

“Smirk USA”

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Arrhythmic white light revealing Melissa Matasavage's bare, bent olive-complected legs, splayed and framing our view of Jomo grrr-ing and sweating in his demo vid. Zoom in on the screen, then the MC's head is replaced by a wide-angle of Full Frontal and The A, the two hooded, zipped and strapped in parkas, strutting in an urban playground. Summertime and the graffiti climbs high on the schoolyard walls: SMIRK USA. Jomo reappears, even closer to the cam (cominatchya!) and represents:

Smirk USA
 Oh yeah oh yeah
 Smirk USA
 Oh yeah oh yeah

The track's title is "The Herky Jerk" (J. Fanon, W. C. Field, A. Comegys; Sickyll Sell Productions. All rights read, understood and reserved). The Herky Jerk being the impending Thing, the hip-hop joint complete with its own easily but not authentically recreated shuffle, pop and grind, epiphographed by Jomo.

Jomo: The Herky Jerk boasts a fully righteous groove but The A ran changes with his diamond needles to keep you guessing on the beats like a good Jerk should—even after you've spun the plastic until it melts and your box shouts HELP. Jomo: The Herky Jerk will spin in Cape Town on New Year's 2030—Mandela's grandchildren will Jerk for sure. The joint will have gone mad platinum by then. Jomo: Chinese peewees gonna be sporting Jerk gear in Tiananmen Square, gettin' busy in front of the tanks. Jomo: we've got the Vision that Herky Jerk will be globally large, so we gotsta be ready when the bomb drops. The performance, the vid, the promotion, the merchandise—rags, lids, jewelry, tattoos, whatever—it's all gotta be tight as a ten-year-old's tush. And Jerk-off contests raging all over the world—believe it. It's all gotta be in ink—Smirk USA owns The Herky Jerk. Every time some shorty in Iowa Jerks we get a dime—It's Like That!

I saw you jammin in your jammies
 with the ring around the collar
 go grab a vine girl
 and then swing around and holler
 like you just don't care
 (wave your hands in the air)
 time to rate great and mate
 with the lord of the jungle.
 Black Tarzan, funkin up to go stylin
 Black Tarzan, pumpin up to go whylin
 Black Tarzan got no need for glocks
 cominatchya with only my pipes & my dreadlocks

Black Tarzan ready to go berserk
so step north as he pulls down a fast-time Herky Jerk.

Smirk USA being the group: Jomo (a.k.a. MC Who Am MC and Jomo Know Mo'), Full Frontal (Prophet Profit, Mr. Booty, and HipOFunktamus) and The A (Inspiracist, Finger On Ya Soul and Yin Yang Boomerang). Respective gifts: Jomo lyricizes, Full Frontal emphasizes and The A rhythmizes by whatever means necessary. But there's the magic collaboration. These brothers don't limit themselves—Jomo riffs for Full Frontal who steps for The A who trills for Jomo. The Village raises the Child, the Child being every completed Smirk USA track—The Herky Jerk is only the firstborn.

Jomo's not saying anything but his hype raps through Melissa's head. She feels his temperature rise next to her. He literally heats up every time he watches the vid. Her legs pinch and splay, not to the beat—she hasn't located her own rhythm yet—but spasmodically as though an invisible rubber mallet tapped her. Briefly eclipsed, now Jomo's face seems as though it was unsqueezed by her puny thighs even though it didn't seem squeezed in the first place. The vid's all about his face until the bridge.

A wide-angle of the three marionettes engaged in an extreme Herky Jerk session, guaranteed to hit you with Jomo's supreme height—he's nearly twice the size of his partners—and inflated, blasted upper torso hardly contained in a black T. The Superhero shows himself in all his Superness only when ultimately necessary, explained vid artist Scorez EZ, who directed and produced the clip gratis then submitted it for his final project at IFA!. Scorez EZ narrated over the rough cut: this is a friendly, beautiful Head, this is a rapping, smiling Mouth, then BOOM! this is a frighteningly Huge Man who can boogie and burst out of your tube with ferocity like Iron Mike Tyson once did! When he boarded the joint for Smirk USA Scorez EZ was appointed Minister of Symbols. Jomo didn't know him well—he'd met him once through Tawdra—but as far as he was concerned the dude was Down.

Ahead of ourselves: the vid hasn't even unleashed Jomo yet. New exterior, nighttime: Full Frontal is Jerking and The A is spinning in front of an adolescent birch that was greenheartedly planted next to a bridge's off ramp. Burning trash encircles the tree and the flames lick the nethermost branches. Full Frontal lurches near the orange and Jomo's face reappears.

Things are getting kinda hot
in the crib of world culture
butt naked bros rampagin
and circlin like vultures
like they just don't care
(wave your gats in the air)
howlin foul and growlin
while the white warden watches.

Black Moses, let my people go
 Black Moses, let the sun vibe flow
 Black Moses 2K got an army of Hutus
 with machetes that are ready to unman and do you
 Black Moses ready to get to work
 so cringe or step up for a flat out Herky Jerk.

Smoke tinted with currants is propelled past Melissa's legs, shrouding our view of the vid. From the right Jomo's eggplant cloud pushes forward. The cirri intermingle then languidly elevate to the ceiling, which forces the fuchsia haze to dissipate, forgotten until the process repeats.

And there is smoke in the vid. Scorez EZ borrowed a Subliminal Fog Machine and pointed out wisps doing the nasty, which is what Subliminal Figures invariably do no matter the medium (you never saw one staring out a window, picking his nose, did you?). Jomo still hasn't been able to see them yet, even after 300+ play/pause/rewinds, nor has anyone else for that matter, but he felt a presence during the shoot. The ghost of Lumumba or maybe just dead gangstas. Scorez EZ: the smoke negates setting and universalizes Smirk USA. Any vidhead worth a damn knows it's all about Concealment, anyway. Never let the audience get a sustained look, never let the performers become familiar. So the rent-a-fog envelopes the Jerk session, permitting us to recognize only that Wow that Jomo is a Tall Mofo and Yes the Smirk Boys can shake it.

Mimicking the track's bumpy segue between the breakdown and the last verse, the vid cuts forward and back from the session to a tight interior shot of the three in the rear of a cruising limo. Split seconds of their toys: incense sticks, microphone, shades, (was that a knife?), a Mingus LP, a Subversive Book with a red and black cover, a basket of Xtra Krispee fried chicken, and a placard that says Honk If You Love Allah. The boys stoop and bump in their seats, hurling hand semaphore.

To all ya suckers who been weaning
 off the bootie and ya bro's dish
 consider it ya duty to go kish
 my ash but ya better pukka up
 cuz i can't stand slobber
 on my sweetback buttercup.
 Black Mao, says it's right to rebel
 Black Mao, says it's time to retell
 Black Mao got no need for leaf
 clear-minded to judge ya and give ya grief
 Black Mao puttin on his fat-ass smirk
 so drop the Tai Chi for a bust-up Herky Jerk.

No fade-outs for Smirk USA—the beat halts abruptly and we're left with a super close-up freeze of Jomo's face before he lurched away from the cam. The mouth is frozen in, in, in...the Smirk! Scorez EZ

screamed at the IFA! studio as he scrolled nano by nano then slammed Stop. For effect, the pupils and irises were blackened and the whites whitened through editing.

Jomo rises and rushes to embrace the TV. He waves up the room's lights and apes the Smirk for Melissa.

Jomo: Grrr! Ha, ha! Aaaaaaaaaaaaah!

Melissa: You are one scary individual.

Jomo: I feel so strong and proud! Like Ali, man. I know how he felt—the greatest!

Melissa: The scariest.

Jomo: I'm all about Ali right now. C'mon, Joe Frazier!

Melissa: I'm revoking your vid privileges again. You're not a star yet.

Jomo: In time the nations will fall one by one and the Smirk USA flag will fly over every disco. A flag—we gotta work on the logo.

He kneels on the floor by the couch, towering over Melissa, the size of a young child, before playfully smothering her. She pushes him away, a feat possible only because he allows it.

Melissa: I'm gonna work on you, lover. Give you a dose of humility, a shot of patience.

He presses down on her again.

Melissa: My love tent. My planetarium.

They kiss.

Jomo: Now that you mention it, I could use a little somethin' somethin'. What time is it—time to go Hi?

Melissa: Uhhh, it's one ten. Do we have to go out this late?

Jomo: Girl, it just turned Friday—it's Pro Night! Let's go Hi! Where's Tawdra—she wanna go?

Melissa: Slumbering, probably, peacefully. She had a pepper marathon.

Jomo: Don't even—you're not tired!

Melissa: All right, stay sweet while I slip into something a little less comfortable.

She exits. Jomo waves up Rewind and watches The Herky Jerk backwards.

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The interior of the Hierophant plots penumbrae, velvet, votive candles, runes, rood screens and crystals. Along the perimeter there are apses for the stations of the Tarot. The long bar, an erstwhile sacrificial altar, was acquired from Delphi according to Ether, the proprietor. He wears silver on every other finger and stands in a corner in front of drapes blazed with griffins. Recorded wind chimes peal under the din of the faithful. Hope, the Thursday Night hostess, approaches through planes of shadow in a black brassiere studded with ankhs and black pleated slacks, her skin glowing lunar white. Ether finishes a spliff of comet dust and watches her from next to a Knossian urn. He digs out a fistful of sand.

Ether: Duality. Matter. Spirit.

He lets the sand fall back into the urn and looks at the story in his palm.

Hope: We're fifty over capacity. At least fifty—it's really crowded.

Ether:

Hope: What should I do? Do you want me to clear it out a bit? Stop the new people from entering? What do you want me to do?

Ether: Your job is to make everyone feel welcome and have a fine night.

Hope: Isn't it technically a fire hazard to have so many people?

Ether: Fire is not enjoyed tonight. Fire is not even on the menu.

She exits in her ankhs and Ether spills more sand on a low circular tiled table on which a wolf howls. He traces a smiley face crowned by two horns. Grains on his fingertips, he presses beneath his thinning red hair the cicatrices where his had been removed. Hope returns.

Hope: Roxanna's here with some friends. And Johann from Procter & Gamble is here with a party from Mobil.

Ether: Right, the bankers. Tell them five minutes then bring them in here. Tell Sharina to wait on them. Tell Magdalene to read for them. Tell Roxanna I'm busy for a while.

He brushes the sand back into the urn and precisely arranges the wicker chairs. He stands in front of a predominantly turquoise diptych: on the left is a rendering of *The Lovers*, crafted on spec by a Chinatown crone named Bri. The naked figures do not look at each other but overhead at a radiant sun and winged angel with a stern countenance and a quiver of arrows. A tree of twelve fiery fruits flanks the man; a tree of five small apples flanks the woman. At their feet a serpent writhes. In the background lush mountains beckon them. On the right is a poem Bri exquisitely calligraphed.

The Lovers

my breath on a pane
no match for the City's lessons
blotted by the rags of Now

your breath in a mist
curtains questions of Time
humming in the warmed moss

there was an angel
there is an angel
there will be an angel

and two gasps
of love unconjugated

Ether wrote the poem for a lover while she was backpacking in Bulimia and he was suffocating in an East Village studio. She never returned and the poem was never delivered. This was years before The Hierophant. Hope returns and steps past the bankers who wait impatiently outside.

Hope: Jomo's here.

Ether: Good news. Tell him to come to my office.

Ether's office is a cell of stacked holos of dollars and pentacles, representing exchanges at all venues within the bar. Ten dollars buys eight pentacles, the only currency allowed on the premises. Ether waves off the visuals, leaving only a stock desk and filing cabinets. He embraces Jomo, who fills the room. Melissa stands in the doorway.

Jomo: Ether, man, so good to see you! Business looks doubleplus good!

Ether: Commerce rides the vibe. I'm feeling much better now that you're here—it's been way too long!

Jomo: I know it! Just trying to get my house in order, you know, Smirk USA and whatnot. Trying to push the boulder up the mountain.

Ether: Right on, but once it gets over the top and starts rolling, it's all good. That first inch is the hardest part. I remember, the doom-and-gloomers naysaying me to death.

Jomo: Right, right! They're everywhere, all over me, bro, like wild snakes.

Ether: Keep hope alive, that's all, my man. It's Melissa, right?

Jomo: Yeah, yeah! You remember Melissa!

Ether: You've been here only once.

Melissa: That's right. Jomo always waits so late before he decides to wants to go out. And I usually have to work.

Ether: Teacher, right?

Melissa: First grade at a boutique uptown.

Ether: Which one?

Melissa: Quantico.

Ether: No kidding. I know a bunch up there. So, are you two thirsty?

Jomo: Yah mon, come trink wit us!

Ether: Here.

From the desk's side drawer he takes a handful of actual pentacles and gives them to Jomo.

Ether: Is there anything else I can provide?

Jomo: Such as?

Ether: Let's see.

He fishes around a drawer on the other side.

Ether: What I thought—just curiosity. No surprise to top it off, which is the way to go, I find. You want it straight up?

Jomo: Sure, bro. Like you say, it's all good.

Ether hands them each a capsule.

Ether: I must make a mental note to replenish. Excuse me for a second.

He calls up his message icon, a hand, and ties a string that says replenish around a finger. The hand vanishes and the lights die as they all exit.

They sit in a VIP apse on a low sofa at a table painted with three eyes. At the adjacent table an owl perches on a bald man's shoulder. Melissa folds her legs under and Jomo juts his out. In the main room, antique coffee tables, chaises and high-backed chairs surround a gilded pyramid. Water dribbles from its apex into a circular pool of goldfish and papyrus. Artificial sunlight streams through a bubble window directly above the fountain. Sohaila, an Iranian girl with considerably arched eyebrows, brings them phosphorescent Lake Erie Water and takes their drink orders. They swallow their capsules and wash them down.

Melissa: Be prepared, this is the last you will hear from me for a while. Curiosity makes me fall into myself.

Ether: You can't articulate the questions.

Melissa: I won't even want to. I'll be introspective.

Ether: Silently but busily wondering...

Melissa: Should I do a monologue, tell a few jokes while I still can?

Jomo: No need, baby, but if you want to riff, get off all over your itty-bitty self.

Sohaila returns with the potables: nonalcoholic Thai iced tea for Ether, Giuliani 2001 for Jomo and a Rumsfeld straight up with a double twist for Melissa.

Sohaila: Roxanna wants to say hello.

Ether: OK, tell her to come over.

Jomo: Roxanna!? Roxanna!?

Ether: Sure, man. Her.

Jomo: Oh, shit! You getting busy with her?

Ether: She's just a friendgirl. She drops by when her team's in town—whichever one it is these days.

Jomo: The St. Paul Sirocco, dude, she bought them two years ago! They're at the top—the Amazons don't have a chance against them tomorrow.

Ether: Never did. They can't spike for shit. Did you ever play? The men's league's taking off, I hear.

Jomo: I played when I was a kid but it wasn't my bag.

Ether: I had a pretty decent serve—sneaky sidespin. I played wing in soccer—kicked big banana corners. Never could do anything straight, always had to rely on English. What does that say?

Jomo: So you getting busy with Roxanna?

Ether: You getting curious?

Jomo: Oh yeah, dude! Fess up, you busy with her?

Ether: Melissa, are you with us?

She nods.

Ether: Cool. She's with us. What do you think she's dreaming on?

Jomo: Dude, I don't even know where she's at half the time. She had a 6.0 at Chappaquiddick—she's a regular Curie. She got the job at Quantico with no experience—you know how hard that is?

Roxanna looms in front of them in lime green silks and a gold monocle. Her cheek says StP in henna. She kisses Ether and introduces Xunta, a squat digger in hot pants and a St. Paul traveling vest, and Astrid, a lithe blocker in a Velcro body stocking. Xunta rubs Jomo's head.

Xunta: And who's this young thing?

Ether: This is Jomo. He's going to be a big MC once he gets his house in order.

Xunta: Aw, we've heard that before, haven't we, girls? I was just sayin' we could use us a new ballboy. Wore the last one out so bad his tail drags permanent.

Jomo: What does it pay?

Xunta: You heard that, ladies? He wants the gig.

Jomo: You girls play tomorrow afternoon, right?

Xunta: Some fun in the sun, it's like that.

Astrid: We just love that dayball, right?

The Sirocco laugh together, apparently at an inside joke.

Jomo: You worried about the New York Amazons? They're tough.

Xunta: About as worried about them as you are.

Astrid: Who's the precious gem?

Ether: Melissa is Jomo's girl. Jomo, why don't you two have a reading while the ladies and I talk. You have some issues, don't you Roxanna?

Roxanna: I'm bursting.

Ether: Jomo, have Ursula read for you. She smells otherworldly.

Jomo and Melissa get up and navigate past the pyramid.

Jomo: What is it with v-ballers, man? They are some seriously ignorant chicks. And they can't dress for diddly. I bet they thought they were getting all decked out and whatnot. All that coin. What do you think Roxanna's discussing with Ether? Investments? Starting up a chain of v-ball restaurants? Fitness clubs?

She can do anything, she just needs guidance. Man-age-ment. Girl, I could lay it all out for her. How much do you think she's got offshore?

They check their shoes before entering the rear chamber, a meadow imported from Stonehenge and dotted with hypoallergenic dandelions. On the ceiling and each wall an IMAX pastoral vid perfects a Druid afternoon. Readers sit on blankets throughout the lea, their counsel rapt or perplexed. Jomo and Melissa sprawl on the waiting quilt with other nonreaders. A robed attendant hands them goblets of nectar.

Robe: We celebrate courage, generosity, poise and presence. We know that character is beauty but beauty fortifies character. Loveliness, natural or embellished, mirrors the magnificent spirit in the center of your secret self. We are dedicated to fusing the magic of the soul with the miracle of the body. We are devoted to honor and excellence, to nobility revealed.

Jomo: Are you a reader?

Robe: I haven't lived with the cards long enough.

Jomo: How much longer do you have?

Robe: I'll know when I'm there, won't I? Like when you two fell in love, you looked in each other's eyes and understood the communion.

A smiling woman returns from the lea to the quilt and offers her waiting companion a dandelion.

Smiling: We definitely are soul mates!

Dandelion: I'm so happy!

Hand in hand they walk away and Melissa overhears a whisper: Now what?

Jomo: Who is Ursula? Ether said she should read for us.

Robe: Over there on the hill. Looks like she's just become available.

Jomo: Great, let's do it!

Robe: One goes, one stays.

Jomo: Oh, right. OK, I'll go first.

Robe: Have you prepared?

Jomo: My Qi is read-y. Watch my girl when I'm gone.

Incense emanates naturally from Ursula, insinuating uneasiness as Jomo mans her rug. Candles are braided into her mane. Her faceted eyes point upwards.

Jomo: I'm Jomo. Are you blind?

Ursula: Duh, are you?

Jomo: Ether told me to ask for you. I'm a friend of his. Are you a friend of his, too?

Ursula: There is one Great Spirit. Are you into groups or something?

Jomo: Are you gonna give me a positive reading? I could use good news.

Ursula: What concerns you?

Jomo: Music. Performing. I'm trying to get my groove going but it's hard, it's hard. You wouldn't believe. But I'm working at it, doing my thing. I would

appreciate some guidance or a sense of the timing. It's all gonna happen but the question is when.

Ursula: Jomo Ambition, shuffle the cards slowly.

Jomo: Has your hair ever caught on fire?

Ursula: Fire is not enjoyed tonight.

She laughs and arrays the cards.

Ursula: So this is a financial endeavor for you, not an artistic one. What else is new. You believe the riches you have are insufficient, inspiring desperation. Try some perspective, dingbat. You have made sacrifices contributing to this situation. Who hasn't? They have made you wiser but poorer. You can achieve wealth if you employ the skills you have developed in recent battles. In other words, get a grip. You have been engaged in playful exercises that have distracted you. God Bless America. You will continue to dream of wealth but the dreaming will keep you from taking necessary steps. Land That I Love. You are willing to take risks to achieve your goal. Allons Enfants De La Patrie! There is a dark woman who already has the riches you crave but you are too proud to ask for her assistance. Stand Beside Her And Guide Her! You fear leaving the others involved in your musical project. You will be traveling soon. O Beautiful For Spacious Skies!

She stifles a sudden sob and picks up the cards.

Jomo: Traveling? Where am I going? Meeting scouts, producers? Doing gigs, what?

Ursula: Lesson One: traveling makes or unmakes a man.

Jomo: I get around as it is. Am I leaving town?

Ursula: This isn't your home. You're not from here.

Jomo: I don't have a home! Shit, I gotta crib here—that's home enough!

Ursula: Lesson One, Part Two: traveling is not belonging.

Jomo: Were you crying before? Do you always do that or was that for me? What do you see?

Ursula: Through tears, only a man.

Jomo: But am I going to make it? The question was: Am I gonna make it?

Ursula: The future is what the latest brings. Hit the road, Jomo.

Melissa plucks a dandelion and gazes at the intricate, wafting cloud patterns: the Minotaur drags Rapunzel by the tresses while hoary elders protest. On the quilt a man with a forked tongue rolls over restlessly, addressing all present.

Tongue: Politics. It's never my turn in this field. I've been waiting, what, an hour? Politics. The drinks here suck. I hate all this new micronectar anyways. Just pour me some Hellmann's—that's all. It blows this fruity syrup away.

Jomo returns, wagging his head.

Jomo: I've been had! Wow, man, I don't know. Questions and questions.

Tongue: I've never been polled once in my life. They flash and survey people every day, ask them what's up. Are you pro-secession? How many tattoos? Tried suicide? Not me, they haven't polled me. They don't know my politics.

Jomo: It's your turn, small fry.

Melissa walks up the hill.

Jomo: What's your beef, bro?

Tongue: Are you polling me?

Jomo: If that's what you want to call it, man. Let me ask you ask this: have you gotten any lately? You seem a little edgy.

Tongue: That's not a poll, that's prying. Reshuffle.

Jomo: I've just been shuffled by that woman up the hill.

Tongue: Is she a witch?

Jomo: I was looking for a few little answers, dig, and the broad tells me I'm going traveling. I'm busting beats 24-7, label shopping, and she's telling me I don't have the cojones to ask my girl for coin.

Tongue: Your girl—that gorgeous pipsqueak was your girl?

Jomo: Right. Watch it.

Tongue: She's got scratch, huh? What is she, a teacher?

Jomo: Yeah, man, at Quantico.

Tongue: Wow. So you're bringing together a hip-hop act?

Jomo: Smirk USA, you heard it here on the grass.

Tongue: You ever talked to Prep Boy?

Jomo: No, man, who's that? You in the biz?

Tongue: Talk to Prep Boy, talk to him.

Jomo: Yo, I heard you the first time. Who is he? Where is he at?

Melissa returns and hunkers against Jomo.

Melissa: She wouldn't read for me. Finished for the night, I guess. Let's go back inside.

Jomo: Fine. Yo, who is Prep Boy?

Tongue: Is it my turn yet!?

Robe: I have a rug opening up in five minutes.

The Sirocco contingent is drunk. Xunta plucks owl feathers and attaches them to Astrid's Velcro ass. The futile attempts to remove them inspire further hysterics. Ether reads Roxanna's ears intently.

Jomo: Ether, bro, a thousand thanks for the hospitality but that reader—she spouted anthems and called me a dingbat. What's up with that?

Ether: Ursula smells better than country bacon, you have to give her that. You have to.

Xunta: Yo, Stick, you look menage-able. Ballboy tryouts in five seconds under the table!

Astrid: Get down, Stick, get down!

She wipes Jomo's cheek with a callused palm. Ether leans over and whispers to Melissa.

Ether: You OK? Silently wondering but all right?

Melissa: Yeah, mm hmm. Why don't you come over and have dinner with us some time? I have a roommate.

Ether: When I leave here I lose my magic powers.

Jomo: Dude, some tongue said I should I talk to Prep Boy about my music. You know him?

Ether: He's been here. I'll hook you up next time.

Roxanna: Girls, we gotta split. I get new biceps bright and early tomorrow.

Xunta: And Iron Woman gets herself a pedicure!

She flings a bare foot on the table.

