

DON'T SEE, DON'T SPEAK  
A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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## Abstract

This short story collection follows diverse characters as they long to find their place in the chaos of modern world. As the trend of postmodern literature traces our failure to understand our lives and discover a larger context, we find that our reality is ever-changing and there is not a single constant to follow. We are disappointed by modern political systems, our lovers, and our own individual capabilities. The issue of belonging means finding a place that, both physically and mentally, provides context and meaning for our existence. The five short stories presented here examine social issues, such as immigration, political revolution, and social role of the media. At the same time, the subtleties of personal belonging – love, rejection, fear of the future, crisis of identity – are dissected under a looking glass, brought forward to emphasize the individual human element while the larger themes fade into the background.

The main character of “Winter Velvet” speaks from the midst of the Velvet Revolution taking place in Prague, anxiously awaiting the outcome and attempting to understand the impact this revolution will have on his life. The narrator of “Metathesiophobia in Three Parts” possesses the kind of existential fears and anxieties we see in the eyes of American youth as they all face grim futures in a country without direction. “The Stage” explores the moments of terror an immigrant experiences when facing his first deportation scare. “El Pollo Negro” is the story of a Mexican man haunted by a black chicken as he attempts to build a life in America. Finally, “Jeremy Stock Live!” examines the role of morality in American reality TV shows ala Jerry Springer. What is it that fascinates us about pitting tragically flawed people against an

audience of judges and a host/executor? In all of these stories the characters experience a longing to hold onto a single place, to find firm ground in the world and allow home, whatever and wherever it is, to pour over them and never let them go.

## Dedications

For my beautiful mother, who showed me the world and taught me to love it.

For all the mentors who shared their brilliant minds and illuminated my journey.

And for my incredible friends around the world, who infuse my life with stories.

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## Winter Velvet

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1989, I was ten years old, stepping out of my father's old Lada, clenching my fists and holding back tears. The ground was layered with icy snow. In front of me stood a two-story house my father liked to refer to as a "cabin," while snorting and holding onto his belly. He had purchased it when I was eight for a very low price, mostly because it was located in a small village far away from Prague, and the property was so big it required at least two full days of grass-cutting or snow shoveling every two weeks. But my dad loved the house because it was his, and he made the event of visiting it a religious ritual.

Other things happened on November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1989. Eight hundred thousand people gathered in the streets of Prague and shook their keys against the red flags surrounding all buildings and statues in the city. The protest was the result of a military crackdown by the Red Army, suppressing the government's attempts to relax restrictions on free speech and travel. All broadcasts had been shut down, but a radio station operating from an unknown location reported on the events and supported the demonstrators. Soviet tanks stood throughout the city, but received no orders from the Moscow headquarters.

Two doors closed behind me and I glanced back quickly.

"Well, we didn't need to bring the portable fridge," my father said.

His girlfriend, Radka, laughed.

I let them pass me, and her skinny hand landed on the top of my head. She caressed my hair, gave me a wet kiss on the cheek, and followed my father to the entrance. I wiped my face

and glared at her frizzy orangutan-orange hair and a slightly hunched back. I stuck my tongue out and squeezed my ears and jumped three times to burn off the tingling of anger at the tips of my toes. My father unlocked the door and walked inside and she followed him, three feet behind. He was always quick to turn around because he'd forgotten something that had to be done, and he got angry if he ran into you.

“I think the pipes might be frozen, goddammit,” my father said.

“Tome, you don't need to cuss,” Radka answered.

“Don't tell me what to do,” he said.

I turned away and walked behind the house. I thought about my friends back in Prague, playing soldiers and gypsies during the day and at night sitting with their parents and watching the riots on television. My father always did everything differently. It's just a matter of time now, he said. We would go spend some time at the “cabin” (snort, belly) for a few days and everything would be sorted out. The communists would fall. I knew that was a good thing, not only because everyone said so, but because I could see Mom again.

Behind the house were tall pine trees and oaks, my personal forest in which during the summer I would hide with a book and go unnoticed the whole day. But it was cold and I could not sit on the ground. I turned back toward the house, hoping that the argument was coming to an end. It was too early in the weekend for them to really get into it.

“Hey junior, the pipes are fine.” My father grinned when I entered the living room. It smelled of old furniture and the air was still cold and sharp, no relief from the frozen outdoors.



My father stripped to a shirt and a pair of sweatpants and began putting wood into a small furnace that would heat up the pipes. The furnace was very low and so he bent over and stuck his butt out in a way that made me laugh. Out of the bedroom came Radka, still wearing her big goofy jacket and rubbing her hands together.

“Aren’t you so cold, Tomášku?” she asked and put her hand on my cheek. I pulled back and groaned. I sat down at the dining table and looked around the room. Walls painted in ugly rustic blue, orange furniture my father obtained from some Russian he worked with. Radka sat across from me.

“Do you want to play cards?” she asked.

“No, thank you.”

I gave her the smile I had reserved for her, the one she so adored. It cramped my jaw and brought back the tingling in my toes, but I had to do it, keep the peace until I could go to bed and hide under a blanket.

My father got up and joined us at the table. I could hear the wood popping in the furnace. He gave me the smile he had reserved for me and then the one he had reserved for her, and we were all smiling at each other in silence while watching our own breath.

“I hate it here,” I said.

Radka looked away, outside the window. My father got up to get himself a beer.

It was around ten, and the lights coming from neighboring houses created the kind of look I saw on Christmas postcards every year. Houses two hundred years old, each unique, covered with snow and ice that would crawl inside the wall cracks and rip the house's belly wide open. Inside those houses, I imagined families gathered around the tree, eating carp and potato salad and drinking warm rum with cinnamon. I wondered if our "cabin" looked like that from the outside. I wondered whether my mother would like it. She liked nice things, antique furniture and pictures of houses in French magazines. She sent me photos of nice places in America, and even my father would stare at them with a smile. I would ask if he missed her, and he would remain silent.

My father turned on the radio. Eight hundred thousand protesters gathered around the main square and shook their keys. "Thank you, leave," they chanted.

"It's going to happen," he said.

"I'm going to bake a cake tomorrow. To celebrate. We should have lunch out!" Radka said.

Her words made me nauseous. My plan was to stay away, miss lunch if I was lucky. I wasn't hungry around her. My stomach tightened and I had a bad taste in my mouth.

My father got up and brought a bottle of whiskey and two beers from the kitchen. He set the bottles on the table and Radka reached for a beer. Her cold hand brushed mine. I shivered.

"I think I need to go to bed," I said.

“It’s early! I’ll let you stay up late tonight. You will grow up in a free country,” my father said, and offered me beer. I pushed his hand away.

“I’m tired. Besides, I’d rather be there and see it happen,” I said.

It was a lie. I wanted to hang out with my friends, play some games, read my worn copy of *Robinson Crusoe*. What would Robinson have done, stranded in this “cabin”? My father set the beer down and cleared his throat, a gesture of disappointment. Radka took a big swig from the bottle and stayed quiet, shifting uncomfortably.

“Goodnight,” I said, and entered the bedroom.

Radka rarely came with us to the cabin. After the day she threw a phone at my father and broke the porcelain elephant my mother gave me for Christmas, I told him I didn’t want to see her, ever. He said that he would try his best, but this time she had to come along to get away from possible violence in Prague, and I had to sleep in the guest bedroom that was cold and smelled like a hospital. I took my pajamas out of the bag and slid underneath the sheets, feeling my testicles shrink and my teeth shake. I breathed under the cover to warm it up. I thought about the bottle of whiskey and how much of it they were going to drink. In quiet voices they spoke of the revolution and how nice it was to have a house to hide in and wondered whether it mattered if we stayed in the village for a whole week. If there were no communists, there would be no communist jobs to return to.

“Maybe we could open our own flower shop,” Radka said.

I stared at the cracked wall in front of me, wondering what my friends in Prague were doing and whether they were able to sleep.

I opened my eyes. I'd somehow managed to doze off. Outside the door there was shouting, then a door slam.

“So I’m not good enough for you? It’s *him*, isn’t it? That’s why I can’t live with you!” Radka screeched.

“I’m raising a son, and you’re not exactly good for that.” my father answered.

I looked out the window facing my bed, recognizing the snowy silhouettes of tree branches against the backdrop of utter darkness. I imagined what it must feel like being buried underneath the frozen ground, shielded from voices and changes. I pulled the blanket over my head.

“What about his mother, doing America! Doing it all, if you know what I mean. *Kurva!*” Radka said.

I pulled on the blanket until I felt my nose squished against my cheek.

“You don’t know shit about it,” my father said.

An explosion vibrated through the empty space. Something had hit the entrance to the living room, and from the loud ring it made when landing on the ground I assumed it was the phone. She’d done it again.

“Don’t touch me you...” she said, and human weight fell on the soft living room couch. I imagined her with her back broken over the armrest, a drop of blood falling out of her mouth. I scratched my nose and wished for it to be true.

I heard her loud weeping. For two hours I listened, until both of them retired into their bedroom and her weeping was replaced by a different sound, sad, but also apologetic. Their lovemaking didn’t sound like the American movies I’d seen, but those movies had given me the basic idea of what their naked shapes looked like. I pictured them spilling into each other like tan milk, rubbing back and forth with their mouths open. The moans accompanied me to sleep.

I woke up to diamond-covered snow and a crow cleaning its feathers on the window sill. My first thought was whether the republic was free of the communists yet; the second, about me having to eventually get out of the warm bed and walk into the chilly living room. They were up and talking in quiet voices, peaceful. I smelled raspberry tea and sausages. Not even those were appealing to me. I lay on my side and thought about the last conversation I’d had with my mother over the phone. *Soon*, she said, *the communists will be gone and you can come visit me in New York*. She said we would go to the movie theatre and see the pretty American actresses and get hot dogs at four o’clock in the morning. Once the communists fell, I could be free. I decided that I would stay with her, maybe write plays or become a policeman.

The thought of a hot dog with cabbage got me to slowly roll from underneath the blankets, crawl onto the ground, then get up and look through the small window on top of the door. They sat around the table, laughing. I heard the radio, the voice of an announcer. I took off my pajamas, put on pants and a shirt and a sweater.

“Good morning, *ty kluku*,” my father said with a mouth full of bread. “Sit down!”

“They say the revolts will be over soon,” Radka said. She pulled me towards her and kissed my cheek.

“Good morning,” I said.

I sat down, reached for some bread, and spread cheese on it. I cut off half of a sausage, determined to eat just a little bit to eliminate the pain in my belly. The announcer said that Gustav Husak was scheduled to speak in an hour. Probably to announce that the communist party would give up power.

Radka reached for a piece of bread.

“Are you sure you need another?” my father asked, and snorted.

The scene froze. I knew what would follow. An eruption. It always happened that way, his careless jokes about her appearance, him talking about my mother with that haze in his eyes, my handsome father who didn't know anything about women yet couldn't keep away from them. Radka dropped the bread into the basket, then took her glass of milk and poured it back into the carton.

“No, I don't fucking need it,” she said.

I pushed myself away from the table, ran into the hall and bent over to put on my boots, feeling my father behind me. I stuffed myself into two coats.

“What are you doing? We're kidding around,” he said.

I ran outside, my feet sinking deep into the ground. Like a penguin I wobbled through the front yard, opened the rusty front gate, and found myself on the road, running down steeply toward the main village square. My father didn't follow me. The snow on the road was dirty and slushy, mixed with the ashes neighbors used to keep themselves and their cars from slipping. I walked in the slush because I liked the sound it made. Soon I reached the square, a small avenue with a fountain, convenience store operated from the owner's house, and a butcher shop. I rang the convenience store bell and waited. Nothing happened, so I rang again. I heard a window open above.

"Yes?" the lady said. I could never remember her name, but she had a perm and a cute daughter.

"I'd like to buy some candy," I said. I craved gummy worms, wanted to buy a huge bag with the ten crowns my father had given me and sit somewhere in peace while I ate them.

"Read the sign on the door, sir. There is a revolution. I am not opening the store until the communists leave," she said. "I'm sorry."

After she closed the window, I raised my fist toward it and stuck my tongue out. *Baba jedna*. I reached into a pile of snow and formed a snowball. I spat on it, and threw it at the window. By the time it clunked against the glass, I was already running.

I walked to my favorite spot in the village, right at the edge of a forest located in the middle of long potato fields. During the summer, men would drive their tractors to get the potatoes above the surface, and the women and children walked behind and collected them in

bags. But during winter, the ground was frozen, dead like city pavement. I walked through, looking around at the vast nothingness around me. I could only see white mountain tops hiding behind clouds in the distance. The resting ground patterns caused hallucinations of wolves and angered bulls freeing themselves from their chains and running straight for me. But all of the animals were hidden inside, and I was certain wolves did not live around the village.

