upon finishing the machine that, although he was able to give it the likeness of his daughter, the robot had no soul and existed only as a shadow of his child, never truly alive. Feynham would usually pause dramatically at this point to let his words sink in before continuing. The scientist spent the rest of his days trying to craft a soul for the robot, but eventually died without succeeding. The robot, lacking life herself, was unable to understand the concept of death and waited many years for the scientist to return. Eventually, she wandered out into the world to find him. She traveled for several years and underwent many hardships before coming to the town of Weedon where, lost and confused, she now wandered the streets of the town in her search for the man who had created her, without even being able to understand why he had left.

This story seemed entirely plausible after a few drinks and, since there were no challengers willing to speak out and oppose it, the visitors accepted it as the history of the robot. Tourists armed with this information would seek out the robot and use their observations to confirm what they had been told. They noted that there was indeed a sense of femininity present in her form, which was slim and curved. They were not sure why they had not noticed this previously. She stood about five feet tall and, on closer inspection, it was agreed that her proportions were very much like those of a child. As they watched her wander the back alleys and narrow streets of the town with no destination, they pointed out to each other the scrapes and dents she had picked up on her long journey.

Their curiosity about the robot took on a facade of pity at her misfortune, which they felt was made worse by the robot being unable to understand the misery of her own situation. Occasionally, this pity would motivate visitors to donate their spare change to
help her in some way. A wooden collection box, balanced on a small folding table surrounded by blue plastic sheets, was set up just inside the door of the town hall for this purpose. Feynham’s story apparently moved many hearts as this box proved to be a steady source of income for the town. There was some confusion over how to spend this money, since it was intended for the robot and no one had ever been able to communicate successfully with her to determine what her needs entailed. The town council, after much discussion, came to the unanimous agreement that the robot, if she could make her wishes known, would want to give back to the town. Thus, the money was allocated for the repair the roof of the town hall, which had taken a severe beating in a fierce storm and needed patching up before the first rain of winter. The robot herself showed no apparent concern for either the weather or the appearance of a new set of blue sheets which were draped across the town hall roof in preparation for the repairs. She continued to wander the streets even in the depths of winter, seemingly oblivious to the rain pelting against her face.

While Feynham’s tale was enough to satisfy visitors, who could return home to big cities where no robots wandered the streets, the people of the town eventually began to ask questions that Feynham’s story could not answer. At some point, no one recalled exactly who brought it up, people began to wonder why the robot never went outside the boundaries of the town. Whenever she reached the outskirts, she would simply turn around and walk back the way she came. A rumor sprang up that she stayed in the town because she was waiting for something. This rumor became fact when a young child, Timothy Spraighth, turned in an imaginative essay to his English teacher on what he had done over summer. Timothy claimed that the robot had told him she had come from
space to invade Earth and was waiting for the rest of her robotic allies to arrive. Timothy, with the conviction of a child who believes everything he says, went on to claim that this particular robot was special because she was the commander of the robot army. Her status was designated by her left arm, which was painted black in contrast to the pearl white of the rest of her exterior. Mrs. Archen, the teacher who received this essay, responded by assigning Timothy an F for failing to complete the assignment as required. His parents intervened to prevent any stain on their son’s permanent record and, after a bit of back and forth, the grade was subsequently changed to a C for acceptable work. Someone, again no one knew quite who, leaked the story and a copy of Timothy’s essay to the local newspaper, which, having nothing else to report in a small town, ran the story to fill up blank space on page five.

The townspeople had a good number of laughs at Timothy’s expense. Didn’t the boy know, they said, that no one had ever been able to talk to the robot? The story was completely ridiculous. The townspeople could not deny that the robot was real, but to ask them to believe she was an alien as well was going too far. But, someone remarked, what if there were other robots out there after all? One robot was alright, it might even be said she benefited the town by bringing in tourists and their money. A whole bunch of robots wandering around and blocking the roads was another matter entirely. Undoubtedly, one man said, this robot was something special. There was no way that that asymmetrical black arm was normal; it was clearly meant to mark her as unique, as an important figure. Another man suggested that her short and stocky proportions would give the robot good balance in a fight. She had definitely been through some rough encounters, the dents and scrapes were more than enough proof of that. There was no telling what she was capable
of. “Watch yourself around that robot,” became a repeated phrase among the townspeople, though they kept their thoughts to themselves when the tourists were around.

People started to recall that the robot had been involved in all kinds of nefarious incidents. Kent Williams’ kitchen window had been broken by a large rock, one that was certainly too heavy to be easily thrown by a human. One of Richard McHane’s cows had previously disappeared and the body had never been found; he now remembered seeing the robot in the immediate area around the same time. These sort of tales went on for a while until, one evening, after hearing Doug Michaels claiming that the robot was responsible for sabotaging his sprinkler system and causing the subsequent loss of an entire acre of tomatoes, Luis Feynham slugged him in the face and asked him where people got off blaming their problems on a little girl who had already suffered more than enough. His speech would have been more impressive if he wasn’t so drunk that he slurred half the words, but it had the intended effect regardless. The townspeople were shamed into vowing to treat the robot better and to be kinder to her in the future. They arranged a ceremony to ease their consciences in which the mayor presented the robot with a red woolen scarf, emblazoned with the town crest, to keep her warm in the coming winter months. Though the robot showed no understanding of the reasons for the gift, she did slow the pace of her walking enough for the mayor, assisted by a member of the town council, to place the scarf around her neck. The townspeople interpreted the robot’s relaxed gait as a gesture of gratitude and forgiveness, allowing them to return to their daily lives unburdened by guilt.

The townspeople’s cordial feelings for the robot lasted up until she had an unfortunate encounter with a group of young boys. Three teenagers, drunk more on the
The thrill of breaking into a parent’s liquor cabinet than on what they had actually taken from it, were stumbling through the town square around midnight and came across the robot. The exact details of what transpired that night were never fully made clear, as each of the three boys told a slight variation of the events. However, the agreed upon facts were as follows. The leader of the group, a kid by the name of Stephen Coatle, approached the robot and began to speak to her. The other boys, following his lead, also came up to the robot and, as a result of the robot’s slowed pace, which she had maintained since receiving the scarf, the three of them together were able to crowd around her and obstruct her path. Despite her route being blocked, the robot continued to make some slight movement, pushing against the boys, until one of them (accounts differed on exactly who was responsible) grabbed the robot in an attempt to halt her progress entirely. This contact apparently provoked an unexpected reaction as the boys suddenly found themselves sprawled against a wall on the opposite side of the town square with several broken bones among them and no memory of the last few minutes.

When morning came and the boys’ story became public, the town was in an uproar. How could anyone feel safe, the townspeople repeatedly exclaimed at a meeting in the pub as soon as it opened, when a mechanical monster that attacked children in the night was wandering the streets at will? A mob was swiftly formed and, armed with various farming implements, set out to locate the robot. It was unfortunate that the one man who could have possibly talked sense into these people had not long ago passed away from sudden illness. Luis Feynham’s existence was quickly forgotten by the people of Weedon; the only remaining evidence of his having lived was a bench dedicated in his memory, established at the whim of a distant relative who had never visited the town, and
which the town council decided to hide down a rarely used back alley. Thus, there was no one to prevent the mob from rallying against the robot. They spotted her near the center of town, as she emerged from a side street between the post office and the building that housed the local newspaper, and the people eagerly rushed forward and began to strike at her. These blows proved ineffective as their pitchforks and hoes shattered upon contact with the robot’s white shell. Their sole accomplishment in this melee was managing to tear the red scarf from her neck, leaving a few threads dangling behind as if to represent the blood they could not draw. The people, faced with the uselessness of their assault, were forced to resort to angrily telling the robot to leave the town and never return. The robot showed no acknowledgement of any of the attacks, whether physical or verbal, though a careful observer might have noticed a quickening of her pace as she walked away on her continuous journey through the town.