Ether: My man Jomo here might like to drop in on you girls tomorrow at the hotel if you were sincere about that tryout. Maybe you could leave a number he could attempt to reach you at or something.

Xunta: Allow me!

She inserts a tube of StP lime green lipstick between her toes and scribbles.

Outside, a faulty street halogen chirrs. Binned medical waste stinks up the block. Cabbies chat outside their vehicles. Melissa hops in the first one and Jomo crams in behind her.

Jomo: Damn, baby, we forgot our shoes! They're back on the grass—should we go back?

Melissa: Leave them. We'll get them tomorrow and play footsie tonight.

Driver: Good evening, sir and madam! Would you like to see my elephant?

Jomo: Sure, captain.

In his right hand the driver produces a sleeping elephant, its trunk curled around his wrist.

Melissa: Ohhhh!

Jomo: How'd he get so small, chief?

Driver: He never became small because he never became big!

Jomo: Huh. Watch the wheel, there. Baby, remind me tomorrow to pick up my treads. They're two grand at Pampers but Fronty got them for five hundred.

Driver: Would you like to listen to a little Indian music?

Melissa: Do we have to?

Jomo: It's cool, it's all good, Mr. DJ.

The driver pushes a button and percussive rodents seem to scramble under a singer's swooping glissades.

Jomo: This is not bad, captain. What is it?
 Driver: Inspirational Indian music! The singer is world famous!
 Jomo: What part of India is it from?
 Driver: Pakistan!
 Jomo: Ah.
 Driver: Do you know how many times I have played this tonight?
 Jomo: How many is that?
 Driver: Six!
 Jomo: There's some grooving in there somewhere. Where can I pick it up?
 Driver: No need! I will give you this disk so you can listen to it when you are home tonight! I insist!
 Jomo: Thanks, chief. Whoa, we're here, stop! Keep on rockin' in the free world!
 Driver: Thank you!

Jomo's summer routine: exit cab; salute doorman; shake leg absentmindedly in elevator while studying the signature of its inspectors; produce, drop and employ first and second keys; dash to freezer and insert head for a freon blast; chug water; feed the boas; strip; urinate; set alarm; lie supine and consider the ceiling.

Jomo: How is that your dad has never offered me a job?

But Melissa doesn't hear because she is not on the sultan's bed she bought especially to accommodate Jomo—she is back at Stonehenge looking at the reader with small fires in her hair. Tears of blood fall from the faceted eyes and the woman's visage contorts before she bows and hurriedly packs up. Was it horror she saw, Melissa wonders, and what was that about?

#

There is blood on Peter Matasavage's collar, he sees in the elevator's reflective wall, dried and fresh. The doom of shaving. Forty years of experimentation—Sharp straightedges, Dimple Pinch pivoters, Microsoft rotaries—all in vain. Even expert barbers sliced him. Thirty years of starch further devastated his neck, a stretch of ire, regret, ooze, and renegade whiskers. To wear a beard or turtlenecks had always been out of the question on account of his senses of pride and fashion. All in all though, he must say he looks good and carries his heft well. He tugs the collar but the shirt is an inch short where he needs it most and the stinging clench continues.

The door slides open to the marbled lobby of G-Y FDR. Behind the receptionist's desk, two antennae quiver. Nancy is down below, removing her commuter treads according to the firm policy that footwear impedes creativity. The founders, when they were around, which was infrequent, traipsed about in pricey, florid Caterpillar socks; Nancy wears nude peds. She sits up and engages her systems.

Peter: Bon jour, Miss Nancy.

Nancy: And how are we today, Mr. Matasavage?

She chuckles, completing their short ceremony. Peter trudges down the hall to his corner office, following a trail of smudge and shoe polish. The corporate creativity edict does not affect him, as he is only a tenant, not an employee.

The few G-Y FDR hangers-on are grossly overcompensated, he knows, since they rarely perform tasks. Their respective responsibilities are mysterious, save Nancy's, but Peter does recognize the firm's pecking order. Ennui and the absence of leadership bred a bickersome workplace and the incessant sniping ripened fully over the years. Peter's m.o. has been to spectate, goad, and retire to his office. Before he reaches his destination they are already at it. Shivonne rubs lotion onto the bellies of one of her infant triskadecaplets cradled around her workstation. Dartie, a box-jawed albino, watches over her shoulder.

Dartie: You missed a spot. There.

Shivonne: You'll be seeing a whole lot of spots when I'm done with you.

Dartie: You missed it again. I can see it now, these kids will be the worst volleyball players in school, serving wide, spiking long, missing digs.

Shivonne: Ghost boy, you got a ghost of a chance getting through today with your white sheet still on your back.

Dartie: I couldn't hear you, my knees were knocking too loud.

Shivonne: I'm gonna knock all the change out of your cash-register mouth if you keep it up.

Peter: What are you buffing those bellies with, woman?

Shivonne: Hi, Peter. Perspective. I saw a show last week that said how beneficial it is to apply it at an early age.

Dartie: Obviously nobody rubbed you down.

Shivonne: At least my parents didn't send me away to Albino Town.

Peter: What do you think would happen if you rubbed Dartie with that stuff?

Shivonne: My hand would fall off on account of his cooties.

Dartie: You wish you could rub my board instead of the hairy gut of your fat Buddha husband.

Shivonne: Maybe I'll just flash him to get over here right now and sit on you. Peter, you know what a squashed albino looks like?

Peter: What's that?

Shivonne: Bird shit.

Peter is further down the hall, thinking that guano means bird shit and it's big industry in the Galapagos. Trivia. He triple unlocks his door, which says Peter Matasavage International Consultancy. In the '80's he'd actually done some consulting of the PR genre for Mike and Bo: placed some puff pieces and spread

some impactful rumors. Rather than bill the Russians, he'd negotiated free space for life. They had been low on meaningful currency at the time, so the deal was a win-win.

Over the millenium change, G-Y had resurrected numerous rotting urban harbors, morphing them into brick and cobblestone family zones. Strictly deal makers themselves, the two principals hired dozens of architects along the way and eventually swallowed FDR, a civil engineering concern. From his corner Peter watched the serious professionals come and, years later, he saw them go singly and in "teams." Harbor Places were out. Abandoned mines and fallow golf courses were in—the public flocked to pastoral escapist residence parks accessed best by SUV's, the remoter the better. Thanks to a trickle of management fees (they subcontracted the actual management) from some of their initial ventures, Mike and Bo sustained the skeleton of the company and, because the floor was cheap, its vast, now largely unfurnished office. Neither principal visited much: Mike accepted a sinecure from IFA! to conduct an odd seminar or workshop; Bo summered year-round with a cabala of soused pleasure cruise magnates. Peter was left alone, the way he always wanted it. Besides electric and heat, he was in all respects self-sufficient.

He switches on the light, folds his jacket over the virgin guest chair, punts his briefcase under the petrified maple syrup desk and climbs into his pod, which protests as he tilts to pre-set—150 degrees. With the lighter that sings Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah (a gag gift from Mindy) he lights up a blunt of mustard grinds and turns on his gas machine, an IV bottle (another gag gift from Mindy) with a tube hanging into a mug shaped like a bear's paw (a gag gift from Melissa). A jaundiced cloud fills the room while his preferred gas, high in lead and octane, percolates. His floor neighbors drink a brew virtually devoid of both, tasteless and pointless to Peter, a slow starter in the a.m. He reaches over to the fridge and takes out a crumbcake and a bottle of vintage myst distilled by a friend of Bo's. The First Mug Of The Day is ready and he drops pieces of the cake into the gas, adding the myst until spongy bergs float above the rim. With habitual caution he brings the mug to his lips and slurps.

No natural light enters this corner office. The single blindless window, cracked presumably for ventilation, looks out across a narrow murky alley on the metallic pixels of the adjacent skyscraper's base. How many messages has Peter wished to spray or etch there.

#

The front entrance to Quantico Elementary does not exist anymore, obliterated during a grenade launch during the 0's then walled up after the parents took back the facility. A mural of peace—frolicking children amid tropical flora and fauna, spray-painted in X-tra vibrant colors by the students—decorates the cement barricade. Melissa enters around the side, past the brimming trash bins, through a fluorescent security tube.

Her first-grade classroom is littered with bedrooled pillows surrounding a sandbox sensibly treated with anti-micturants. Led by the warm-up coach, the thirty students are already at play, constructing and demolishing towers and low, flat structures according to whim and gender. Summer

enrollment, though optional, was unchanged from the traditional season—Quantico Guidance and a Quantico Square Lunch were too good to pass up. Bill the Parrot watches the activity from a fake birch tree next to the blackboard.

When Quantico first won the district contract and installed its radical early childhood sandbox curriculum, there had been complaints. Some of them concerned households becoming sand-infested, so there were now large brushes in the classrooms ever at the ready to minimize take-home residue. Sure enough, skills and self-esteem began to rise there and at other Quantico franchises. Melissa joined up just when profits and growth were matching Wall Street's exponential valuation of the firm. Blessedly laden with stock options, she removes her shoes and drops her backpack under her desk. The coach glares at her and slips out the door.

Melissa: Hola, Bill.

Bill: Hola.

Melissa: Children, be quiet! Children! Warm-up is over! Sit still! Statues, all of you! Still! Pretend you're statues—nobody move a finger. Good. Now the first thing I have to say is that I'm very sorry I'm late today. I hope that you'll understand and forgive me. Zillionaire, statue! Sometimes people are late and this is the first time for me but I apologize and promise it won't happen again. Zillionaire, stop it! I asked you once already—now out of the sandbox, right now!

Zillionaire: I know why you late, Miss Matasavage.

Melissa: And why is that, Zillionaire?

Zillionaire: You out drinking last night!

Bill: Drinking last night!

And the children:

Melissa: Very funny, Bill. Settle down this instant! Now! Quiet! Good. Now everyone, take out your pictures. Zillionaire, step over here.

Zillionaire: I'm sorry, Miss Matasavage.

Melissa: I bet. Do you have your pictures?

Zillionaire: Uh huh.

Melissa: I bet you do. Where are they?

Zillionaire: In my bag.

Melissa: Go get them.

Zillionaire: I can't.

Melissa: Why not?

Zillionaire: My bag's in the sandbox and you kicked me out.

Melissa: That's right. I kicked you out because you were misbehaving. You're allowed to go into the sandbox now, but only to get your pictures and bring them here right away.

Zillionaire struts into the box, kicks Success, elbows Unique, and brings back his bag.

Melissa: Zillionaire, didn't you realize I was watching you? I think you did and you purposefully misbehaved again! You will not be allowed to show the class your pictures and you're out of the sandbox for the rest of the day. That's right, you should cry. Everyone will learn and have fun and you will have to sit on your pillow and watch.

Zillionaire: I wanna show you my pictures!

Melissa: After everyone else shows theirs, I'll look at yours. Now sit down and be quiet. All right, children, who's going to be first to show us your pictures of your family? Unique, go ahead!

#

One button at the end of the left armrest activates his system, pod/vid interface, headset and bodygear. He straps in amid the blinking of several repair icons. Peter himself assembled the hardware and installed the software and thereby feels entitled to disregard their idiosyncrasies as they mature. The pod cants him slightly to the left but not so much that it worsens the persistent crick in his cervix. He points through a swarm of his system's blocky holograms and views his mail, his happy time. One e-check for \$61 from Ms. Arlayne Redmaster of Alamagordo, NM, rests flat and he kicks it into the deposit bucket. He waves up the accompanying letter.

July 4

Dear Helpin' Needy Kidz,

Although I don't read the classifieds with all those advertisements from vendors of weapons and filth and such, nor for that matter do I read the news articles (expounding on the aforementioned themes), the paper was folded in such a manner on my kitchen table that your message of hope caught my attention and, on sheer impulse, I instructed my daughter Arlayne to immediately forward payment of the suggested amount. Put it to use and Godspeed.

Yours truly,
Arlice Arlee Redmaster

Peter pastes the return address into his Thank U letter and prints it with an envelope.

July 9

Dear Friend,

Your heartfelt philanthropy is welcomed and appreciated. A small sacrifice in our prosperous nation becomes a harvest of hope in regions of scarcity and desperation around the world. Your funds have been directed to the village of N'Buta, Nigeria. In approximately six months you will receive correspondence from the child you have adopted. Thank you for celebrating humanity—you have made one life healthier and happier.

In progress,
Helpin' Needy Kidz

He posts and seals the snail mail, the irreplaceable token of acknowledgement, and flings it under the desk, where it rests on end against his dossier. Miracles. A sudden coughing fit wracks his reclined length. He spits a cheek of phlegm into the nearest receptacle, a blue bag for recyclables, aggravating his crick and setting off a flurry of holos. A refill, mix and slurp settle him down. He pulls Redmaster into the N'Buta house and diaries a follow-up date for January 9.

He opens the follow-ups for today, July 9. Houses titled N'Buta, Mollojorra and Lochin appear. Underneath Lochin lies a folder named Mighty. He opens it and pages down past the initial correspondence and receipt for \$61 cash from Maurise Mighty of St. Paul, MN (must be a Sirocco season ticket holder). He takes out a piece of rice paper, purchased years before from a Chinatown vendor, a crone nearly as tiny as Melissa, and a matching but stained, flimsy envelope. Perhaps the woman had been disappointed when he'd neglected her clutter of calligraphy panels, porcelain and jade, and made his mundane acquisition, the way he was perpetually disappointed upon receipt of merely the "suggested amount." Or maybe she'd simply been thankful for some scratch, as he was too in the end. Shopkeepers

all. He blinks on Lochin 6Mo, inserting his Hotpoint pen between his left ring finger and pinkie, purposefully viewing the holo more than the paper as he writes.

To The Honorable Mighty Maurise,

We thank the great american heart! Due to you there is two big animals giving drink for the family. Due to you there is no great sickness for the family. I am ten years strong and fast. I carry drink over the big hill to get money. Three years I buy music box to be happy all the time. School begins again for me. Small sister and brother do no school for working. Due to you I am happy more. Goodbye!

Lu Tin Mah

Right-handed, Peter began writing lefty to evince a child's scrawl. In spite of his efforts, his penmanship improved as he switched to the less dexterous fingers and he is now at the end of his digital incompetence. He folds and stuffs the letter, addressing the envelope and flipping it under the desk near a manila folder marked Cambodia. The folder is too flat for his liking—only a few letters to mail to his man in Phnom Penh. But he will send them today anyway, as it has been two weeks and he's never missed one of his internal deadlines in thirty years. Another coughing fit thunders through, inspiring him to depod and go piss. He shuts the office door, which locks automatically. Not wanting to attract undue attention to his penchant for security, he doesn't bother with the second lock or deadbolt for these walks. Even so, he worries a few seconds down the hall and invokes a silent spell against would-be trespassers.

Exiting the grim, gray G-Y FDR men's room, he sees D'Angel's newly skunked tail, brushed out and teased and dyed black and white according to her suburban New Jersey taste, twitching in her cubicle. He walks over and catches his breath, finding her rear roundly protruding at him, her sweatshirt raised as she rummages through her backpack, the pale small of her back glistening in blue monitor light. The tail slaps at his midriff, startling him.

D'Angel: You think I don't have eyes in my butt? I see you there, mister.

Peter: Oh, uh, I like the skunk. Looks good on you.

D'Angel: Thanks, I don't like it. I let Unique do it cuz I always let her do what she wants but it came out bad. Maybe I'll get severe and get a piglet.

Peter: What's that?

D'Angel: You know, shaved and curlicued. But I think I'm too long for that.

Peter: I've seen that look downtown—the piglet. Too militant for you. I like the way you have it now, long and lush.

D'Angel: Thanks. You wanna buy a vid? I got some great bootlegs in here—all new releases.

Peter: No, no. No thanks. Unless there's any, uh, personal-type footage.

She sits up, faces him and waves up a tabloid on her screen.

D'Angel: A vid ain't nothin' next to the real thing.

Peter: It's too early for this. You're gonna make my dirty, old heart stop. So, uh, new taildo—does that mean new boyfriend? What happened to Viktor?

D'Angel: Hah, hah! Viktor's still around but he's slipping.

Peter: Not treating you like the queen.

D'Angel: Nah, he treats me good—he got me this handcuff. There's real silver in it. See: it says his name. He wears the one with mine.

Peter: So what's the matter?

D'Angel: Nothing. He's just getting a little boring. He used to attack me like I was his prey or something.

Peter: The hunt's over. Is there a new stud?

D'Angel: Hah, hah! I was out dancing last Sat'day with my girlfriends and this alpha started dancing with me and we talked. He flashed me yesterday. His name is Viktor, too, so I gotta be careful. I mean, I have my home system cloaked so I wasn't sure it was him when he flashed even though he has a lower voice than my Viktor.

Peter: Good looking?

D'Angel: Oh yeah, yeah. Tight butt. Small waist. Big arms. Sharp canines. Green eyes. Silver whiskers.

Peter: Good job?

D'Angel: He's a notary. They make good money, I heard. What is that, anyway?

Peter: Who gives a shit? They do make good money. Take a lot of tests.

D'Angel: Yeah, he said he's studying for one. What's up with that?

Peter: Who cares? So, you going out this weekend?

D'Angel: I told him maybe I would. I told him to flash me here today.

Peter: You gonna go dancing again?

D'Angel: I don't know. Maybe I'll go over to his place and get surprised or something.

Peter: Oh, he's into that? Does he deal?

D'Angel: Nah, I don't think so. He just said he had some.

Peter: What if he doesn't flash?

D'Angel: He will, I could hear it. But if he doesn't, maybe that's a message to stick with boring Viktor, you know?

Peter: I would flash you.

D'Angel: I know you would.

Peter: I'm not lying, I would.

D'Angel: I know, you're a good boy.

Peter: How old is this kid?

D'Angel: My age, I think, maybe a little older. Maybe 24.

Peter: Ugh. See... No experience. You're missing out.

D'Angel: I been out with guys older than you, mister.

Peter: Really.

D'Angel: Hah, hah! You didn't know that about me. There's a lot you don't know.

Peter: And vice versa.

D'Angel: I know, locked up in your office doing your secret stuff. You with the government?

Peter: Which one?

D'Angel: The real one, the hidden one.

Peter: I'm unaffiliated. Just a lone wolf looking for a meaty lamb.

D'Angel: Would you pounce on her and tear her apart?

Peter: I would flash you.

D'Angel: All right, wolfie, go back to your cage.

Peter: Wolves don't live in cages. We don't have homes.

D'Angel: Go back to your office.

Peter: I'm gonna check in on you later and see if he flashed.

D'Angel: You don't have to.

Peter: I know, but I'm a good boy.

#

Unique: I drew my pictures of my Daddy. I love Daddy. This is me and Daddy. Daddy picked me up in a big blue car. This is it. Daddy picked me up in a little red car with no ceiling. This is it. Daddy picked me up in a big black car but I wasn't allowed to go in it. This is it. When Daddy visits me he always has a new car with a new color. I asked him if he can drive any car in the world and he said yeah. This is me asking Daddy about cars and him smiling at me. The end.

Melissa: Very, very good, Unique! And the pictures are very pretty, don't you think, class? I do! Who's next?

There is a noise at the door from a stern woman in a wheelchair.

Melissa: Well, look who's here, children! Señora Guzman!

Bill: Hola, Señora Guzman!

Guzman: Come out in the hall, Miss Matasavage, I want you. Children, sit still for one minute. If one of you moves I'll jump out of this chair and make you very unhappy.

Melissa closes the door behind her and looks up at the principal.

Melissa: We've just begun showing our pictures of our families. Unique did an excellent job.

Guzman: Of course she did. Ten minutes late today, were we? Look, you know the August Tests are just around the bend. Do I have to remind you that the performance of each student greatly impacts not just your commission, but mine as well? Every minute you, a certified Quantico professional, spend with a student means a better payout for all of us.

Melissa: I'm terribly sorry. There's no excuse.

Guzman: Of course there is. You were out carousing last night with your titanic boyfriend in search of a career.

Melissa:

Guzman: Right now, I want you to walk to the gymnasium. There's another voucher client who will discuss a new enrollee for your class. I'll cover for you and get your children back on track for August.

#

Trudging back, Peter almost turns again into the restroom but decides against reliving his increasingly acrid output. He enters his office to the comforting aroma of mustard and lights up again before podding. His antiquated holofields are too bright, even with his headset on, so he lays it aside and massages his eyeballs through clenched lids. The speckled void, violent bands and circles of color—the birthing cosmos inside us... D'Angel's tail brushes against him again, though now his chest is bare, and she lets it linger against his belly, teasing his tangle of black and gray then tapping his deep navel. He jerks out a clutch of PaperMates. The skunk treatment has stiffened her bristles. He squirms as her caudal finger dances a concupiscent script then rises up to reveal a wink and he shudders, rupturing a side support of the pod, sending him to the floor. His shin hurts. There is a knock on the door.

Dartie: You all right in there, Peter?

Peter: This fucking pod! I'm fine. Just fell out of the pod. Fuck! Fucking Swedes can't build shit! 'Yew put dis shit tewgedder.' 'Fuck!' in Swedish!

He picks himself up and examines his shin, marked only by a turgid vein which was already there. Aging. He presses it for at least ten seconds and wonders that stopping the blood flow doesn't effect any noticeable pathology below. An insignificant tributary. The pain subsides as it should and he knocks off the remaining nog and repods, now at an awkward sideward perspective. Disgusted, he decides to put off Mollojorra and N'buta follow-ups and he takes out a thick photo album from the

credenza. Shriveled masking tape down its spine says Lochin. The negatives reside in sealed pouches in the inner front and rear covers; the prints hang under relentless acetate flaps. The most valuable purchase or lease he ever made, this book, more than a full generation later. Black and white, the images remain compelling. There is a lesson in that, even for a non-photographer like himself.

The album is tabbed twelve times. He flips to the seventh section (July) and peels out a print from the Lu Tin Ma leaves. An emaciated waif poses next to an earthen jug nearly twice his girth, two teeth punctuating a proud grin. Behind him in the dirt a toddler reaches out for something forever unseen and bawls. A water buffalo grazes among bursitic bamboo in the rear. Peter slips the print into the envelope for Mighty, then seals it and places it with two other sealed letters into one oversize envelope, which he addresses to his man in Phnom Penh and drops into his dossier.

The third paw of gas in the morning is never the tastiest but it goes down the quickest. Fresh mustard fills the room as the pod budes to starboard. To compensate Peter leans on his left side, thinking nothing until he finishes his smoke. Absolutely smirched, the ashtray is a mollusk shell, once a radiator ornament in his parents' den and, before that, home on the sea floor to sentient cannoli filling. Positioned so, Peter stretches out for a drawer for a palm of jellybeans, which he drops into his mouth one by one. The emperor.

#

High, soaped windows permit limited light into the gym, highlighting dust motes that evoke a perpetual aura of nostalgia, notwithstanding the new-fangled kiddy volleyball machines and self-defense equipment. Melissa finds herself walking across a myriad of strips of tape of different colors, each designating boundaries or paths for games unknown to her. A sharp-beaked man wearing sunglasses and a black leather cape awaits her in a semi-circle of segmented red tape. She stops next to him, bare feet on a cool, blue curve.

Melissa: I'm Miss Matasavage. How can I help you?

Beak: My boy Pow gonna 'rol in your class. He's got skills. If other shorties act up, make him take care of them right away—his main thing. Let him take care of business. Guzman's hip. He don't take care of your problems, flash me.

Melissa: I understand. Where's Pow now?

Beak: In your classroom.

#

He twitches and rolls onto his back, sliding out of the pod in bewilderment. His Time Warner says 11:50—he's slept for about a half-hour. No incoming flashes this morning; the world is at bay. Envelopes and mustard stowed away, he deactivates and decamps. He triple-locks the door and shuffles past Dartie's vacant cubicle, then past the unattended infants, one of whom cocks a sideways glance. In

the lobby he tips an imaginary derby to Nancy, who's on a personal flash with a magician for a party for her grandchildren.

Nancy: You don't need your assistant—these are kids. So don't float. So don't disappear.