I reached my spot, a big rock surrounded by snow-covered bushes. I climbed up on it and sat down. I desperately wanted some candy. I could sit on the rock for hours and just think, sometimes read, but this time I wanted to stuff my face properly with all of the sugar I could get for the coin in my pocket. I remembered the big bag of gummy worms my mother had sent me once. Food from America normally never got through to the addressee, but somehow the package made it to me unopened. The worms were bigger and juicier and sweeter than any other candy I ever had. I ate half of the bag before my father came home from work and saw the package. He tasted one of the worms and nodded. He said that candy like that could only be made in America. He said he heard they had walls full of candy like that in stores. This made America sound pretty great to me, despite what my teachers and people on television said of the country's loose morals and generally evil intentions.

In my mother's letters, she always described the fancy dinners she went to with her American friends, all professors like her. She said that there were many Chinese restaurants where they sold noodles with chicken. I loved noodles, but there were few places in Prague to get them. My mother had a boyfriend she wanted to marry in order to become a citizen, but she couldn't because of my father. That was the only time when she mentioned him. She wanted us



all to go to America together, but my father refused and insisted that I had to stay, or he would give her up to authorities for wanting to leave the country, a major offense under the regime. He refused to divorce her and I had to stay behind, so I could sit on a rock in midst of a village called *Studenec*, or Coldville, without gummy worms or any order to my thoughts. I contemplated fancy dinners and the perfume on my mother's neck, the scent that made me close my eyes when I hugged her. My father liked it too. "Aničko, you smell like an angel," he would say.

I sat on the rock for an hour, until I could no longer feel my cheeks. I jumped down, wiped the snow off my butt. I turned at the sound of footsteps behind me. It was Radka.

She did not see me. She was looking out toward the fields, hands in her pockets. I had never seen her alone before, without my father's presence. She looked smaller, somehow, even skinnier. I wondered if I would like her if she was a stranger on the street, if I would look at her like I looked at the mothers of my friends, with their long hair and big breasts.

After a few minutes she spotted me.

"Tomášku, here you are!" she said, and walked towards me.

"Yeah," I said.

She stood close to me. Did not run her hand through my hair, kiss my cheek. Just looked.

"I come here to think sometimes," she said.

"Me too."

“I’m sorry we upset you this morning,” she said.

“It happens all the time.”

She wiped her nose, looked at her feet. I’d never seen her look sad. Angry or happy. Never sad, until then.

“I don’t think me and your father are good together. But he likes my cooking and I love the way he can fix everything around the house,” she said. “It seems like those things should matter.”

“I don’t think you’re good together either. You make him miserable,” I said. It felt wrong to say, somehow. I expected to be relieved, but instead I felt pressure in my lungs.

“I know. Do you think I make him happy, too?”

“No,” I lied. We both turned toward the fields, and I took a step to the side. I didn’t want her to see my lips tremble.

“I always think that I could retire here with him. I would wake up in the morning and go get some fresh milk from the neighbor. We could have chickens to get our own eggs. I think we could be happy here, without all the people and the mess. It’s simple. I would stop drinking,” she said, and turned her body towards me, her arms crossed, teeth chattering.

“You call my mom names and destroy our things and make him angry. I don’t care what you do, as long as I’m not there,” I said, and kicked the snow.

“I understand.” she said, turned around, and walked away.

I felt like she did understand. She knew she wasn't welcome. I decided to give them an hour to talk, while kicking snow around the field and counting how fast my spit could melt ice. I thought that maybe now, since the communists were leaving and Radka was on her way to break up with him, my father and I could go to Mom. She wouldn't marry the boyfriend but kiss my dad and let us move in, so we could all have dinners with her friends. My dad could be a handyman. I had the entire plan in my mind when I arrived back at the house.

I took off my shoes and jackets and walked into the living room. Radka and my father were standing in embrace, kissing. They looked at me, then at the radio.

“I repeat, Gustav Husak surrendered the power of the communist party, and guaranteed that the police force of the republic would oversee a democratic election. People of Czechoslovakia, we have long fought, and today we claim victory over oppression and tyranny in this Velvet Revolution of 1989. Join in...”

The words faded. The communists were going away, just as everyone had predicted. But Radka wasn't. They were laughing together, and my father extended his hand toward me. He said something about celebrating, and Radka said something about me growing up in a free world. I looked outside, at the fairy tale cabins mixed with two-story houses, all beautiful, all covered under pounds of white powder. I imagined my friends getting sips of champagne from their parents. I pictured the Prague Square filled with people ringing their keys and waving flags, hugging and kissing. I guessed that's what people did on days that made history. I looked at them, locked into each other like they would never let go.

“So now we can travel?” I asked.

“Yes,” my father said.

“I’m going to America then. As soon as we get back. Mom will buy the ticket,” I said.

His arms loosened, dropped. He took a step away from Radka. I walked outside again, hearing his voice behind me call my name. I sat on the stairs, and he walked in front of me, talking, pleading. I couldn’t hear. People from neighboring houses flooded the road, hugging, shouting. Dogs barked, men poured brandy, some teenagers piled up Soviet flags for burning.

The Prague celebrations lasted all day and night. People sang and danced with nothing but the present in their minds. The past rolled away together with the Soviet tanks, and the future could be anything, anything at all. I stared into the snow, and saw the new world as clearly as I ever would. In three months, the snow would melt, exposing thick stems of green grass. I imagined everyone happily working in their gardens, no longer calling each other comrades. Perhaps the grass on my father’s property would grow tall and wild, surrounding the house. He would be too busy opening up his own business with Radka to cut it. Perhaps the ice would finally rip the house open and turn it inside out, and moss would grow over it, creating an abandoned ruin where kids could come and play. And I would be far away, too far to care or to see, and I could telephone my father from America to hear how happy he is with Radka, how much better things are looking up. The red flags burned and the neighbor shouted at my father to come and have a toast with everyone. He walked toward the fence and accepted a glass of plum brandy.

*Things are looking up.* I really liked that thought.

## Metathesiophobia in Three Parts

I make copies. I have coffee breath. I pretend to create spreadsheets while watching cat videos. I eat carbs and drink whiskey when I get home. I need to turn my life around. I know this. When I get up to gather my things and turn off the office lights, I think about the long dreams I've been having. They last lifetimes and sometimes I cease to believe I'll wake up. There are three of them.

A. I'm running. It's an ugly colorless morning and I'm the only person outside. I'm joining the Peace Corps, and I know I need to get fit. I'm in my kitchen and I throw out all of my cookies and frozen dinners and fill my fridge with broccoli because it's likely that wherever I'm sent, I will be eating a diet consisting of raw food. I wish Peace Corps could tell me where I will be sent so I could learn the language, but I like the guessing game. I hope it's Africa. I walk to my hut as the afternoon heat burns my back. I give chewing gum to the kids and they tell me stories about their elders. The recruiter calls and tells me I'm a perfect candidate. They will be ready to ship me off to training in another two months, and yes, I'm going to Africa, specifically Botswana. I tell my father about this, and he yells at me for living like a gypsy and tells me that a real man needs to put down his roots and start a career with a good company. I explain to him that this way of life no longer exists. My mother is proud of me, because she is the one who infused my blood with wanderlust. I'm at a friend's house, there is a cake with my face on it, and everyone is shaking my hand. My boss says they will miss me around the office.

I go to Lake Eola and rent a boat. I let it carry me around and stare directly into the pastel blue sky, wondering how a man could ever be unhappy or discontent. For a

brief moment I come back to earth and look at the boat floating ten feet away from mine. The brunette sits there in her black t-shirt and grey shorts, holding a book but not reading it, instead looking ahead. She has a tattoo of a sugar skull on her arm. Her eyes make the sky look pathetic. I look up again, but she looks back at me and I just know there is no turning back.

We are on our first date, watching a movie outside on the lawn of her university. Afterwards we get frozen yogurt. We can't stop talking – she asks about my country, I ask about her tattoo, those obvious parts of us. She leans closer when we talk about Peace Corps and I want to jump out of my car's window because the naked skin of her neck is so close to my lips. Before we know it it's two in the morning and we have been sitting in the car for hours. We're hungry again, so I drive us to Taco Bell and we sit in the parking lot eating quesadillas. The food gets cold and soggy because we talk for so long between bites. I can tell I missed my chance to kiss her, so we decide to go home and see each other the next day.

The recruiter calls. Yeah, I'll get to my doctor's exam soon. I've been busy.

I go to her place. It starts with me sitting at the edge of the bed. We lie next to each other. She laughs for no reason, and I know she's laughing at me. The moment before kissing is why we do it – the act itself is just an echo of the expectation. I can't hold myself any longer. Kissing is a slippery slope for us, and she asks me to turn off the

lights. We can see each other because of the street lamp outside, and I'm glad for it. This light guides me to her curves, and I don't miss an inch. I want to memorize her, in case the world vanishes in front of my eyes. We are naked and I say, it's too early, not like this. I have to go home, can't stay the night, and I should be able to stay the night. She says okay, smirks because we are so close, one inch and it can all be over. She dares me with that smirk, and when I give in she calls me a quitter. We are sore and drenched in sweat. My bladder is on fire but I can't leave her just yet. Jesus. Why didn't I just keep looking up?

I stay the night and call out of work. We drink tea and watch movies, stay inside when it's a perfectly beautiful day outside.

The recruiter calls to talk about the details of my trip, and asks why I haven't faxed over the doctor's report yet. I stay quiet. She asks again. I tell her things have been coming up, and I'm not sure if I should go anymore. She tells me she knows it is my dream and why am I hesitant now. Is it cold feet? I tell her my father is very sick. Really, she asks. I say no. I don't know why I made that up. I just don't know if this is the right thing. She says everyone gets cold feet, she understands. She tells me to give her a call tomorrow with a final decision.

I go to Sofia's place and tell her I'm not going to leave. She says she is glad because she probably loves me. Probably? We both laugh and I say yeah, I probably love you too. I'm hunched over textbooks because I want to get into an international relations

graduate program. Sofia and I are sharing a big slice of pizza in New York. The pepperoni falls into the filthy snow, and she picks it up and dares me to eat it. We are in Chicago, and she rips my jacket off and runs away with it. We watch a movie while I massage her feet. On our eight month anniversary I start having issues, can't get it up. Probably because of the stress of applying to schools. She is very understanding, patient, but I keep thinking this is it, this will fuck everything up. She leaves to see her family and I take time off from work to go to bars with friends. I'm drunk and sleeping on someone's couch. When she comes back, I pull over on our way from the airport and we fuck in the middle of a parking lot. Everything goes back to normal after that.

We move in together. During the move her desk breaks and she stops talking to me. It drives me crazy, but I stay quiet. I don't want to cause trouble, and I'm starting to guess that's my main problem. I tell her she has been cold, she says I'm crazy. We watch TV, she on the couch while I sit on the floor. We don't eat together. We explode.

I'm reading a book when she announces she is going to Taco Bell. Doesn't ask if I want anything. The clock shows it's two hours later when I get a weird feeling and walk outside. She sits in her car and talks on the phone. Millions of things go through my head, images of men with hair sleeked back and abs carved into shapes of basketballs. I wait for her upstairs. Her words: I don't know if I'm with you only because it's better than being alone. I punch the wall and feel like less of a man because I don't leave a hole. She spends the night at a friend's house.



She moves out. I stock the fridge with beer and pantry with whiskey. I stop going to work. I browse the Peace Corps website, and linger on a particular section – What makes a perfect candidate? I don't know. I call the recruiter but she doesn't answer.

Then I wake up.

B. I scream at my son over the phone. His name is Robert, and he tells me he just got a tattoo of his girlfriend's name. I tell him her name will always be there to punch him in the gut. He says he is glad he moved to France so he wouldn't have to put up with my bullshit. I tell him that these days, young people break up for the stupidest of reasons. They just don't know how to talk to each other. He asks me if that's why his mother divorced me.