Doug Michaels, who secretly still harbored resentment over the loss of his tomatoes, demanded that the robot be made to stand trial, but this was abandoned as impractical. The robot could not be injured or imprisoned, and she had no money or possessions of which she could be deprived. Furthermore, given her incessant walking and the fast pace at which she now moved, there was no way to get her into a court room or even remain still long enough to be charged. Accordingly, the only punishment the people could carry out against the robot was to completely exclude her from society and deny any evidence of her existence. As time passed, ignoring the robot became the accepted practice. There were still the occasional visitors who burst into the pub after having encountered the robot, but their exclamations were brushed aside and their questions went unanswered. The visitors would leave the pub and return to where they
had seen the robot, though, without a story to guide their observations, they soon grew
tired of watching her and eventually returned their attention to the vegetables they had
come for. Thus, the robot was forgotten by both the visitors and the townspeople even as
she continued to walk amongst them.

II.

At the age of seventeen, Emma Castile decided that she wanted to be a writer. She
wrote eight short stories in the years that followed, five of which made it into print in
various magazines. Emma, feeling that this was sufficient qualification for her to move
up to the next level, then set to work on what she conceived of as her ultimate goal,
writing a novel. She soon ran into difficulties. Her short stories primarily dealt with the
subject of human nature, of which she had a negative view. Emma had been self-
conscious of her appearance since early childhood and, consequently, grew up seeing
insults and slights at every turn. She therefore imagined humanity to be disappointingly
shallow, an opinion she gave full vent to in her short stories. However, she exhausted all
her childish anger in writing these pieces and was left with nothing to write a novel about.
Without a subject, her novel made slow progress. By the time she was twenty-five, only a
single chapter was finished and even that became continually worse the more she reread
it. Emma decided that the chief cause of her problems was the fact that it was simply
impossible to write a novel in the city and moved to a suitably remote town where she
was sure inspiration would abound. This town was named Weedon.
There was a little brick cottage on the outskirts of the village which was available for rent at a rate that was within Emma’s meager finances. She brought with her only a few essential items of furniture (namely, a comfortable bed, a well-worn desk, and a familiar chair) as a reminder that she was there to work. She wrote for eight hours a day every day except for Sunday, on which she rewarded herself by venturing out of the cottage to browse the weekly farmers market. Though Emma did buy the occasional carrot or potato, she went there mainly in hopes of finding a muse amongst the crowd of visitors and locals. There was a wooden bench with peeling moss-green paint located in an alley off the town square from which Emma could watch the people moving among the stalls without being seen herself. When they inevitably failed to provide her with anything to write about, Emma’s attention switched to attempting to decipher the dull bronze plaque on the back of the bench. A combination of time and frequent rain had worn away most of the inscription, but Emma was able to make out a few letters which she thought might be a name. She tried asking around town, thinking there might be an interesting story behind the bench, but no one that she approached could recall anything.

By the end of a month, Emma had filled several sheets of paper and written nothing of value. She then resolved to take advantage of her surroundings and went on long walks through the nearby countryside. She returned home with the intention of writing, but always found herself too tired to actually produce more than a few lines. Since she was unable to write anything meaningful anyway, Emma spent an increasing amount of time on her walks. These walks were always conducted alone and in silence. On the rare occasion that she encountered another person, such as old man Coatle,
limping back and forth from the town to his distant farm, their only exchange was a simple nod.

One day, as she was returning to the town after exploring some hills to the north, Emma was surprised to find a person walking briskly down the road in her direction. She first thought it was the young daughter of a visitor who had gotten separated from her parents among the back alleys and needed help, but, as she drew nearer, Emma was astonished to find that it was a robot. The robot gradually slowed down as it approached Emma and then, as Emma drew level with it, the robot turned and began to walk with her back to town. Emma was unsure of whether to draw attention to herself and kept silent whilst snatchng sidelong glances at the robot. She observed that the robot was immaculately sculpted, with curves that clearly identified it as feminine, and possessed a flawless complexion of white, the exception being her left arm which was colored black below the elbow joint. As they reached the door of the cottage, they both paused and Emma, unaware of the pointlessness of talking to the robot, invited her in. The robot watched her in silence and Emma felt a lump appear in her throat, along with a brief resurgence of her childhood insecurities, before realizing the robot was simply waiting to follow her inside.

The robot expressed no interest when Emma offered her a glass of water and simply stood in the center of the living room. Emma, to fill the silence, nervously rambled on about any subject which came to mind. She spoke of the city and coming to the town and of her novel and of wandering the countryside. Eventually, she paused and asked the robot for her name. The robot did not reply. Back in the tail end of her school years, Emma had held an unrequited love for a classmate named Julian Porter. She had
not thought of him for several years, yet suddenly remembered him and asked the robot what she thought of the name Julia. The robot remained silent as she did not possess a mouth of any description and was therefore unable to speak or express any particular fondness for the name. Regardless, from that day forward, Julia came to live with Emma.

Julia adopted a new pattern of behavior upon taking up residence in the cottage, one which largely consisted of standing in the same place all day. Emma continued to go on her daily walks and would return in the evening to find Julia right where she had been that morning. Emma became worried that her new companion might be bored with nothing to do and gave Julia some pages of her old writing one morning before leaving. It occurred to her later, as she made her way along a dirt track surrounded by prickly bushes popping with red berries, that the robot might not be able to read. On her return, however, she found the papers scattered about the place as if they had been caught in a tornado. Julia stood at the center of the debris, watching Emma with expressionless eyes.

Following this event, Emma adopted the practice of stopping by the town library as part of her daily excursions so as to continuously supply Julia with fresh reading material. The library was an L-shaped building; an old grey brick affair that seemed in continuous danger of suddenly collapsing into dust, like nearly everything else in the village. It was run by an elderly woman with grey hair named Mrs. Archen who was in the habit of thanking everyone who spoke to her, even thanking them for thanking her. Friendly, but without a hint of curiosity, Mrs. Archen proved a helpful accomplice in selecting which books Emma brought home. As she considered herself a writer, Emma would have preferred to apply her own standards in choosing books, but her elitism was rendered impractical by the inhuman speed at which Julia read. In a little under two
weeks, she read everything in the library’s children section and Emma, with assistance from the librarian, was obliged to begin picking books from the main collection. Though Julia was not a picky reader, there were certain standards to be followed. On one occasion, Emma ventured away from fiction into the reference books contained in the shorter arm of the library’s L. The book she took from there, *A Brief History of the Development of Hydroelectric Power* by Doug Michaels, went unread, and from that developed an unspoken agreement that Emma would only bring home stories. In addition, there were two further guidelines in book selection. The first of these was to avoid any books which contained robots, on Emma’s belief that this might be a sensitive topic. The second was to forsake the romance genre entirely as it seemed inappropriate for Julia due to her youthful appearance.

As Julia’s reading progressed, Emma began to note changes in her behavior. While she previously read standing up, she now took to perching herself on the edge of the desk and, on a handful of occasions, Emma came home to find her sitting in a chair. Initially, she was concerned for the state of her furniture, but Emma’s fears were alleviated by the discovery that Julia was unnaturally light despite being made of metal and even a spare cardboard box was capable of supporting her weight. One night, awakened by a sudden thirst, Emma found Julia stretched out on the floor in an imitation of sleep. Until then, she had simply assumed Julia spent the nights reading or standing around as she did during the day. Emma, feeling guilty and embarrassed, invited her to share the bed. They slept together every night after that, although, as Julia’s eyes consisted solely of blue lenses, devoid of eyelids or pupils and with a continuous soft glow only evident in the dark, Emma never knew if she was actually sleeping.
Inevitably, the moment came when there were no more books for Julia to read. Emma returned the last of them to the librarian, thanked her for her help, and was thanked in return. Then she returned home, where Julia was waiting for her. They sat down together on the floor and Emma explained that there was nothing left to read. Julia still could not speak, but Emma thought she understood.