#

Draped in an adult-sized T depicting Roxanna as a sirocco incarnate with a human right arm, Pow glowers at the class from the edge of the sandbox. He remains erect and shod in Rubbermaids. Melissa notes that his hands clench the sides of his shirt. Success is presenting pictures of his Auntie Left Eye.

Success: 'N' she makes chicken 'n' ri—.

Melissa: She makes chicken and what, Success? I didn't hear you.

Success: Ri—

Melissa: Rice?

Success:

Melissa: What kind of rice?

Success:

Melissa: Can we see the rice? Did you draw the rice?

Success: Nope.

Melissa: Your Auntie makes chicken and rice. Does she serve anything else?

Success: Yup.

Melissa: What does she serve with the chicken and rice?

Success: Red bees!

He proudly holds up the picture.

Melissa: Bees? Oh, red beans! Chicken, red beans and rice! That sounds de-li-cious!

Success: Hee hee. Auntie Left Eye is a good cook.

Zillionaire: I heard your Auntie's a ho! That's what my cousin Tito told me!

Success: Shut up!

Zillionaire: Tito said Left Eye is a big-ass ho!

Success bawls and the bell rings. Melissa lines up the class by height for their escort to the lunchroom. She yanks Zillionaire by the collar.

Melissa: Not so fast. Who do you think you are, talking that way? You think you're bad, Zillionaire? You're out of the sandbox for the rest of the summer—how do you like that?

Zillionaire: Don't matter to me.

Melissa: Oh, is that right? Then you're in the stinky bathroom all day long with the door locked!

Zillionaire: You put me in there, you gotta come get me out.

Melissa: You're right, I'll throw you out so fast Señora Guzman won't even see you rolling out the tube!

Zillionaire chuckles and for the first time looks Melissa straight in the eye.

Zillionaire: I'm sorry, Miss Matasavage. I's just tryin' to get yo' attention.

Melissa: Don't feed me that garbage. You've crossed the line too many times this summer. In the bathroom! No lunch, in the bathroom, now!

She moves to lead him by the arm but he grabs hers. They're the same height.

Zillionaire: You my girl, Miss Mata. Don't push me. You my girl.

Melissa shakes free and sees Pow frozen in the same spot, staring at the sand.

Melissa: Pow? Come over here. I want you to meet Zillionaire.

Pow steps over deliberately and looks at Zillionaire's feet.

Melissa: I think you've been listening to this situation, Pow, and I'd like you and Zillionaire to get to know each other. I'm going to lunch—I'll see you when I get back.

#

Peter slides his manila envelope into the slot at Speedo, his courier of the moment. In his opinion, privatizing the mail was a glorious consequence of the Provincial movement. He perspires more than usual, strolling through the lunchtime extras for a few midtown blocks, then turning down a treeless side street, which boasts two even sidewalks. Brownstones and graystones stare at each other across the way, none presenting potted flowers on the stoops, or drawn drapes revealing bookcases and oil portraits, or shadeless awnings, or well-clamped trash cans, or any other signs of urbane residentialism. In fact, most of these stiff walk-ups house unofficial satellite outposts of embassies of nations scorning Favored Trade status. Conspicuous surveillance cams glare from many ledges. Black town cars are parked on both sides. Peter stands in front of a numberless door and waits to be buzzed in by a sentry he has never seen.

Monsieur Deng's is not the poshest snuff club—appointed as it is with faded rugs, cracked leather, chipped pottery, and warped hardwood—nor is it the most prohibitively priced. Still, there is known to be a not insignificant cosmopolitan waiting list ready to replace a largely absent, cosmopolitan membership of active dues-payers. Peter uses the club weekdays and some weekends as his home away from—, his office away from—whatever. Pedestals throughout the main bar and dining area support embalmed women of many cultures, pinned with lingerie they never would have found, much less worn, while breathing. Peter sits in his customary corner booth next to a swarthy, ink-haired corpse whose origin he has independently determined to be Balkan. An ashen waiter in a white coat smeared with a rainbow of condiments approaches.

Edgar: Hot enough out there for you, Peter?

Peter: Nothing I can't handle on a shrimp cocktail and an extra-tall myst on the rocks, Edgar. The Mrs. will sit out the first round.

Edgar places two glasses of water, hands Peter a second napkin to mop his brow, and departs for the kitchen.

Peter: H2O, my gypsy rose?

Gypsy Rose:

Peter: I'll have yours then, if it's all right. Having a day, having a day. My pod ruptured and Technical Support is out sick. Business is down and Marketing is robotic. Sales can't close a screen door. Accounting is demoralized. Management is non-confrontational. I flashed the Board and told them, "No more excuses. The competition is irrelevant. The suggestion box is headed for the incinerator. Our margins have to disappear for a while so we can regain market share. 'That which doesn't kill us...'" I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Running on about work as always. Cheer me up, will you? Go shopping this morning?

Gypsy Rose:

Peter: Edgar is slower than molasses. You think he's cloning the shrimp? When I first joined here, Monsieur Deng would personally escort me to this booth. You wouldn't remember this. He never tolerated poor service. Wonder if he's still alive. Probably—everybody is these days. Well, not Mindy. I'm sorry, that was just a slip. You know I'm not obsessed. I bring her up in conversation only. Anyway, look at me—I'll be scratching away at 95 in spite of my behaviors. Did you know I've never had a cavity? Hey, Ray! Over here, my friend, plenty of room!

A goateed man in a checkered kimono sits down.

Ray: Good to see you, Peter.

Peter: Long time, no flash!

Ray: Been shooting in Taipei, the proverbial powder keg.

Peter: Who're you on assignment for?

Ray: Free-lance, as always. Got superb footage. You know there's such a big market for heavy artillery in Asia—that's where all the heroes are these days. Just finished zipping teasers for the media. The custom shorts for gamers will go out next week.

Peter: I bet there are some, er, diplomatic prospects here for you.

Ray: This I know. This is why I'm here.

Edgar sets down a cocktail of ten shrimp and a tall drink.

Peter: Might as well bring another beverage for me at the rate you're going there, Edgar.

Edgar: How's that, Peter?

Peter: What can I get you, Ray?

Ray: Oh, nothing much. Something fizzy and mild. A Pataki with a lemon, please, Edgar.

Edgar departs. Ray coughs mildly as he lights up a shock of coconut hairs, prompting Peter to hack authoritatively as he goes for the mustard.

Peter: Nice bark.

Ray: The Taipei fog hugs with octopus tentacles. Takes me weeks to recover. You?

Peter: My hack? Oh, just reaffirming my existence.

Ray: How's business with you?

Peter: Good, good. A few solid consulting projects on the platter.

Ray: Who for?

Peter: Oh, you know, subsidiaries of multinationals. Quality improvement, value enhancement. Nothing exciting but it pays the rent.

Ray: Might I have a prawn?

Peter: Certainly, please.

Ray: You getting any?

Peter: No riveting dispatches from that front. I live with my girlfriend, but she's been in Colorado for six months setting up a dojo.

Ray: When's she coming back?

Peter: When she's finished. Maybe another two or three months.

Ray: Sounds casual.

Peter: Hmmm, casual. I tell you, I have an employee at work that sets my loins a-tingling.

Ray: Yeah?

Peter: Big blow-dried tail. Administrative chick. Something's in the air between us.

Ray: You mean nothing's happened yet?

Peter: No, not yet. I'm just feeling out the situation.

Ray: Well, I'd jump on it. Those workplace flings are best open and closed quickly. I make it real clear when I hire a hip, new assistant that life's too short to hold things up or dry them out.

Peter: How many assistants have you—

Ray: I have a permanent listing on the IFA! site. I'm always hiring—or interviewing. Pass me another prawn, if you don't mind. Heavy on the red sauce.

A dollop of Culture Club raspberry-infused yogurt drops on a field of black and white, an empty crossword puzzle that swims out of focus then closes in on us as glyphs and stairways. Melissa tousles her hair then plucks a strand to check for gray. Black, like all the past samples. She breathes deeply but anxiety stays cuddled around her heart—it's a workday. Rather than engage a napkin, she crumples and discards the puzzle, as a woman crowned in white plastic joins her.

White Queen: Well, we're having a time understanding the movements of the pieces. Week Four and stuck on Knights. I don't think we'll pass En Passant by September. Very slow class. How's yours, slow?

Melissa: No, they're on. Track. Family pictures today.

White Queen: You OK?

Melissa: I popped some curiosity last night and just can't get it together. Plus, Guzman reamed me out about being late and then she gave me a new voucher client, another enforcer type.

White Queen: I heard Guzman got an offer from Hatch. Seven figures.

Melissa: Where'd you hear that?

White Queen: I move in all directions and dance with each piece on the board.

Melissa: She'd be a fool not to take that kind of money. Although she probably brings home that much here.

White Queen: I heard she's leveraging Quantico National for a counteroffer.

Melissa: Ah.

White Queen: So, how's that giant boyfriend? You two were out last night, huh?

Melissa: Yup. He's good. Good.

White Queen: How long have you two been together now?

Melissa: Going back to the night we met at Chappaquiddick, two and a half years. But we were sort of off and on at school.

White Queen: So, what's the deal? Is it true?

Melissa: What's your deal, still with...?

White Queen: Twyla. No, I ditched her flat ass. Now I'm flowing with Xenophobia.

Melissa: Another model?

White Queen: You know me, queen to her color. Your man got a job yet?

Melissa: No, nope. He's making a hip-hop record, trying to get signed. It sounds good to me but what do I know?

White Queen: So, what's he do every day, rehearse?

Melissa: Not exactly. For example, today he's out on an Om Ego ritual.

#

Fists to the sun, a man robed and masked in scarlet mutely defies the preoccupied extras in corporate attire, his reflections perning in an automatic revolving door. He segues deliberately into a rigid cross. Across the street a similar figure assumes the lotus position next to a sculpture of a defensive porcupine. Elsewhere in Manhattan:

On a skyscraper's observation deck a similar figure places his hand over his heart. His photo is snapped by a Mongolian tourist.

Next to a plaster model of the Missing Link based on extrapolations off molar and ankle fragments, a similar figure shakes his own hand. A girl in a stroller grins and does likewise.

Under an imagined black hole in a gravitrain terminal, a similar figure salutes no one. An oboist stands along side and wets his reed.

In a rowboat on a pond in a freshly sodded, quality-free park, a similar figure nods repeatedly. A boat carrying two lovebirds bumps into his, eliciting no response from any of the parties.

In a supermarket/recycling center, a similar figure rolls down the frozen foods aisle, stopping against a basket of brooms on sale.

Back to the original figure, but closer now, so the costume can't conceal that it's Jomo. A handsome compatriot in lay clothes approaches him.

Full Frontal: Yo, J, we got trackwork to take care of. The A found some megabooming samples, old-school fusion and shit. Let's kick it at the crib tomorrow afternoon, a'ight?

Jomo:

Full Frontal: Yo, I said tomorrow, right?

Jomo:

Full Frontal: Aw, man, this Halloween pantomime routine is cold. It's wack, man! You stand out here, everybody knows you. They see you. No real brothers wear those robes, you know. Who suckered you into this phony gig, anyhow? If you had asked me, I woulda told you to step north, you know. Yo, are you coming tomorrow or what? Yo, if you can't speak, move your head. Yo, are you even down with Smirk USA or what? Shit. Look, bro, you owe us rent even if you spend all your time with your girl. Your name's on the goddamn lease. At least utilities, bro. You owe us. Tomorrow afternoon, J. See you, bro. I'm over this scene.

Past the porcupine a woman in disintegrating overalls, a Harpo Marx wig, and a scarlet mask holds a mike and talks at a mounted cam. We look through it.

Tawdra: Tawdra TV on the street, rebels, for the obligatory footage of the revolution in progress. As you can see, I lifted a mask off one of these Om Ego clowns. He didn't even budge. I should have filmed that, I recognize now. Where was my director? Where was my best boy? Anyways, it's one of those sneaky Om Ego

days and I'm standing across the street from my friend Jomo, who's one of them. I'll have to fix the cam so you rebels can see him. There he is. OK, that's enough. Now, back to me, rebels. There. So Jomo's across the street but we're not gonna talk to him because that's tab-oooooooooo. How did my lips look on that? Tab-ooooooooooooooooo! Oh, you know you love those lips, rebels. Well, since we're not gonna accost Jomo—you probably know him anyways, I mean how many ten-foot dudes are there?—and he's around all the time, I mean, you know, he's one of those heads that's just always around, like, you're here and he's here or, like, you're there and he's there or if not, then, like, he was just there and uh... we're here! Rebels! We are most definitely here, except, of course, only I'm really here and you're watching this on tape, but you're with me, rebels. We know this. Today's code word is "rebels," don't you know, because that's what you are to me: rebels. You're the rebels and I'm Marie Antoinette and I'm gonna squash your pathetic little revolution by cramming cake down your constricting throats. Rebels. You're all gonna choke on icing and whipped cream and love it. Anyways, back to my commentary on Om Ego, this masque of the red adolescence. I mean, what is it, anyways? A secret society? No, because we all know who's in it. If there's a secret, it's the initiation, which they won't discuss because there isn't one. I mean, it's just attention grabbing, right? Just another conspicuous enigma. 'Look at us, we're a secret krewe!' The outfits are lame, I mean, red robes? Please, I graduated from high school. And they wear dungarees underneath, for Tawdra's sake! They wear sneakers. It's a joke. Who does the choreography? It's like Chaplin on cat tranquilizers. The all-male thing is fine by me, I mean, everyday is ladies' day, so get off in your red robes once every whatever your calendar-of-events is, Om Ego. They don't practice anything any other time, right? I mean, this little demonstration is like the sum total of what they're all about. I guess it's an art thing or a theater thing. But who cares if it is, right? I'm your artist, rebels, I'm your theater. In this moment. I hope the cam's working, unlike last episode, remember? Of course you do, rebels. There were quite a few distraught flashers if I recall correctly, and I do. I insist on recalling correctly. Someone's gotta pay attention—it may as well be me, right? I have a memory like a bear trap. Rebels, you ever notice you can remember something so tightly that the thing you're remembering gets crushed? You have this bear trap and you're catching rabbits with it. And you catch a cute rabbit-memory with a puffy white tail and it bleeds and twitches in the clamp and you see its tendons and bones and insides like you didn't the first

Scar: This means?

Peter: You are curious. Are you on that stuff?

Scar: You were sayin'?

Peter: I help folks direct resources to other folks efficiently.

Scar: And what is the name of your consultancy? It sounds like a very uplifting place of engagement.

Peter: It's just myself. And, unfortunately, I'm not hiring, if that's what you're asking.

Scar: Well, Ray seems to have settled on a special arrangement with that special patron.

Peter: Now that's my kind of talk. What is your impression of his new client?

Scar: What is yours?

Peter: He's one of those generically tall, trim, spectacled, silver-tufted, well-placed, family-oriented assholes. The type who doesn't spit in his own toilet.

Scar: Is there vinegar in your myst or are you always so cynical?

Peter: Yes.

Scar: Your choice of pejoratives is most unusual. Aren't you family-oriented?

Peter: It's a question of style. I am, but I don't flaunt it. Anyway, I have a small family. One small daughter.

Scar: And what is her name and how old is she?

Peter: Melissa, 23, going on 43 or 13. That's 23, though, isn't it?

Scar: And what is her occupation?

Peter: Oh, she's quite the Curie. She went to Chappaquiddick and landed a job at Quantico right away.

Scar: My, my, you have every right to be the proud papa.

Peter: Yes.

Scar: And where is the proud mama?

Peter: I'm a widower. Never liked that label. Implies some sort of responsibility on my part. 'Murder-er, widow-er.'

Scar: I'm sorry.

Peter: Don't be—we didn't enjoy each other's company.

Scar: And why was that?

Peter: Mindy taught femipsychosocioliterit at Grenada. For her, my existence was a lesser-than-which-cannot-be-conceived.

Scar: Was that always the case?

Peter: Yes, ma'am.

Scar: Then, pray tell, why was there a marriage in the first place?

Peter: Pretend you and I have met through mutual friends at a chalet in northern Vermont. It's New Year's Eve 1998.

Scar: What?

Peter: Pretend you and I share this. Our mutual friends cavort on and around the hot tub under fireworks illuminating the evergreens and empty slopes.

Scar: What?

Peter: We share this. Just pretend. We have remained inside, where the lights are dim. Shadows of wine bottles and flowers, thrown by the fireplace, flutter on the knotty paneling. In the window I see our two masks. I raise one eyebrow and think back to young Peter raising one eyebrow at the bathroom mirror. He scrunches one side of his face into a glinty scowl and calls it The Half-Of-Face-Burned-By-Acid Face. I can do this now in the window and you don't see. I ask you, what are you thinking. What are you thinking?

Scar: Why are you asking me?

Peter: That's right! And I tell you I'm going to try and guess. I think you're thinking that the millennial New Year's will be the most unfulfilling evening of all time. And I ask you if that was even a close approximation. Was that even close? Pretend you and I share this.

Scar: What?

Peter: Now pretend it's 2002 and you're milling about a street festival in Little Italy and there, all of a sudden, there I am. And I say hello. Hello.

Scar: Hello?

Peter: Yes! There is a Ferris wheel set up in a parking lot. We get on without exchanging anything more than a few niceties. And after we spin a few times, we're suspended at the top, rocking slightly amid the semi-quaint buildings. And one puny flare goes off down the block and as it sputters to the street I ask you if it was even a close approximation. Was it?

Scar: What?

Peter: Yes. And then you say, 'Close to what I was thinking or close to the ultimate result of my New Year's 2000?'

Scar: Neither.

Peter: Perfect. The jackpot permutation. Should we get married? It seems we should.

Scar: I don't think the way you do at all.

Peter: That's the beauty of it. And that's the story.

Scar: Oh. Oh. I'm not sure what to make of that... romance.

Peter: That's the tragedy of it.

Scar: When did she die?

Peter: She was walking to her office two years ago and a piano fell on her head.

Scar: How terrible!

Peter: Painless and without the slightest foreshadowing, one can only hope. I had frequently envisioned her drowning in a stormy sea.

Scar: Did she sail?

Peter: She was afraid of water. Despised the tub. That's why she was inside in Vermont.

Scar: I see.

Ray: Peter, who is your captive companion? Hanging on your every word, I've been noticing.

Peter: Ray, this is Scarlett. Scarlett, Ray.

Ray: I've preferred Raymond for the last twenty years.

Scar: I've gone by Mary Nell all my life.

Ray: Well, I want to call you the way you want to be called. Peter— Scarlett?

Peter: A flash of tomfoolery. My apologies, Mary Nell.

Mary Nell: Peter was relatin' the story of his whirlwind courtship.

Peter: I was rambling. My apologies.

Mary Nell: Before that, he was describin' your practice of the visual arts.

Peter: Rambling.

Ray: I see.

Mary Nell: I understand you were a photographer before you ventured into moving pictures?

Ray: That used to be true of everyone. Remember?

Peter: I was that way. It was proper that way.

Mary Nell: Peter has saved some of your vintage photographs, he tells me.

Ray: Is that right? Which ones, Peter?

Peter: I was rambling. I didn't think she was listening.

Mary Nell: Why did you think that? Do you always think that?

Peter: What is the correct response? I bet it's complicated.

Ray: Nowadays everyone is an auteur in time: video taught us that pause, rewind and fast forward are essential.

Peter: My daughter has never operated a photographic camera. To my knowledge.

Mary Nell: No family shrine in her apartment? What's stuck to her fridge?

Peter: Fingerprints?

Ray: Funny that you mention Melissa, Peter. I found a file of the two of you on an old hard drive. It's in here somewhere. I must have known I would run into you.

Mary Nell: Can we see it?

Peter: I don't know what to make of this.

Ray finds and opens the file.

Peter: The best thing is not to watch.

May Nell: Have you seen this?

Peter: No, I was there. The unexamined life.

Ray begins the clip and Peter finds himself peeking past a Southern stranger's padded shoulder at an improved version of himself on a Naugahyde sofa, standing over a tot with black curls and gold studs in her ears, tugging on her left lobe.

Improved Peter: I love this ear. This is my favorite.

Tot Melissa: Why?

Improved Peter: It's pretty and perfect and I love it. This is the best ear in the world.

Tot Melissa: You're tick'ing me!

He tugs on the right ear.

Improved Peter: No, no. Wait a minute. This ear is better than the other one. Look at this ear! It's beautiful. I've changed my mind. I love this ear. This one is my favorite.

Tot Melissa: Ahhh! Don't put your finger in my ear!

Improved Peter: Why not? It's my favorite!

Tot Melissa: Stop, you're tick'ing me!

Improved Peter: This is the best ear.

Tot Melissa: No! They're the same!

Improved Peter: It's the best. I'm going to taste it. Yum!

Tot Melissa: Ayyyyyyy! Daddy, stop!

Improved Peter: Delicious. Can I have some more, please?

Tot Melissa: No!

The screen says Cut. It snows and asks if Ray wants to replay it. He exits.

Mary Nell: What happened next?

Peter: My life slow-forwarded to this stool right now.

Mary Nell: You made quite the lovely couple. You have the same hair and coloring, don't you?

Peter: Why did you do that, Ray?

Ray: Be more specific.

Peter: Why?

Mary Nell: Why did you cut it there?

Ray: When to cut, when not to. These are an editor's choices.

Peter: Why, Ray?

Mary Nell: Raymond, what is the name of your company?

Ray: Myself's productions, limited, incorporated, et cetera.

Mary Nell: What is your web site?

Ray: Currently offline. I'm still searching for the designer to suit my virtual taste.

Mary Nell: You must see my Fall Collection.

Ray: Who are your clients? I can look at one right now.

Mary Nell: You must allow me a proper demonstration. We should exchange background information and exchange references.

Ray: We'll interview next week.

Mary Nell: Next week is probably a very good time to page me.

Edgar stands inside the bar. Perhaps he has been there the entire time. Peter looks at two fingers' worth in his glass and makes an executive decision.

Peter: The chit, Edgar. People to go, places to meet, until the last frame of unrecorded time.

Edgar slips away, Ray slips his laptop into a lambskin satchel and his card into Mary Nell's sequined folder, and Peter slips off the stool to the floor.

Peter: Don't make them like they used to. Ho, ho.

Ray: First day with the new ass?

Peter: I can't speak. You have me on file.

Ray: And you have my old negatives.

Peter: I was only rambling. You have my unscripted bumbblings to breathe free that I don't even remember.

Mary Nell: You don't remember that time? Even now?

Peter: I have no obligation. I was there, shrugging in 3-D.

Edgar: May I have a word with you, Mr. Matasavage?

Peter: Of course.

Edgar:

Peter: Please, Edgar, speak as if we were all famous friends.

Edgar: I'm unable to generate a chit for you. There's a problem with your account.

Peter: Yes, there is. You're not giving me a chit.

Edgar: Perhaps you should visit with Management upstairs. They're in.

Peter: I've lunched, mingled and fallen down, Edgar. I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Now you do what you are supposed to be doing and bring me my chit.

Edgar: They'd like to see you upstairs.

Peter: Do I have to give you my lecture on Client Service, Edgar? If I do, I'll leave out all the jokes.

Ray: Let me take care of this, Edgar. Peter's played the entertaining, if reluctant, star and he deserves an easy exit.

Peter: How long have I been a member here, Ray, how long?

Ray: Not to worry.

Peter: This is a losing-of-face Monsieur Deng himself would never have permitted.

Ray: Bad things happen in the absence of management.

Mary Nell: Do they?

#

Arcing skids inside the door at B.F. Goodrich, revolving at a presumptuous allegro for the customers. The introductory tempo serves to rush the activities within: buy and sell, deposit and withdraw, borrow and default, and always, always refinance. Inquire or complain and you find your stride broken and egress becomes problematic. Melissa makes it in with choppy hops, and zags for the holo vestibule. She does some estate banking here rather than from home because of the security. A robed Om Ego extra makes several transactions. A distraught woman straddles two briefcases in front of Melissa.

Briefcases: Can you watch these for a sec?