I'm walking through the park with my girlfriend, Sam. She is drunk and cusses at the kids who pass us on their bikes. We sit down on a bench and she puts her head on my shoulder, cries and asks why I won't have children with her. I tell her she's fucking crazy, and I need more time to accept that and maybe see about the future. She wipes her face and we walk to her apartment and she makes love to me, tearing my clothes off and screaming and moving her whole body, putting my hands on her and whispering *Think of me, no one else but me.*

I'm at my apartment, looking in the mirror. I nod at the broad shoulders and thick arms, but as I look lower, the nod weakens. A big soft layer covered with fur, pale and pathetic. I think about all the Mexican food and beer I consume with the hunger of a young man. I go outside like this, and women at shops talk to me, tell me I have beautiful blue eyes and ask if they could touch my dark hair. I wish I could cut through the furry layer, show them my young man's abs again, but I can't picture myself at the gym. I am at the gym, dressed in sweatpants and grunting while I watch myself bend over in the mirror. The furry layer looks comical compared to the hard stomachs of all these naked men around me. I play basketball with my buddies and feel the explosions in my calves. I'm with Sam, we breathe heavily, and she tells me I have incredible legs.

I stand in front of the high school class I teach, seeking out curious eyes. It's a rare thing. In the office, I talk to my colleague, an old man in a sweater, and he tells me we are in purgatory. The students are, too. All of us together, trying to dig ourselves out. I phone Robert, and I tell him that he just needs to keep going and never stop. I apologize for telling him he should be a lawyer or doctor. I tell him that the dream chooses you, and feel a bit stupid for how boyish my voice sounds. I tell him that's the one thing I have figured out. He says he loves me and has to go.

I sit in this bar I've never been to, and on the wall there is a painting of a lobster with a white beard. Underneath it says, *If God is a lobster, why so crabby?* I look at the lobster and I ask him why he lets us hurt each other so often. I ask him why at a young

age, we are so focused on actions and then in the old age the actions all blend together and we look for some kind of a theme, like listening to a movie soundtrack without watching the movie. Does it take a woman to build a home? I come back to my place and I think, I could grow old here, but the place doesn't see me, doesn't speak to me. Sam comes out of the living room and she speaks, but she smells of beer again and all she wants to do is go to bed. I can't get a moment of peace. I wish I could speak to the lobster again.

I'm driving my car and everything goes black and my leg bone is shattered into pieces. I'm not sure what happened until I'm at the hospital with an IV in my vein and a bandage over my head. My nose burns. Robert's mother comes in and sits next to me with that defiant smirk. I have kept her as my emergency contact hoping it would force her to see me again. She asks how I am. Fine. She doesn't say anything after that. We hadn't spoken about anything but Robert for so long, but his life is now so far away that we can't use him as a shield. The reality of us, the things we've seen and the nights we have drunk red wine and eaten tacos and made love until we couldn't walk anymore, they are again in the room with us, and there is just nothing to say. She holds my hand.

I don't know how to get out of this life, I tell her, and she nods. Then I wake up.

C. I buy a small grocery shop in Seattle. The Vietnamese man takes my check and tells me he wants to try his luck in Canada. Lot of people come in to chat and

buy, and I try to make the place as pleasant for them as I can, hanging up some art and keeping flowers up front. When the little boys come in quarters short on their soda, I just let them have it. I think this is why people keep coming in so often and I just manage to make a decent living, because in midst of all these online carts and delivery by UPS guys who wear brown and never hang around, people just miss saying hey to each other. The doctor is looking at his e-tablet when he tells me I have cancer. The government won't take care of it and the doctor says well, without treatment this, without treatment that. I sell the shop and house and buy a ticket to Madrid. My son, who now lives in California with his Swedish wife and kids, protests, claims they will take care of me, but I just tell him I will call when the plane lands.

I'm in Madrid. I go to the market and encounter an old woman kneeling by the corner with cucumbers laid out in front of her feet. She gives me one for free. You are sick, she says. I want to ask her how she knows, but she either doesn't understand my Spanish or doesn't want to say because she just shakes her head and smiles, revealing a single tooth. I take a walk to the sea. Men and women walk hand in hand, and the sun reflecting on the ocean turns life into a faded Polaroid picture. I end up in a café holding the picture and continue my race to read all of the books I have neglected in life when a woman with long dark hair and a woven purse enters. She orders a Chai and sits by the table in front of me and opens up the newspaper. She angles it so that I can see her smile, and I realize I'm staring. I look away. She has dark eyes and dimples. I guess she is about

fifty, but I have never been so attracted to a woman at a first glance before. If you'd like to join me, you can, but you need to ask first, she says. I ask, and she nods.

We go back to her place drunk on shrimp and champagne. I cover every inch of her with every inch of me, expecting her to disappear under my hands any minute. I trace her wrinkles with my finger while she screams louder than any girl I've ever been with, and then she pulls my head over hers and whispers I'm too gentle. I pull her hair. She digs into my back. She asks me to be gentle again, so I lay my head in her lap and caress her thighs with my fingertips. Her hair is a mess and falls into her face and it makes me ready for her all over again.

I don't want to go to the hospital. I die in the sea, just fall over. I die in that café where we met, just let my head down, lean back, hang my arms. I get on my knee and ask her to marry me, but she says no. Says she stopped believing in that because it doesn't mean anything. She says, reading together in bed, burning fish on the grill and eating creamed potatoes instead, catching up on Almodovar's body of work – those are the things worth her time. Not rituals or trinkets. I say fair enough. She says, besides, you might find some young tall thing and want to try it with her. What would you do with your hag of a wife then? I demand an apology. She slaps my buttocks. I don't know why God wouldn't give you to me earlier, I say.

We walk into the water in our bathing suits and observe the young. We wonder what they will become in the future. We are inside, our suits still wet. She runs off to the bathroom and I see the toothless woman from the marketplace standing ten feet away from me. She is wearing the same red summer dress. She hands me an old book and walks away. The book is small, cover made of leather. By the time the toothless woman climbs out of the window, my love returns and kisses me on the cheek. She asks about the book.

I notice one page of the book is bent. I open it there and read a recipe for chicken stuffed with cucumbers and shrimp paste. I immediately drag her to the market and pick up the ingredients. I have her sing to me in Spanish when I cook the meal, the aroma soaking the walls of our apartment. I wish it would smell like this forever, she says. I serve the food with some fresh bread and we eat without speaking, but look at each other after every bite. This is the most amazing meal I've ever had, she says. I nod. It is. Everything at that moment is the best I've ever had. When I finish I don't wipe my lips. I lick the last bits of flavor.

We sit outside, on the balcony, with wine and cigarettes. She lights up and I ask for one, too. She shakes her head. Just one, I say. She hands one over and I light it, and we look into the lights, smell the sea, smell the shrimp paella from the restaurant behind the corner. It mixes nicely with her scent, saffron and lemon lotion, apple shampoo, and

natural body milk. We hold hands and she says, we are here. We are finally here, I respond. I need her so close that we can't move.

Sharp pain digs into my stomach. This is when I wake up.

I'm not sure what to think of these dreams, but I have written out every detail of them, just to see what happens. I have been tempted to call Peace Corps, something I have always been interested in – but what if? What if. I could set these dreams in motion, and it could be a good thing. Or an awful thing. I continue to make copies and drink coffee while I make my decision. What I'm really afraid of is dreaming of being buried in a coffin made of paper boxes while my casual Friday clad co-workers pour coffee onto my body. I'm afraid I will dream this and then wake up to realize it is true, that I really am dead. I think about this at night and keep myself from falling asleep. Without dreams, I miss the lifetimes I have lived.

## The Stage

“Have you seen my eyebrows?”

Jack’s bass voice carried through the living room, breaking Toly’s concentration as he tried to cut his toenails. He threw the clippers aside and lifted the couch cushion, revealing a black makeup pencil.

“You left them in here again,” Toly yelled back.

Jack walked in wearing a thong, dark blue pantyhose and a stuffed bra, still a few steps away from his full transformation into Jackie. Toly threw the pencil at him and looked down to the line of curly dark hair underneath Jack’s belly button, the one part he couldn’t shave because of a rash.

“Thanks,” Jack said. “When is Jenna coming?”

“Any minute now,” Toly answered. “She is staying the night, the school is closed tomorrow.”

“What are you guys going to do?”

“We’re going to get pizza and watch Nightmare on Elm Street. She is appalled that I haven’t seen it.”



“Well, you know,” Jack said over his pocket mirror while drawing black lines above his eyes. “I have really been working on this set. You should come.”

“I kind of want to just be with her tonight. We haven’t had much time together...Magic, stop that!”

The beagle put his paw back down and lowered his head with eyes fixed on Toly. Magic was a master of this game – whenever his attempted indoor urination was foiled, Toly found him staring directly into his eyes in challenge. The dog was there, carrying his powerful weapon – the bladder – ready to strike at the right moment. Toly liked to think Magic was a hedonist, a pursuer of pleasure who simply followed his philosophy the best he could, leaving drops of yellow on the carpet whenever the anti-pleasure authority turned its eyes elsewhere. Toly didn’t get angry at him, except for the time he was drunk and threw a book. He suspected Magic would never forgive him.

Jack left the room for a moment, then returned in his full outfit. He sported a white shirt with the words ‘Flirt me’ printed on the front, and held his brunette wig while clipping the side to his satisfaction.

“Well, if Jenna wants to see some real men, you guys should come,” he said.

“Men dressed as women,” Toly countered.

“The best kind. You’re never going to get over that weird macho bullshit, are you? I thought that European men were all about this sort of thing.”

Toly measured Jack up and down. He wouldn’t want to get on his bad side even when there were wigs and heels involved. As a man, Jack was a mountain of muscle, and in drag, he was a mountain of confidence and attitude, capable of spewing lava or shaking up a snowstorm on and off stage. Toly used to love watching him on stage because he was so happy, so himself, swinging his hips and belting out in baritone. That same happiness was now the reason Toly didn’t want to go anymore. It somehow became harder to watch.

“Listen, I know you’re feeling crappy lately, thesis is not coming along, whatever. But you gotta pick yourself up, take Jenna out once in a while. Even if she loves sitting here and eating shit food, I’m sure she would love the change. Think about it.”

Toly glanced at his writing corner. He wished it would disappear.

Jack walked back into his room and through the closed door, Toly heard the *maaa-meeee-moooo* of his vocal warm-up. He stepped into the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. Jenna was supposed to arrive any minute. Lovely Jenna, with that black hair and a nose piercing and never-ending thirst for horror movies. She was young enough to laugh at most of his jokes and old enough to tell him when he was being a dick. He dated all kinds of girls America had to offer, thick and thin, happy and gloomy, medicated and no longer medicated. But Jenna was the one he couldn’t quite put one of those stickers on, always an inch or two ahead of

him while daring him to follow. For her, he fixed his hair and straightened out his shirt, not to get laid but to impress. It got harder lately when he faced the blank page every day, an aspiring new historian whose academic fame depended on twenty more pages of his doctoral thesis. Failure doesn't impress.

When he walked out of the bathroom, he saw the pile of mail lying on the floor. He picked it up and began sorting through. Bill, bill, vet bill, new pizza menu...

A letter from USCIS, United States Citizenship and Immigration Services or, as Toly's Chomsky-quoting friend from the Village liked to say, "those goddamned fascists." He dropped all of the other letters and stared at the envelope while counting in his head. His green card was valid for another five years. He hadn't committed a felony. He didn't travel out of the country. He...

At that moment, a gentle knock interrupted his thought. He put the letter in his back pocket and opened the door. Jenna smiled and jumped up to hug him with her legs. He backed up into the apartment and she kissed him, slipping a tip of her tongue in his mouth.

"Hey handsome," she said when he put her down. She kept her arms around his neck, and he grabbed her firmly around the waist. The letter burned in his pocket.

They both looked at Magic as he sniffed Jenna's skinny jeans, then stuck his nose inside her purse.

“I missed you,” Toly said. She tilted her head and furrowed her brows a bit. He realized that whenever he said this, it usually meant something was wrong.

“Hey babe,” Jackie said and gave Jenna a hug. She was now fully transformed, in her wig and makeup and heels. Toly admired Jack’s vocal abilities. Jackie sounded sexy, a bit rough, like a Southern belle who had gone through hard times and whiskey and beds of violent men, holding on to some gentleness under the strain.

“You look gorgeous, doll. Wanna take me out?” Jenna said and spun Jackie around.

“Alright, everyone keep their pantyhose on,” Toly said and took Jenna by the arm, marching her out of the hall. Magic followed them, and Toly noticed the beagle now had cookie crumbs on his chin and eyebrows. If there was anything delicious in anyone’s purse, Magic was the one to find it. He sat on the floor and looked at their faces, reading into their tone and movement. Toly wished he could send thoughts back into those eyes. It was this mind-reading expression that got Toly to adopt Magic from a shelter a few years back, when he was still new to America and New York, looking for some peace. Magic had it. His life was a peaceful submission to pleasure of taste, smell and urination.