The next morning, Emma took Julia with her on her walk. They headed west along the main road that stretched out from the town square, ignoring the passing cars of visitors flocking into the center. They turned down a dirt track, walking past a series of identical fields in which various things were growing. Presumably, there were different vegetables, but Emma could not make a distinction from the few green shoots rising above the dirt. They reached the end of the farmers’ fields and carried on into the countryside, untouched except for the dirt road that indicated other people had gone this way at some point before. Eventually, they came to the base of a small hill. Though the incline was slight, Emma was breathing hard by the time she reached the top and stopped to rest. Julia continued on, disappearing down the far side of the hill and coming into view on the track below. Emma stayed there for an hour, watching until Julia was so far away that she appeared no different than the countless trees on the horizon. Then she turned around and walked down the hill, through the open countryside, past the farmers’ fields, and back into town.

She passed by her cottage and kept on towards the town square. She passed the library, closed, and the post office, also closed, until she reached the town pub. The door was open and noise came from within, so Emma entered. Though it was early in the day, the place was filled with people, all talking loudly, all laughing at their own jokes. Emma
noted the presence of a few obvious tourists among the locals, recognizable by their fancy shoes completely unfit for walking the countryside, and wondered whether she herself possessed some telltale sign that identified her as a visitor or outsider to the town. Emma pushed her way through to the bar and signaled the bartender. She thought of ordering champagne just to see if they had it, but got a Coke instead.

Emma asked the bartender, she gathered his name was Tim from the greetings he exchanged with other patrons, if he could tell her about the robot. Tim laughed and told her he didn’t know what she was talking about, before moving down the bar so he could join the friendly banter between a couple of regulars. Emma moved away from the counter and repeated her question to a few more of the pub’s patrons. Most of them laughed at her, though a couple of townspeople vaguely recalled hearing an old man who used to frequent the pub tell a story that featured a robot. Apparently, when the old man had had too much to drink, he had been fond of spinning a yarn for tourists which told of a robot that had been built long ago by a scientist. The old man had died several years ago and the story had died with him; those few people who remembered anything about it at all couldn’t agree on whether the scientist had been Russian or German and a good-natured argument arose. Emma politely excused herself, finished her Coke, and left.

She returned to her cottage, where she was struck by how quiet it was; a thought which seemed strange considering Julia had never made a sound. Emma gathered up a few stray papers that had fallen to the floor. She had already been out for a walk that day and didn’t feel like going out again. Instead, she sat down at her desk, grabbed a pen and a clean sheet of paper from a small stack, and began to write the story of the robot.
Fish Sandwich

At three in the morning, Thomas Brock briefly awoke with an intense sensation of nausea. The feeling quickly subsided. He rolled over to lie on his right side and went back to sleep.

Five hours later, Tom woke again. This time he knew he would not be resuming his slumber and so lay on his back staring up at the ceiling. He had been having a rather odd dream in which he had grown a thick, bushy mustache and for a few moments his mind frantically tried to separate the dream from reality. Eventually, reassured that he had never had a mustache, Tom got out of bed.

It was a grey morning and a chill haunted the air. If not for the requirement that he be at work in an hour, Tom would have stayed buried in his warm blankets. However, he had no choice in the matter and could only grumble as he staggered across the hallway into the bathroom. Tom gazed blankly into the mirror. His first thought was that he was indeed mustache free after all. His second was that he definitely needed to get a haircut, though it would have to wait until next Saturday when he was off work. It wasn’t until he reached up to brush the hair away from his forehead that he noticed his left hand had turned into a shark.

The transformation must have occurred sometime during the night. At least, Tom was reasonably sure his hand had not been a shark the previous evening as he brushed his teeth before bed. It was a vaguely interesting sight, to see his hand transfigured in such a fashion. About halfway down his forearm, his skin had taken on a grey tinge which ran all the way to the end of his hand, now replaced by the shark’s gaping mouth. A triangular fin stuck up from just below his wrist. As he stared into the shark’s beady
black eyes, Tom wondered how the shark was able to survive out of water. There was no question it was alive; since Tom had become aware of it, the shark had begun shaking its head back and forth, opening its mouth slightly to reveal rows of jagged teeth.

His typical day of going work was no longer a possibility. Tom did not possess the charisma to smooth over the fact that he had a shark hand or play it off with a laugh. Even the thought of having to endure all the stares and questions from coworkers was making him queasy. Briefly, Tom’s thoughts touched on the fact that he would have difficulty typing now, which would almost certainly harm his future employment prospects. It was an issue he would have to confront eventually, but right now he didn’t want to think about it. Instead he picked up the phone and, forgetting he no longer had a left hand to dial with, jabbed the shark’s snout into the number seven.

The injured shark let out a startling cry, causing Tom to drop the phone. Was that a normal shark noise, he wondered. What did a normal shark sound like anyway? Tentatively, he attempted to soothe the shark by patting it with his right hand, pulling back quickly as it responded by snapping threateningly at him. Tom retrieved the phone from the floor and, keeping a wary eye on the shark, awkwardly dialed with his thumb.

He spoke to Susan, the receptionist at the office, and told her to let everyone know he was sick and would not be coming in today. She made some irritatingly sympathetic noises and hoped he recovered soon. Tom put down the phone and stared out of the window at the grey morning sky. He suddenly felt incredibly grimy and decided to take a shower.
Since he felt that he no longer had a place in normal society, Tom resolved to spend his day confined to his apartment. This decision lasted until shortly after noon, when a cursory inspection of his refrigerator revealed his failure to plan for this kind of situation. For a moment, Tom considered skipping lunch or attempting to craft something edible from yellowing lettuce and a bottle of ketchup. As he stood there, peering into the white space inside the refrigerator, a heated debate was occurring within his head. Eventually, hunger won out over shame. The thought of starving to death in his apartment was not particularly appealing.

In the back of the hall closet, partially hidden by a vacuum cleaner, was an old overcoat. Tom remembered seeing it for the first time in the store, a jet black robe fit for a gentleman. He had bought it immediately, paying far too much, and rushed home to find that in the dingy apartment light the coat looked like a joke upon his awkward body. The coat had since been locked away. Tom was far too self conscious to go out in it, but he had held on to the overcoat in the belief that one day he might be worthy of it.

He now had a reason to wear the coat. The long sleeves concealed all but the tip of the shark’s nose, and that could be easily hidden by keeping his left hand tucked into the deep pocket. To keep the shark from fidgeting (apparently it did not appreciate being shut away in a dark woolen prison) Tom tucked a few lettuce leaves into the pocket. The shark chewed on them peacefully, unaware that it was a carnivore. Perhaps it too was unaware of normal shark behavior.

The outside world was still as dull as it had been when he woke up. A sullen faced man sat on a hard stone bench waiting for a bus. Why was that man so miserable on this particular day? Had he too woken up to find himself transformed? For the first time, Tom
considered that his shark hand was not a unique affliction. He had spoken to no one this morning; in a wild moment he wondered if perhaps there were others like him. Wait, thought Tom, he had spoken to Susan on the phone after all. He doubted she would have failed to mention an office full of shark hands. Most likely he was unique, or at least uncommon. He felt a sense of bitter pride at being probably the only man in the world with a shark hand. The sullen faced man continued to wait in silence.

There was a taco place on the corner. Hungry as he was, the greasy stench emanating from what was presumably the kitchen drove Tom away. Besides, the thought of giving a taco to the shark seemed ludicrous. Simpler foods were needed.

Tom walked another block and crossed the street to a burger joint. He paused outside; despite having passed by numerous times, he had never consciously taken in the restaurant’s name. Shark Burger. This was a joke on him, it had to be. A hot, black ball of rage congealed in Tom’s stomach. He wanted to go in there and shove his shark hand right in their faces, see how they reacted when confronted with that which they mocked from afar. Instead, he opened the door and entered, keeping his head down and his hand deep in his pocket.

A young boy, a teenager, waited at the counter to take orders. What did he know of the world, of suffering? There was no point in being angry at such a person. Tom ordered a chicken burger for himself and a fish sandwich for the shark. He had difficulty extracting the money from his wallet with one hand and felt the boy’s impatient eyes on him as he fumbled with the notes. Don’t look down on me, he wanted to say, it’s not my fault.
Only a few customers were in the restaurant, and Tom was able to find an isolated table in the corner. He sat with his left side to the wall and, hidden from view, withdrew the shark from his pocket. It had been very well behaved, all things considered. Tom wondered if the shark had fallen asleep, and was surprised to realize he was not even sure that sharks slept. When he got home, he would do some research. Absentmindedly, he brushed a few scraps of lettuce off the shark’s nose and it turned to look up at him. They watched each other for a moment. Then Tom unwrapped the fish sandwich and set it down on the chair beside the shark. He peeled the wrapper from his own meal and took a bite. They sat there in silence, Tom and his shark, having their first meal together.