Melissa shrugs as the woman pivots and walks to a bosom-high shelf holding forms of many neons but one size. She pushes a placard announcing New Low Rates and peeks out the window, then scribbles with a pen on a leash. In the corner of the vestibule a soiled down comforter budes.

Briefcases: See this?! This calendar is wrong. It's two days off! Not one—two! And the pen doesn't work! How can I bank with confidence amid these shaky fundamentals?

Melissa: The key is to remain calm.

Briefcases: The pens tease you! You start to write and in the middle of your name you disappear!

Melissa: I have a pen.

Briefcases: No, I'm going to use this one anyways and etch my goddamn deposit. Fuck those motherfuckers—let them read their own disappearing ink!

The comforter moves in several directions, mostly vertical.

Comforter: Oh yeah, baby.

Comforter: That's right.

Comforter: Si, si.

Briefcases: Now I'm back here and I'm thinking 'Why don't I bank online like every fucking Bonnie and Clyde in this town?' Why do I come here at all? They don't want us to, that's why! Fuck them!

Comforter: Si.

Comforter: Crazy. Uh huh.

Comforter: Ay!

Comforter: Like that.

Briefcases: I've got special issues. Urgent. That's why I'm here. Why are you here?

Comforter: Like that.

Melissa: It's on the way.

Briefcases: Not for long, baby. They don't want us here anymore. Soon they'll be offshore, every last fucking one.

Melissa: This is fine. That'll be fine, too.

Briefcases: This teller image. It tells me jack shit, that's what it tells me. I think 'teller' comes from 'fortune teller' originally.

Melissa: You think?

Briefcases: Fortune. Teller. Get it? I've got a fucking fortune here down in the vault and I'm in a hurry. I'm gonna—

Comforter: Yeah. Yeah!

Comforter: Si. Si!

Comforter: Yeah. Yeah.

Briefcases: I'm gonna—

Comforter: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yyyyy—

Melissa: What?

The Om Ego exits stoically and the woman kicks her briefcases toward the holos.

Briefcases: I'm gonna write a fucking letter to my congressman and c.c. every fucking newspaper in town!

Comforter: Siiiiiiiiiiii!

Briefcases: Mark my words—this flophouse is gonna burn!

#

A creased, pink mass, a human change-purse: a cauliflower ear, clinging to an obese man in a white, bursting wide-collared polyester short-sleever over a purple and black batik sarong. He smokes birch bark vigorously. Sweat puddles around his Mercury sandals as he waits by a phone kiosk plastered with faded bills of deflated raves and defeated politicians. More puddling; time drips to the concrete. Still draped in his Om Ego garb, Jomo owns the phone. He leans forward stiff-leggedly in order to speak, or rather shout, into the receiver.

Jomo: Full, Full, Full! Yo, button it when I'm talking! I'm talking! I'm the one talking! You listen! It's like this—one damn half-day of the year I got business and I can't be reached! I'm flasherless for five damn Om Ego hours a

year and you're all up in my face spouting bullshit! Like a damn malfunctioning CD, spinning the same riff over and over! It is not—you don't even grasp Om Ego! And if it is, what's it to you? It's five damn hours, only five damn hours a year that I'm unapproachable! Bitch, don't front with that crusade talk—I'm the one busting the rhymes! You got that? You got no rhymes! No, I'm not going to the studio! Maybe tomorrow—it's my call! That's my call! I'm 'a rhyme when it's my time! Work out? When? Maybe. I'll be there and maybe I'll spend a quiet day with Melissa. Who? She flashed me this morning? Who? Who's she with? The Sirocco? You gave her my home flash? I don't care what she said, you don't give that out! When? When this afternoon? What kind of a message do you take, bro, are you obliged? You are obliged, aren't you? That hydroponic shit. Forget it, bro, I can't believe you smoked it all! When, tonight? Maybe. Meet me at the gym—we'll talk there.

He dismounts and checks his pager and smiles down at the liquefying man.

Jomo: It's all yours, tuna melt, I'm going to hang with Roxanna tonight!

Cauliflower: Really?! Roxanna!

He watches Jomo bound away, picks up the phone excitedly and presses it to the squashed ear before switching it and punching the keys. A trio of upper-register Disconnected tones pierces his receptive eardrum, dropping him to the sidewalk. From his back he witnesses a row of bearded patriarchs made of clouds, moaning at the sun.

#

Ringless and tastefully manicured, a hand grips an aluminum pole then releases. Melissa examines her palm for the invisible before regripping. She surveys the subway car full of extras and ascertains there will no available seats soon. At any rate, she's homeward bound, thanks to Quantico's summer hours. She regards two women sitting at her eye-level. One wears a shapeless black frock, boxy men's workboots and a black and white bonnet. The other sits underneath a scorpion's tail shaped out of her fuchsia hair, the stinger casting a question mark on her multipierced brow. She munches on zwieback and brushes the crumbs off the words "Cut Here" tattooed on her forearms. A billy club rests against her tapping feet, horseshod in iron. Her minidress says Do Not Confuse Me With A Captured Terrorist. The car lurches, prompting the first woman to look at the second.

Frock: Did that hurt? The foot thing?

Scorpion: Religiously.

Frock: They nail those in, right? Did they put you under?

Scorpion: I never shy away from the consequences.

Tawdra: No, the contestant has been selected and is waiting humbly in my living room with the boas. Next. Hello?

Flasher: Please let me have the jalapeño. Please!

Tawdra: Have you been naughty or nice?

Flasher: Naughty?

Tawdra: Response is incorrect.

Flasher: Nice!

Tawdra: Response is incorrect. I tell you what you've been. Next. Hello?

Flasher: I will give you frankincense and myrrh if you let me have the jalapeño.

Tawdra: I hate Frankenstein movies. Next. Hello?

Flasher: Yeah, uh, what's the deal with your hair?

Tawdra: There is no deal, obviously. I don't have any.

Flasher: Are you on chemo?

Tawdra: No, are you?

Flasher: No, but I have hair. Why—

Tawdra: Hello.

Flasher: Tawdra, I love your show! It's the most compelling cultural phenomenon of the past five years.

Tawdra: Eat shit. Hello?

Flasher: Hi, my name's Gonzo and my friend Kermit is in Om Ego and he didn't come home yet and I was wondering if you selected him for the jalapeño.

Tawdra: You'll know either way when he comes home. Hello?

Flasher: Yes. Hello?

Tawdra: Speak.

Flasher: Hello? You're there, oh. I've been thinking about the rabbit in the bear trap. I watch all your episodes over and over, but... I'm all confused and I don't understand.

Tawdra:

Flasher: They're all great, your episodes, every time. What is an Alpha Rabbit?

Tawdra: Single petal of a rose. Ask Duke Ellington.

Flasher: What?

Tawdra: Freeze your present sense of bafflement and replay this part one hundred times. And never flash me again. Hello? Hello? Hello?

Flasher: Can I plug my band?

Tawdra: You're unplugged. Hello?

Flasher: Hey Cue Ball.

Tawdra: Hey Apollo!

Flasher: You wanna go to The Hierophant tonight? I heard Roxanna was there yesterday.

Tawdra: Maybe next week. Flash me next show. Hello?

Flasher: G'day! I'm flashing from Australia. We get over you Down Under.

Tawdra: What time is it there?

Flasher: Time? Two o'clock.

Tawdra: Today or tomorrow?

Flasher: Eh?

Tawdra: Liar. Next. I am worldwide, rebels, in case you didn't grasp my divine scope. I get your flashmail, I watch your infantile chat sessions about me. The code word is 'rebels' and I'm finished with flashers. You're boring me, as usual. Ennui can be positive if you're not unhappy, don't you know. Well, now I'm going to edify you rebels through my little lesson of the week. Where is my knife. Under the couch—here. If you haven't fixated on me in every episode—big 'if'—you may have been intrigued by my wallpaper. The underlying question is, 'What's behind it?' Let's make some semi-surgical snips and see what we find.

She rips off a swatch and exposes the letters "IST", scrawled in black marker.

Tawdra: Before I dressed this wall with bars and ivy, I wrote the most despicable, heinous words I know. Talk about catharsis. Talk about therapy. I felt exhilarated for weeks. There's a resonance in this room to this day. 'IST'—I'll let you imagine what precedes it. There's a galaxy of evil around, don't you know, when you make a few cuts. Remember this lesson, rebels, because it is now concluded. And now, let me clear these props away and I will provide the jalapeño, provided I can find it... under the couch—here. As you have been instructed in so many past episodes, my pepper comes from a region of Mexico notorious for cultivating the hottest, spiciest of chiles. I prefer the green ones, which aren't ripe red yet. A genetic freak, I am able to withstand ungoddlessly amounts of capsaicin, the hot stuff. I eat the top part here, under the stem. This contains the placenta and is sixteen times hotter than the rest. See it? Now, I'm going to eat very slowly, allowing the venom to spill into every nook and cranny in my mouth so that every taste bud and nerve ending is inflamed and coated with this excruciatingly painful toxin. This is a good one, rebels! Ooooh, lordy, lordy, lordy! I keep my peppers in a humidior, don't you know, to maintain peak venomocity. There—now I'm finished. I'm on fire and I'm ready for this week's contestant. Fido!

#

The pod moans and double-clicks repeatedly as Peter straps in and sighs. Flexing his post-athletic legs results in a distraught creak. The crash was worse than he thought: wires between the pod, CPU and monitor snake on the carpet, conjoining seemingly against their wills at an exposed port. Red and green lights blink in syncopation.

Peter: Little early for Christmas. Or late.

He fixes a new tank of gas then lights up and blows mustard fumes at the vid field.

Peter: Red, yellow, green. Traffic light. Three options. It's really green that overrides. The other two merely relate to green: when or how to go. Always the go.

D'Angel's cube is probably vacated now, he thinks. Out hawking her bootlegs or flagellating one of her shiny Viktors, spinning his libido like a quarter on Formica then slapping it flat under the palm of her authority. Tails, she wins. Peter twirls his lower curls into two pipe cleaners. They slacken into whimsical ciphers, twin wizard's caps. Everyone can contemplate their navels—gems or spider imprints. D'Angel's an outie, he suspects, centered with an ugly blank plug. This would explain the marbled or striped get-ups. Safety pins, chains and pendants at every appendage, ultra-violet manicure and pedicure. The skunk coiffure. Her visual is everywhere and nowhere. The eye bounces around her perpetually and her nexus is forgotten. Incoming! screams the vidcom. Above his captioned name, Lieu, a pimpled toady, stares behind pursed lips.

Lieu: Afternoon, Matasavage. Am I disturbing you?

Peter: What? How did you... Yes, you're disturbing me. You disturb me. My vidcom block must have been, uh, deactivated. We had a meltdown this morning. I can't receive any communications right now.

Lieu: Do you ever receive communication? My collection flashes have been blocked for months, Matasavage. Perhaps we are not your only creditor.

Peter: You're from Monsieur Deng's, aren't you? You have no reason to flash me, a tenured member in good standing. What is this about?

Lieu: Don't be *mignon*, Matasavage. You're 180 days past due on expenses, not to mention one year behind on the membership dues.

Peter: Just use my bond, knucklehead. That's what it's for—extenuating circumstances like this.

Lieu: Apparently you don't read my paper correspondence. Your bond was liquidated thirty days ago and applied to older outstanding balances. About your circumstances—consulting to charitable institutions isn't what it used to be?

Peter: Global altruism is nearly dead. But that's not the issue here. I have years of recognized service to the club and I deserve the proper respect. Monsieur Deng

would never permit this type of intrusion! And I refuse to discuss anything further unless it is with Monsieur Deng, who himself accepted my nomination years ago.

He waves to disconnect but the holo holds. Another malfunction.

Lieu: With pleasure, Matasavage. Voici Monsieur Deng.

A wispy globe, half the size of the focused Lieu, appears.

Monsieur Deng: Hello, Peter. I am honored you requested my personal attention.

Peter: Monsieur Deng. Long time, long time.

Monsieur Deng: I had hoped to shake your hand this afternoon, yet when you rebuffed my invitation via Edgar then left so quickly, I recognized you had more pressing engagements. I had made preparations for a tea ceremony for the two of us, in honor of the formal commencement of our relationship. I hope you remember that occasion, years ago though it was.

Peter: Of course I do, Monsieur Deng.

Monsieur Deng: Then I trust you remember the good faith expressed mutually that day. When we meet again I look forward to renewing our pledge of cooperation.

He evaporates.

Lieu: Do I have to spell that out for you, Matasavage? Monsieur Deng is too kind. We require full remittance upon entry. And we expect you in the very near future. Speaking of which, we understand you enjoy access to sufficient funds in the name of your adorable Melissa. *Cherchez la petite femme*, Matasavage. And fix your trousers, *petit con*.

He vanishes before Peter hurls the paw-mug at the void. He tumbles to the left, disengaging the pod from its base. The audio message center activates: Hi it's me guess you're out to lunch two hour time difference don't know why I can't get that straight don't bother flashing me today going for a hike then yoga guess I'll see you tomorrow but I have classes all day bye.

Peter: Is every block in this rig deactivated?

A bulletin board appears: auto-archived messages bannered with Past Due, Please Remit or Urgent. Cracking his back, Peter stands up and kicks the pod before belaboredly deleting the mail. He retrieves the paw, picks out a dust bunny, pours straight myst, and decides to review his marketing reports to himself.

#

2:35 behind condensation on a clock stuck to locker room tile. Cut to gratuitous shots of nude male extras, most of them bronzed and close-cropped from head to toe. When they take off their jocks, they talk up their stocks. When they towel their hair, they hint at affairs. Move through a door into the steamroom and drown in billowing clouds, overhearing the disembodied voices.

Jomo: So when do we do this thing?

Full Frontal: Anytime, bro, anytime. When we're ready, we can go over. I'm relaying what the girl said, verbatimically.

Jomo: We can roll over there from here.

Full Frontal: Or not, bro. It's like that.

Elvis: Have some steam, boys.

Jomo: What was that?

Full Frontal: They rigged a sample of Elvis dialogue to the thermostat. You ever see his old concert footage? That boy was a sweater.

Jomo: It's wack, anyhow.

: I saw a shoeshine man with a cardboard sign that said, 'Have some shine.'

: My traps are fried.

Full Frontal: I'm gonna be sore tomorrow, bro. My pecs are packin' right now.

Jomo: You were looking good, bro. We gotta flash over there first?

Full Frontal: We just gotta arrive in effect.

: My neck! Did you hear that?

: Not enough curvature of the spine. Manipulation is the ticket.

Elvis: Have some steam, boys.

: Glad they fixed the thermostat.

: Elated.

: Remember when there was no steam. I used to have to look at your red wet thing.

: Nostalgia.

: I was here and you were there and we had each other to complain about the thermostat.

: New management.

Full Frontal: You flash your girl? Check in?

Jomo: Punched the clock like a motherfucker.

White laughter everywhere.

Jomo: Yo, you ever hear of Prep Boy? Some tongue told me to check him out for Smirk.

Full Frontal: Can't say.

Jomo: The dude's mega-jacked and we should hook up, I heard.

Full Frontal: Really?

: You want to talk to Prep Boy, go talk to Kwirt first. More accessible times ten.

Jomo: Who did what? Who is that?

: Talk to Kwirt.

Jomo: Yo, I want to talk to Prep Boy.
 : He spins at This Mortal Koil just about every night. Check him out.
 Jomo: What's the kid's name again?
 : Kwirt.
 Elvis: Have some steam, boys.
 Jomo: Fronty, we'll swing by the Hi on the way to the hotel. I gotta pick up my kicks from last night.
 : Can we cut the chatter? Trying to relax here.
 Elvis: Hot enough in here for you?

#

In Tawdra's room a tight-lipped brute in a zoot suit and oversized dog collar swaggers in and poses in front of the couch. Down the hall the front door opens and closes. Melissa drops onto the firm swansdown wraparound sofa and stares at the blank vidscreen. In the convexity she sees suggestions of herself, a lit floor lamp, an unlit wall candle casting a shadow parallelogram, and the boa cage, its inhabitants appearing as one thick noodle. Without looking she pokes the remote icon and Jomo's grrr appears. She pokes it off. From Tawdra's room there are bloodcurdling shrieks that precede the weeping, now red-faced zooter, who races through the room, frantically grabbing the crotch of his unbelted trousers. Tawdra runs after him with a cam. The yelping pup slips and falls before exiting. Tawdra points the cam back at herself, as the cries outside fade.

Tawdra: Twenty-four seconds. Not even a top ten finish. Never underestimate the power of the jalapeño. So, rebels, I leave you now as always: glorious and ready to munch on some grapes. If you attempt to contact me, I won't respond. If you dream of me, I won't awaken.

She turns off the cam and heads for the kitchen. Melissa looks back at the screen and notices reflections of gold specks in the Collector's Edition print of Klimt's "The Kiss" above the swansdown.

#

"Alien Altruism" is one of his favorites, like many of them executed during the morning of the consultancy. He reads at whim, freed of the discipline of top-to-bottom, and flits among aphoristic fragments accompanied by bullet points and tables. Philanthropy and war belong to the same side of the coin, both measuring our relation to The Other Who Is Not Like Us... War is most fervently exercised when viewed through the polarity of Race... Altruism is deemed most just when the recipient resembles no one in our community... Our test recipient pools were located in Southeast Asia, West Africa and Central America... For three successive three-month periods we rotated classified advertisements in small-market newspapers nationwide, highlighting each respective pool... The country was grouped into

regions: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, Northwest, Southwest, and California... Hawaii and Alaska were excluded... The test pools were ranked according to their percentage of total sales:

1. Southeast Asia 37%
2. West Africa 35%
3. Central America 28%

The regions were ranked according to their respective sales:

1. Midwest 23%
2. Southeast 21%
3. Northwest 21%
4. Southwest 18%
5. Northeast 12%
6. California 5%

Following is the share by region for each pool's sales:

<u>Southeast Asia</u>	<u>West Africa</u>	<u>Central America</u>
Midwest	Northwest	Midwest
Southeast	Midwest	Northwest
Southwest	Southwest	Southeast
Northwest	Southeast	Northeast
Northeast	California	Southwest
California	Northeast	California

After per capita adjustments, we conclude that altruism is relatively equal throughout the country, save the Northeast and California... Our further analysis of the market performances per test pool shows that altruism is inversely proportional to the size of the recipients' racial compatriots who have immigrated to the United States... In other words, altruism showers most on the strangest flowers.

Peter: I don't know if I'm up for it.

This is the verbalized conclusion to a non sequitur thoughtlet about waddling around the corridors and rousing the G-Y FDR troops for amusement's sake. He ventures out and down the hall, stopping to pose with mock authority, arms crossed, chin down. He glares at D'Angel, who is restriping her nails to match her coiffure, and Dartie, who is watching a webcast on D'Angel's monitor of a woman in a preposterous wig on a street corner. The volume is too low and Dartie's snickering too loud for Peter to hear the show.

Peter: Everyone remain calm.

D'Angel: Why do you always say that? Are you not?

Peter: All I'm saying.

D'Angel: There was some kind of racket in your office. Pod problems?

Peter: Remain calm and everything blows over.

D'Angel: You're in charge, huh? Cool, calm and collective, like a-

Peter: Collected.

Dartie: Cucumber. I hate cukes—they're like a poor man's pickle.

Peter: A pickle is a cucumber stewing in brine and special juices.

Dartie: This is what I'm saying. Let the cucumber stew and I'll consider it. Leave it alone and it's just garnish.

D'Angel: I like garnish. I saw a show about it once.

Peter: Just remain calm, please, everyone. Viktor flash?

Dartie: Which one?

D'Angel: Don't even mess with my scene, pale face. I'll mess you up.

Dartie: Don't let your mouth write any checks your ass can't cash.

D'Angel: Excuse me, but I think you're watching a show on my computer.

Dartie: Excuse me, but if you shut your mouth I'll be able to listen to my show.

Peter: Viktor flash? Or phone at least?

D'Angel: Not yet. Why are you so interested?

Dartie: Duh.

D'Angel: And what's that supposed to mean, chalky?

Dartie: I'm talking to the show.

D'Angel: Well, keep it down so us pigmented people can carry on our conversation.

Peter: Remain calm, everyone.

D'Angel: You look a little out of sorts, Mr. Peter. Even more than usual. What's cooking?

Peter: My stringy, bony, wizened goose.

D'Angel: Who did what?

Peter: Picture that two-month-old sponge in your kitchen sink that is so shrunken and tired you feel bad grinding it against a week of jumbled dishes caked with petrified egg foo young. You're out of dishwashing liquid, so you clench it tight to summon any latent cleansers and you go to work with vigor and pity. D'Angel, I am that sponge.

D'Angel: Business is slow?

Dartie: Duh.

Peter: Oh... It's as fine as it can be, I guess.

D'Angel: What about your girlfriend in Colorado?

Peter: She flashes me or sends me voicemail during my appointed lunch hour. So.

D'Angel: There it is.

Peter:

D'Angel: How's Melissa, anyways?

Peter: She's always peachy. You know them.

D'Angel: Who?

Dartie: She still going out with that tall guy?

Peter: Yep, mm hmmm. Yep.

Dartie: That kid should play volleyball. Even if he sucks, I bet some team would take him. He'd look good in the airport.

D'Angel: Excuse me, are you the supreme volleyball expert or something?

Dartie: Something. Like I could explain it to you.

D'Angel: Shut your trap and lick my screen. Peter, when's your girlfriend coming back from Colorado?

Peter: It's my policy to never question a sensei.

D'Angel: So, you're all alone in your apartment?

Peter: Just me. I keep the lights off so my shadow split.

D'Angel: There it is. Speaking of it.

Shivonne saunters over.

Shivonne: Excuse me?

D'Angel: Excuse me?

Shivonne: Your gums are flapping but nothing's coming out.

D'Angel: Oh yeah, well, you got more than that flapping, sister Shivonne.

Peter: Reste tranquille s'il vous plaît.

Shivonne: Who did what?
 Peter: Never mind, it's just French.
 Dartie: Duh.
 Peter: What are the thirteen up to?
 Shivonne: Sleeping. Some of them were cranky so I slipped them some good stuff in their formula.
 Peter: One of them looked at me this morning. I mean, it was some kind of look.
 Shivonne: That was Unique. She's very perceptive.
 D'Angel: Just like her godmother, thank you very much.
 Dartie: There you go again, saying the opposite of what you mean.
 D'Angel: Excuse me, but if you keep it up you'll be ground-up fertilizer like they put on the lawn.

Nancy bops by, her headset engaged.

Nancy: Fresh gas is bubbling.
 D'Angel: Keep it to yourself, buggy.
 Nancy: Listen, you little hooker, I'll bust your furry behind before you can say Jumpin' Jack Flash.
 Dartie: Jumpin' Jack Flash. Sympathy for the Devil.
 Nancy: Pipe down, molar boy. He looks like a tooth, doesn't he?
 D'Angel: One that needs a root canal. With no anesthesia.
 Dartie: Hardy, har, har.
 Shivonne: You arrange the magician, Miss Nancy?

The headset lights up.

Nancy: I take care of everything, don't I! G-Y FDR, good morning. I'm sorry, I mean 'good afternoon,' can I help you?
 Dartie: Duh.
 D'Angel: Shh, it could be Bo.
 Dartie: He can't hear anything anyway.
 Nancy: Yes she is, may I ask who's calling? Thank you, please hold. Oh wait, does she know what this is regarding? Oh, I see, please hold. Oh Miss D'Angel, it's Viktor.
 D'Angel: Which Viktor?
 Nancy: Hello? Which Viktor is this?

D'Angel cracks her tail across the receptionist's face. Amazingly, the headset does not move.

Nancy: Please hold. I'm gonna fuck you up, you little hooker.
 D'Angel: I'm gonna fuck you up, you... Which line is he on?
 Nancy: That's for me to know and you to find out, it seems.

D'Angel: Everyone make like an egg and leave.
 Dartie: It's make like an egg and beat it. Make like a tree and leave. Duh.
 D'Angel: Now!