“I got a letter from immigration,” Toly finally said. He showed the unopened envelope to Jenna.

“What is it?” Jenna asked.

“Did I hear immigration?” Jackie catwalked to the living room in her heels. “Nothing bad, right? You’re all set with them.”

Jenna reached for the letter.

“Read it already!”

“It’s probably nothing. I don’t...I’ll be right back,” Toly said and charged for the bathroom. He felt their footsteps behind him, but they didn’t go inside. He locked the door and sat on the toilet. Inhaled. He slid his finger underneath the small space on the envelope. Exhaled. The moment reminded him of a pregnancy test commercial.

The letterhead, wings spanning behind a big golden badge. Department of Homeland Security.

“Get out, Ruski,” he whispered under his breath. His eyes slid by line after line, the hello and it is ordered and the...The end. The Earth split into two, an atom bomb made its way across the ocean, the Antichrist was born to a virgin. He dropped the letter on the floor and walked out of the bathroom, hands in his pockets. Jackie and Jenna stood there with their arms crossed while Magic stretched out on the carpet.

“Babe, you look like hell,” Jenna said and extended her hand toward his face. He accepted it. He sat on a laundry basket and counted to five, wishing for a single thought, but his existence was only filled with that neat letterhead and a series of boldly printed words.

“I have thirty days to leave the country.”

“What?”

“I haven’t reported my address in the last four years. Apparently they deport for that now. I’ve got...I don’t know.”

“That’s crap man, they can’t just do that,” Jack said. He ripped his wig off and reached down to peel off the heels, throwing them aside. His voice was again gruff and deep. Toly couldn’t read Jenna’s face. It was so still he could swear she didn’t blink.

“Yep, they can. I need to lie down,” he said. He fell on the couch, face first, and let his arms hang down over the side cushion. “Can you guys not talk for a while? Maybe give me a second alone?”

He heard them walk off. Magic lay down at Toly’s feet and licked between his toes with great fervor, covering every inch. The couch smelled of wet animal fur. Toly thought about the immigration waiting room, the place he swore he couldn’t ever return to. He described it as Hell’s Waiting Room to his Chomsky-quoting friend. It was perfectly white, with officers

dressed in office casual waiting behind bulletproof glass windows and calling the immigrants one by one, shaking their heads, passing over paperwork. The uniformed security officers paced down the hall and monitored the faces of each visitor, as if an incorrect blink could mean a shoe bomb. A baby cried and one of the officers announced: "If you cannot control your child, leave." Toly pictured himself marching back in there with a lawyer, gesturing with his hands, explaining while the officer shook her head no, no, no. Hell's Waiting Room, no music, no television, just waiting for the number to be called. He waited in that room for New York, for his first day on Times Square, those lights that burned a new image of what life could be into his eyes. His brain had pulsed with footsteps of strangers and their languages. The hypnotic dance was worth the humiliation.

Toly turned on his stomach and let Magic come up to rest his wet nose on his chest. Toly lived with an old mean hag and had hard time finding friends when he walked into the Humane Society and found the little beagle covered in sores and scabs. His pool of familiarity was thinning, his phone conversations with his mother becoming shorter because she was stricken with grief over the death of his father and guilted Toly for not coming to the funeral. At the same time, he wasn't making progress in his new home, being rejected from Columbia and NYU. The women that took him home for a night never called him again, and he wasn't particularly interested anyway. He desperately wanted friends, but the bars were his only connection to the world at the time, and all of their occupants seemed either too cool or too drunk. When Toly asked about Magic's story, the lady told him they found the dog covered in fleas and starving on a street corner, sitting by himself and looking up at pedestrians. Like Toly, Magic didn't like

loud noises and kids. The dog could've come from anywhere, could've had a perfectly good home or been abused since birth, but there he was. Toly took Magic home and rubbed ointment on his scabs, talked to him every night after the roommate hag went to bed. They ate potato chips together, watched X-Files and eventually the wounded beagle became Magic, the dog with no roots. The first year of his life didn't matter, and no one knew about it. This was a perfect arrangement for Toly, a perfect understanding. He had friends when his green card was approved, but he still preferred to celebrate with Magic.

Toly sat up and looked out the window. It got dark while he lay there, and he heard Jenna and Jackie's hushed voices from the next room. Magic sat up and looked out the window as well, his sleepy eyes sliding from left to right.

"It's our city. Who could leave it?" Toly whispered to him.

Jenna entered the room and ran her fingernails on the back of Toly's neck, sending shivers down his spine.

"Hey, don't wallow about it anymore babe. We're going to call a lawyer first thing in the morning, okay?"

"I'll marry you if I have to," Jack said, "how about I ditch the gig tonight and we go grab some dinner, get wasted? We'll celebrate your first deportation scare."



Toly shook his head.

“Nah, go to your gig. Good luck.”

“Okay.”

Clip clap of heels. Jenna moved Magic to the floor and sat next to Toly, who would have preferred to continue his silent conversation with the dog. None of this ‘it’s alright babe’ bullshit. She massaged his shoulders.

“Why are you so worried?” she asked.

“My mother lives in a one bedroom apartment in Moscow, Jenna. I’m turning thirty next year – what am I gonna do, go to a Russian university and start my degree over again? Just...Disappear from here?”

“We’re not going to let you go. It’s a misunderstanding,” she said.

“It’s not up to you. Or me. It’s up to a person licking the tip of their pen somewhere.”

She stood up and pushed him on his back, then lay on top of him and kissed his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“There is something we could do, maybe,” he changed his tone, smiled a little, and put his hand on her exposed lower back.

“Mhm?”

“You could, if it’s the only option, you could marry me.”

She shot up and looked at him, half-smiling, but not in a way he liked. It was her you-just-told-a-terrible-joke smile.

“Only option, huh? As in, a citizenship marriage. You’re asking me now in your living room.”

“It’s stupid. Forget it. I just thought... You said you wanted to marry me someday. So I thought...”

He remembered the afternoon she first said this. They were having muffins and cupcakes, and she wore a summer dress.

“Yeah, maybe in couple of years, I figured maybe we’d go to Paris or something and you’d get on your knee...”

“I’m getting kicked out of the country!”

“You’re being hysterical.”

Hysterical? Jesus, I got a letter. I’m not dreaming it.”

“Well, I don’t want to get married.”

“We were having cupcakes last month and you said you couldn’t wait to be my wife. Wifey, actually. You said wifey.”

“Yeah, but not you green card marriage, Jesus Toly.”

“She moved to the far corner of the couch and turned her head the other way. He ran his hands over his face. He had imagined her saying yes, maybe shedding a tear, and then he would have promised to get her a ring soon. Of course, it was ridiculous. He didn’t want to marry her yet, either. He wanted to marry New York and the life he had planned out, he wanted to marry a *kotva* that would keep him anchored away from Moscow. But he couldn’t go back on his words, and decided his anger was justified. How could she love him and not consider this?

“So if I get on a plane tomorrow, you won’t care.”

“That’s not fair.”

He squeezed the pillow. That word – fair. This irritated him about Americans, the search for fairness, the ideal. It was bizarre. Life was easier for those who didn't worship the Church of Fair.

“Well, I'm pissed off, so I'm going to take a walk. Watch Magic?”

She nodded. Magic sleepily opened one eye, then turned on his other side. One crumb still remained on his chin. Toly patted him on the head, and the beagle yawned and groaned.

When Toly walked outside, he looked back wishing Jenna would run after him, or at least yell out of the window. She did that sometimes, never really desperate, more demanding (“Come back upstairs, shithead”), and it made him feel special. It didn't happen. He nodded at Climpy, the homeless man who hung out in front of the Chinese restaurant across the street. Toly peeked through the window and considered getting some fried rice or dumplings, but it didn't feel right to eat. In such moments, Toly held hunger strikes against the world, and now that his body didn't belong to him, now that he was at mercy of New York and Moscow and a couple of officers who stamped his goodbye letter, the pain of an empty stomach was the only feeling he could induce himself. Control. He walked, passed bars, drug stores, women in shorts walking their dogs. Breathe in, New York.

Moscow.

It was faded, black and white, in his mind. He heard that it was now a hub of wealth and culture, nothing like the starved, tense outpost of failed ideas it was when he left. But his parents told him that behind the new malls and golden fountains were still the old slums he remembered, sores and pimples on the face of Russia's democratic progress, filled with violent crime and despair. His mother said it would take five minutes of walking on the right street to find groups of child prostitutes fending off stray filthy dogs who, in madness of their starvation, attacked people and each other. Perhaps it was an exaggeration, and the same description could easily fit New York. He wondered whether he could regain his accent, write in Cyrillic again and pretend that none of this had happened, that he never left his land and was a Russian to the bone, unchanged and unfazed by America's seduction.

Mustache Kisses. He didn't realize he had walked this far already. Mustache Kisses was Jack's favorite place to perform. Toly had gone there a few times before, tense, always bringing Jenna to make sure everyone would consider him only a visitor, not a member of their club. The neon sign, a green mustache with a pair of stockings hanging from its edge, flickered as he wondered what it would feel like to be a lone man in the crowd, the worst kind of voyeur, one who isn't watching for sexual or aesthetic pleasure but who hopes to watch others be themselves, see just how good at it they can be and hope to mimic that, bring it into his life. Happiness and satisfaction were the things he envied, the things he sought. He entered, showed his ID to the Marilyn Monroe bouncer, and proceeded to one of the tables near the stage. The place was packed with well-dressed men and beautiful women and it was hard to distinguish what they had hiding in their pants, but it didn't matter. He sat at the bar and felt pairs of curious eyes on him.

“Jack and Coke,” he told the Pamela Anderson bartender. Audrey Hepburn raised her glass toward him when their eyes met.

“Studs and babes, time for another lusty performance by the one, the only, Jackie Mackenzie Farrah!” Female Conan the Barbarian announced and hopped off the stage. Toly checked his watch – eight o’clock, the time Jackie performed every Friday. He observed the costume changes Jackie made since he saw her last – she clipped butterflies to her stockings and put on bright red lipstick. The green and pink stage lights lit up. Toly never asked Jack about the origin of his cross-dressing, just like Jack didn’t ask Toly what brought him from Moscow. Toly guessed they were motivated by the same thing – happiness, discovery, whatever other bullshit a motivational book encourages one to do – but only one of them found it. The one in the heels.

Toly pushed his empty glass and watched his friend put one foot in front of the other while swinging a leather purse. The music cut in. He wondered whether Magic and Jack got it right while he somehow kept missing the point. Magic and Jack lived in a world of smells and tastes and curves and ethanol and, in Magic’s case, bacon. How did Toly not get in on the secret?

He ordered another whiskey and coke, and another. Audrey Hepburn came up to him holding a long filtered cigarette with a gloved hand.

“Hello,” she said. The voice was silky and magnificent.

“Hello. I’m such a big fan,” Toly said and moved so the lady could sit down.

“Thank you darling. I’ve never seen you here before,” she said.

“I come in sometimes. That’s my roommate on the stage. And best friend.”

Audrey looked over her shoulder, revealing a tall slender neck, incredibly feminine.

“I love Jackie, she is a sweetheart,” Audrey said and sipped her whiskey sour through a straw.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Only one a decent lady could answer.”

Toly hesitated. He had no idea whether he was about to get a drink thrown in his face.

“Why do you do what you do?”

“You mean, how do I get to be this gorgeous?”

“Sure, well. I’m sorry. I know this is weird, but can we be serious for a second?”

Audrey leaned forward toward his ear, and her voice changed from smooth silk to a man’s whisper, deep and heavy.

“Look around. Do you see another Audrey here? No, because no one can pull this wig off like me, and no one has this much class. I come home from the office and put this on because it’s the one way for me to have a place anywhere. Does that answer your question, mister drag curious?”

“I’m not,” Toly stuttered, “Yeah. Yes it does. Thank you Audrey.”

She raised her glass, drank to the bottom, and walked away with a smile. Toly ordered another drink and watched Jackie put on more lipstick, pucker her lips and smooth out her skirt. The lighting changed to a combination of red and purple, the piano cut through an explosive applause, and she whispered:

“This one is called La Vie En Rose. Edith Piaf.”

*Des nuits d’amour a plus finir,*

*Un grand Bonheur qui prend sa place*

*Les ennuis, les chagrins s’effacent,*

*Hereux, hereux a en mourir.*



Jackie nearly matched Piaf's unmatchable voice. *Happy, happy to die of love*. Toly recalled the nights Jack would practice in his room, call him in for an opinion, and Toly would nod and say *great, great*, but he never actually listened, not like this. He felt deaf to the world, or maybe it just wasn't telling him anything, unlike the song. If life could be a song, he could know. Know where to go, who to like, who to be. Songs could answer everything.