Around three o’clock, a ray of sunshine broke through the clouds and briefly provided a bit of warmth to the city. Then it was gone, and the grey returned. Tom shivered despite his thick overcoat. He had not returned to his apartment after lunch and had instead chosen to wander the streets at random. Though he didn’t want to admit it, he was seeking a connection, some form of acknowledgement, but, of course, everyone else was hidden away inside the buildings, busy with work or school. There were some middle aged women devotedly shopping at the supermarket. Tom passed them by, turning his head so no one could see his face.

It wasn’t the women that caused Tom to be afraid. He had worked at that supermarket for one summer and, since then, refused to go back to it. This was fairly typical behavior for Tom. Mostly he was worried he might run into someone he used to work with and be recognized. Such a meeting would inevitably lead to an awkward conversation despite the participants having nothing to talk about. It was best to prevent
such situations and so Tom usually stayed away from this part of town. There was nothing to actually be concerned about, however, as most of Tom’s former coworkers had left by now and kept as far away from the place as they could. Only two people remained from Tom’s time and they had no memory of the boy who had worked there briefly a few years ago.

Tom’s wandering brought him to a movie theater. It was a small brick building, naturally quiet in the middle of the day. Though he had no real intention of seeing a movie, Tom paused to read the marquee. None of the titles were familiar to him. His mind drifted away as he turned to resume his wandering, but a sudden movement drew his gaze back to the theater. Beneath the sign was the theater box office and inside that there was a girl. She was watching Tom with what might have been curiosity, though it was hard to tell with several feet and a glass panel between them. An odd feeling of reckless confidence overtook Tom as he looked back at the girl who had noticed him. He would show her his shark hand, he thought. He approached the box office, walking a little too fast, and requested a ticket (knowing nothing about the films, he based his choice on the titles alone). The girl exchanged the usual pleasantries with him and then, ignoring the thumping of his heart, Tom reached out with his shark hand and took the ticket from her with its teeth. He looked to see her reaction. She smiled and told him to enjoy the film.

Either she had not noticed or she did not consider the shark to be worth remarking on. Embarrassed by his failure, Tom slunk towards the theater door and quickly entered. The inside of the theater was just as empty as the outside world. A couple of kids (delinquents by the look of them) were fiddling with the ancient arcade games along one of the walls. Tom watched them as they haphazardly made their way around the course in
some kind of racing simulator. Something about the kids was incredibly annoying and Tom felt the desire to rebuke them. The obvious thing to do would be to challenge them to one of the games, but Tom doubted his ability to win when limited to one hand.

Having a shark hand would probably prevent him from driving his car, now that he considered it. The thought was abstract; it did not generate an emotional response. Tom had never been fond of driving, or more accurately, he had never been fond of dealing with other drivers. He had tried taking the bus to work, but after a couple of weeks of safe traveling it had culminated in an unpleasant event. A hunched-over old woman, ripe with decay, had sat next to him on the way home one evening despite there being no shortage of empty seats. Tom had endured the event in silence, nearly vomiting when the bus turned a corner and the woman’s shoulder had touched his own. He had henceforth decided that dealing with the impatient tailgaters and assorted idiots of the road was an acceptable tradeoff for the solitude of his own car.

The shark had chewed up and swallowed the ticket by now. Fortunately, the theater was so quiet that no one was bothering to check tickets. Still, Tom thought, perhaps he should get something for the shark to eat. It had been a while since the fish sandwich and he had no idea of how often the shark needed to eat. What was its normal calorie intake? Where did all the food go anyway? Tom realized his knowledge of sharks was woefully inadequate.

Over at the concession stand, the girl from the ticket booth was handing a bag of putrid yellow popcorn to one of the idiot kids. Was she the only one working here? Tom slipped his shark hand back into his pocket. She had snubbed him once already; he wouldn’t give her a second opportunity. He bought the largest bag of popcorn she had in
the fewest words he could do so. Then he entered theater three, where the movie he had
paid for was about to begin. Naturally, it was empty; Tom had not expected anything else.

He sat down, balanced the popcorn on the armrest, and stuck his shark hand into
the bag up to the elbow. The shark thrashed around excitedly and tore the paper bag in
two. As the popcorn poured out onto the floor with the rest of the trash, the shark seemed
almost remorseful. Tom picked up a few pieces of popcorn in his right hand and held
them for the shark to eat. Overhead, the lights darkened as the movie started. Tom sat
through the previews and left during the opening credits.

Tom sat high above the earth and looked at where he imagined the sunset would
be behind the clouds. He had been passing by a park and been drawn to the cold steel
frame erected in the deserted playground. It had been surprisingly tough to pull himself to
the top; the shark refused to bite down on metal and so was useless for climbing. The air
grew ever colder and he drew the overcoat tighter around himself. The shark shivered in
his sleeve.

He thought of the girl at the theater. Had she truly not noticed his shark? What if
she had noticed and not said anything, feeling it would be kinder to feign ignorance?
Perhaps she thought the shark was a kind of disfigurement, a condition that evoked
sympathy rather than admiration. Well, he didn’t need her pity.

“We don’t need her,” he said to his shark.

The shark peaked out from Tom’s sleeve, curious at the sound of his voice. The
words sounded foreign to Tom as well.
Night had fallen by the time Tom returned to his apartment. He had remembered his food situation and purchased a loaf of bread on the way back; an accomplishment which was slightly devalued by the fact that he had forgotten to get anything to put on the bread. It seemed there was no other option than to resort to the ketchup in the refrigerator (he scrutinized the yellow lettuce for a few seconds, before finally throwing it away). Tom poured the thick, red slime over a slice of bread. He folded the bread over upon itself, lifted it to his mouth, and took a bite. It was cold, sweet and gelatinous; odd but not unpleasant.

After wiping the last crumbs from his mouth, Tom prepared for bed. He brushed his teeth vigorously as the reflection in the bathroom mirror did the same. When he offered the toothbrush to his shark, it bit the brush in two and lunged for a bar of soap. Tom pulled it away and held the shark up to the mirror. In this confined space, saturated with artificial light, the shark’s skin looked almost white.

At the close of the evening’s rituals, Tom walked through the apartment turning off the lights one by one. Even without them, enough light filtered in from the streetlight outside his window that he could see his way around. He drew the curtains shut, though they were too thin to make a difference. At last, Tom got into bed. He lay on his back with his shark resting on top of the blankets, slightly worried that it would bite him if he rolled over on it in the night. Tomorrow he might have to go back to work. He couldn’t call in sick forever and sooner or later he would have to deal with his new life. Although, maybe not. Hell, maybe he would just quit. He was the man with the shark hand; why should he endure the mundane trivialities inflicted upon the rest of humanity?
The shark softly chewed at the corner of the blanket, a loose thread caught between its teeth.
Chloe had spent most of the morning doing nothing. This was typical of her winter break so far; she had come home from college at her parents’ request to watch the house while they were gone on vacation, meeting them on the doorstep as they struggled out with an armada of suitcases. They thanked her in passing and added that it was only for a couple of weeks, before throwing their luggage and themselves into the taxi waiting at the curb to take them to the airport. Some girls would probably have been thrilled to be left alone with an entire house at their disposal. Whether one preferred wild holiday parties with people one hadn’t seen in forever or all-night movie marathons with a few close friends, it was an opportunity for everyone to indulge in their particular pleasure without parental restriction. Unfortunately, the small number of people Chloe could call friends had either remained at school or had gone back to their own homes, all of which were far away from where she was now. She had tried to have a movie night by herself, but without the commentary or company of others she didn’t feel in the mood to continue after the first film, a generic romantic comedy where a supposedly ugly girl learned the secret to getting the guy she wanted was to change her hairstyle and take off her glasses.