The crowd disperses and as Peter enters the restroom the sweet tone of D'Angel's hello as she picked up the phone resonates in his ear like a triangle's ping in a vacant concert hall. Good architects design interesting bathrooms, he thinks, but this one is dark, tight and windowless. Levels above a third-world shithole, though, no question. This mental leap reminds him to check the shipping logs of his agents abroad when he's done. He flushes and enjoys a few seconds of cool, perineal atomization, then does it again. Life's little pleasures. Despite controlled, deep breathing he learned from his absent sensei, nothing eventful happened and he is not surprised. Irregularity and its false promises. Outside, his bloated belly sinks as he detects cooing down D'Angel's way.

#

Love Is Enough is embroidered in sparrow's egg and ecru on a throw pillow that Melissa clutches into her belly. One pulse marches through the animate and inanimate. Melissa regards Klimt's elongated duo, stretched and racked in amorous finery, and thinks that her own feet and hands are much too proximate to her own head for her to have posed for the master.

Tawdra: You had a day. I can see, Itty.
 Melissa: Guzman's a puta. She might be leaving, though.
 Tawdra: The IFA! Fall Schedule came today. I'm seriously weighing several of the offerings. Toss it over here—it's there under the Pine Dust candle. Thanks. What do you think about this one: Multiparty Screenwriting?
 Melissa: I didn't know you wanted to go back.
 Tawdra: How about this one: Catchy Slogans for Public Health Campaigns? Yowza, yowza.
 Melissa: This is new. When did you start thinking about this? What about your webcast?
 Tawdra: Here's another: Trolley Aesthetics. Taught by the award-winning Mike Gorba. Just kidding. Can you imagine the absolute drudgery of that class? I see a field trip of three students to an un-condemned cannery. Do you see that?
 Melissa: This is Friday and higher learning is back in the picture for you. What will we talk about Saturday?
 Tawdra: Web Sites in Sepia: Romance and Retail. How can a girl begin to choose?
 Melissa: Guzman is such a bitch.
 Tawdra: Saw your beau in the AM. Shot him downtown during Om Ego.
 Melissa: You interviewed him?
 Tawdra: Of course not. I respect ritual.
 Melissa: Hmm.

Tawdra: How's it going with you two? Do I sense a treading of water?

Melissa: It's great, I guess. I don't know.

Tawdra: He's such a looker. But he speaks without listening and then not-speaks without listening.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: I sense the elevator is stopped at Sports Wear and you want to go up to Formal Wear or down to Handbags and the street.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: I never understood the anatomical compatibility between you. How do you—?

Melissa:

Tawdra: The dimorphic privates. I mean, how is it possible?

Melissa: He had it shortened. Radically.

Tawdra: Hey now! For you?

Melissa: No, before me.

Tawdra: We need a few earnest inches, that's all, folks!

Melissa: But that's not what we're about, anyway. I mean, that's only part of our deal.

Tawdra: Really. Intermittent at best. Interesting. Why do you think? Who holds back?

Melissa: How would I know?

Tawdra: If you're not the navigator, you're wind in the sails.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: I practice. When's your father dropping by again?

Melissa: Don't even.

Tawdra: He's a fan. I could smell it under the mustard.

Melissa: Don't, don't.

Tawdra: That means 'do.'

Melissa waves at the vidscreen and disinterestedly conducts her way through afternoon content. After a while Tawdra steps in and waves up a public access feed. They see a wide-angle of a subway entrance shot from a couple of stories up, accompanied by a clamor of disconcerting wind chimes over an industrial loop. Zoom in on a short woman in a Gillette skirt with a papoose, robotic and bleary after an apparent day's work, stepping up the stairs with the flow of homebound extras. She stops at the corner newsstand and leafs through some magazines.

Tawdra: I forgot this is on. How fortuitous.

Melissa: That's me.

Tawdra: It's got nothing on my show, but it's all right.

Melissa: It's me.

The short woman lingers over a cover then pays and stuffs it adeptly over her back.

Tawdra: It is you! You made it!

Melissa looks at the papoose at the other end of the swansdown and then at her Gillette skirt.

Melissa: That was today. That was just before.
 Tawdra: I'm so happy for you. Congratulations!
 Melissa: I was just there.
 Tawdra: You're going to walk away and it will repeat.

The woman walks away, hesitates, then continues down the sidewalk. The episode halts then restarts as the chiming moves forward.

Tawdra: Here you come. Up. The angle's different but I recognize the inspiration. That old flick about the exorcism, you know. There's the priest's dream sequence with his mother. Up. The stairs. The angle's different, but that's where it came from. What was the name of that movie?

Melissa: What's the name of this show?

Tawdra: I don't know.

Melissa: I thought you watch it all the time.

Tawdra: I don't know what it's called. That's fine, though. It's always a public location from a disconnected vantagepoint. The soundtrack is always like this. There's always one preoccupied starlet, always a chick. I know it's the show when I'm rapidly surfing.

Melissa: Who does this show?

Tawdra: There you go with the zines. What to read, what to read. Smutty? Sporty? Glammy? What did you buy?

Melissa: I can't believe this.

Tawdra: You stop! For a second you just stop! Something else, perhaps. Something less demographical? Something vaguely political and analytical? A motorcycle rag? No, no, I know! Something for Jomo! But no, he never wants you to impose on his head. 'Don't buy me no readables.'

Melissa: What?

Tawdra: Repeat. It does this for the full half-hour. That's the show. This is a great one. What are you thinking when you stop—did I guess it?

Melissa: How would I know?

Tawdra: I'm so excited for you. Everybody will want to talk to you for the rest of the week.

Melissa: Who does this show?

Tawdra: It's anonymous. Like medieval art.

Melissa: Who's going to want to talk to me?

Tawdra: Anyone who meets you. It's that kind of show. I know these things. You might want to cloak your vidcom—it's going to get crazy here, soon.

Melissa: Really.

Tawdra: There are no closing credits or contact info. The repeats keep punching right up to whenever the slot is officially up, as dictated by the carrier. I wonder at what point you're going to get zapped. On the stairs?

Melissa: While I'm thinking about it, you owe me three months' rent and utilities.

Tawdra: This is how it goes: you're on TV and you call in your chits in point-five seconds.

Melissa: Shit, you were talking about school before, which is how many dollars, and I'm thinking I'm the queen of lapsed landlords!

Tawdra: Itty, relax. You're airing now, so you're not yourself. I'll take care of everything in the near future. You know that. You know, Itty.

Melissa: I'm sorry I snapped at you.

Tawdra: So, when is your dad coming? I forgot what you said.

Melissa: Any day, I suspect. His visits are directly proportional to his economic descendancy.

Tawdra: You mean, you give him!

Melissa: Mindy left him nothing. So.

Tawdra: His business?

Melissa: Is what? Nobody knows. So.

Tawdra: So.

Melissa: He says a number and I divide it by two or greater. Depending.

Tawdra: On.

Melissa: On the teariness, the stuttering. It's not a happy time.

Tawdra: Look at it as role reversal. A learning experience for the Itties to come.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: That stop kills me. See, you stop there. Then keep on truckin.'

The vidcom says Ring and Jomo's head holos up in a box.

Jomo: Hey, girl. Can't see you—I'm on Fronty's unit.

Melissa: How was Om Ego?

Jomo: Boss. Ol' beanhead was shooting me from across the street. Guess I'll be worldwide tonight.

Melissa: I'm on right now.

Jomo: Gotta talk to her, see if I can plug Smirk USA on the show.

Tawdra: Too late, stretch, I already aired.

Melissa: I'm on right now.

Tawdra waves her hand through the holo of Jomo's head.

Tawdra: I love doing this.

Jomo: What? Damn! I needed a shout-out!

Tawdra: Next time.

Jomo: The next show, girlfriend, right before the chili pepper. You owe me.

Tawdra: Yeah, right. That's prime Tawdra Time and it goes for more than you've got in your media budget for the next decade.

Melissa: You coming back?

Jomo: No, I gotta take care of some business with Fronty. I'll flash you later.

He vanishes.

Tawdra: The speaking and the not-listening.

Melissa:

Tawdra: I'll brew some Brent Crude. Just the way you like it: dark and sweet. Keep watching, and tell me when you get zapped.

#

Locked in his office, the wreck of the pod mocks him. Before attempting to reblock the vidcom, he fetches his liquid and smoke fix and identifies a new tightness to the right of his sternum. Can't be cardiac—even he knows that would be on the left. He tries the breathing again to no avail. Must be a yoga placebo she prescribed him. His hands quiver, but that's a familiar tic. Non sequitur: the woman in the wig on the webcast Dartie sounded like Tawdra, Melissa's latest roommate. When Melissa introduced her during his last visit, he was shocked to recognize her from his websurfing and to learn that even off-cam she wore the see-through polyethylene. She was a Grade AAA provocateur. The toady Lieu infected his interior monologue with Franglais, he thinks, and he fingers the holofield to activate the vidscreen. Seconds of potential viewing whiz by as the selector searches for a preset. He engages the headset and sprawls on the wreck, legs out and to the left, a poor, post-millennial man's Lady Godiva sidesaddle on her oblivious steed. The screen pops up the Tawdra webcast. He doesn't have to fast-forward like always to the good stuff: the hairless, insightful wonder is riffing on rabbits and memory, pre-pepper. Peter looks at the paw mug standing upside down on a filing cabinet. How did that happen.

A red light blinks and the vidcom yells Incoming! Irked, Peter punches at the Block icon, a turreted castle wall, but the holo freezes up. A shrouded head floats next to Tawdra and growls.

Shroud: Push-it Pete, this is a Mundo Modo alert. Big card tonight. Dragons in the ring and action on the wing. The jets touch down this afternoon, so you know the combatants will be plenty enraged when they're uncaged. Three classes of ten, top lizard takes 20K. Can we reserve a seat on the sand for you?

Peter: How many from the home team on the card?

Shroud: Thirty, if they're right, led by the undefeated Strom, of course.

Peter: He fought last month. He's spent.

Shroud: He's not even nicked—the bout went thirty seconds.

Peter: He's over the hill.
 Shroud: Then take the challenger if you're so sure. The odds will suit you.
 Peter: Yeah, yeah.
 Shroud: Will you take a seat?
 Peter: Two. I'll enjoy watching that geezer dragon perish.
 Shroud: First blood at nine, Push-it Pete. Bring a friend strong enough to hold you down.

Tawdra is locked mid-sermon, the pixels of the antiquated screen dicing her into a Chuck Close grid. What appears to be trompe l'oeil jungle scenery covers the wall behind what the provocateur calls one of the most celebrated couches in webdom. Peter has watched this segment several times, though he'd taken a pass on her interviews and other adventures, he thinks. After touring so many sites, who could keep anything straight. He wonders if the couch has always been there. This can't be confirmed or denied since he has never saved the webcast, pursuant to his self-imposed lifelong policy against recording. *Carpe diem*, cried the Romans, and you cannot do so if you are bent on recording and archiving, cried he. Even her eyebrows are absent, he marvels, when the entire system crashes and the vid goes black, leaving Godiva all alone in her one-horse town. Dartie will no doubt be checking out the jalapeño, so he exits with due haste.

The kid's monitor is not even half the diagonal of D'Angel's, but then a mailroom grunt can't demand much from Purchasing, even at a fading but still tony concern such as G-Y FDR. Sure enough, Dartie's rapt, inches from the blue, his tongue exposed like a third lip. From a side angle, Peter watches a punk wail on his way out of Tawdra's bedroom and out of Melissa's apartment. Tawdra grins and the viewers emit a similar raspy chuckle. Dartie breaks off the feed and realizes he has company.

Peter: What was that jackass's time?
 Dartie: Twenty-four seconds.
 Peter: Not even top fifty.
 Dartie: Not even top one hundred. What a loser.
 Peter: You ever flash her?
 Dartie: No way. Me? No way. They're all a bunch of losers who flash in.
 Peter: I've flashed in a few times but it's always been busy.
 Dartie: Yeah.
 Peter: You know, I actually know her. Tawdra.
 Dartie: Really?
 Peter: I've been in her apartment.
 Dartie: Did you sit on her couch?
 Peter: I declined at the door.
 Dartie: Wow.
 Peter: I met her only once but I'll be seeing her again soon.

Dartie: What are you going to do?
 Peter: Nothing. I'll just talk to her. I know who she lives with in that apartment, so I'll go over there and she'll just be there.
 Dartie: Wow.
 Peter: You ever play the dragons?
 Dartie: You mean bet on them? No. I dig them big time, though. Look.

He pulls a squamous Strom cap out of a drawer.

Peter: I have two tickets on the sand tonight. Interested?
 Dartie: Tonight? Sure!
 Peter: Strom's fighting.
 Dartie: Tonight! Great!
 Peter: Swing by my apartment around seven. We'll have some booze and then head on over. First blood's at nine. Don't wear that headgear—gotta present well at my table.
 Dartie: Great!

#

Melissa's index finger hooks the handle of a carbuncled clay mug glazed in pink and green circles, a gift from Unique after their very first Art lesson. Who else could she give it to? Guzman had asked when she saw the proud recipient displaying it in the Teacher's Lounge. At her home they use only bottles and cans, Guzman snorted. Then she lit up her plantains and said the student was already brown-nosing for an A, as her exhale divided the room and intimidated the weaker, modern hazes of the young faculty's smokes. I prefer to interpret the gesture on its own simple terms, or so Melissa had said, without any political connotations. Eyebrows had raised at this defiant stance, but not Guzman's. The principal kept squinting at no one in particular, plucking the spokes of her wheels. She said something to the effect that since Melissa so readily testified to her pupil's promise, the principal herself would conduct Unique's evaluation at the semester's end. When that time came, Melissa was genuinely surprised that Guzman made no overture toward Unique or any of her students. Their marks, it turned out, surpassed the regional norms and spiked Melissa's bonus. Reflecting on the extra effort in the sandbox, Melissa recognized that the principal had simply thrown down the gauntlet. Much as she wanted to loosen the wheelchair's screws, she had to respect good administration, even when it was confrontational.

Funny how the Early Child Development (Pre-K to 3rd Grade) Administrator, Bebel, never advised her about dealing with Guzman. Her first day at Quantico, Melissa arrived at the crack of dawn in order to clean, rake, arrange and stock the classroom, then download a library of resources from Chappaquiddick. She'd been clicking through the student profiles when someone said, You might be an early bird but you're pretty damn small to be worm hunting. Then Bebel, who'd been the third of her interviewers, laughed, braids shaking in the doorway. Melissa saw right away that the woman had issues. She asked about the

Reading vidconferencing uplink and Bebel's eyes glazed in ignorance or indifference before she walked away without responding. Melissa's updates and commission slips were signed with an X as soon as they were submitted, and that was the extent of her direct supervision.

A few weeks into the first year Bebel began to arrive late and leave shortly after her long lunch, which she spent off-campus with her aspiring-actor boyfriend, according to the authorities in the Lounge. Thanks in part to the ever rising attendance and performance reports, Bebel's yearly commissions alone breached a half-million (murmured the Lounge), which, along with her healthy base (Lounge: 400K easy) enabled her to continuously renovate her Shallows triplex. Her husband managed their staff, worked out, and appeared frequently during online restaurant critiques, shouting about matters of service and lighting.

There must be a tacit mutual respect between Bebel and Guzman, Melissa supposes, as she has rarely witnessed any intercourse between them. Once she did notice the star supervisor smiling at the principal's idle remark in the Lounge, though it was addressed to a teacher. She intuited that Bebel did not care for Guzman and that this was due to the former's ambition. Nonetheless, Bebel smiled at Guzman and obliterated her quotas every quarter. Ships in the night in calm seas need only a flash, a single, brief beacon. Money.

The executive between Bebel and Guzman was Vice Principal Dente, the token male manager as acknowledged by the Lounge and himself. Fortyish and narrowly bearded, he wore baggy suits to attempt to conceal a displeasing figure. Dente has no ass, the Lounge giggled, he left it at home. Diligent and detail-oriented, Dente briefed the teachers on the minutiae concerning Group Events, his personal division. Why did you seat your class in two long rows by the fire escape at the Winter Concert? he'd asked Miss Matasavage. Because Unique played third flute and she would be most visible to her classmates from that position. But Success plays the triangle and stands on the left, doesn't he? He stands in the rear and jokes with the bass drum—that's not a proper role model. I see, I see, but next time you better submit your seating chart earlier. Dente defeated again. Group Events accounted for less than a fifth of Quantico's revenues, though its section of the Annual Report always entertained shareholders via sunbursting icons, Did-You-Know?'s, and interactive audio-visual gimmicks. Dente's proficiency in commanding the innovations of business communications, combined with his earnest if goofy appearance, made him the ideal Quantico spokesperson for community and media relations. He traveled a lot. In considering the rumors of Guzman's imminent departure, Melissa understands that Alfredo Dente will never become principal.

Love Is Enough glances off her shoulder, startling her out of her contemplative slouch on the swansdown. Tawdra leans on one foot, arms crossed, and nibbles at the quick of her thumb. She wears her trademark Saran wrap.

Tawdra: You looked sad. Thinking about your uncaring man?

Melissa: I'm not sad and get off that subject.

Tawdra: My finger is bleeding now but I can't stop biting. Does that make me a bad person?

Her permanent dishabillement, if one could call it that, in the apartment gave Melissa a little pause when her tenant first moved in. During that pause she envisioned her father entering the living room, egregiously drunk, leering at yet struck dumb by the presence of this fast-talking, bald, essentially nude woman whom he would know from his prurient browsing. He would exit quickly in a profound fluster and then, back in his office or in The Shallows, religiously call up his mental Tawdra vid (anatomically exaggerated and facially inaccurate as a result of his two decades of drink as his consortium) until his next encounter with the flesh. She knew him cold. That first visit eventually took place as though choreographed. Her father was due to return and Melissa did not care to predict what would transpire then.

Tawdra: I've decided. Intro to Hollywood Economic Spin: Over and Understating production and marketing expenses to entice the public and shock the industry.

Melissa: Beg your pardon?

Tawdra: My IFA! class. I figure I need a better handle on the figures. I mean, I'm still all about the creative—my vision is platinum. Meantime, I'll do some collecting off the webcast and the rent will flow.

Melissa: Back rent, you mean.

Tawdra: This baby's got back and more some. Itty, I'm gonna let you roll in the bills after I'm done frolicking in them like a fat cat in heat.

She caterwauls while pouring another crude, then walks to the window. If I were a hot painter, Melissa thinks, I would not execute her portrait. To my eye, she's a generic shopping bag advertising essentials but containing nothing sacred. And Tawdra would demand her portrait and demand again, then resort to meaningful threats as might a petulant CEO, but the artist would remain firm. How often we happily dream of a station of privilege in order to refuse its accordant tasks we would never perform in reality. How often do we wish to decline with thanks... Tawdra blows on the window and presses the side of her hand against the vanishing cloud.

Tawdra: You ever make foot imprints with your hand on a foggy car window?

Melissa: Only when I'm driving.

Tawdra: You can't do that just hahhh-ing in this window. It's filthy, anyways. When does Anastasia come? This flat needs a cleaning.

Melissa: She hasn't flashed this week?

Tawdra: Nyet.

Melissa: For the nth time, she's not Russian, she's Colombian.

Tawdra: She's blonde and speaks with a Russian accent. These are facts.

Melissa: You can see her roots. Her name is Amy Velez and she recently moved here from Medellin.

Tawdra: She stowed away on a tanker from Odessa and snuck into Caracas, where she lay silently under blankets on a burro's back to end up on the outskirts of Bogota.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: Have you seen her papers?

Melissa: I've paid her bills. Do you feel that you are honing this skit through repetition? Let it go—it died on the vine.

Tawdra: Inside jokes, Itty. This is how friendships develop. Do not be a crab. Nobody loves a crab.

Melissa: Regardless, Amy doesn't do windows.

Tawdra: Make sure you tell me when she's coming next so I won't be here. I hate all that make-up and bubble perm.

Melissa: Put on a happy face and let disinfectant spread all over the place.

Tawdra: You're quick today, Itty. Maybe the Econ class is a bad choice for me.

Melissa: Maybe something more market-oriented. Identify your audience. Then you can grow it and prosper.

Tawdra: I'm an artist! I can't worry about the john. Still, you have a point. I'll give the catalog a twice over. I mean, it's not like there's an emergency here. I missed the first semester's deadline so I don't have to do anything stat, you know?

Melissa: Go do your research and report back to me.

Tawdra: Aye, aye.

She walks down the hall without any style or purpose. Out the window on the ledge a pigeon croaks and Melissa relives Bill The Parrot's morning mischief. Rats with wings! her father once shouted at a pigeon horde from behind the wheel, driving into a gray and white covey gorging on tossed crumbs. The pop pop of pneumatic executions punctuating her filial disquietude... Often the feathers release on impact, she noted on the streets near Quantico, where souped-up luxury sedans caught the scavengers unawares. Ya slow, ya blow—a gunslinger's credo taken into the hood without an acid test of skepticism. Say "pigeon" or even ESP the word and her father would knee-jerk "rats with wings"—predictable and crude in his pop gun vocabulary. What are my mantras? she wonders. Memo to Self: evolve or replace mantras to fortify integrity. The vidcom glows and Guzman appears as she sits up quickly.

Guzman: Hello, Miss Matasavage. That's a fine swansdown sofa. Excuse me for interrupting your siesta.

Melissa: I was getting ready to analyze the new curriculum adjustments. Refreshing my system.

Guzman: Of course you are. You may very well partake in the scuttlebutt in the Lounge, which recently has offered rumors of my imminent transfer to Hatch.

Melissa: No, I don't. Didn't hear anything. To that effect. Nothing.

Guzman: Well, it's true as of a half-hour ago.

Melissa: Really. Then congratulations are in order.

Guzman: Bebel will replace me, not Dente. You can expect to hear from her shortly.

Melissa: Why is that?

Guzman: She will ask you what I offered you to come join me at Hatch.

Melissa:

Guzman: They're short on talent there, but that's no secret. You've seen their scores, I assume.

Melissa: 11th in Manhattan and declining.

Guzman: Very good, Miss Matasavage. I need self-motivators committed to excellence, ready for high hurdles.

Melissa: You're offering me a position.

Guzman: More than 200 pupils under your charge. The commission upside is outstanding. Plus, I will raise your base 25%.

Melissa: That's a very entertaining proposition.

Guzman: Especially for a teacher with as little experience as you have.

Melissa: I'll have to think about it. I don't know the staff there. I'll have to review all the student profiles.

Guzman: This is not an occasion for sleeping on it, Miss Matasavage. I'll need your decision this evening so I can finalize my transitional appointments with management.

Melissa: I see. Well, I'm flattered.

Guzman: Be more than flattered, be opportunistic. You can flash me at home tonight—you have the address?

Melissa: I have it, Señora Guzman.

Guzman: I'll speak to you later then.

She evaporates.

Melissa: Thank you...

She claps her hands and rocks a few times then shuffles down to Tawdra's room. It's vacant, so she proceeds to her bedroom and finds her roomie near the foot of the unmade sultan, her face in the IFA! catalog.

Tawdra: The scent they chose for this issue—it's so compelling. I feel so scholarly.

Melissa: Señora Guzman just offered me a post at Hatch with a big raise!

Tawdra: Olé! And?

Melissa: I have to get back to her tonight. What should I do?

Tawdra: Take it, of course. First, touch me with those lucky little hands of yours. This is your day and I want some of that stuff you're wearing.

#

From commercials Jomo knows the roof of the Procter & Gamble cuts a distinctive glyph. There is no proof of that from the street. Gawking at the atrium, thirteen stories high to avoid the unlucky-floor-numbering problem, even he feels insignificant next to the Orinocan rain forest. For its importers, climate and light control was a snap but treating the glass for moisture-free viewing proved deceptively troublesome. In daylight the diverse fauna rarely played to the audience. On occasion, if prodded, a monkey mocks the human passers-by—who's having fun? The cold-blooded creatures lie low. Four o'clock chimes from a grimy, venerable Episcopal church across the avenue, standard market activity halts, and lucreted extras step lively outside, the flow somewhat disrupted by a figure knelt in prayer. Jomo tacks through the current toward the figure, pushing forward in its slipstream. Fifteen, twenty minutes and the rush subsides. Logy stragglers depart into their livery. The figure hasn't moved. Jomo steps around and faces her.