The show was over. He applauded. Jackie jumped off the stage and received flowers, received hugs, picked up a drink. She noticed Toly sitting across the room, put everything aside and walked towards him.

"You made it! Jenna in the bathroom?"

"She didn't come. Listen, can we talk outside? I won't keep you."

Jackie nodded and they walked outside into the warm night, inhaled the lingering smell of trash and Kung Pao chicken and cigarette smoke. Toly leaned on the wall to rest his legs.

"Smells like dumplings and socks out here," Jack laughed. He took his wig off and scratched his scalp.

"Yeah. Every place reeks of something, you know? It's never...Scentless. Eventually you just start smelling like it and don't notice," Toly said.

“Huh, okay. Where’s Jenna at?”

“Home, I think. Maybe she left. I don’t know what to do man. I know it’s your big night and I’m intruding, but I can’t get it out of my head.”

“The letter.”

“Yeah. There is a chance I might leave, so all I can think about is leaving. And then I think, wouldn’t it be better. Maybe I’m chasing bullshit here, maybe, you know, I should just try my hand at something else, somewhere else. I can’t even write twenty fucking pages. I want to be brilliant, like you in there, but, you know, maybe not everyone is brilliant.”

“You’re actually thinking about going back?”

“Maybe I can be something at home.”

Jack reached into his stocking and pulled out a single cigarette and a mini-lighter. He lit up and measured Toly from head to toe, twice, and shook his head while he inhaled. The corners of his mouth twitched.

“Do they have bars in Moscow?” he asked.

“What?”

“Bars, in Moscow. I’m sure they have them. Do they have stages in those bars?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, so I could sing in Moscow. Or I could sing here. Or maybe in fucking Korea, or Spain. Spain would be awesome. The point is, fucking stages everywhere, Toly. So where to sing is really the last thing on my mind. You get it?”

“Yeah.”

Jack put his wig back on and stepped on the cigarette.

“I need to get back to the ladies, but I’ll see you at home, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Jackie walked back inside the bar. Toly walked home, whistling *Des nuits d’amour a plus finir, Un grand Bonheur qui prend sa place*. By the time he got to his front door, it was ten thirty. When he walked in, Jenna had Magic turned on his back, scratching his belly and making his paw twitch.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey, listen,” she said and kissed him on the cheek, then on the lips. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

“We’re gonna figure it out. And the marriage stuff, we can talk about that another time,” her voice lowered as she spoke. She slid her fingers underneath his belt and jeans, her nails scratching at his pubic hairs.

“You should make yourself comfortable. Do I smell whiskey?”

“A little. You should go,” he said and sat on the couch, bringing Magic to his lap.

“Well. I guess you’re pissed. And drunk.”

“I need you to go right now. I’m going to call you in the morning. We can have breakfast, maybe. But now, just go.”

“Are you going to call a lawyer?”

“I’m going to do what I need to.”

She gathered her purse, wiped her eyes with the edge of her sweater. He felt his lungs pierced and hooked to the ceiling, trying to burst out of his chest cavity. He counted silently to calm himself. Jenna trembled.

“Are we breaking up or?” she asked.

“I need to do something. And I will call you tomorrow. I’m sorry about the marriage stuff. I was just looking for some...Grounding.”

She threw the purse over her shoulder and walked off. He expected the door to slam, but didn’t even hear it close. He rubbed Magic’s belly as the beagle stuck his tongue out. Toly glanced at his writing corner, the blue flashing laptop light, the sticky chair. The stage.

He put Magic down on the floor and placed the “Writing!” sign on the living room door before closing it. He sat down, cracked his knuckles, and opened up the word processor. The letters he had written months ago looked up at him, and he imagined an entire village of bites cheering at his return. He imagined himself writing until the morning, without stopping, his breath turning sour and eyes filing with blood. He imagined closing the laptop and drumming on it in victory. Two hours later he knew it wouldn’t happen. He had written one page – not an excellent one, either, but a page. He closed the laptop and stretched. One page. That was okay.

He called the office of an immigration lawyer he saw in a newspaper ad, and left a message. Said he needed to stay in the country no matter what. When he set the phone down, he

looked at Magic just as the beagle pulled out a piece of pizza crust from underneath the couch, swallowing it immediately.

“Moscow is not for us, buddy,” Toly said as the dog looked up at him. “I hear the dog food sucks.”

He took Magic in his arms and stood over the window, looking into the distance for the towers of Kremlin, curious about their shine and how they would compare to what he had seen as a child. Moscow could wait. Whatever he could do there would too. He needed to watch Nightmare on Elm Street, help his friend with singing rehearsals, and maybe become a famous historian, whatever that meant. Magic licked his paw while looking out into the streets of New York, bronze and brown, filled with trash and pretty women always in rush and fruit stands on corners, a palette of life everywhere like a germ underneath the microscope. The man and the dog then lay on the couch and slept before the clock turned another day.

## El Pollo Negro

Guillermo entered the slaughterhouse and began untangling his face mask and gloves. He spotted the group huddled around Bernie by the conveyor belt. The boss was already assigning their positions, and one by one workers separated from the group. When Guillermo arrived, Bernie barked:

“You’re late. You’re the killer today.”

Guillermo rolled his eyes, nodded and started putting his gloves on.

“Hey, you rolling your eyes? Don’t test me, you brown fucker.”

Bernie flared his nostrils and wiped the sweat off of his balding spot. Guillermo looked down the belt line, finding all eyes anxiously on him, including Emma’s.

“Sorry Bernie. Won’t happen again,” he said and looked down at his feet. Bernie walked off, his flip flops clapping all the way to his office, a glass nest overlooking the entire line.

Guillermo looked back over his shoulder at Emma. She waved and half-smiled, and his eyes lingered on the baggy uniform that made her body shapeless. The bleach whiteness of it was only interrupted by the blue chicken head logo with “Johnston” written underneath it. He waved back and stepped toward the boiler room.

As the belt clicked and creaked, he fastened his pace and cursed under his breath. He pulled a black bandana over his ears to lower the volume of the old machinery that was about to merge with a new sound. Buck buck, cluck cluck sang the chickens as they approached the line, shit-stained, too big to move, though some of them still opened their wings in attempts to reach a better place. Jebby the Shocker, a fat man who loved wrestling, spit between his palms, rubbed them and grabbed the first incoming bird by the throat. That was the last thing Guillermo saw before he reached his destination and picked up his tool, a long knife permanently covered in scarlet stains. He took the sharpener and rubbed both sides of the knife while Jebby shocked the chickens, and the four hangers picked them up and placed them on hooks running towards automatic blades. Because Jebby occasionally let some chickens through without shocking them and the blades weren't reliable in their task of cutting the throats of panicking animals, the Johnston slaughterhouse created a special position, known as the killer. The killer's job was to catch the chickens that slipped through alive and slit their throats manually before they reached the boiler. And majority of the work days, Bernie assigned this task to Guillermo.

The boiler room operated at a hundred percent humidity, and Guillermo cooked inside his own clothes as he watched the birds fall into a pool of boiling water. He made a game of counting how many chickens he failed to kill before they reached it. The bandana he wore also served to drown out the chicken screams. Red poured down his sleeves, and the world seemed a distant place. It became a rhythm of slicing, grabbing, slicing, grabbing, only a couple of inches, no more needed. Thoughts were a luxury and didn't belong in the boiler room. They would interrupt the flow.



He counted twenty failures before break time at noon. The conveyor belt kept moving, but it was now empty, the chickens being held inside cages on the other side of the warehouse. The employees removed their protective glasses, and some didn't even bother wiping the shit off their sleeves. The floor was a swamp of body parts, beige liquids and feathers. Guillermo walked through it and removed his bandana, following the others into daylight, fresh air and cigarette smoke.

Outside, Emma, Guillermo and the hangers stood in a circle. Jebby sat aside on some crates, eating his usual egg sandwich. Guillermo joined the group and Emma handed him a cigarette. He nodded and lit it while Roberto stood next to him and patted him on the shoulder.

“Hey *hermano*,” Roberto said.

“Hey. You making dinner tonight?”

“I'm busy with my *chica*.”

“Which one?”

Roberto grinned. Guillermo felt the drops of sweat coming down his forehead and wiped them with his shirt. He noticed Emma watching him.

“You know, you shouldn’t always be the killer. It’s too hot in there. Tell Bernie,” Emma said.

Guillermo dragged on the cigarette, then released. The sky was grey and the entire courtyard muddy, a field of large buildings and few older cars and trucks.

“That’s a terrible idea, hun,” Janice, a smiley mother of two, said.

“It’s a great idea,” Roberto said, “The CEO will pull up in his limo to listen to our problems. Shit, Guillermo here might get a medal for speaking his mind.”

Roberto’s wide shoulders bounced up and down as he chuckled. He wore blue pants and a wife beater, the uniform of a truck loader. He didn’t need the marshmallow suit the rest of them wore to protect them from flying guts. He dumped the chickens on the belt, nothing else.

Emma shook her head and looked to Guillermo in expectation.

“That asshole does it on purpose. He doesn’t like me, Emma.”

“Bernie is a reasonable guy,” she answered.

“Maybe to the *mamacitas* he is fucking,” Roberto said.

Emma blushed, took a last puff of her menthol and threw it at her feet. Guillermo watched as she smoothed back her coffee-colored hair. Even when she worked up to her elbows in chicken parts and sweat, her hair always looked silky and smelled of apples on those occasions he got close enough to her. He wanted to run his hands through it on those nights they sat on the couch and drank beers and talked, always ten inches away from each other. This is what she always talked about – talk to Bernie, he is a good guy. Guillermo explained, *we are in different clubs. I'm in the illegal one.* She didn't think Bernie would call the *migra*, but Guillermo was positive that *hijo de puta* always had one thumb ready on the dial button.

The break siren announced twelve thirty. Everyone dragged at their cigarettes for the last time, threw them aside and shuffled back into the slaughterhouse. Roberto gestured for Guillermo to come over.

“You didn't come home yesterday,” Roberto said.

“She was going to tell me something, but then she fell asleep, man. I couldn't leave.”

“Ay, *Dios Mio*. This girl, she's crazy. She's making you crazy. Did she put out?”

“*Eres en pendejo*,” Guillermo said.

“If Bernie finds out you're spending the nights with his girl, you'll get some shit, *hombre*. And you're not even doing her. I don't get it.”

“I gotta go. I’ll see you home.”

Guillermo walked inside the slaughterhouse and put his bandana on. From inside the glass nest, Bernie observed him while throwing a coin, up and down. The two men made eye contact before Guillermo broke it, rushing again into the boiler room while the chickens filled the belt and the symphony of buck cluck synchronized with the creaking gears.

...

By seven o’clock, the sun was setting over the horizon. Guillermo’s eyes sought Emma’s as they walked in front of the slaughterhouse. The curves hiding under her soiled uniform were on his mind during those rare seconds of contemplation in the boiler room. He wanted to carry her to Bernie’s office, push his Maxim magazines and beer cans off the table and rip off that ugly piece of cotton that concealed her body. His back felt scathed by fire and he knew he couldn’t go home to his trailer, sit alone and sip beer while trying to catch a channel on his old antenna. Roberto’s company was rare – he was always running around town, hanging out with girls and getting them to buy things for him. Guillermo knew this was one of the nights he needed Emma. But in the past month, she slipped away more and more as her visits with Bernie increased, and he wasn’t sure how to ask her to sit on that couch with him anymore.

She joined him by the exit, rolling up her sleeves, revealing her skinny wrists.

“Are you busy?” he asked.

“Well, no. I was going to say... We need to talk, so, you should come over, have a drink.”

“*Si*. Okay.” he said. They walked to her gray, muddy Honda Accord, and Guillermo lit up another cigarette while studying her face.

...

Her house was small, more of an oversized box, formerly painted in bright yellow which had faded into the color of piss. The six square meters of a front yard were covered with trash overflowing from two garbage cans.

“I haven’t cleaned in a while,” she said, as always.

They entered the kitchen and stepped onto the tile floor, scrubbed clean and leading to a space perfectly organized, not a single dish or crumb of food sitting where it didn’t belong. Guillermo shook his head. The woman was a princess born to the wrong white trash family. He had never seen a single smudge in the house during his visits. He wasn’t sure what she would do if he found an imperfection.