The plot of the movie came back to her now as she lay on the floor of the living room, flicking through the pages of the TV guide to see if there was anything on that was worth watching. It was so stupid, she thought, how did movies like that keep getting made? She wished her dorm roommate from school, Sarah, was there to make fun of it with her, though admittedly they weren’t that close. If she had someone, anyone, to laugh at it with, then she could move on and forget about it. On her own, she got stuck repeating the same ideas over and over in her head.
She dropped the magazine and, not wanting to get up, rolled across the floor to where her bag sat on the sofa. Chloe reached an arm up and dug through the bag’s contents until her fingers felt the slim plastic circle of her mirror and pulled it out. She lay on her back and held the mirror above her face while using her other hand to remove her glasses. The world immediately dissolved into a blurry mess of colors. It was impossible for her to make out her reflection in the mirror, even at the short distance at which it was held. If she squinted, she could just about make out the distinction between the pink blob of her face and the brown cloud of hair fanned out on the floor around it, but nothing she recognized as herself. To see anything clearly, she had to bring the mirror down so it was right next to her eye. Though she couldn’t see herself without the thick lenses of her glasses obscuring her face, at least she could see how her eyes were supposed to look without a layer of plastic in front of them. The eye in the mirror was mostly green, with a ring of brown round the pupil at the center. It looked like it belonged to an alien creature and Chloe was surprised when she blinked and the eye did the same.

The sound of a car coming down the street outside caught her attention. She listened as it paused outside her house for a moment before carrying on down the road in a hurry. Probably the mailman, thought Chloe as she replaced her glasses and stood up. She could kill a couple of minutes by going down to pick up the mail from the box by the road and, if she was lucky, there might be something interesting waiting for her. Since she had nowhere to go and nothing to do, Chloe hadn’t bothered to change out of her pajamas and was ill-prepared for going outside on a cold winter’s day. Still, she figured the sky blue attire would be okay for the short walk down the driveway to get the mail. Sticking her feet into a pair of worn pink sandals lying by the front door, she stepped out
into the grey world while taking care that the door didn’t close and lock behind her. A shiver ran through her as she left the artificial warmth of the house; it was colder than she had expected, though thankfully there was no precipitation. She jogged down to the mailbox and flipped down the front flap to retrieve the mail.

There was nothing inside. Clearly the mailman hadn’t been yet and she had merely mistaken the sound of a passing car. Chloe was a little embarrassed at her screw-up; she hoped the neighbors weren’t watching from behind their kitchen blinds, smirking and jabbing each other in the ribs as they laughed at the silly girl in her pajamas who had come running out of her house to check the mail when it hadn’t even arrived. She glanced down the street to see if any passersby had caught her error. Fortunately, there was no one in sight. As she breathed a sigh of relief, Chloe noticed a small white bundle lying in the road across from the Menard family’s house next door.

Chloe closed the mailbox and, drawn by the itch of curiosity, walked over to the bundle. As she drew closer, she realized it was the body of a cat, dead, probably from being hit by a speeding car. The body was intact, for which she was thankful. Not that she was one of those girls who collapsed at the sight of blood, but she preferred to avoid it if at all possible. She knelt down next to the cat and, with a gasp of horror, recognized the scattered black patches on its white fur. It was Pierre, the Menard family’s pet cat, with whom she had just recently become friends. Maybe “acquaintances” would better describe their relationship; it wasn’t as if they had ever hung out or anything like that. Though she had seen him around quite often recently, they had only spoken once, a couple of days ago, when she had noticed him prowling around her backyard. She had
been feeling lonely without anyone to speak to and, on noticing the cat, had flung open the backdoor to address him.

“Hello, cat!” she had yelled, probably, she thought later, coming off as a bit desperate.

The cat had frozen in place at the sound of her voice, staring at her with wide eyes.

“I am to be addressed...” he had said slowly, speaking with a slight accent, “…as Pierre Menard.”

She had stepped out onto the patio, ignoring how cold the stone felt on her bare feet. Then, as now, she had not bothered to get dressed for the day and was only wearing pajamas.

“Mr. Menard, then. Pierre. Can I stroke you?”

“No!” he had cried and leapt up and over the fence to the safety of his own yard, leaving Chloe standing there with her hand half extended.

Though their interaction hadn’t consisted of much, it stood out amongst the emptiness of her recent days. The way she was seeing him now, loose and lifeless, it was hard for her to believe he was the same cat as that tensed ball of energy that had shot over the fence like a bat out of hell. She wondered how he had died, if he had looked at the approaching car with the same wide eyed stare he had used on her. Her own eyes felt wet and heavy. She blinked a few times and took off her glasses to clean the lenses on her pajamas. This wasn’t the time to fall apart, she told herself, she had to be strong for poor Pierre. She certainly couldn’t leave him lying out in the street like this where his body would be defiled by careless motorists.
Chloe scooped up his soft body, so light that she only needed one hand, and stood up, cradling him against her chest. Pierre was cold and she wondered whether that meant he had been there for a while or whether it was because the winter had worked quickly to steal the last traces of his life. Either way, she had to return him home and let his family know.

“It’s alright,” she whispered to the cat, “I’ve got you.”

She carried her small burden up the two steps to the porch of the Menard house and knocked three times on the large white door. After a moment, she noticed a doorbell alongside the door and she pressed that as well. A chime sounded from deep within the house.

“Come in,” a muffled voice called through the door, “It’s unlocked.”

Chloe turned the knob and pushed the door open. As she entered the warm house, the difference in temperature alerted her to how cold she was. Her hands and feet suddenly felt like blocks of ice and her nose tingled, requiring her to give it a quick wipe with her pajama sleeve.

“Hello?” she called.

“In here,” a voice sounded from the room to her right.

Although she had never met the Menards, Chloe assumed the deep, commanding voice had to belong to the father. That was good, better to explain to him about dear Pierre than to have to face crying children or a distraught mother. There was a foreign note to the voice too and she wondered if the whole family had come from abroad. Menard, at least, was not a common name in this part of the world. Certainly, she thought,
only a foreigner would leave the front door unlocked or invite unseen strangers into his home.

It occurred to her that she didn’t know very much about the Menards at all, despite living next door. Part of that was due to the fact that she didn’t live next door at all, at least not in her mind. While her official school transcript might cite that place as her permanent address, and indeed she had grown up there, she now saw it only as her parents’ home and no longer as her own. Part of this was simply the natural impulse to be independent that accompanied her growing maturity and departure for college. The other part, however, was born out of the feeling that she had never really belonged there to begin with. She had always felt slightly out of place, unable to form lasting connections with anything or anyone, including her parents, and their failed attempts to understand each other had given way first to a cordial distance and then a physical one. Thus, when the Menards had moved in a year or so ago, she had been absent both in mind and body and, with the exception of her few encounters with Pierre, had no basis on which to form an expectation of what she would find in their house.

As she entered the room to which she had been summoned, Chloe saw it was a living room, though much more expensively furnished than the one she had been lying in that morning. Two leather sofas and a trio of matching armchairs were circled round a sturdy wooden table at the center. Shelves lined the walls, filled with thick books and the occasional plant, chess set, or valuable looking vase. There wasn’t a television to be seen, though a piano stood in the far corner. As surprising as the room was, Chloe’s attention was captured by the one who had called her into it. There, perched in a brown leather armchair directly facing her, was Pierre Menard.
Chloe looked down at the cat in her arms in confusion. She was certain it was Pierre; he had all the correct markings, right down to the black dot in the center of his forehead. Yet the cat sitting in the chair across from her also had the same mark on his head and, looking at him, she was equally certain that he too was Pierre.

“You’re the child from next door. What have you got there?” the Pierre in the chair said in a cold voice, his eyes narrowing to tiny slits.

“I found him lying in the road. It’s…” Chloe hesitated, not sure what to say, “It’s you.”

“Don’t be silly, girl. It can’t be me. I’m right here,” Pierre responded, flicking the tip of his tail back and forth.