Jomo: You done, Mom?

Jomo's Mom: Amen.

Jomo: Amen. You done now?

Jomo's Mom:

Jomo: I've got your briefcase, see? You shouldn't leave it behind you out here. These people—you never know their next move.

Jomo's Mom: Today is Friday. TGIF is the holy day for the unawakened.

Jomo: Time to get up. Here, let me help you.

Jomo's Mom: It's so good to see you. I wish I could see you more often but you have your own life I know.

Jomo: Mom, I see you all the time.

Jomo's Mom: It's never enough! My only son.

Jomo: Any converts today?

Jomo's Mom: Only prospects. You know me—I am some kind of intimidating character.

Jomo: That's for sure. I saw fear in some eyes just before.

Jomo's Mom: You saw the longing for love. Last week a young thing—pretty smile, rosy cheeks—knelt at my side and held on to my beads.

Jomo: That was months ago, Mom, you keep telling me about that.

Jomo's Mom: That's right, that's right. It was a while ago.

Jomo: Let's go get something to eat and you can update me on your jobhunting. How's that?

Jomo's Mom: That will be fine. I'm just glad you're here.

#

Impulsively, Melissa spans Tawdra's bottom. They squeal and the bedroom vidcom glows. Bebel's head appears along with her disembodied hand holding a flute of champagne. Melissa sits closer to the vid, thankful Tawdra is out of range.

Bebel: Yo, Melissa.

Melissa: Hola, Bebel. Is there a problem at school?

Bebel: Not any more. I'm sure you've heard from Guzman. Hatch was bound to stop the hemorrhaging sometime. Whether Señora G can make the patient well is debatable.

Melissa:

Bebel: We have a special situation here at Quantico, I'm sure you recognize. The client base is solid. We don't have to spin our wheels on internal matters. In any case, now that I'm in charge, I'd like to preserve our managerial direction. There's a post to be filled. Early Childhood Supervisor. You're small and you're green, but I need someone competent in the post, someone I don't have to train. What do you think?

Melissa: Are you offering me your old job?

Bebel: What, are you stupid? Yes, I'm offering you the job.

Melissa:

Bebel: Did Guzman offer you Supervisor?

Melissa:

Bebel: Let's get real here. What will she do for your base—25%?

Melissa: 35.

Bebel: I'll give you 40. And your commissions here are golden—you don't have to hope and pray for Hatch to convalesce. I'll even bump them up 25%.

Melissa: I'll have to think about this. It's very sudden. And very intriguing.

Bebel: Only because you've never been around the block. How do you think I got where I am? You think I started at Quantico?

Melissa:

Bebel: Fair enough, I'll give you some time to accept. I'll flash you later.

She vanishes and Melissa falls back onto the bed.

Tawdra: Girl, you are absolutely stepping in it! That Bebel is definitely something.

Melissa: She's the kind that wears tight tops and makes deprecating comments to everyone about her boobs—you know the type. And that's my dilemma. Is it a good step forward if I have to kiss that puta's ring everyday?

Tawdra: That's not a dilemma—it's a hot fudge sundae with walnuts.

Melissa: I hate nuts.

- Tawdra: Exactly. But you pick them off. And if some sneak into a mouthful you spit them out. And if some get swallowed, you wash them down with a loving spoonful of vanilla.
- Melissa: You think?
- Tawdra: I behaved just then, you have to admit. I didn't interrupt the entire exchange.
- Melissa: Like you usually do.
- Tawdra: You should be thanking me. I mean, I'm giving you good counsel right now, in your time of deliberations. You should be thanking me with extreme sincerity.
- Melissa: Go to your room. And fix the wallpaper.
- Tawdra: That's not nice.
- Melissa: I know. Thank you in advance for allowing me a few minutes of silence while I let this all sink in.

Tawdra stays put so Melissa rolls over and inserts a fold of the sheet in her mouth. It tastes like Jomo, she wishes, but in fact it just tastes like sleep. On the wall the row of photographs framed in thin metallic black and matted in stark white offers a welcome distraction—sometimes the art we own can intrigue. This is Eng's Petroleum Jelly Series #1, her mother told her while hanging the pieces in her office. This is a photo of Eng's fingertip smeared with petroleum jelly. This is a photo of Eng's lens smeared with petroleum jelly. This is a petal of a rose smeared with petroleum jelly. This is a bullet smeared with petroleum jelly. This is a mirror smeared with petroleum jelly, reflecting part of Eng's face, which is probably smeared with petroleum jelly. And this is a dollop of petroleum jelly refracting the letters PJ, which stand for Petroleum Jelly. Notice that each print is itself smeared with petroleum jelly. The glass and the frames are too, Melissa said. I did that, Mindy said, the process needed to be extended in my opinion—don't mention it to Eng. This is an exercise in texture and a study of the manipulation of reality and beauty, Melissa posited. First and foremost, Mindy said, this is the recording of several applications of petroleum jelly. When it's yours someday, don't tell anyone otherwise.

But no one, meaning Jomo, Tawdra and Amy Velez, the only guests to date in this bedroom (in her presence), no one has asked her about the series. Eng was one of Mindy's friends and once asked Melissa to sit for her. Mindy found out and quashed the idea, telling her Eng was simply intrigued by her size and, besides, my daughter will not sit until someone has sat for her. Eng abandoned photography to head up the Mardi Gras Bead Department at IFA!, Melissa heard, though she'd lost contact with her after Mindy's death. And no one has stared whimsically at this series, no one has begged an interpretation. No one wants to talk to her about art at all.

- Tawdra: The Smart Alec In You: Evoking the Inner Adolescent.
- Melissa: You're back. Sounds like bingo.
- Tawdra: If you'd put me in a room with a monkey and a typewriter, we might have designed that course ourselves.

Melissa rotates on her belly and smiles at a right angle over waves of linen.

Tawdra: You gonna stay at Quantico?

Melissa: Pfff. Maybe.

Tawdra: These sheets smell like Jomo.

Melissa: Not me?

Tawdra: There's more of him, so there's more smell.

Melissa: I can't smell it.

Tawdra: Try here. Smell.

Melissa: I can't smell it.

Tawdra: Over here. Ground zero, if I may be so bold.

Melissa: Stop it.

Tawdra: The mushroom cloud reached the firmament, liquid fire all below.

Melissa: Where do you come from?

Tawdra: Oh Itty, we're all from the cosmic womb. Hey, you were on the air today.

Melissa: No one's flashed. You said everyone would.

Tawdra: You probably have email up the wazoo.

Melissa: I think Wazoo is where you come from.

Tawdra: Tell me what goes on here on this battleground.

Melissa: No.

Tawdra: Give me an inkling. A tingle.

Melissa: I prefer not to.

Tawdra: This is what I'm suspecting. Have there been recurring disagreements?

Melissa: You don't understand.

Tawdra: Exactly. The two of you, the dynamic—is it compelling?

Melissa: Not on your level.

Tawdra: Don't wax platonic on me. Every knife needs a good grind.

Melissa: You think?

Tawdra: How long has it been? Whose unwillingness wins out?

Melissa: Why?

Tawdra: Is there a rush to judgment? Is there fumbling?

Melissa: Why?

Tawdra: Erotica is comprised of exquisite questions unanswered.

Melissa: I thought religion was.

Tawdra: It's all about ecstasy, no matter how you sweat it.

On the swansdown Melissa lights up some currants and regards the drab, 2-D Hatch home page. Three graphs of corporate copy in a newsy font sit on a centered, shadowy rendering of the school's façade. Guzman will ax the communications staff in no time. Melissa exits and calls up reports from Procter & Gamble, the Wall Street house least bullish on elementary education. The news is out: "Turnaround Guru

Guzman To Steer Hatch” pulses as a slot machine rings up three dollar signs and dispenses a flood of coins that rapidly mount at the base of the screen. “A pure play for Education speculators... Prudent investors adopting a show-me stance... Parents elated... Staff uneasy... Transition team may include Quantico talent...” Melissa sees her name in a list and exits.

She looks at The Kiss—an embrace of the gorgeous Not-I, which she realizes in Jomo’s spidery affections. She called him Daddy Long Legs to herself only and thought it romantic to protect the pet name. Reveal it to him and it would instantly become infantile and trite and subject to infantile and trite discussion. Unlock a secret’s hermetic seal and the phlogiston whooshes out and staleness sets in. In her palm she rubs a rounded piece of seamless amber. This is a worrystone, Mindy said, it was your grandmother’s—I found it in her bed when she died. She was confronting her faith, casting out into the unknown, Melissa said. She rubbed it as therapy for her arthritis, Mindy said, I myself never had use for it, but you might if you worry. Such a simple object, preternaturally cold and clammy, radiating strength and weakness all along her life line. Melissa has never been aware of picking it up or putting it down. It simply appears in her hand.

The vidcom flashes up Full Frontal, sucking on a pacifier. He spits it out of view and looks at her.

Full Frontal: Yo, Mellie Mel. What’s up, what’s up?!

Melissa: You’re obliging again. Where are you?

Full Frontal: Hanging in the studio. You know, bustin’ beats, taking names and numbers.

Melissa: Jomo there?

Full Frontal: Nah. That kid took the low road when I took the high.

Melissa: How was the gym?

Full Frontal: Your boy benched 400. He is most definitely blasted, I must say.

Melissa: So, what’s the story?

Full Frontal: We gotta whiz by This Mortal Koil tonight to meet some mack who’s down, you know, so I’m figuring we all meet up there and float as long as it’s good.

Melissa: Sounds like a party.

Full Frontal: Yo, I heard you were on the air today. They have it on tape here—I’m gonna check it out.

The vidcom glows.

Melissa: I have another flash. Gotta suspend you.

Full Frontal: You were live, I heard.

The pacifier reappears in his mouth and he seems to look at Guzman next to him, the way the Brady Bunch “looked” at each other in their squares.

Guzman: Miss Matasavage. I thought to measure the progress of your decision-making. Perhaps you’ve heard from Bebel.

Melissa: Yes.

Guzman: And.

Melissa: She made me a counteroffer.
 Guzman: 35%.
 Melissa: 45% and EC Supervisor.
 Guzman: I see. I never underestimated her grasp of the dollars, ever if she never cared a whit about customer service. Understand—I'm working with resources that are presently limited. As I stated before, your potential earnings here will escalate dramatically over time.

Melissa:
 Guzman: Candidly, I don't think you're ready for Supervisor at this time. And I think you know that yourself. I don't throw titles around if the requisite experience is lacking.

Bored in isolation, Full Frontal vanishes.

Guzman: I can't afford to give you 50%, but I will because I have to. But that's all I can do. What do you say? You're a team player, are you up for the challenge here at Hatch?
 Melissa: I'll get back to you in one hour. It's a big move for me.
 Guzman: A half-hour. I need to move.
 Melissa: One hour. I need to think.
 Guzman: I'm waiting. The Hatchlings are waiting.

She evaporates. The roomies march to the living room, where Tawdra assumes the lotus on the shag and inhales and exhales at Melissa, nestling in the swansdown.

Tawdra: I'm not done with you yet.
 Melissa: Tell me something I don't know.
 Tawdra: Today is a pearl for you. You're so special today.
 Melissa: Tell me something else.
 Tawdra: One of many pearls in your life's long necklace. Myself, I'm working on a locket. I mean, I'm not a necklace maker, I can't string beads, can't sustain process. I'm looking to forge a singular, beautiful statement. Does my locket have to be heart-shaped? Probably, it's a locket and lockets tend to be heart-shaped. Mine will throb or seem to. The face of life pounding inside engraved metal.

Melissa: This is something.
 Tawdra: But it's hollow. I mean, it's a locket and they tend to be heart-shaped and hollow. Inside, you would keep a picture of your sweetheart. For me that's absurd.

Melissa: A joke.
 Tawdra: I don't know what my locket will hold.

Melissa: Maybe this is a good thing.
 Tawdra: Of course, you will celebrate your good fortune today.
 Melissa: I've made no decisions.
 Tawdra: Maybe a diamond nose stud. You're ready.
 Melissa: Now we're speaking literally.
 Tawdra: From the—
 Melissa: Heart.
 Tawdra: Oh, I love it when you complete my thought. You truly are Yang to my Yin.
 Let's do more. Ready: OK, this is not a—
 Melissa: Test.
 Tawdra: The frost is on the—
 Melissa: Pumpkin.
 Tawdra: Patent—
 Melissa: Pending.
 Tawdra: We are inextricably –
 Melissa: Linked.
 Tawdra: Three, two, one—
 Melissa: Liftoff.
 Tawdra: Hah, hah! Oh, my. Hardy har—
 Melissa: Har.
 Tawdra: Yes!

The vidcom glows. It's Bebel. Melissa pushes Tawdra out of range and scowls.

Melissa: Be—
 Tawdra: Quiet! I can do it, too!
 Bebel: Yo, shorty. Let's wrap this up.
 Melissa: I—
 Bebel: You flashed Guzman, didn't you? You're killing me here.
 Melissa: She flashed me.
 Bebel: Give me the number.
 Melissa: 55%.
 Bebel: Fine, so will I. You stay and there'll be no relocation hassles and costs to assume. Your Supervisor commissions kick in now. We'll sign everything tomorrow morning.
 Melissa: Tomorrow is Saturday.
 Bebel: Right, Saturday. I have a charity function in the afternoon. It's a 20th Century Sculpture opening at the Oldsmobile. There will be plenty of edibles and eligibles there—you should join me and my boyfriend.

Melissa: I can't make it.

Bebel: Oh, we have the busy social schedule, do we? So, we'll sign on Monday.

Melissa: Hold on. I haven't decided yet.

Bebel: What is the problem here.

Melissa: I weigh the Supervisor spot and its commissions equally with the upside and options at Hatch. You and Señora Guzman have both offered me a 55% base increase, so everything's level.

Bebel: I'll make it 60% only if you take it right now.

Melissa: Done.

Bebel: You're a tough negotiator, Matasavage, for a squirt. See you Monday.

She vanishes.

Tawdra: I worship you! I. Worship. You!

Melissa:

Tawdra: So, what was the clincher? I mean, I know it wasn't just the money. What made you stay?

Melissa: No good reason.

#

Peter awakes on the pod with seedy mustardmouth. The system lights are blinking again, meaning there may have been flashers watching him snore, twitch and drool. For a quick tack, he calls up his last annual report, prepared while he was dimly compelled to arrange the dwindling data. Underneath a real-time U.S. map, all the rankings and proportions had changed from his first analyses, save California's position at the bottom, which skewed his previous authoritative insights on giving. There were reasons, to be sure, most notably the centrifugal force that swept the nation. California, for example, now constituted only two-thirds the territory it used to claim: Eureka grabbed everything north of San Francisco and some of Oregon, mingling hippies and woodsmen. That represented one of his many lost wagers. When the campaigns for Provinciality first fomented, Monsieur Deng's raised a tote board and the odds for each referendum. Peter became a big player and went on what he called his American Instinct. He'd heartily expected Texas, the erstwhile Republic, to go first but it turned out the staunchest supporter of the good ol' Union. South Carolina turned its back on Fort Sumter, stayed a state, and disappointed him. When Idaho split along the Snake River, he'd doubled down and was twice as shocked at his misfortune. Acadia took New Orleans and the Delta, which was fine and fitting but a setback. When Maine seceded he fortunately hadn't had any action with the house; Down East hadn't made the board due to insufficient betting interest.

Then the reservations expanded coast to plain to mesa, offering émigrés outlandish lotteries, plenty of room to spit and plenty of parking to go with. Many-colored territories now speckle his virtual Mercator, presenting a lively visual to the casual cartographer. There was a new geometry involved in seeing the country. Peter has idly triangulated distances between places whose names he'd never heard

uttered before: Toppenish to Owyhee to Mahnomem; Kayenta to L'Anse to Rosebud. Like the Provinces, the Territories enjoyed limited sovereignty from Washington (separate and distinct, to his financial dismay, from the District of Columbia) but they all continued to genuflect to Wall Street and its bondsmen. The ramifications hit the consultancy hard. The new governments minted currencies as populations migrated or hunkered further down, and they were formally wary of "federal" or "global" businesses. Media became localized. The tiny classified ads for Helpin' Needy Kiz now ran in circulars with four- or five-digit circulation. Formerly benignly ignorant of the consultancy's taxation status, the publisher's reps emailed rounds of questionnaires and "recertification" contracts requiring processing fees. Peter completed them all as generically possible, claiming without example his redirection of funds to Anytown if the situation merited, but he took dollars, his business address remained Midtown Manhattan (divorcing now from the Boroughs, The Shallows and The East River) and therefore he was helplessly subject to the proliferating anti-federalist policies. His placement priority dropped miserably and his ads sank below the fold, buried under error-prone copy for local pharmacies.

He nogs and smokes and accesses the Speedo client site to view the Phnom Penh shipping log. He views the field chronologically, scrolling over weights and arrival dates of his first missives to Burton Craftcroft, the pallid Brit he'd met fortuitously years ago at Monsieur Deng's, a few weeks after procuring Ray's negatives. On holiday, Craftcroft had been making the requisite once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Manhattan, he'd articulated, taking up a longstanding guest pass to the snuff club. The very moniker "Manhattan" resembled a skyline, he'd uttered, not that that was a particularly astute observation. Craftcroft sipped North Sea Brent (unavailable at his post) after lunch and longed for a scone. High Tea at Raffles in Singapore, now that's the smorgasbord—steamed dumplings and crumpets and boiled and fried offerings from the South China Sea and petit-fours... Yes, quite... Somehow Peter asserted the Queen's Poodle had expired and he ended up wagering the lunch and cocktails. When Buckingham Palace confirmed the pooch's vitality and the bet was lost, Peter offered to make it good many times over with a business deal. Craftcroft returned to Phnom Penh and Peter set up the accounts for receiving and sending, taking care to personally guarantee the costs. All the Brit had to do was deposit the administrative fees—think of it as a royalty, Peter said—and slide the letters into the International/U.S. slot. Peter magnanimously upped the royalties during the halcyon days of the consultancy, when philanthropy was rampant and he schlepped bulging gray mailbags to Speedo twice a month. Craftcroft never acknowledged the increases, though the checks were posted and cleared the day of receipt, nor did any business or personal correspondence flower between the two.

Paging down, leaping over three decades to the July line items. Three measly letters from two weeks with blanks next to Received and Registered. Page up to the June's batch of four, all of them signed for by Bucro, the Speedo recipient code for Burton Craftcroft. Before Peter's mind can spin through explanations for the present delay in processing, he exits and calls up his agent's ID template, complete with a murky head shot, the visage unidentifiable under a peculiar, battered rain cap. What a leap of faith it had been to entrust this shadow with his correspondence all these years. He had never had direct means of

verifying his pieces were actually forwarded back to America—he had only to wait for the six-month renewals from his clients, which were now, like everything else, lagging badly.

Assume the good, Peter had said so often to himself when wracked with doubts over his far-flung operatives while he smoked in his pod and stared at the wall of doom across the alley. He exits the app and brings up his checking account. An entry for 4477 remains open. Craftcroft, what are you up to? Subsequent checks for Speedo and his men in Lagos and Medellin were cashed. The spinning between his ears accelerates and he envisions the Coreolis effect sucking a third of his meager revenues counterclockwise down a Southern Hemisphere toilet. He suppresses the need to light up and accesses the Phnom Penh white pages. No Craftcroft, but that doesn't mean anything—the Brit probably was unlisted. Returned checks deposited where? Peter leaps from the pod and riffles through his filing cabinet, hurling a box of manuals for the pod and knocking over the IV, halting its bubbling. This is the time when you wish you never owned a paper shredder, he hisses to his chuckling invisible guardian alien.

But he does find a groined dossier from those early days, when his intentions were still mixed and his procedures were self-consciously hardening. It holds a host of returned checks, punched and bound uniformly. Craftcroft's are stamped in red on the back: Khmer National Bank, dated 25 years ago. What if, what if, what if the Brit had switched banks? Or the bank had folded? Cross that bridge later... He needs to access its database and locate its profile of Craftcroft—impossible from his weak, private server. In his head he speaks French: *Impossible!* and thinks of a server up to the task and sufficiently secretive for his purposes. That would be Monsieur Deng's. He struggles to his feet and grabs the doorknob, then lets it go as Lieu's threat echoes at him, a debtor on severe notice. He needs a proxy, someone to log on at Deng's. There is a knock at the door and a voice behind.

Dartie: Peter?

Peter cracks the door and looks at the G-Y FDR grunt fiercely scratching his knee through shrunken, unpleated chinos, creased roughly around his crotch from weeks of constant sitting.

Peter: What's going on down there?

Dartie: What? Oh, I have some kind of rash or something.

Peter: What kind of rash? Prickly heat?

Dartie: Hah—that's what babies get. I haven't looked at it yet. I'm just itching.

Peter: Probably not a good idea to do that, but hey.

Dartie: You said seven, right? My day's over here. Summer hours on Friday—I'm going home.

Peter: What?

Dartie: Seven at your place and then we go check out the dragons—right?

Peter: Oh, yeah. Right.

Dartie: I, uh, need your address.

Peter: Right. You need a pen and something.

Dartie: I have a pen.

Peter: Paper would be good, too.
 Dartie: No, I'm gonna write it on my hand.
 Peter: I hate that. You need paper. I'll get some.
 Dartie: No, it's better this way. I don't sweat.

Dartie prints the information and shows it to Peter, who nods and shuts the door. The kid wouldn't even make it to the top step under Monsieur Deng's awning before he was escorted to the far street corner. Maybe they'd even rough him up a bit on account of his looks. Now D'Angel...

Peter locks up and marches to her cubicle. Her screen is split between a soap opera and a shot of a girl at a newsstand. D'Angel exits both of them, pulls off her earpieces and swivels around.

Peter: There's a sixth sense in that luscious tail.
 D'Angel: This I know.
 Peter: Viktor flash?
 D'Angel: Next question.
 Peter: I need you to do something for me.
 D'Angel: This I know.

She swivels away but Peter spins her back by the skunk, bristly in his grip and hardened with gel and other treatments.

Peter: We have to leave now. Tell Shivonne you're sick or something.
 D'Angel: I don't have to tell her anything! Let's go!

#

In a triangular plaza, Jomo carries two paper cups of low octane to a bench Pollocked with guano. Special brew like March Qatar Land for two would have set him back a stack of bills and eaten into his cab fare. His mother looks unseeing, hands clasped on her briefcase. He sits between her and a chico with alarming prosthodonture and an electric-maize python wrapped around his shoulders and torso.

Jomo: Mom, look at this bench—you had to sit here?
 Jomo's Mom:
 Jomo: I got you some gas. Low oc, detergent-rich.
 Jomo's Mom: I would like a cup of hot water.
 Jomo: Have the gas instead. It's hot and there's water in it.
 Jomo's Mom: Hot water for me, please.
 Jomo: Damn, Mom! It's too far to walk back and back. You should have spoken up before when I asked you.
 Jomo's Mom: I did. You didn't hear me.
 Jomo: Whatever. Yo, compañero, I've got an extra gas. You want?
 Compañero: Not for me, bro, but maybe Goldilock wants.

Jomo takes off the lid and holds the cup under the python's tongue. The snake takes a pass.

Jomo: He doesn't want any.

Compañero: He knows what's bad for him.

Jomo: I got two babies in my crib but they don't have his color. And they got yards to go to slither up with this muchacho.

Compañero: Feed them white rats and walk them as much as possible. Check this out—you know that jungle they got a few blocks over there?

Jomo: Yeah, dude. I was just there.

Compañero: I snuck Goldy in there one night and the next morning he had a bowling ball in his throat, man. Don't know what it was but they got some crazy snake delights, I'm telling you. Yo, my boy didn't want to check out of there.

Jomo: No kidding. Thanks for the tip, chief.