They stepped into the second and last room, and sat on a secondhand brown couch which smelled heavily of Febreze. Across from them was the television which often filled their silences.

“Do you want a snack?” she asked.

“Maybe later. I’m nervous,” he said.

She sat next to him, maintaining the ten inches. Often he wanted to move, overcome that distance, see what she would do, whether she would kiss him back or punch him in the mouth. He never tried. Guillermo was thankful for those ten inches. It was better than twenty, or thirty, or never even meeting her.

“There is a party by the lake tonight, did you hear?” she said.

“I heard something, yeah. Bernie taking you?”

“I was wondering if you’d want to come with us. It should be fun.”

“Is that what you wanted to tell me?”

She shifted her knee and looked at him for a while. Then, she lay her head on his chest. This was his sixteenth visit at her house, sixteenth time he was close, but they never touched before. He had never smelled that hair so closely, wanted to bury his nose in it.

“I’ve got...A problem,” she whispered.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s about Bernie. And me. He doesn’t like to use rubbers, and usually I don’t give in, but.”

“*Jesus*,” he said. He looked up to the ceiling, kicked his foot up and down.

“Don’t be mad. I haven’t told anybody.”

“Why are you telling me?”

“You’re kind of my best friend.”

He counted. One, two, three...

On ten, she lifted her head and stood up. Didn’t look at him, smoothed out her uniform, still caked with blood.

“So, I’m going to take a shower. You should go and get ready. We’ll pick you up by your trailer, if you’re coming.”

He stood up as well, took a few steps toward the door.

“Jesus Emma, that fucker, he beats you.”

“We will get you at nine,” she said and walked off into the bathroom. He heard her clothes drop, waited for the water to start running. Outside, he kicked the trashcan over, and paced home, squeezing at the insides of his pockets and whispering: “Fuck, fuck...”

...

He finished buttoning his only flannel shirt when the lights of Bernie’s truck penetrated his blinds. At first, he planned on putting on a ripped t-shirt, getting drunk as quickly as possible and smashing Bernie’s face until the other white boys kicked him to the ground and beat him senseless. Then he thought of the sheriff, the deportation bus, and chose a different approach. He sleeked his long hair to the back with water and a comb, shaved with a disposable razor, and wore the best of his wardrobe, the shirt and a pair of clean, special occasion jeans.

He walked outside and climbed up to the bed of the truck, next to a couple of boxes of beer and some vodka. Emma nodded at him through the back window. Bernie had his arm around her shoulders.

“Ey, Georgie, can you pass two beers this way?” Bernie said while leaning out of the window. Guillermo wanted to grab the vodka bottle and smash it over his Coors Light hat, watch it pour over his blonde beard. Georgie. Fuck.



“Yeah,” he said, and handed the bottles over.

“You’re welcome to some too, bud,” Bernie added.

To Guillermo’s surprise, Bernie drove carefully, probably to avoid the attention of cops. When they arrived at the lake, there was a large tent set up by the picnic area. Inside were tables covered in bottles and cups, and surrounded by people Guillermo knew by sight but not by name, the Mossy, Alabama working youth he avoided. Guillermo didn’t care for company of most, needing to turn off all noise after listening to the chicken symphony all day. Most people were noise, amplified and unnecessary. He preferred the echo of Emma’s laugh to anything else.

“Can I talk to you?” he asked Emma when they got out of the car. She looked at Bernie. He nodded. As they walked off, Guillermo could feel his gaze following them.

They stood in silence, and the grasshoppers reminded Guillermo of chapulines at home. He felt the blood still caked between his fingernails. It seeped through his gloves, and even after a shower, he couldn’t scrub it off completely. He longed for the empty streets and smell of Chili Rellenos back home, the rhythm of his language carried from building to building like fresh breaths of oxygen. It had been seven years since he crossed the border, and he guessed that in another seven years, the worlds of his past and present would merge, and the smell and taste of America would be no different from Mexico. And Emma was on this side of the line, the one and only Emma. He looked at her intently, reached his hand to her shoulder. He wished he could tell her all of this, but the language, it couldn’t cover it.

“He’s nice to me, you know,” she said.

He pulled his hand away.

“He busted your lip two months ago.”

“Yeah, and I hit him in the ear and he heard ringing in it for months. So?” she said.

“Did you tell your mom about the kid?”

“She’s got plenty to worry about with that son of a bitch husband. I’ll tell her when it’s out.”

An invisible hand grasped his throat. The words he had concealed from her came to the tip of his tongue. He had the special shirt on, they were by a lake, and she probably already knew. She must have. He needed to say it.

“I need to tell you...about us,” he stuttered. His accent felt stupid to him. The way he said *you*, as if swallowing it. The collar of his shirt felt tighter.

“Not now,” she said. She pulled out a pack of cigarettes and walked away without a single glance. Guillermo followed.

They joined a crowd of white men and women in the tent, dancing to something Guillermo has never heard before. He took a bottle of vodka and poured some in a cup and kicked it back while watching Emma walk toward Bernie. He regretted following her and choosing to subject himself to more screams and more madness of this life instead of turning around and walking home. What came before and after the slaughterhouse was a platform which carried him from one shift to the next, a window of hours filled with shitty beer and counting pennies and waiting, just waiting. Emma buried her face in Bernie's bullish neck, her hair spilled over his shoulder. She swayed her hips to the sides and lifted her arms, and Guillermo wasn't sure whether she forgot he was there, or was putting this show on because he was watching. The words had been on this tongue for weeks, the words that hold the same meaning in all languages, *te amo*, whatever. The phrase slipped back down his throat, landed deeply in his stomach and cut it up like a pair of razorblades. She had made her choice.

He walked outside the tent and toward Bernie's truck. The beers were still in the bed. He picked up a whole box and walked into the night, tempted to look back. He resisted, walked until the music faded away with his steps. After so many nights with her, listening, nodding, silently admiring, he still knew nothing about her, what she was capable of. *Jesus*, he repeated to himself. In half an hour, he sat down in his trailer, opened up a beer, and wondered just how much a man can resist before the world swallows him whole.

...

He got up at six in the morning, and pulled the curtain dividing the bathroom from the rest of his trailer. Roberto's bed was empty. He took a dump, ate a couple of twinkies, and showered. He sprayed on deodorant, and put on his tank top and Dickies. He glanced at the box of beers he left out, grabbed one and drank. It was warm and bitter. He drank it to the bottom.

At seven sharp, he walked out of the trailer, the dewy grass imprinting on his pants. He walked to the main road, nodded at the few employed neighbors who were headed in the same direction, the wealthier ones on their bikes. It took twenty minutes on the main road to reach the creaky gate of the slaughterhouse complex. It wasn't a scenic route, but it was quiet aside from the cars passing by here and there.

He didn't see Emma by the lockers. She still wasn't there when Bernie came in and barked the day's assignment at his group. Finally, he assigned someone else to be the killer, and Guillermo wondered whether Emma had anything to do with it. She arrived through the door, zipping up her uniform.

"Emma, three on hanging. Guillermo, two. Get your asses in position, people, the stock is coming," Bernie shouted.

The right side of Emma's face was black and swollen. Guillermo nodded at her, she nodded back while pulling gloves over her pale hands.

"Did he not even give you a ride?" Guillermo said loudly.

She didn't answer. He remembered a painting he saw at the farmer's market once. The artist painted his daughter, a plain blonde girl with crooked teeth. Guillermo had no idea why the artist didn't make the teeth better. He spilled purple pain on it, but tried to sell it anyway, and someone bought it for twice the price. Said it had value beyond the picture. Guillermo thought he could say that about Emma, too.

He grabbed the first bird, a properly shocked chicken that lay paralyzed. He hooked it by the feet and reached for the next one. And next. He was back in his element, knowing exactly where to grab the conscious ones to avoid their retaliating beaks. Unlike in the boiler room, there were no failures here. He didn't have to count – he knew the break was near when the muscles in his forearm began to ache. The cigarette smell from his fingers teased him. He looked at the clock behind him, causing an overflow of chickens to Emma.

“Hey,” she said.

“Sorry.”

He glanced toward the glass cage. Bernie's eyes were fixed on him, the rest of his face in sort of a half-smirk, half-frown. Guillermo didn't know what it meant. It was eleven fifty five. He counted, just to avoid thinking about Emma in any way, about her bruised face and what led up to it. He resisted squeezing the chicken throats, slamming them on the edge of the belt just to feel better. Did she tell him about the kid? Was that why? He looked down the line. Amongst the dozens of white chickens, he noticed something rare – an entirely black one. Jebby picked it up

to shock it, but it slipped out of his hand and fell on the floor. Jebby bent over, slammed the chicken back on the belt, and twisted its leg. It cracked.

“We got a blackie!” he shouted, and passed it on.

A sharp scream cut through the sound of machinery. Guillermo’s arms froze, and the two other hangers, Emma and Janice, backed away from the belt. All of the slaughterhouse employees looked toward the noise. The black chicken - beak opened - flapped its wings, rolled itself toward the edge, and continued to emit the high-pitched screech. Bernie came out of his office.

Intimidated by the noise, the chickens that weren’t paralyzed used all of their strength to push their heavy-breasted bodies off the belt, falling around Guillermo’s legs and crawling away in agony. Jebby hung his arms and lowered his shoulders, like a little boy who had torn off insect wings for the first time. The screech boiled Guillermo’s blood, but when the bird reached him, he couldn’t bring himself to touch it, to twist its neck and continue working. Jebby covered his ears. Emma walked toward the exit. The black chicken slid under the blades, unharmed.

“The hell are you people up to here?” Bernie screamed when he reached the line, pointing at the animals piling up on the floor. He looked at Guillermo, then at the screaming chicken, just as it passed into the boiler room. The killer, Johnny, watched it with his hand over his mouth while raising the knife. He did not strike when the chicken passed him. Finally, it fell into the

boiling water, where its scream faded as its head disappeared under the bubbles. Guillermo leaned on the line.

“Stop the fucking line, load up the belt and get back to work. And tell Emma she has thirty seconds to come back. Move it, asshole,” Bernie screamed into Guillermo’s ear.

“You go to hell, Bernie,” Guillermo said and took a step back, dropping his glove.

“Oh, ho! There he is. I knew you had it in you! Listen, you goddamned fence hopper. Don’t forget your condition here. Don’t test me, all right? I can replace you. I can replace you today,” Bernie said with alarming calmness. That couldn’t be good.

Everyone picked up the crawling chickens and put them back on the belt. Just as Bernie walked off, Emma returned, her face pale.

“You okay?” Guillermo asked.

“Morning sickness.”

When the belt started up, Guillermo couldn’t get back into the rhythm. The chickens clawed at his forearms, biceps, face. His tongue was dry, stomach turned upside down.

“Just do it,” he whispered, “everything’s fine.”

...

As soon as the lunch bell rang, Guillermo ran outside to avoid any chance of contact with Bernie. He stood between two storage sheds, looking out for Emma. He waved her over when she walked out.

“Crazy in there, huh?” she asked and lit up.

“What happened last night?”

“When, exactly?”

She stared at her cigarette.

“Whenever. After I left. Before. Whatever,” he said.

“We fucked.”

He smacked the cigarette out of her hand and pushed her against the wall, his elbow digging into her chest. The look in her eyes startled him, and he eased on his grip. She didn't move.



“What did I do? Huh? What did I do to you?” he whispered through his teeth. He wanted to let go, but not until she said something. Anything.

“You’re supposed to be the good guy. The good Mexican. And look at you,” she said. Her lip trembled.

“You think Bernie’s an asshole? He’s got nothing on you. He’s clear about what his motives are,” she finished.

He let her go, and she slipped around him.

“Drop the friend act,” she added before turning around the corner. He followed her. She misunderstood, he needed to explain, but once again the words weren’t coming to him...*How do you say...*He wanted to shout something, like an American hero would. Something dramatic.

He took five, ten quick steps forward, turned the corner, the slaughterhouse now in front of him. Emma stopped and looked ahead. He followed her gaze to a shiny SUV parked ahead, and two uniformed men talking to Bernie by the entrance. Bernie pointed toward Guillermo. The men turned around, and so did Emma. Her eyes were red.

Guillermo ran.