“It really is you though, just look,” Chloe insisted.

She gently set Pierre’s body down on the center wooden table. It seemed as if he were only sleeping and might at any moment yawn and stretch out his paws. The other Pierre hopped up onto the table and crept toward the body, giving it a cautious sniff before settling down in a crouch reminiscent of a roosting hen. Chloe began to feel uneasy as she observed the two identical cats, one living and one dead. It occurred to her that the situation was too odd to be real and she had to be dreaming. Perhaps she had fallen asleep on the floor back in her house or maybe she had never gotten up at all. That was the problem with wearing pajamas all day, she chided herself, it made it hard to tell where the dreams ended. She needed to confirm whether this was actually happening and reached out a hand toward the crouched cat. If she could feel the warmth of his body and the beat of his living heart, she would know this was real.
Just as her fingertips were about to brush against his fur, Pierre flung himself off the table and scampered away into the shadows under the piano in the corner. Chloe followed and sat down on the floor with her back against a bookshelf. She could see the cat watching her, his green eyes wide in terror as if she might lunge at him at any moment.

“No touching,” he said, “Especially not by strangers. Besides, you’ve been carrying a dead body. Think of all the germs on your hands.”

Chloe felt her shoulders sink at the feline’s words. So he considered her a stranger? It was true they didn’t know each other that well, but she had thought there was at least some level of familiarity between them. What about all the moments they had shared, like the time she saw him in her backyard or the time she found one of his toys, a little straw mouse, out by the road and returned it to him by tossing it over the fence? Did all those things mean nothing?

“You could be nicer to me,” she mumbled, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them, “I did bring your body inside instead of leaving it out where a car could mangle it.”

Pierre sat back, lifted his rear leg up, and began licking himself.

“That’s not even my body,” he said between flicks of his tiny pink tongue.

“It is you. It’s exactly the same,” groaned Chloe. Her head was starting to throb and she wasn’t in the mood to argue with this disagreeable animal, but she needed to convince him that she had returned the body to the right place. Otherwise she didn’t know what she’d do with it.
“Hardly,” said Pierre, abandoning his self-cleaning in order to again fix Chloe with a narrow stare, “We are nothing alike.”

“But you have the same markings.”

“Not at all,” Pierre flopped over on his back and rolled around as if consumed by laughter, though his voice was as stern as ever, “I have an arrangement composed of a series of points which form the tips of an asymmetrical pentagonal star. He has five spots. I have a noir head ornamentation which is beautifully contrasted with my pure white fur. He has a black patch between the eyes. Only a philistine would consider us even remotely similar.”

There didn’t seem to be any point trying to argue with the cat, so Chloe simply leaned her head forward and rested it on her knees. Part of her wanted to scream in frustration at the whole situation. She had thought she would be doing a good deed, returning Pierre’s body, performing a favor for him and his family, doing something meaningful at least. Instead, it had all gone wrong. Moreover, the Pierre she thought she knew, the Pierre she was getting to know, her Pierre, whose body she had so lovingly held against her own, was not Pierre at all. She shut out the rest of the world and concentrated on the rhythm of her own breathing. Slowly, she began to relax and think about what to do next. If the body on the table truly wasn’t Pierre, she couldn’t leave it there. Neither could she return it to the street where she had found it; that would be cruel and callous. She could leave it somewhere else though, where someone with a better idea of what to do would find it. Or maybe she could call someone to come take care of it. She had heard that the fire department helped rescue cats from trees and wondered if dead
felines fell under their area of expertise. Either way, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d be abandoning someone who needed her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sensation of something lightly tickling her hand. She turned her head to look and saw that Pierre was sniffing at her fingers, his whiskers brushing across her skin. She watched him for a moment and then reached out her hand to touch his head. For a brief second, she felt the smooth silkiness of his fur and the heat of his body rising up through his skin. Then he bolted away and out of the room. Chloe waited and watched as, a minute later, he came creeping back, slinking along the side of the sofa. He sat down at a short distance from her and began to pick at the carpet with his claws.

“This situation does present some possibilities,” he said suddenly.

“How so?” asked Chloe, raising her head to speak clearly.

“Though I maintain we are markedly different, the fact is that you mistook that other cat for me and, therefore, others are likely to make the same mistake. If I were to, say, take this opportunity to flee and leave the other cat in my place, no one would suspect that I had escaped,” Pierre’s ears twitched, “Except, of course, for you.”

“Flee? Flee from what? Are they mean to you here?”

“Not at all. The father mostly ignores me and the youngest child occasionally pulls my tail or pets me too hard, but otherwise my care is adequate. I get food and attention as I need it. I even have a ball filled with catnip. Wonderful stuff.”

“But then why do you want to leave?”

“Why do you want to stay?” Pierre’s expression was unreadable. If he were human, Chloe would have interpreted the thin eyes and tight mouth to signify disdain of
her, but, as she reminded herself, he was a cat. That condescending look was simply his natural expression.

“Someone has to watch the house,” she muttered.

“The act of going is the very reason for going itself,” Pierre continued, not even deigning to acknowledge her response, “If I see an open door, I walk through it. If I see a loose thread, I pull it until everything unravels. But don’t mistake my actions for chaotic randomness simply because I lack specific intent. All that I do is a carefully calculated impulse.”

Pierre, having said his piece, turned his attention to scratching behind his left ear with his paw, closing his eyes as if in ecstasy. Chloe watched him, unsure of how to respond. Perhaps it was due to no more than the dignified timbre of his voice, but she had found the cat’s little speech quite compelling. Not that she would ever admit to that being the case, embarrassing as it was to face the fact that she could be swayed by the words of a cat. She doubted she could change his mind even if she wanted to, but she had to ask one more question.

“Don’t you care about the people you’ll leave behind? Don’t you think that your family will miss you?”

“Why yes, I’m sure that they will mourn me. However, by leaving a body behind, they’ll be able to have a sense of closure. By believing that I’m dead, they’ll have a much more comforting ending instead of suffering the ambiguity of my simply disappearing. With the certainty of a conclusion, they will be able to move on. Maybe they’ll even get another cat.”
He had clearly thought the whole thing out and there didn’t seem to be any more to say. Chloe stood up and brushed off a few white cat hairs that had attached themselves to her pajamas. She located a pad of paper and a pen on a shelf next a carved wooden chess set and tore off a sheet in order to write a brief note for the family, which she then placed next to the body of the dead Pierre. With that done, she and the living Pierre left the house, making sure the front door locked behind them. They walked together down the street until they were outside Chloe’s house. Pierre started to sharpen his claws on the post of the mailbox, carving thin lines into the wood.

“Where will you go now?” Chloe asked him.

“I think I will keep heading in this direction until I find something that justifies my decision to do so,” Pierre replied and promptly walked away without so much as a goodbye.

His departure bothered her, not because of the rude abruptness, which she had come to expect, but because she was now once again alone. She walked up to the front door of her house and was surprised to find it locked. Perhaps it had blown shut, she thought, though she hadn’t noticed any wind. It was probably a good thing, she thought with a touch of guilt, seeing as how she was supposed to be watching the house and had gone off leaving the door open. The shock of finding Pierre’s body in the street had caused her to completely forget her duties. She retrieved the key her parents kept hidden under a fake plastic rock next to the doorstep and used it to let herself in. After her time spent with Pierre, the house felt even quieter and emptier than before and she found herself wishing that, as rude as the cat was, he had come home with her. She kicked off
her sandals and made her way into the living room with the idea of distracting herself by watching a movie.

There was a body lying on the sofa. Chloe stopped in shock, but, having already been exposed to death that day, quickly recovered and approached the body for a closer look. It was a girl wearing blue pajamas similar to Chloe’s, but they were more worn and washed-out, probably secondhand. The girl was lying on her back, with her long hair hanging over the side of the sofa, and had a peaceful expression on her young face. She could have been sleeping, except that her eyes, visible behind her glasses, were open. Unable to resist, Chloe removed the girl’s glasses and bent over to look into her eyes. At first she thought they were brown, but, as she stared into them, she noticed they were a mix of green and brown, one color blending into the other. They were, Chloe thought, very pretty eyes.