Compañero: No problemo.

Jomo: Mom, give me the scoop. How goes it with the interviews?

Jomo's Mom: My appointment for today was re-scheduled for next week. TGIF.

Jomo: With an agency? What day next week?

Jomo's Mom: I have to contact them next week to schedule the appointment.

Jomo: Why didn't you set it up today, Mom? Don't let them front on you. It's just a damn temp agency.

Jomo's Mom:

Jomo: What about those other places? That list I gave you.

Jomo's Mom: I read through it and made some notes. Some of the entries seem promising, to be sure.

Jomo: Get it out and let's go through it.

She lays the briefcase on the ground and squats while opening it. A photo of young Jomo with her and his baba appears and disappears behind faint printouts. She finds the list and brings it closer to her glasses.

Jomo: What are you doing down there, Mom? Sit up here.

Jomo's Mom: This is more comfortable.

Jomo: Agh, I can't do this like this. We'll get you a job next week.

She closes the briefcase and regains the bench. She knows his tone: he's thinking she's enjoying displeasing him and he wonders what his baba would say if he were with them and not in Kenya.

Jomo: Yo, chief, my moms needs a set-up. She's been on the sidelines for months. Any suggestions?

Compañero: Keep a positive attitude, amiga. Don't let the putas grind you down.

#

Peter is so glad D'Angel said Let's Go! Things not only go, they go faster when someone says this in the movies. He envisions a gaggle of bumbling shoplifters fleeing the convenience store when the

pimplily lookout spots the coppers' flashers. Let's go! and the hand-held cam careens behind the fugitives into the getaway 4x4 out back. Frantic close-ups of the hyperventilating desperadoes in the rear and side-view mirrors. As they pile in the driver spits out chew or gas. Spinning wheels, flying gravel. Burning rubber. The chase—Let's go! Peter nurses his gourmet crude in the Bohemian Oil Boutique around the corner from Monsieur Deng's. He won't look at his watch here, even though there are few affected or disaffected customers in the shop to disapprove of Time's observance. Assume the good: D'Angel is capable. He offered her nothing on the walk over, but then he had nothing to offer her. Just a chore, a diversion. Something suspicious and real—that's what kids wanted. So now he waits for her to return from her mission to Monsieur Deng's.

A mod cur with clotted tags of flesh and fur tends the bar. Peter believes the employee is a genuine bohemian, but an inquiry in that direction might spark a harrowing line of chatter. The cur laughs to himself, working on his shtick. He's probably in a shit band, Peter thinks, the "rhythm guitarist," the most cartoonish and least musically accomplished member of any shit band. Peter's neck is acting up from exertion and nerves. He slackens the knot of his tie below the second button. You can put your head down in here and no one will ask you for your papers. Let's go! she said and he felt the exclamation point in his loins. Spanish speakers are so excitable they invert the first and place it up front, then finish the whole thing off with another right-side up as the caboose. He draws ¡! on a Bohemian Oil Boutique napkin. It looks coital, reciprocal—double your fun. His man in Medellin was a Spanish-speaking German-cum-Colombian whose chilly ancestry no doubt inhibited him from engaging in mutual, in-your-face exclamations. They spoke no Spanish the afternoon they met at Monsieur Deng's. Peter spoke less than fifty words of it anyway. *La quinta, por favor*—one of his four or five word-tacos and not his favorite.

Under no circumstances mention my name, he told the girl with the treated tail. I heard you the first ten times, she said. You know, you're lacking in management skills, she said. You're not articulating your vision, she said. I'm not a motivator, he said. This was all after she'd said Let's go! A stack of folded backgammon kits sits on a radiator by the chalkboard listing Today's Fossilicious Fuels in cursive so ornate he can't muster the will to read on. Maybe the cur wrote it in a fit of rococo. Lift the kits and the bottom one will grudgingly unstick. No, it's summer and the radiator is hibernating. His backgammon strategy, no matter the weather, is to advance at all costs into the home quarter, covering up be damned. Ineffective, yes, but it makes for good copy. In each kit there is a fifth, white die for wagering, but Peter has never encountered a player who could teach him how that worked. D'Angel enters with a Mona Lisa on her face. Peter wishes he had a damp washcloth to wipe off her look and mop his own brow. She walks to the bar without looking at him. What is she doing, making the *petit con* (what had Lieu called him) sweat?

Cur: He'p you?

D'Angel: Yeah, um, give me a, uh... Hmmm.

Cur: Indecision and paralysis. So now I have to wait.

D'Angel: Give me a half-light, half-dark Louisiana Sweet.

Cur: I say, live large or live small. Light or dark—make the choice like a real woman.

D'Angel: Pour the half and half Louisiana. No, make it an Ashtart. Half and half, tall.

Cur: I've got a better idea: I'll give you whatever I fucking feel like and you'll fucking like it.

D'Angel: Stick your nozzles up your ass, wombat.

Muttering and working up phlegm, the cur attends to the tanks and pushes the drink in a happy-face mug at his customer.

D'Angel: He's paying.

Peter nods at the cur. D'Angel goes to the fixin's bar, squirts white and powders brown in her mug, and sits at the table.

D'Angel: I hate these places. They don't have any character.

Peter: So.

D'Angel: So, I hate them. That's enough.

Peter: So, so—

D'Angel: I like Mister Feng's. It's nice in there. Everyone's real stiff—the live people, I mean—but they're all right.

Peter: It's Monsieur Deng's. I've belonged there for about thirty something years. That would be significantly longer than your life span.

D'Angel: I didn't see your name on any of those plaques on the walls. They got a lot of commemorated members.

Peter: I'm unrecognized. I'm nondescript.

D'Angel: They'll put your name up there for something at some point, bucko.

Peter: God, I hope not.

D'Angel: Met a great guy named Raymond. I'm interviewing with him tomorrow.

Peter: What else did you say to him?

D'Angel: Nothing to worry your little head over. Your neck's bleeding.

Peter: Nervous reaction. Or hormonal. It's just a thing. So?

D'Angel: So, Raymond hacked around and got access really quick, he said.

Peter: What do you mean? You didn't log on?

D'Angel: No, I didn't go upstairs. Raymond said he'd go.

Peter: Oh, no. No. I told you to do it!

D'Angel: You asked me to get you the info and I did. The dude's dead.

Peter: What.

D'Angel: Raymond said Craftcroft kicked it two weeks ago.

Peter: What.

D'Angel: That's what he said. Deceased, according to the profile.

Outside two other mangy curs, probably the shit drummer and shit bassist, pound against the window and flip off their mate, who happily responds in kind. They walk away.

D'Angel: You gonna pay for my oil?
 Peter: Please respect the fact that I'm having a crisis.
 D'Angel: Hah, hah! Is there something you're not telling me?
 Peter: This Ray. This Ray chats you up and disappears.
 D'Angel: He went upstairs. You really think they were gonna let me up there? You said the server was upstairs and that's where I told him to go.
 Peter: This Ray reappears and tells you Craftcroft kicked it.
 D'Angel: You don't have to tell me—I was there.
 Peter: You see my crisis. I have nothing. I had a need and I got second-hand zip.
 D'Angel: The guy's dead. Check it out for yourself.
 Peter: Craftcroft's dead, I'm being told by someone who was told by This Ray.
 D'Angel: I have to go meet Viktor. Guess which one.
 Peter: You don't have to tell me.

#

Sit-ups are nice when there isn't far to go, Melissa thinks. In the mirror on the closet door an upside-down inchworm grimaces back. Jomo motivates her for daily pain, not by taking her to the gym or flopping down on the plush beside her, but by coming home and pulling up his shirt, goading her to punch his rippled heavy bag. C'mon, whatchya got? He was always about Ali, but even she knew from the old analogs that the champ went soft in the middle after his first comeback, just like Elvis. And didn't Cosell or whoever in the tux at ringside inevitably marvel at the champ's acumen, guile and durability in spite of his less than formidable condition? Mindy had attended many noteworthy bouts with colleagues and contributed parafreudian commentaries on the spectacle of glove-to-glove combat, ex. *The Incarnation of Sperm Dueling at the Edge of; the Institutionalization of Proletarian Potency Through; Nicknames and Dehumanization as Seen in; Silk, Robe and Leather—Variations of...* These were Mindy's pop insights that cropped up in perfumed glossies, folded and torn in racks by the checkout lanes in supermarkets and price clubs. She made money on that content. Everywoman never bought a line of her rigorous, annotated work, now hidden on floppies and anemic hard drives in musty college-library basements. Find my exegeses of Tori Amos, Melissa hears her say, I dare you.

Jomo didn't box or spar, though he won oversized training gloves at a raffle at a Chappa Homecoming keg party. Melissa stretches out from the sultan and pulls open the closet door. There they are: dust-coated red, under a black duffel bag, the only piece of luggage he owns, into which he'd crammed all his clothes and effects. He'd carried it over his shoulders like a limp yoke across her threshold when their cohabitation became semi-official. Lumps in the bag constitute sweatshirts, vid games, tied-up

greeting cards, cummerbund and bow tie—such are the items a man leaves packed. The gloves had been taken out, though, for a special occasion.

Languishing in the sultan one winter afternoon, Jomo popped some assertiveness then twisted Melissa's baby arm to follow suit. He donned the gloves, his custom cotton bathrobe (missing its belt), baggy palm-fronded swim trunks, and a pair of high tops. After playing Ali and a groupie for some laughs and a quick round of clumsy affection, the two hit the pavement, Jomo in costume, bouncing on the balls of his feet, throwing shadow punches and brushing his nose. Someone yelled out, Hey Champ! and grinned, but not as broadly as Jomo did. He felt the love. Melissa stepped back intuitively and followed her bouncing beau several steps behind. She saw a pizzaman slide up his window to shout Go Rocky! A turbaned hack honked, as did the driver of a van advertising aquarium equipment for the home. More Ali's, more Rocky's and more smiles, and they headed south of 14th Street. A gaggle of Hispanic boys swarmed around the robe-on-stilts, who played to them in pugilistic mime. The swelling entourage halted for a small procession in honor of Santa X heading east on 7th away from the park. Jomo threw shadow hooks and uppercuts at an attending cop who stuck out his gut with glee as the crowd went bananas. Again they moved forward and when a kid yelled, Yo Adrienne! Melissa found herself jumping up and down and loving her champion who no more resembled Ali or Rocky than she did. Later, back at their pad, rubbing down his sore calves (larger than her arms) she reflected on the indisputable communal joy the makeshift icon generated, and she felt intimations of her mother's preoccupation with the warrior sex.

The vidcom says Ring and Melissa scrambles to the living room. She finds a holo question mark, rendered gruesome from hook to corseted shaft to bloody period.

Melissa: Who is it?

The response appears in creepy captions.

?: What's your name?

Melissa: Oh, it's like that. Gotta go.

?: Returning your message.

Melissa: Which said...

?: You want a tape of today's program.

Melissa: Program—the one I was on today?

?: You purchased a magazine. Perfectly.

Melissa: I didn't flash you. Why would I flash you—I don't even know who the fuck you are.

Down the hall Tawdra waves and beams.

Melissa: Oh, I see. My trusty sidekick is at the bottom of this.

?: Do you want a copy off my master? The chimes ring so true.

Melissa: No, I want the master. I feel like I was violated. Shit, what are you about?

?: Reliving public moments. Do you want yours?

Melissa: My boyfriend is very tall. Keep that in mind when I find you.

- ?: Easy, babe. Nobody got hurt.
- Melissa: Yet. Call me babe again and I'll have your tongue cut out.
- ?: Take one hundred deep breaths and get over it. I'll be at This Mortal Koil tonight with your copy. I'll recognize you.

The mark vanishes.

#

The gravitrain plummets from Manhattan's pins and needles to the sleek main Shallows terminal, from which the light rails weave through the new, regulated skyline, laying a Cyrillic code for energy-conserving mass transit among the gated communities. Peter walks with homebound extras to the park-and-slide lot, voicing off the alarms and activating the generator of his white uni. He bellies in and works the joysticks to maneuver out of the reserved space. Prone with legs slightly below his upper body, he feels his neck crick, confounded by his incompatibility with the uni's ergonomics. He cracks it violently and stares stoically through the windshield. When he was a child, sledding till dark down the neighbors' driveways never caused such chiropractic consternation. How many years ago was his childhood by the Long Island Sound, when snow piled unvaporized and hot cocoa topped with desiccated marshmallows was the best-est fix. "My Girlfriend's Uni" should be a song, he thinks: "She pays the tax and I bruise my knees/I crack my neck and she aims to please."

He brakes behind a gold uni, the vehicle of The Shallows Management. Its sister or parent company had low-balled the bidding for the initial development, Peter had seen in a recent exposé, exchanging perceptible profit margins for "indefinite" exclusivity. Oldest trick in the boardroom, bound to depress the concern's stock price for a time, but now they're the only dealers in the skinny town. If he had any liquidity he'd be grabbing shares like nobody's business. He'll advise Melissa instead, when she's less unreceptive to his vision. He follows the gold leader out into the thin lane, then spots a rainbow decal on its rear window: Helpin' Needy Kidz. Another satisfied customer from the early days, when he splurged on promotions. He passes it and whirs between residential zones, stopping at a light by the Ellis Island traffic circle.

Once the Tappan Zee Dam held high and firm, the reclamation of the Hudson basin proceeded with digging, pouring and raising on a spectacularly mammoth scale typically associated only with Asian public/private leviathans. Workers had died early on in the mud, Peter knew. Progress was seen early enough: already gated neighborhoods existed in The Shallows and apartment complexes rose up in The Harlem and East Rivers. Today, in Hard Hat Areas the pounding of the pile drivers and churning of the cement mixers is muffled under white-noise umbrellas to appease the new denizens. The construction of The Shallows will last generations if not centuries, he thinks, like Sagrada Familia in Barcelona.

Zippering past tourist extras, he hangs a left onto a thread adjacent to a pancaked park planted with rows of saplings. Volleyballers galore, even a few boys who rally in small groups rather than join in the formal games. Gated Residential Zone 113: Peter lowers the window and salutes George the Security

Guard. George is a saccharine dog and an unnecessary fixture, in Peter's opinion; the bar code on a uni's roof triggers the access or the alarm anyway. But we like a uniform and a gesture, don't we. Besides, there was the time when George kept everything copacetic, allowing the movers to haul in Peter's belongings despite the misplacement of the requisite forms.

From his terrace Peter takes in much of the northern and western extent of the Shallows, where a five-story ceiling had been proscribed by forces unknown to him. Curving around Lower Manhattan, the new community appears as a skirt of a Christmas tree. He looks at Liberty in profile, flanked by pivoting derricks twice her size to his eye. Beyond them paddleboats inch along the Little Hudson, a vestigial aqueduct bordered by discrete runways that are tarmacked, har-trued, bricked, paved or mulched for bladers, creepers, boarders, bikers, sidlers, strollers, equestrians, etc. Stay the course and keep to the right, he might read on the signs if he ventured down there, if he could muster up the whatever-it-takes to block out a few hours of day or twilight and walk among strangers, his neighbors. He knocks off a myst and goes inside, leaving the sliding door wide open. It still smells like New in here, but then they all do, these Shallows condos, due perhaps to an olfactory mood-enhancement conspiracy. After Peter moved in the sensei dragged him to fondue parties, clone christenings and aura sessions, and he inevitably found himself out on a terrace with his mustard, carping about the insidious stench of New to a spade-bearded vibration therapist and his ex-ex (That means you're back together?), found himself gesticulating with a cube of free-range tofu on a toothpick. Riding home in the uni piggyback on the sensei, her dulcet admonitions droning in his ear: Bruth and Kit said you're quite the curmudgeon, You barely looked at the clone, Why can't you hold eye contact with someone when they're talking to you? What could he say, he was a bilious character, least anxious and least disengaged in Manhattan. Conversation in a condo with condo people felt awkward to him, but his point had been that the smell of New—it's cloying, that's all—whatever, he'd only been fishing for a yeah-you're-right kind of thing... Once she went to Colorado to set up the dojo and he was left alone, he'd declined a few invitations from her condo friends, then quickly stopped receiving them altogether, which was appropriate for all concerned. The best smelling place outside of a hardware store, if he had to pick, would be Mundo Modo after the bouts were done and the lights flamed on.

Ochers and periwinkles purr from the walls and surfaces in his living room, even from the trays and pottery containing the extensive bonsai terrarium. Gnats swarm around a gnarled dwarf and Peter slides the door shut. He endures a hacking fit, then listens to the central AC hissing another round of preservatives. Watering and pruning are his responsibilities now, along with setting out cash for the cleaning lady and forwarding the mail. The mortgage and utilities are not on his plate, so there is nothing to complain about. Plus, there are no pets. He shoos the gnats in vain and sits on the futon, a rigid wave made tolerable if you propped your feet up on the wicker table. He didn't need to be told to remove his shoes when he'd moved in along with his slovenly practices; he was grateful for his new godmother. Mindy's estate had closed when Melissa finally sold the Upper East digs. She'd dragged out the showing, the sale, and the closing, he knew, to let him search for a new home. When opportunity, in the form of this romance, knocked so quickly he'd suspected it was no coincidence—his daughter was behind it all. All

these women operate behind the scenes, letting him make choices a fool would refuse. The honeymoon in the condo lasted six months, then the dojo situation presented itself and his lover departed. He stares at the tree next to his feet and for the first time relates it to his miniature daughter, a runt without a litter, the solitary fruit of his loins. An appointment with her must be made, over the weekend if possible, to grovel for a check with more zeroes than usual.

When Peter was married and Melissa was half a peanut he would sit in a rocking chair Mindy salvaged from a great-aunt's freestanding garage. Broad-seated with a crest on the backrest, it was the kind of chair that made him want to sit still but he would rock anyway, not wanting to disappoint his host. Use me... A prayer kilin from a Turkish colleague of Mindy's lay underneath, pointed at the vidscreen, eliminating creaking from the floorboards. His silent rocking disturbed Mindy; it was one of her lame excuses to read in her study. When she was home, that is, which was rare—she enjoyed the company of many friends. Most evenings Peter acted the metronome and, while Melissa steered her dolls on the floor through pretend cotillions and webcasts, he surfed the satellite feed for Dominican dance revues, volleyball call-in shows, cheerleading contests, Antarctic weather updates accompanied by penguin counts, infrared slavery and black hole propaganda... He assumed the cuckold's posture complacently—it struck him early on that it was congenital. His parents had been combative and faithful in the old style; one of them had been a carrier. Peter would rock and work the remote and pay a little attention to Melissa and imagine his wife out dancing in circles of intelligentsia, ejaculating her cliticrit into the zeitgeist. This was around the time he began opening lifetime accounts with porn providers the world over.

#

Jomo stands in front of the registration desk of the Sony Hotel, looking down at a wombat clawing at her ears disconcertedly.

Jomo: I am a guest! How many times I gotta tell you?
 Wombat: You are not a guest of the hotel, sir.
 Jomo: I am the guest of a guest of the hotel, a guest who invited me here, making me a guest.
 Wombat: I see no records of an appointment. You are not a guest according to hotel policy.
 Jomo: Enter me into your database and make me a guest.
 Wombat: Of course I can't do that. If you give me the name of our guest, I will flash up and see if you are expected.
 Jomo: I'm waiting for my guest, who has all the information.
 Wombat: Then may I suggest browsing in the many fine shops on the sixtieth floor?
 Jomo: No, you may not. I'm gonna sit in that armchair and smoke a fat eggplant blunt till my guest arrives. How you like me now?

Wombat: Of course you may sit in that armchair for five minutes, but then you'll have to leave, as it's reserved for guests.

Jomo: The Sony Hotel is a leader of the hospitality industry, am I correct?

Wombat: Yes, sir.

Jomo: As an employee of the Sony Hotel, you are a member of the hospitality industry, are you not?

Wombat: Yes, sir.

Jomo: Well, I'm gonna hospitalize you when my guest arrives and I get out of that chair.

#

The vidcom sounds a cheery half note, rousing Peter from the couch. Sunlight comes at him through the draped kitchen window from the west, stirring dust motes into an ethereal mating ritual. If he looked out that window he'd see all the way to the post-toxic fens of New Jersey. As a result of multi-level subsidies and inspired pro-risk financing, 90% of the Shallows held titles to their condos, a factoid strung into every newsy commentary on the burgeoning community. Home ownership became inseparable from the infrequency of violent crime, low birth-mortality rate, disproportionately large number of teenage astronomers, and absence of self-exalting or other-denigrating graffiti. In The Shallows there was also the darker news featuring the stern penalties for behaviors such as spitting, gum chewing, quality dealing, and self-exalting or other-denigrating graffiti. Caning was prevalent, though increasingly less so, on account of home ownership. Peter asks George who's there and knows the answer before he squawks. Let him in, he's a guest, no, he's not staying over. Tidying or freshening up would evoke an unwanted date-like vibe, he thinks, so he puts on his shoes and sits back down, farts, and waits. D'Artie knocks then walks in, his top lip hidden. Peter waves casually from the couch.

Peter: Hey man, how's it going?

D'Artie: OK.

Peter: Come on in and take a load off. So, you made it here no problem?

D'Artie: Yup.

Peter: The gravitrain crowded?

D'Artie: Nope.

Peter: First time down here?

D'Artie: Yup.

Peter: Uni OK? I hate those piggy-backers.

D'Artie: I walked by the river. Stubbed my big toe real bad.

Peter: You walked all that way—that's something. Whaddaya want to drink? Myst's my poison. I don't have any mixers except ice or cheaper myst. There's other stuff in the cabinet. What'll it be?

D'Artie: Nothing.

Peter: What? Oh, come on. Whaddaya want?

D'Artie: I'm OK right now.

Peter: Really. Well, I'm thirsty, but that's not exactly a front-page headline, heh, heh. He goes into the kitchen and pours himself a tall one. This is like a date—the kid's freaked. What can you do with an albino like this? He eschews ice and rejoins his company.

D'Artie: This is a nice place.

Peter: This? Oh yeah, you know. Amenities galore. There's a health club on the roof. Pool, sauna, big-titted masseuses.

D'Artie: Really?

Peter: Sure, except for the last part. Wanted to see if you were listening.

D'Artie:

Peter: Anyways, I haven't been up there yet. You sure you're not thirsty?

D'Artie: Nope. I mean, yup.

Peter: All right, well just relax and get off all over your tee-totaling self.

D'Artie: Were you watching anything? Got any Tawdra tapes?

Peter: What—on the vid? No, I wasn't watching anything.

D'Artie: What were you doing?

Peter: Plotting pocketbook nuclear testing. What are you, a fucking G-man?

D'Artie: No.

Peter: I was just kidding, just kidding. Let's all remain calm.

D'Artie:

Peter: You hungry? We can order in some sushi.

D'Artie: Nope.

Peter: Of course not. Well, let me knock off this bad boy and we'll hit it and quit it.

D'Artie: You wanna wait a second? I have some quality.

He unrolls a ball of aluminum foil that was apparently in his hand the whole time, though Peter never noticed. The kid dices and lines blue powder by the gnarled dwarf. Peter sees that the bugs are gone.

Peter: And this is.

D'Artie: Loyalty. It coats the sinuses. It's a long ride—sometimes it stays with me for days.

#

Close-up of ten rings on ten fingers spelling F-U-L-F-R-O-N-T-A-L. They cover Jomo's eyes before he slaps them away.

Jomo: Damn, chump, play peekaboo with your woman!

Full Frontal: Whassup, homes? Is this Sony lobby sweet or what?

Jomo: Slick, you gotta get out more. This hole ain't worth half a damn—you know how cramped the guestrooms are? Why are you late?

Full Frontal: I'm not late. I'm punctual and funk-tual.

Jomo: Your fake wrist candy is fast and you're five minutes slow, fool!

Full Frontal: Yo, easy, chief. It's nothing but a t'ing.

Jomo: Aw, that wombat behind the desk jobbed me with an anti-tall attitude. That backwards way of thinking flies high in places like this.

Full Frontal: You ready? Let's roll up.

Jomo: I'm not talking to that pro-short wombat.