He reached the gate by the time wheels screeched on the dusty road behind him. He crossed the main road and jumped into the bushes, finding himself knee deep in the river. He thrust himself forward, fighting against the weight of the water until he reached a small island in the middle. He looked back, and about three hundred feet away the officers stood outside their vehicle with hands in their pockets. The first one said something. The other laughed. Guillermo jumped back in the water and swam until the sun hid behind rooftops and he couldn't see the slaughterhouse anymore. He knew they couldn't guess where he would end up because the river branched out in three different directions. He dragged himself up by the side of the road a mile away from town. He knew he should walk south, hop on a train and take a ride to Missisissippi, meet up with Jose Alejo who washed dishes in a restaurant somewhere around Brook Haven. He knew *migra* would get his address from Bernie and wait by his trailer with their horny hands and horny handcuffs. He wasn't worried about Roberto, knowing Bernie wouldn't give him up because he was a damn good driver. He didn't care for any of the shit at his place, but couldn't leave yet, not without talking to Roberto, not without seeing Emma. He crossed the town line again, glancing at the generic sign proclaiming: "Mossy – You're welcome here."

He snuck through his neighborhood and hid behind the bushes dividing his trailer from the road. He didn't see any cars. Guillermo picked up a small rock and threw it at the trailer window. Seconds later, Roberto came out in his underwear, holding a can of beer. Guillermo gestured for him to come forward.

“*Put a madre*, I can’t believe they busted you. I packed your things. You should go meet Jose Alejo,” Roberto said and put his hand on Guillermo as they sat behind the bush cover. The sun was setting.

“Bernie called them. I’m going to kill him. Right now.”

“Don’t be stupid. *Migra* were here earlier, asked about you, then left. They won’t look for you long. Didn’t even ask for my papers. Just spend the night somewhere and get on a train.”

Guillermo looked ahead. It was cold, and he shivered in his wet clothes. The hairs of his beard stuck to his face. His mind raced back and forth, to the different colors of the world coming to light under that same sun. The scream of the black chicken returned to him, that feeling of being helpless, crippled, standing paralyzed while the bird melted.

“Remember when we chased that chicken with sticks? It was Tuco’s. He beat our asses so hard we couldn’t sit to take a dump for weeks,” Guillermo said.

“Yeah. We said we’d go to America and get rich and then roll back in our *Fordes* and pay him to beat his own ass while we watch.”

Both of them smiled. Roberto handed the beer can over.

“That girl of yours, she really fucked it up,” he said.

“*Si*. The year I’ve known her, it has been a good year. The job, that’s okay, the people here. If I could say why I came here with you, it’d be for her. Not dollars. Her,” Guillermo said.

“*Stupido.*”

“I should go. Get my things?”

Roberto nodded and walked to the trailer. He emerged again with a backpack and a bottle of water. Guillermo took the bag and put it on, then shoved the bottle in his pocket. He looked at Roberto.

“I’m going to see you soon,” he said.

“*Si*. Remember, we need to get that *Forde*. Write from Mississippi. You let me know when you’re rich, and I’ll meet you,” Roberto said.

They shook hands, held them there. Seven years. Guillermo felt the sweat forming on his forehead despite the cold weather. The panic was setting in – he was losing his friend, the asshole whose snoring he listened to when he couldn’t fall asleep at night. The other Mexican.

They separated, and Guillermo walked without looking back. He opened the water bottle and drank up.

“Hey, don’t kill anybody,” Roberto said. Guillermo kept walking.

...

He passed empty valleys and snuck behind cars, looking out for the few patrol vehicles the Mossy sheriff owned. The street lamps, bar lights and television screens shining through the windows were the only signs of the town’s life. Guillermo stood in front of Emma’s house. The trashcan was still lying on the ground, tuna cans spilling out from it. He knocked and crouched as the sound cut through the empty street. After a few seconds, he knocked again. The door creaked as Emma’s nose appeared.

“Are you insane?” she whispered.

“Let me in!” Guillermo pleaded and pushed himself forward.

“It’s not a good time,” Emma said but didn’t resist. Guillermo pushed the door in and entered the kitchen. Two dishes sat on the counter.

“Is he here?” he asked.

“I’m supposed to call the cops when I see you. You’re really putting me in a spot here,” Emma said.

Glass shattered in the other room.

“There we go,” Guillermo said, “stay here.”

He gently pushed her aside and entered the living room. His eyes watered from the floating smoke. Bernie, holding a joint and an empty beer bottle, looked up at him from the couch, and grinned. In front of him was a half-eaten can of tuna. Guillermo felt his stomach turn, and stammered back from the smell of weed and fish. He realized he hadn't eaten all day. Next to the can was an industrial grade knife, the one killers used at the slaughterhouse.

“Georgie, buddy, I'm glad the pigs didn't get you,” Bernie said calmly, and extended the joint toward Guillermo. “Here.”

“You called them,” Guillermo said. He took a step forward.

“Oh, are we having a serious talk? Let's talk serious, *Guillermo*,” Bernie said and leaned forward, carefully placing the joint on top of the tuna can. Guillermo felt Emma behind him. She said something, but he could not hear over the blood rushing into his ears.

“Go back to the kitchen, Emma. Yeah, Guillermo, I called them. What did I tell you when you started working for me? Don't fuck with me. Don't fuck with me, and don't try to fuck with my women.”

“I didn’t do anything to you, *pendejo*.” Guillermo said. He paced his speech to keep his voice from shaking. *Steady*.

“What did you think was gonna happen? You would tell her your feelings and she would run away with you, the beaner prince? Live in the desert? Yeah, she told me. She told me you tried to stammer your faggot feelings by the lake. So what, man. She is carrying my kid. I tried to give you a break, buddy, but then you fucked with me at work. Again. Don’t fuck with me.”

“Emma,” Guillermo looked behind his shoulder and shouted into the kitchen. He heard water running in the sink.

“You told him?”

No response.

“You’re no good here. I did you a favor,” Bernie said and reached for the joint again.

The room spun. Guillermo looked at Bernie’s face, still grinning. Before he could give things another thought, he propelled himself forward, pulled Bernie’s head back and pushed the blade toward his throat. Bernie let out a loud groan, but kept his hands on his knees.

“Keep it shut,” Guillermo growled. He glanced behind his shoulder – Emma wasn’t there. *Grab and slice, don’t use the whole arm, just the wrist, a swift motion, only need to cover few*

*inches... One, two, one two, would his mama ever have thought he'd become so good at slitting throats?* One swift motion and the red would pour all over the bones, all over the room, and it would not matter, just another dead animal.

"You're another piece of meat on the line," Guillermo said. Bernie was quiet, his arms spread out to the side, knees tense.

"I should gut you for what you do to her. I've dreamed about it," Guillermo said. He let go of Bernie's hair, and slid the knife behind his belt. With a shaking hand, Bernie reached for the joint.

"Stay there." Guillermo said, his hand still on the knife.

When he walked into the kitchen, Emma stood over the sink, her shoulders trembling.

"Did you hear anything?" Guillermo asked.

"No."

"You can't just stay with..."



“It’s his kid, okay? What am I gonna do, stay with mom? Listen to that asshole of hers? You’ve always got another place, fifty states, Canada. But this is as far as I go. I need him,” she said.

At last, the words slipped out from his throat. He imagined the scenario a thousand times, but it never took place in a kitchen, never took place after he almost cut a man’s head off. He was no longer sure of what drove him to say it, and it had no effect on the density of the room, the rhythm of the clock. The three words didn’t light up the atmosphere, didn’t bring Emma to her knees.

“Okay,” she said, “and if I said I do too, what then? You’d take me to your trailer? Take me on the road? You don’t know what you’re saying here.”

“I don’t,” he said, and walked outside the house.

He wondered what time it was. Late. Most of the street lights were off, but Guillermo did not need to see. The train station was in a town south, and that train would take him anywhere, away. He ran, and the road turned into grass, into puddles of water, into train tracks. Houses transformed into trees. The sound that so often plagued his dreams resonated through his head, buck buck, cluck cluck, and then the horrible scream and rust of feathers. What did a woman sound like when a man made love to her? What about a river, when a human body penetrated its cold surface? When he sat on the wagon, next to boxes of beets, he could only recall the screams,

the clinks of beer cans, and the alarm clock awakening him when he could only wish to die. That was the America he knew.

He didn't go to meet Jose Alejo. He wandered for months, moving from one town to the next, dreaming often, dreaming of the black chicken. It came to him in different forms, sometimes big and healthy, walking toward the horizon. Sometimes its legs were broken and twisted, unable to carry the weight. On bad nights, its wing was cut, sticky with pus, and its beak missing completely. He took jobs wherever he could, worked days as a laborer and nights as a dishwasher, using the money to get on the train or bus and to buy one meal a day. He missed Roberto. He was the negotiator, and he sang crude songs before they went to sleep to cheer him up. Without him, Guillermo couldn't talk the employers into paying more and had only his own voice to interrupt the silence of night. He stuffed the money he didn't use into a plastic bag and then his sock. Before bed, he wondered if Emma had married yet, whether Roberto stopped messing around and found a steady girl. Day by day he got closer to the border, until finally, he faced the line between the two worlds of different colors, and crossed back to the familiar shades of sand. The other side wasn't for him. For Roberto, maybe, because he didn't give a shit that much. The words Guillermo used to keep trapped in his throat for Emma faded, died, dissolved, and there was nothing pulling him back. When he approached his old house, made of wood and reinforced with scrapped metal, he smiled. He kissed his mother on the cheek and said, "*Mi hogar.*"

That night, his cousins surrounded him and asked about his years away, about the details he couldn't fit into his letters. They asked about Roberto. They asked about all of the girls he slept with. Guillermo couldn't muster a single word. Instead he sat in silence and imagined what Mossy, Alabama looked like now that he hadn't seen it for over two months. In the morning, the slaughterhouse would open its gates to welcome employees. The cut, chilled pieces of chicken would leave those gates in the evening, and in a few days would be served, battered and fried, in paper bags to families all over the country. On Sunday, Roberto would walk outside in his underwear and pee in the bushes and watch the trailer kids play catch. And Emma, she would drink her coffee with milk and watch her belly grow, and Guillermo would pray to God every day she would think of him, at least once.

"I don't understand that country," he told his cousins. They roared with laughter over their beers, and there, for the first time, Guillermo didn't feel at home, felt distant from their voices, missing his life as the killer for minimum wage, a bringer of mercy in a world that seemed to have so little of it.

## Jeremy Stock Live!

Jeremy Stock marches on the stage and greets his cheering audience. The cameramen adjust their lenses and pull levers. Jeremy takes a step back, crouches a bit, his usual killer intro move. He points at himself – me? Me? He looks over his shoulder. He skips forward, takes a bow and sits in his blue satin chair. A dark blue neon sign above his head lights up with a characteristic buzz, announcing, “A Night With Stock.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, whatta night, whatta night. Thank you! I’m Jeremy Stock, and you’re watching a night with me. A night with Stock. I have quite the guest tonight, a gentleman who has come to us all the way from Eastern Europe. His name is Milo, and he has a very interesting story to tell, perhaps the most interesting one we’ve heard this season. Please put your hands together for...MILO KAVOS!”

The audience goes wild again, but this time they do not stand up. Two young men bark like dogs. Milo enters the stage, wearing a button up shirt that is too broad around his chest and too tight around his love handles. The shirt is tucked into a pair of brown khakis that have a small patch on the butt. Cameraman #2 zooms in to emphasize Milo’s bowl-shaped haircut. It muffles his ears and makes his chin look small. He isn’t ugly, but the camera isn’t kind. It magnifies the pox scars on his cheeks. He sits down and gazes into the audience as Jeremy shakes his hand.

“Milo, I am so glad you agreed to be here with us. You know, the unique thing about this show is that no one has any idea about who you are and why you are here. We flew you here and paid for your visa and put you up in a nice hotel right here in LA, haven’t we?”

“Yes, yes Jeremy. Thank you.”

He softens his S’s and rolls his R’s and speaks so quietly the microphones barely pick up his surprisingly high pitched voice. Subtitles roll at the bottom of the screen to help the audience decipher his accent.

“The audience is so eager to hear your story, to find out why we would spend all of this money to get you. To ask you questions. What is it that you could have to say to us, Milo? What’s the secret here?”

“You just want me to tell?” Milo asks.

“Let’s start at the beginning. What do you do for a living, Milo?”

“I am a farmer.”

“A farmer in a country we will not disclose, as agreed. What kind of farming do you do, Milo? Or did?”

“Pig farming.”

“Pig farming. Ladies and gentlemen, Milo here provides bacon and toothbrushes to the boys and girls of Eastern Europe,” Jeremy says.

“Yes, yes.”

The audience cheers at the word ‘bacon.’ Cameraman #4, dedicated to audience shots, points out an obese man with a moustache who raises his thumbs and smiles wide.