Chloe replaced the girl’s glasses and stood back, twisting her mouth in a thoughtful expression as she tried to explain the girl’s presence. Although they were quite different in appearance, was it possible that someone had mistaken this girl for her and brought the body here by mistake? It was not impossible, she had to admit, the people around here didn’t know her that well after all and a neighbor who had only glimpsed her a few times could have easily confused her with someone else. She looked around to see if a note had been left with the body and was annoyed when she didn’t find one.

“When leaves a body without a note?” she said aloud to no one in particular.

Her bag was on the sofa by the girl’s feet and Chloe quickly checked through it to make sure nothing had been taken. It occurred to her that, in the absence of a note, she had the opportunity to write her own. She thought for a moment about her parents and if
they would miss her if she left; it was probably too much to hope that they would understand why she couldn’t stay, but at least they could take some consolation in the fact that this girl had remained to keep their house safe. From her bag, she took a pen and a yellow sticky note, scribbled a short message, a carefully calculated impulse, and fixed it to the forehead of the girl on the sofa. It looked a little odd there, so she moved it to the girl’s stomach where the yellow went nicely with the blue of the pajamas. Then she grabbed her bag and hurried over to the front door, slipping on her sandals before going out, and closing and locking the door behind her.

As she walked down to the road, she saw the mailman leaning out of his van to stick a few letters into the mailbox. She waved at him and he returned the greeting.

“Heading out?” he asked, making idle small talk.

“Yes, but it’s okay. I found someone else to watch the house for a while,” Chloe replied.

She waited as the mailman continued down the street, depositing mail at the Menard house, and the one after, and the one after that. Then she turned and ran in the opposite direction, running until she no longer recognized the houses around her, until she found a reason to stop, until she caught up with Pierre Menard.

“Hello,” she said breathlessly, reaching down to stroke his head.

The cat flicked his tail back and forth without saying a word.
End of the Revolution

The notes of Chopin’s *Revolutionary Etude* rained upon George from the elevator’s speakers. He was on his way down from the student council rooms located on the thirty-fifth floor of Valentine High School’s central administrative tower. One of George’s first moves after being elected council president had been to acquire the top floor of the tower so that during meetings he could stand at the windows and gaze out upon the campus he controlled. From the ground, one was simply overwhelmed with the grandeur of the school’s design. The perspective of his high office allowed George to properly appreciate the classical architecture of the school buildings with their mixing of the elegant simplicity of the Doric and the pleasing slimness of the Ionic orders. He saw them as Grecian temples which raised him up to the sky as a marble-carved god at their center.

Unfortunately, the rest of the student council lacked his appreciation for the world around them and would rather amuse themselves by playing cards or gossiping about the latest school love triangle than join him in his observations. Well, he thought with the trace of a smirk upon his lips, that was why he was president and they weren’t. Not every bud bloomed into a flower. Despite his penchant for romantic contemplation, he was committed to the realities of the world, or, rather, he aspired to manifest his ideals in reality and not abandon them as daydreams. His ambitions had made the student council the most powerful force on campus, a thought that brought him great pleasure though he would never say so openly, and it was not unusual for him to remain in the council room long after the lights in all the other buildings went out, working to make his latest desire real.
Such was the case on this night as he rode the elevator towards the ground floor with a brown envelope containing the evening’s work tucked under one arm. He had been finishing up a proposal mandating a change in the school dress code from the current black jackets to more stylish white ones. The other council members had complained about the difficulty of keeping white uniforms from getting dirty, but he silenced them by pointing out that just meant students would have to take better care of their appearance. They eventually acquiesced to his logic and departed, leaving him to write the plan up in the required formal language. Of course, the board of trustees would still have to approve the proposal, but this was no more than a formality as they had yet to reject any of his plans. Although he had never met any of the board members personally, George suspected he had an ardent admirer among them who served as an unknown ally in his schemes for the future of the school.

That was not so surprisingly, George thought, brushing the long, auburn hair from his eyes so he could study his image in the polished metal of the elevator doors. He was well aware he had many fans among the student population, both male and female. He turned his head to display his profile, reveling in his own beauty. His face presented a sharp, angular outline, yet had a certain softness of the features that combined both the masculine and the feminine. It was, he marveled, the best of both worlds. He couldn’t help striking a few poses, spurred on by his own reflection. He had already removed his jacket and had just begun to unbutton his white shirt to better show himself off when the elevator abruptly ground to a halt at the twenty-fifth floor. George’s image vanished as the doors split to reveal a man who entered with an amused smile and a nod. George
coughed in slight embarrassment at being caught and replaced his jacket, but left the top two buttons of his shirt undone. The elevator resumed its journey towards the ground.

George was curious about the stranger who had interrupted his self-admiration. It was unexpected to see anyone still at the school at this hour, and though it would be rude to stare openly, he couldn’t resist glancing at the man out of the corner of his eyes. His first thought was that the man was slightly too old to be a student, yet he couldn’t be a teacher as George had made a point of speaking with every instructor and did not recall this man’s face among them. He was certain he would remember if they had met before as the man was strikingly handsome, perhaps even more so than George himself. The extra years has sharpened the man’s features, giving him the appearance of an unflappable sense of self-confidence. He wore a hint of a smile and had a peaceful calmness about his dark eyes, which made him eminently approachable, while, at the same time, the color of his tanned skin and slick black hair suggested hidden depths. He was not the kind of man to go unnoticed, which made George even more curious as to his identity.

“It is rather hot tonight, isn’t it?” the man tilted his head towards the unbuttoned collar on George’s shirt.

“Excuse me,” George apologized, reaching for the buttons with his free hand.

“It’s not a problem. In fact, I think you have the right idea. What better sensation is there than the feel of the cool night air against your skin,” the man said silkily. With a hooked finger, he loosened his tie, before popping open the first three buttons on his black shirt, each one revealing a bit more of the dark, smooth body that lay beneath.
The music ended and another piece began to play. George recognized it as another of Chopin’s works, a nocturne, Op. 9 No. 2. He turned to face the man directly.

“I’m sorry, who are you?” he inquired, undoing a third button on his own shirt so that they would be on equal footing.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself. My name is Arthur Valentine, I’m the chairman of the school board. And your biggest fan, George Upton,” the man lowered the hand from his shirt and George grasped it instinctively in a firm handshake.

They stood like that for a moment, their hands clasped together, until a chime announced the elevator’s arrival at the ground floor and the doors slid open. Arthur smiled and inclined his head towards the outside.

“If you would care to accompany me, there’s something I’d like to show you.”

They made their way out, locking the doors of the administrative tower behind them. George let Arthur take the lead and was content to follow, letting the other man worry about their direction while he floated suspicions in his mind. Presumably, Arthur was the one who had been getting his proposals through the board, which suggested he was an ally. But why had he approached George now and what for? Surely he wasn’t going to tell George to abandon his plans to change the dress code. Certainly, if Arthur understood George at all, then he should recognize the magnificence of a student body clad in white.

They stopped outside of Dawson’s, a twenty-four hour convenience store. The artificial yellow of the lights inside was spilling out onto the streets, giving both George and Arthur long shadows even though it was nighttime. Above them, the large neon blue
D that made up the store’s name was flickering on and off. George could see through the windows that the store was empty except for a young man, a couple of years younger than himself, standing behind the register. He was wearing a blue apron with the store’s name printed in blocky white letters on it and had earphones jammed in his ears. There was a charming naiveté about his appearance and, if he were alone, George would have gone in and spoken to him. The boy, unaware he was being observed, drummed with his fingers upon the counter while nodding his head to a fast beat.

“My apologies for the walk,” said Arthur, his face half lit by the glare from the store, “Under other circumstances, I would have driven you, but I seem to have misplaced the key to my car.”

George turned to Arthur with a smile on his face and shrugged, taking care to keep his eyes from lingering on the man’s exposed collarbone.

“It’s no problem. I prefer walking. It lets me see things that would otherwise pass unnoticed.”

They left Dawson’s behind and headed uphill towards the mountains on the edge of town, Arthur still in front and George a few paces behind. One by one the buildings fell away, ten-story apartment buildings giving way to two-story homes and then buildings with only one floor. Eventually, even those came to an end and the pair of walkers were accompanied only by the red rocks alongside the mountain road, and the occasional burst of rich, green foliage. After several minutes climb, George spotted a silver convertible a few feet ahead of them, which, out of place this far from town, he took to be their goal. However, Arthur turned away and stepped off the road, vanishing amongst the low branches of a thick, short tree.
George was surprised, not only by his guide’s sudden disappearance, but by his knowledge of this particular place. With his mind focused on Arthur, he had not been paying attention to the scenery. This tree, which grew along the edge of the hillside, provided a secluded spot from which one could gaze down at the town without being visible from the road, while its low branches served as natural benches upon which to recline. George had been here many times before, occasionally alone when he had some student council business to muse over. More often, he came as a brief respite from his work, bringing some boy or girl he’d taken a temporary fancy to. There was something about the spot, especially at night, that made it the perfect place for seduction. Perhaps, thought George, it was the ability to see the world while being hidden yourself, a feeling of power that loosened people’s inhibitions. As he slipped into the canopy of the tree, he wondered exactly what Arthur had planned.

The older man was already seated on a branch and motioned for George to join him. Together they sat and looked out at the town. George’s eyes went first to the school, easy to find as it was located at the very center of the valley and marked by the shining beacon of the administrative tower. It was like a monument, no, he corrected himself, it was a monument, a symbol of all that he’d achieved. He was reminded of the envelope in his hand and passed it to Arthur.

“Please take a look at this. It’s my suggestion for a change to the dress code, which, while seemingly slight, will have significant long term effects in further enhancing the dig-”
His pitch was cut short as Arthur, with only a glance at its contents, tossed the envelope over the cliff in front of them. The envelope spun in the air and opened, the pages within quickly scattering as the wind carried them off.

“What do you see before you?” Arthur asked, closing his eyes and resting his back against the trunk of the tree.

“Is this a game?” George replied, more than a little miffed at the casual disregard for the proposal he’d spent so many hours working on. When Arthur didn’t respond, he sighed and, figuring that it would be in his best interests to play along and remain in the man’s good graces, studied the scene laid out below.

“I see a school made great by my own efforts, the foundation of a legacy, a torch that will carry a tradition into the future. I see a tower that stretches to the heavens representing man’s ambition. I see dozens of classrooms full of raw, yearning potential, ready to be shaped by the vision of a leader,” he paused, a little breathless.

“What else?” prompted Arthur without opening his eyes.

“I see…” George hesitated. What else was there? His eyes moved from the school to the nearby estate where his house was. There was no one there and without the lights on it was impossible to make out, lost in the shadows of the bright tower. He turned his gaze closer to the foot of the hill below them, “I see a convenience store with no customers, only a boy lost in his own world and a broken sign.”

Arthur laughed softly or George thought he did. It might just have been the wind in the leaves around them. The man rose to his feet and turned to look down at George.

“Have you never thought of looking up?” he said.
In automatic response to his words, George tilted his head back to examine the sky. A million tiny lights winked back at him as they twirled across the heavens as if dancing on a black stage to the Fantasie-Impromptu. But so what, thought George, looking back down to see Arthur was watching and waiting for his reaction. Was this another game?

“You do know they aren’t actually stars,” he said, unable to keep a condescending edge from his words.

It was true. Due to the mountains that surrounded the area in an unbroken ring, clouds became trapped, creating a grey canopy that hung over the town at all times. While the occasional glimpse of the sun was possible during the day, at night it was impossible to observe the faint light of the stars through the thick barrier. Those lights above them were merely the lights of the town reflecting back off the clouds, nothing more than a pretty illusion. Everyone knew this of course, no superstition could survive in a place that was so dedicated to educational excellence, George had seen to that. As chairman, Arthur certainly knew that too.

“Naturally,” he replied, his eyes gentle but fixed on George’s, keeping him locked in place, “But there are real stars beyond them.”

Arthur suddenly turned on his heel, placing himself at the edge of the cliff, and flung his arms out wide in a dramatic pose. As if on cue, a burst of wind tore his shirt open, the dark fabric streaming behind him as he presented his body, lithe and muscular, to the night sky. It was impossible to tell if he was offering himself up as a tribute or demanding one be paid to him.

“Don’t you want to see the stars, George?”
George cocked an eyebrow, “What are you suggesting?”

“Some people spend their whole lives in this town. You’ve done great things for the school, true, but someone of your talent can’t stay here forever,” Arthur spoke in a soft, almost mournful tone.

George watched Arthur’s silhouette, illuminated by the false reflections in the sky. What was the man talking about, he wondered, his sleek eyebrows knitting in contemplation, there were still a million things left for him to do as president of the student council. Aside from the uniform issue that had been tossed over the cliff, there were also the pressing matters of approving the fencing club’s budget, selecting a landscaper for the renovation of the garden on west campus, and reviewing the safety procedures for the upcoming science showcase festival. Who else could he trust with these tasks? He had never once considered any need to appoint a successor or heir to his empire. In his absence, command would most likely pass to the vice president, a girl named Amy, a diligent and capable worker, but one who let the future happen without actively attempting to mold it. The school could survive under her leadership, but could it grow?

And yet, George thought, what of his own future? Staying here would help the school, but would it help him? He already knew the answer. As president, he had claimed the top floor of the tower, the highest building in the town and, as prestigious as his position was, he could ascend no further within these confines. In the end, he thought with a melancholy chuckle, even the queen ant was still just an ant. He rose from his seat on the tree branch and stepped forward to stand besides Arthur. His nimble fingers smoothly unbuttoned his shirt before he cast his arms wide in imitation of the older man’s
pose. He stood that way for a while, his head tilted back, but his eyes closed for he had no desire to see any more fake stars. Instead, he focused on the feel of the wind on his naked chest, embracing the sensation of the cold breath skipping and whirling around him.

“So you’ve made your decision?” Arthur’s voice brought him back to the present.

“Yes,” replied George, “I’m going.”

They stepped out from under the tree to stand by the side of the road, their open shirts draped loosely around them without the benefit of the wind. Arthur reached into his pocket and withdrew a small cardboard tube, which he handed to George.

“Your diploma,” he said with a smile, “Congratulations on your graduation.”

George tucked the tube under one arm and shook Arthur’s hand, lingering for a moment in its warmth before it slipped away. The man turned around, doing his shirt up as he started along the road back to town.

“One moment,” George called after him, prompting Arthur to stop and glance back, “The dress code proposal. I hate to leave a job unfinished.”

Arthur laughed, his voice quiet like the murmur of a half-remembered lullaby, “I’ll make sure it’s taken care of. Goodbye, George Upton.”

Then he was gone, lost in the darkness. George pulled out the cardboard tube, hearing something inside rattle as he did so. He removed the plastic cap on one end and tipped the contents into the palm of his hand. A small, silver key fell out. Immediately, he turned to look at the car parked a little further up the hill, still in the same spot as before. Was it possible, he thought, drawing close to the convertible. He didn’t bother trying the door and simply leapt over it into the driver’s seat. He slid the key into the ignition and
turned it, the car instantly purring to life. For a moment, he sat in silence, enjoying the throb of the engine beneath him, soaking in the presence of the car’s former owner, a lingering scent in the air and the shape of a warm body impressed upon the chair he now occupied. Then he reached over and turned on the radio. Static greeted him as he cycled through the stations; this far out in the mountains it was hard to pick up any signals. No matter though, he thought, he would provide his own music. He started to hum the familiar melody of Chopin’s Op. 10 No. 3 Etude.

He put his foot down and the car leapt away, faster than he’d expected, the wind ruffling his open shirt and his long hair streaming behind him. He realized he had left his jacket under the tree, but he couldn’t go back for it now. The town grew small in the rearview mirror, until all that could be seen was the shining tower of the school and then that too was lost as he sped up the mountain and beyond the clouds.