“Okay Milo. You are a pig farmer. How long have you been doing this?” Jeremy asks.

“Fifteen years.”

“Fifteen. Did you take this trade after your father? Are you married?”

“Yes, I took it after father. I am not married. I had a woman living with me for a while, but she left. She left me with her dog.”

“She took the dog or let you keep it?”

“I kept it.” Milo said.

“Okay, Milo. You used to be a pig farmer, but not anymore. From what I’ve heard, you don’t have the dog anymore, either. Let us get into that because, well, this is something, folks. Milo, what happened seven months ago?”

“Seven months ago, I didn’t have money anymore. I had a farm with eighty five pigs and two cows and dog. Government pay less for everything, stores pay less for everything. I lost all helpers, had to slaughter pigs myself and sell them for so cheap. I run out of money, stopped paying bills, stopped buying food for pigs.”

“Hm. Was this around the time she left you?”

“No, she left before that. Said I was gloomy. Said I couldn’t see the good things in life.”

“I see, Milo. So, you can’t feed your pigs, you can’t feed yourself, your farm business pretty much comes to a stop, am I correct?”

“This is correct.”

“What did you do then, Milo?”

“I had a lot of plum brandy in the basement. I start drinking it throughout the day, and I talked to my pigs. I knew they could understand me, when I said I was sorry. I thought about what I could do. I ask the neighbors, they say Milo, we can’t help you. I wanted to sell the pigs, but nobody could buy. The big farmer east, he had plenty of pigs of his own, big and healthy, special new diet from America.”

“We love our American diets.”

The crowd cheers and Jeremy gestures toward the floor to calm them down. Milo sits in his chair with a perfectly straight back, gazing ahead into the stand for Camera #2. His eyebrow is slightly raised.

“I’m sorry Milo, continue please.”

“What do I tell now, Jeremy?”

“You just tell us what happened. Include every detail. We have a long show.”

“Well, I thought about selling the property at least, and force the buyer to keep the pigs. But I sat on my bed with the brandy and I thought – what would Papa say? He build this farm and made his back bad. I couldn’t figure it out, I wanted to keep it, so I ask the world, you know, I prayed to the world at first...”

“You prayed to the world?”

“Yes, well, I thought, with all the people in it, the good people, praying to the world would be a best start. But then I sleep in the bed for a week – just sit on it or sleep, piss in a porcelain jar my mama made, and I thought, I will pray to God now. And I prayed for another three days, all the time, and I thought, God, if all the people couldn’t help, I don’t know if you can. But give me something. And I drank.”

“So you prayed to the people, and you prayed to God. Did they give you anything, Milo?”

“No, Jeremy.”

“If I remember correctly, you spent ten days like this.”

“Ten, yes.”

“Meanwhile, the pigs...”

“Well, I came out then, Jeremy. I had, what do you call it?”

Milo points to his midsection.

“Diarrhea?”

“Yes, diarrhea, because of the brandy. So I go to the toilet, and I see that the pigs are out. Somehow they got out, and they were watching me. They were skinny, Jeremy, and I could see the hate in their eyes. I realized I didn’t know where the dog was. They were lined up in front of the pen while I ran to the outhouse and pulled my pants down. I left the door open so I could



watch, and they all stared. I think, they would run to me, knock the house over, maybe trample to death.”

“Any idea how they got out of the pen?”

“No idea.”

“So you did...Your business.”

“Is that how you say this? Yes, I did business. And I came out and I was so thirsty, so hungry, but I couldn’t even think of eating when they looked at me. One of them fell on its back legs. I counted, and there were thirty. I wondered where the rest, and I saw the gate to the pen opened. So I walked toward them, slowly. I could see their leader, the white one with black spots. His eyes were red, and despite the hungry, he had muscles bulge around his shoulders. My legs shook and I pick up a stick. I walk towards them, and they don’t back up, they don’t move. They hate me, Jeremy. They hate me.”

“The pigs hated you.”

“So I pass by them and enter the pen. They allow it. And they are rotting, Jeremy. In the pen, there are flies, white worms cover the bellies...As blankets. There are many pigs laying down, resting. They don’t look with hate because they don’t look – they just are. And I hear smacking.”

“This is where it gets good, folks.”

“How is this good?”

“Keep telling your story, Milo.”

“I look to the right, and there is my dog. He is skinny, too, for the first time his ribs stick out. And he is...The pig’s belly is open, and the dog is swallowing. It’s rotten, it is not good, but the dog licks and licks and licks. There is a puddle around the paws.”

Nervous coughing in the audience. The younger members twist their faces into something between a sickened glare and a grin.

“At this point I do this...Throw up? I throw up. And I realize I don’t have a shirt, no pants, and the pigs lying down, they start to notice me. Is this your dog? they ask. Yes, I answered them. And I ran out, left my stick behind, ran out past the screaming hateful pigs. Fat man, they shouted. Fat man who won’t give us anything, who has plenty. And I run back to the house.”

“The pigs spoke to you, and said you wouldn’t give them anything?”

“I had cans of beans, potatoes. No electricity, but a fire. I could eat. They could see I wasn’t rotten, like them. You know, this rotten, the feeling in your stomach. Gut? So, I ran back to the house and I went to bed, again, no brandy this time. And I had dreams, with some of the pigs wearing suits while singing, while the others were naked and crawled around, trails of red dragging behind them. The suit pigs sang about the red tasting like cake.”

The audience is quiet. Jeremy is not used to this – he scouts their faces to find out whether they’re engaged, or bored. They are leaning forward. Some have hands on their knees. They’re eager. Jeremy flashes a smile.

“During this time, were you on any other substances, Milo?”

“Substances?”

“Drugs. Something...Homecooked. You say the pigs talked to you. Pigs can’t talk.”

“You haven’t had a pig look you in the eye.”

Milo whispers this.

“Go on, Milo.”

“When I woke up, a day later, everything smell. Everything is rotten. I went outside and saw, the pigs were gone. The survivors. I ran over to the sty and looked around the dead. Lot of them had wounds, were eaten. The dog. I went back into the house and put on pants and then...I moved the bodies. I dragged them outside and put them inside barrels, stuffed the smaller pigs into boxes. They didn’t look at me. It made me feel like I help – it wasn’t my fault. I was just cleaning up, giving them a gift.”

“How many pigs, Milo?”

“Fifty pigs.”

Someone in the audience whistles.

“I took all day to move the pigs. I didn’t have snacks. All the time I looked over my shoulder, looked for the pigs to return. At night I was done, and I sat in the barn. Have you ever let beef rot over and grow mold in your fridge, Jeremy? No? Try. It smells like everything bad in the world.”

“I see.”

“This is when I hear grunting and barking – the group returned. I wonder, did they hunt for children around the village? Did they take women back to be slaves? I peek outside of my window and there they stand, looking at me. The dog is with them. The dog hates me too – he tasted bloody meat, and now he can tell my beating heart, my worm blood. Their eyes were red, and I thought – I thought this was my last night on earth. My stomach felt sharp...I looked toward the outhouse, but I knew I couldn't live long enough to get there. I took a pot and I squatted over and I pushed, I squeezed and they watched me. I think they laughed, Jeremy. I remember just squeezing and scratching my beard, and they could see right through me. They could see the hate I had was bigger than theirs. One of them fell over, screamed, like this.”

Milo mimics the pig's scream. The audience members exchange glances. Some shake their heads. Jeremy takes a sip of water.

“I figured – this is my last night on earth. I knew they would break in the windows and eat me, the savage dog would chew me to pieces and offer them to his friends. I sat in bed and wished I had more brandy, more anything... I sat in bed and then I remembered my woman. I went to the drawer and took out her picture. Out the window, I saw the animals move closer. My woman was a redhead, big butt,” Milo said.

“You like that.”

“I do, Jeremy.”

Only few of the audience members let out an appreciative laugh. Jeremy grins again to hide his disappointment with the lukewarm reception of the joke.

“I sit in bed and...I shouldn’t talk about this.”

“You should.”

“Well, I sit in bed and I look at the picture of my woman and I imagine her hands on me again, but at the same time I am smelling the rotten pigs, I still have them on my hands...I can’t help but vomit, Jeremy. I lean over bed and I vomit, and then I lay my head on the pillow and I think – soon, I will die. I know I have to.”

“Were you afraid of death?”

“I wasn’t. I thought – well, there are many good things in the world, so the world is good. And if the world is good, I can only die now. I didn’t have to think beyond the day. There was no...How do you say when you think about the future?”

“Wondering?”

“I didn’t have to wondering. I didn’t think about the smell or my woman anymore, that I had to wake up another morning and think about breakfast or the outhouse again. It was very nice.”

“But here you are.”

“Yes, Jeremy.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t come for me. I woke up in the morning and I thought about breakfast and the outhouse. Again.”

“Did you think about taking your own life?”

“I couldn’t. I was afraid.”

The crowd sighs. A few silent boos, but Jeremy can tell they’re saving it for the end.

“So what did you do then, Milo?”

“There were sirens. There were men in big yellow suits outside, like those...Chemical guys. They were looking. Some pigs were running around while the men chased them. The dog looked up at a cop who scratched his ear. I heard knocking on the door, but I didn’t get up. I couldn’t believe I wasn’t dead, Jeremy. It was *unfair*.”

“Did you eventually open the door for the policemen?”

“I didn’t. They broke it down and started asking me questions. The first one, some detective or something, he seemed like he wanted to hit me. I stretched my neck out towards him but he didn’t do anything. He just yelled, what is wrong with you, man, what is wrong with you. I told him, they were all rotten. I didn’t know what to do, Jeremy. I didn’t know what to do. When there is nothing for you to put your hands on, you die.”

By this time, Jeremy can tell he is losing the crowd. The fat man yawns. He hoped for more controversy, not because of the pigs but because of the character sitting in his chair.

“Milo, you allowed all of these animals to starve. You could have done anything, told the neighbors, alerted the authorities. Someone would have taken care of them. It is hard to sympathize.”

Milo looks up to the indifferent faces of his audience. His hands are on his knees.

“I do not know, Jeremy. I just don’t know about these things. The policemen started cleaning taking my piggies out from the barrels, and this one jumped when a piece of meat fell on his shoe. And it was just funny, Jeremy. I wanted to die, but I had to laugh. And that’s what I mean. You just don’t know what you will do. You don’t know how you will answer to these things.”

Jeremy can see a few smiles reacting to the meat bit. He hopes they will hold on for just a bit longer. The punch line is coming.

“Milo, we have five minutes left on our program. And as you know, we usually like to confront our guests with a part of what they are talking about. With you, there were not any humans involved, so we had to improvise. Do you remember...this one?”

A pig walks into the studio, held on a leash by a muscular assistant. Milo stands up and knocks his chair over, and Jeremy is up with him. Curtains go up in the corner of the studio and a live band play a lively tune on trumpets and saxophone and drums. The audience members laugh, some of the kids get up to get a better look. The pig is bright pink and clean, and sniffs at the assistant’s shoe.

“You brought him for revenge,” Milo whispers.

Jeremy puts his hands in his pockets and walks toward the audience. Now he is one of them.

“Will you talk to this pig, Milo? We want to hear its version of the events. Ask, how was the pig’s flight?”

Milo looks up to the audience. They are cheering, repeating what Jeremy said: ask him, ask him! They raise their fists into the air, mothers and engineers and college students. And the pig stands facing Milo, grunts a little bit, and Milo backs up slowly.

“You brought him here to finish me! You are an evil man!” he shouts.

Jeremy takes a step forward and points his finger.

“You are a SICK man.”

The audience members laugh and applaud and cheer: You are sick, you are sick! Milo is hunched over, looking the pig in the eyes, moving his arm back and forth as if deciding whether to touch it. The pig steps forward and its snout rubs the hand, and Milo falls back on his butt. He takes one last look at the pig and runs out of the studio, runs into the hallway followed by a couple of assistants. The crowd members pat each other on the shoulder, talk. The fat man slaps his knees.

Jeremy walks back on stage, turns off his microphone and picks up the fallen chair. He pats the pig on the head, and the pig gratefully sniffs his leather shoe. The cameramen are turning their machines off.



“Take five, and then we will film the end segment,” the producer says.

As assistant jumps in front of the audience, gestures for them to sit down.

“Are we having fun, folks? Are we having fun? There is bottled water coming your way, just a second,” he says.

“Where the hell did we get this pig, anyway?” Jeremy asks the producer.

“Somewhere in Iowa,” the producer responds.

“Can you believe that weird son of a bitch?” Jeremy exhales.

He lights a cigarette and sits down, crossing one leg over another.

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