Full Frontal: Yo, I'll take care of it. Sit here and relax yourself.

Jomo: Damn, you're obliging again, aren't you?

Full Frontal: I'll go flash and facilitate the arrangements.

Jomo: No, man, you get stepped on when you're on that quality. I'm going with you.

They walk past the queue and stand at the desk by the wombat, who is checking in a rodeo star. She looks at her watch.

Wombat: I take it your guest arrived, young man? Another minute and I would have been required to have you removed.

Jomo purses his lips as if he's eaten a radioactive grapefruit dipped in piss.

Jomo: Fronty, this is what I'm talking about! You hear that?

Full Frontal: Ma'am, we'll need your services for a few seconds as soon as you're done with this gentleman.

Rodeo Star: Howdy boys! I'm in town for the little ol' rodeo we got going tomorrow night.

Full Frontal: Is that right? You're gonna buck some bronses?

Rodeo Star: Gonna give it my darndest! Secret is: whisper sweet nothings in his ear before the gate goes up.

Full Frontal: That works?

Rodeo Star: Hell no! But it makes me feel a whole lot better!

Wombat: Sign here, sir, please. I'm sorry for this disturbance.

Jomo: You hear that, Fronty?

Rodeo Star: This is Manhattan, missy—I'm looking for bigger disturbances than you can shake a stick at! These fine men are gonna join me ringside tomorrow, now won't you, boys?

Full Frontal: If you'd like us to. We'd be honored.

Rodeo Star: You'll be more than that after sitting with my fan club! They got some young things cuter than niblets! Here're two tickets. Say, any chance you boys could finagle me into the Sirocco-Amazon match tomorrow afternoon?

Jomo: No dice. Sorry.

Rodeo Star: Well, hey! No sweat asking! I'll see y'all tomorrow night. Good meeting you!

Wombat: Sir, your room code.

Rodeo Star: Thank you kindly, ma'am. And please call me Junior from now on. If it's good enough for my wife, it's good enough for you!

Full Frontal: So long, Junior! And thanks!

Wombat: Next on line, please.

Jomo: We're next.

Wombat: Next on line.

Full Frontal: This will take just a few seconds, ma'am. I have this room number and I'd appreciate if you could flash the guest.

Wombat: The name.

Full Frontal: Full Frontal and Jomo.

Wombat: No, the name of our guest.

Full Frontal: Well, I'm not sure what name they're using. I just have this number.

Jomo: Flash that room or 911 for yourself.

Wombat: The contract governing my employment stipulates that rather than serve a customer who threatens me, I'm obligated to contact Hotel Security.

Jomo: Flash the room now!

Full Frontal: Hold up, hold up. Look, ma'am, can you please just flash the room—they'll explain everything and if they can't, we'll leave promptly.

Wombat: Security is already on its way. You might consider flight. I bet you're good at it.

Jomo slaps the counter as a spindly assistant-manager type with an eye patch emerges from a back office. He looks at the wombat's monitor.

Patch: The security alert on this station went off again. Shut it down and I'll flash Operations.

Wombat: It's not a malfunction, numbnuts—I pressed the key. I was just threatened with physical harm by these two.

Full Frontal: It's just a miscomm—

Jomo: I'd like to file a complaint! We're being denied service!

Patch looks the boys over.

Patch: Why don't you gentlemen step to the side so we can discuss this matter in greater detail.

He leads them to a hall of furniture draped with white bed linens. They sit among the ghosts.

Full Frontal: Let me explain.

Patch: Please, allow me. What are your intentions?

Jomo: Manifold and pure.

Patch: The gong resonates.
 Jomo: To my innermost depths. Are you a child?
 Patch: As I honor my father. Please, use this vidcom and accept my apologies for any inconvenience you may have endured.

He grasps Jomo's hand and forearm for several moments then exits.

Full Frontal: What the hell was that?
 Jomo: Om Ego power, bro. Slick was stationed across the way from me this morning. I recognized him and vicey versey.
 Full Frontal: That was some kind of secret exchange? Manifold and what?
 Jomo: Just flash, Fronty, and if you say ma'am again I'll bust your obliged lip.

#

Peter rejected the notion that sharing vignettes from childhood clued in a lover where he was coming from and where he was going. Abuse, neglect, the silent treatment, vicarious goal setting—simply fodder for future conjugal quarrels. Twice in his adult life he was subjected to intimate interrogation. He knew better than to crack, to set himself up in the future for You're Just Like Your and That Explains. Twice he confessed, peremptorily, my parents belong to a SETI-influenced sect in a western desert. They burn federal documents and watch the skies.

#

Full Frontal gawks out a floor-to-ceiling window at a distant gravitrain. Backlit, he pops a few Jerk steps then struts around the massive entertainment suite, eying statuettes of antemillennium sex symbols, their mature visages leering atop prepubescent bodies posed suggestively in kiddy swimsuits. An artificial fireplace emits faint crackles as a mantis claps her bent forelegs on a plush sofa.

Full Frontal: This is living the life!
 Jomo frowns from a hassock next to a twiggy Madonna.
 Jomo: Don't mind him. He's country.
 Mantis: Sign these releases. Both of you. Now.
 Jomo: What are they?
 Mantis: Releases are meant to be signed by unwitting, eager chumps like you before they brush shoulders with fame. So sign them.
 Jomo: What am I being released from?
 Full Frontal: Yo, let me take a look at one of those.

He snatches a form from the mantis and takes it to the bar, where he pours himself a flute of Mr. Bubbles champagne.

Jomo: Who exactly is entertaining us this afternoon?
 The clapping speeds to double time.

Mantis: You're the entertainment, boys. Why else would you be here?

Full Frontal: Yo, there's language about "harm inadvertently done to my person" here.

Jomo: Who's meeting us? Is Roxanna in that room behind that door? Is that a two-way mirror?

Full Frontal: Peep this! There's language about paternity!

Mantis: Move your pens or I'll have to drag your candy asses to the elevator. Why I keep this job is beyond me.

Full Frontal: F-U-L-L-F-R-O-N-T-A-L on the dots. Here—

She snaps the sheet from his hand and places it between her mandibles.

Jomo: Jomo don't put no Hancock before he gets a taste of the body rock.

Full Frontal: Yo, I heard that!

Mantis:

Full Frontal: I mean, yo, bro, sign the damn form!

Jomo: Who's behind Door Number One?

Mantis: You think you're a player—is that it?

Jomo: I'm saying I don't get played.

Mantis: A player don't sweat a few drops of ink. If I were you, lounging in this swank suite, prepping to throw down with the Sirocco, I'd probably talk some smack, too.

She whips a foreleg and smashes a peewee Schwarzenegger in the blink of an eye.

Mantis: But I'm not you. I'm a bodyguard with seven registered deadly weapons in view and I have strict orders to enter that room only if I have two signed releases in my champers. So what is it?

Jomo: Shit, no need to go vandalizing and whatnot over a piece of paper.

Full Frontal: Right! No need to be causin' a commotion!

Jomo: Pipe down, Country. Here's your release.

She deliberately unfolds both forelegs so they graze his chin before dropping to clasp the sheet.

Mantis: Keep your eyes wide open.

She exits into the other room.

Full Frontal: Yo, stop calling me Country.

Jomo: Sit down, bro. Let's get ready to rumble.

Full Frontal: Don't play me as the bumpkin, bro.

Jomo: Pipe down, bro. Sit tight.

Full Frontal: OK—just don't do that. Cleveland ain't "country."

Jomo: Drink your drink, Fronty.

The lights go off and the drapes creep across the window. Vidscreens pop out of cabinets and wall and floor units, depicting more than thirteen ways of looking at Roxanna above the net, including slo-mo

Astrid: Ooh, we got a live wire here! Where's that oil at? Boy, I'm gonna lube you up so you can get down proper like.

Xunta produces two vials from a cabinet, tosses one to Astrid then sits in Jomo's lap.

Xunta: This is my favorite. It's called Nectar of the Bods. Smell.

Jomo: It smells real nice.

Xunta: You want to put it on yourself or should I do it?

Astrid and Full Frontal start to get busy on the carpet next to a clutch of three-foot supermodels.

Jomo: I don't know about this. I got a girl.

Xunta: What, that shorty last night?

Jomo: She's a good girl—the best. Chappaquiddick, you know. Teaches. At Quantico.

Xunta: Look at me. Honey, I'm all that to the nth. I'm exponential.

Jomo: No doubt, no doubt! But I came here to see Rox—

Xunta: She's just a hitter. I'm the all-around game. Smell this bottle, sugar.

Jomo: It's really nice. Where can I get some?

Xunta: Oh, you can't afford this. But not to worry—we got all we need right here. Just lie back and stretch yourself way out.

#

Consider a series of close-ups: Melissa reclining on the swansdown in oblique twilight. Body still, eyes aflutter, she regards the menus and pop-up billboards in her consciousness, the scrambled neons of recent developments, as well as the sideview mirrors of her memory holding tight icons of lies and whispers and callused palms and what-ifs, each appearing larger as she tours through her Present.

#

A wrinkled tux sets cocktails in front of Peter and Dartie: myst ordered by reflex and a Pataki by default. Peter leans back in the chair and nods at his companion. He surveys the Mundo Modo indoor arena surrounding the combat pit. Glitterati extras press the flesh at their tables for twelve and up. The vampires are noosed and buttoned in formal attire; the vamps flaunt plunging bust lines, rising thigh slits, porcelain sternums and shoulder blades, and rhinestone pedicures. Their glossy do's and radiant skin dazzle Peter; their hearty laughter perturbs him.

Peter: You ever feel that other people have a much better time than you do? I don't mean to be a downer, but do you ever feel that their enjoyment of the moment far outpaces yours?

Dartie: Nope.

Peter: I guess what I'm saying is, I am incapable of having as good a time as 90% of the knuckleheads in this joint.

Dartie: I don't want to be them.

Peter: Right, right. They've got their own burdens. Audits, protection, custody battles, quality addictions. Who needs all that?

Dartie: Depends on the quality.

Peter: You use that stuff a lot?

Dartie: I can't really get any. When I do, I save it. I've had that loyalty in my medicine cabinet for a year.

Peter: I bet D'Angel could hook you up. I bet she could if you asked.

Dartie: I wouldn't ask her.

Peter: Those girls, at work, they ride you pretty good, don't they? I mean, they're pretty tough on you, huh?

Dartie: Their talk slides right off.

Peter: Oh it does, does it? You're real slippery like, huh?

Dartie: Yeah, slippery.

Peter looks over the evening's slate, complete with every dragon's record and the odds for each bout. He stares at the pit, raked in symmetrical swirls. The bunting says Mundo Modo in black and gold.

Peter: I'm feeling upsets in the air tonight. Lots of upsets. Strom will get scratched—did I tell you that?

Dartie: He's never been scratched! Ten-plus years, no defeats.

Peter: Tonight is his doom, then back to Komodo for a barbecue or whatever happens to the losers.

Dartie: No way.

Peter: A hundred gets me a thousand if he goes down.

Dartie: No way! Strom's the baddest! His last fight lasted less than a minute.

Peter: Ten thousand gets me one hundred thousand. That would start to solve a lot of problems.

Dartie: Don't even. Don't.

Peter: Was that a double negative?

He motions to the closest boss, who immediately walks over. Black contacts, headset and an electronic sleeve for swiping plays and house debits.

Boss: Evening, Mr. Matasavage. Been a while since we've had the pleasure.

Peter: Just showing my young ward here a night on the sand.

Boss: Thank you for joining us, Mr.—

Dartie: I'm gonna bet ten bucks on Strom.

Peter: Hold your horses, kiddo. We'll get to you in a bit. I have here a chit of upsets in my hand, just asking to get entered. Slide these picks with care.

Boss: Very good. I'll need your MM card as well.

Peter: Oh, right. Been so long since I've used it. I'm sure...I...still...have...it. Yep, here it is.

The boss slides the gold and black card through, then Peter's chit.

Boss: Good luck, Mr. Matsavage.

Peter: Strom's going down tonight. You heard it right here.

Boss: If you say so, Mr. Matasavage. And your selections, sir?

Dartie: What do I have to do?

Peter: Mark the winners there and the amounts of your bets in the other column. Down at the bottom there are trifectas and exactas and all that gingerbread.

Dartie: I'm just gonna pick a few.

Peter: That's fine, that's fine. This is his first time here, you understand.

Boss: The first of many, we hope.

Dartie: Here you go.

Boss: I'll need a credit, debit or province card as well.

Dartie: Oh, right. Here.

Boss: Would you like to be rated, sir?

Dartie: Who did what?

Peter: They'll track your performance so you can accrue points for comp benefits. How do you think I got this primo table on the sand?

Dartie: I don't wanna be rated.

Boss: Very good.

Peter: You really should get rated. It doesn't hurt you—it only helps.

Dartie: I'm OK.

Peter: Well, there you go.

Boss: Good luck, gentlemen.

The dinner china and three shrimp cocktail cups are cleared and replaced by another round of drinks. Peter calls over a roller of big cigars and empties a packet of Dijon into the house blend—a treat for a special occasion—and catches Dartie ogling him. To have begotten a son, befriended him and nudged him further up the socio-economic pyramid... Ah, but he, an only son, begot an only disdainful daughter, a quarter-pint with four times the intellect, and he sits here now with a cow-eyed albino who's already tipsy on watered down Patakis. The house lights dim and the PA blares the rote alarms as a lame laser show depicts dragons paddling from Komodo to Manhattan and crawling into the arena where they fight and eat and mate in under a minute under a spinning Mundo Modo globe.

Seductive chiming floats around the pit and a spotlight reveals the first female dragon, nonplussed as only a reptile can be, trimmed in scarlet and gold mating ribbons and caged on a glowing dais at the pit's center. Peter knows the mating season for dragons is September-October but he does not know how their biological clocks are manipulated for year-round bouts. Roving spots pick up the evening's first

combatants: lightweights, about three feet long and 300 pounds, lacquered respectively in blue and white for easy spectator identification, and adorned with esoteric martial calligraphy. Propelled by an unseen handler, each clumsily swings his forelegs sideward then forward to walk onto the sand as a super-caffeinated jungle riff accompanies the introductions. Cringing from the bass, Peter wishes he were deaf and earless like the fighters. Thankfully the cacophony ends, replaced by the ever-chilling rasping from the lizards' swelling throats. Tongues flickering, each remains still. Peter follows the seam along Blue's flank up to the groined cowl around his neck. Never will his fascination with this evolution-proof weapon cease. Blue scampers the wrong way smack into the Plexiglas boundary and drops in a daze as the crowd erupts. Peter looks at his chit.

Peter: No, no! I've got Blue! Snap out of it, boy! Get with it, come on!

A crescendo from the audience builds as White creeps up behind unmoving Blue, who spins and faces. They butt and rise up belly to belly, jostling for leverage unsuccessfully. A respite, then they rise and clinch again, chins up and down and back and forth, tails sweeping side to side, churning the sand. They drop down.

Peter: He's got it, he's got it! Bluuuuuuue!

Dartie: White!

The third embrace is short. Blue collapses awkwardly to starboard and the crowd cheers under pulsing lights. White mounts the vanquished and scratches his squamous flanks, scarring and devaluing them for future prospective mates and human collectors. Dragon fluid oozes into the sand below the prehistoric visages, identical totems of inscrutability.

Peter: Shit, he blew it completely. It was there for him.

Dartie: I won!

Peter: Yeah, yeah. It's just the first match. Beginner's luck and all that rot.

The cloaked handlers guide the victor up onto the dais, which slowly descends and takes the newlyweds out of sight.

Peter: I've always thought the females have it the best. Sit tight and let the honeymoon come to you.

Dartie: They don't get to fight.

Peter: Please. Who needs it? They don't even have to watch. Who's up next? More small fries?

#

Tawdra: Humus?

Melissa: Not now.

Tawdra: The key is to add respectable pita. Plus, a slice of tomato to balance that uppity chic pea zip.

Melissa: I understand.

- Tawdra: And of course, it's all dolphin-safe!
- Melissa: What isn't?
- Tawdra: Now that's a question. I wonder if I am. I've never actually touched a dolphin, much less harmed one. But, I mean, what if I were cranky and swimming just to be by myself when a school of gregarious dolphins comes out of nowhere and starts frolicking all around and whistling and jostling me? What if one of them playfully nuzzles me and his teeth graze my arm and break the skin? I mean, what if this encounter unleashes latent anti-dolphin emotions from my past aquatic life as a mermaid? For all I know, I may very well not be dolphin-safe. That said, they are very smooth and social and intelligent, like me. I probably am dolphin-safe but I'm sure not going to advertise it.
- Melissa: Are you a good swimmer?
- Tawdra: Yes, I was one of those underwater babies but I don't remember it. I've been told I make happy gurgling noises in my sleep. Gurgle, gurgle.
- Melissa: Gargle, gargle. Now there's a lost art. Are there any really good garglers out there anymore?

She prances to the window and looks out on one foot at the city's sparkling eveningwear. Bright squares and rectangles, windows commercially blinded or residentially draped, face her and each other and signal "I'm still slaving away," or "We're home and you all can leave us alone now" in the event anyone cares.

- Tawdra: So has anyone flashed you or anything?
- Melissa: I didn't think it appropriate to v-mail anybody about a big, fat raise. It's not like I'm changing jobs.
- Tawdra: Not about that, about the show this afternoon.
- Melissa: Oh. No.
- Tawdra: You open your e-mail or v-mail?
- Melissa: No.
- Tawdra: It's coming—the fame. Everybody's getting back from work and the gym and their projects and they're gonna want a piece of you. Everyone.
- Melissa: You think?
- Tawdra: I'll bet you dinner. Or are you eating with your man?
- Melissa: I don't know where he is.

The vidcom says You Have a Guest Miss Matasava (adding the "ge" to the message is forever on the doorman's To Do list until she gives him a reminder gratuity, which she has determined not to do until she has an additional chore for him). A tired, bewildered head looks at her.

- Melissa: Hey Frothy.
- Frothy: You big star. Me wanna come up and make love to you.

Melissa chuckles and waves him up.

Tawdra: That punk cracks you up every time. I'll never understand it—he's so corny.
 Melissa: Strange—every time he makes me laugh it feels like I was in a bad mood and the last thing I wanted to do was laugh, like I was on that old game show where you won if the comedians didn't crack you up in 45 seconds.

A wannabe comic, Frothy's first bit to new audiences offers sheepishly confessed variations of his name, referencing a snaggle-toothed, lisping grandmother with a snowman fixation and an alcoholic father unnerved by the birth certificate. Melissa doesn't know the true history and has always assumed it a nom de mike.

The wag from *The Shallows*—where the streets are so narrow the chicken only rolls over to cross—hops into the living room with his arms extended ahead as he croons *Vo-la-ré! O-O-O-O!* Tawdra frowns and makes to exit but the flyer sends her back to her humus through blue-in-the-face telepathy. Once she is reseated he raises and clasps his hands in triumph, then mops his brow and blows sweaty smooches to Melissa:

Melissa: We love you, Frothy! We love you!
 Tawdra: You are the biggest cornball.
 Frothy: I dismember that remark.
 Tawdra: Not you, her, for laughing at you.
 Frothy: Oh my god, oh my god, like, Frothy can't even believe he's like in the same, like, ambience as such an important star! Like, can Frothy stroke, your, like, aura?
 Melissa: If you must.

He drops to his knees and waves his arms wildly and tenderly all over Melissa's space, which tickles her to such an extent she hurls *Love Is Enough* at him—*Bullseye*.

Frothy: Oh, so it's like that? It's... like... that? What's it like? It's like—that? Sheesh, it's a tough crowd tonight.
 Tawdra: That's the beauty of it.
 Frothy: Mel, Mel. Loved—your—show today! What can we say? Gritty? Determined? Romantic? Comedic? Suspenseful? Moving? Can one woman inspire all this grandiose pontificating? The answer is a resounding... maybe.
 Melissa: The creep shot me from some window. I never saw him, obviously.

Frothy digs in his cargo pants pockets and produces a plastic hamster and a crumpled sheet of paper.

Frothy: Now that you're big, can I ask you to pretty-please-with-cracked-pepper-on-top sign this?
 Melissa: What is this?
 Frothy: It's my record of all my low brushes with fame.
 Melissa: It says Roxanna. She signed this?
 Frothy: No, but I know someone whose nephew parked her car.

Melissa: I met her last night.

Frothy: You did? Then write her name again. Or just “2x” next to the autograph there.

Melissa: I didn’t speak to her but I was close.

Frothy: I bet she knows you now, girlfriend. She knows you.

Melissa: Jomo has a thing for her.

Tawdra: Is that an issue?

Frothy: Is that humus or are the boas irregular?

Melissa: Who is Kwirt?

Tawdra: Sounds familiar. I think he tried the jalapeño—14 seconds, maybe.

Frothy: He spins at This Mortal Koil every Friday. Hey, that’s tonight!

Tawdra: Keen grasp of the obvious, Miss Marple.

Frothy: I September that Miss March.

Melissa: Is he famous?

Frothy: No, and he won’t be but he should. One of those.

Melissa: If you know him, then why haven’t you signed his name there?

Frothy: I know of him and I’ve glimpsed him from afar, but I haven’t had the low brush yet.

Melissa: Well, I’m not gonna sign this thing. You should.

Frothy: Be that way. Fame is already inflating your cranium—or maybe you’re just hydrocephalic.

Melissa: What about you? Are you working on new material? Any new gigs or are you still doing that improv?

Frothy: Let me let you and the Bride of Frankenstein in on a little secret.

Melissa: What’s that?

Frothy: I’m huge in Japan. I know, I know it sounds funny—strange, not ha ha—but it’s for real. They have fan clubs devoted to my navel’s lint and hubcaps spinning with my warm smile. I’m telling you—I am huge in Japan.

Tawdra: I have a fan club there but I won’t chat with them until they prove their worth.

Frothy: I have an obese fan club but I won’t skat for them until they move their girth.

Melissa: You two are peas in a crooked pod.

Frothy: Two piglets suckling a drunken sow.

Melissa: Tawdra, why don’t you have Frothy on your show?

Tawdra: Ask him, he knows.

Frothy: The nose knows the no’s can’t smell her Noh.

Melissa: What was that?

Frothy: I’m sorry, I farted. Boy, I love humus!

Melissa: The question.

Frothy: Yes, I am working on new material and I would humbly like to launch some funny bombs at your right now because—

He digs in another pocket and pulls out a mike and a live but fading squid. He moistens the tentacles with spittle and tugs them.

Squid:

Frothy: Because I am On tonight! So here I am, rebels.

Tawdra: I knew you were a fan.

Frothy: Rebels, I'm On and you're sitting stoically, somewhat impatiently, defiantly even, as though a cheap laugh is the dearest thing to come by in this millennium. But I'm On so it's all good.

Tawdra: Just do a damn joke.

Frothy opens his eyes wide and chirrs from the back of his throat, widening and closing his mouth to change the frequency. He forms words in two octaves.

Frothy Low Chirr: Huh.

Frothy High Chirr: Right!

Frothy Low Chirr: Huh.

Frothy High Chirr: Right!

Tawdra: What the hell.

Frothy Low Chirr: Huh.

Melissa: This is some kind of vocal tai chi.

Frothy High Chirr: Right!

Frothy stares up at The Kiss and locates the desired persona. Mutating his voice, he utters minced or melded phrases droned or chanted in falsetto with syllables elongated, sped up or emphasized capriciously.

Frothy: My boyfriend—telling me—what parents told meeee—sisters told me— friends told meeee—

Melissa: You don't have a boyfriend.

Tawdra: Never seen him in the close company of one man.

Frothy: They're telling meee—they say—'Frothy, not handyyyyy'—And I try— Unhandiness—somehow cope. Thera-piiiiist—talked to meeee—Unhandiness.

Melissa: You don't have a therapist.

Tawdra: What I said before.

Frothy: May not beeee—avatar of Handiness—avatar installs blinds—tunes cars— programs remotes—downloads firewalls—huh, right! Always—offered gen-u-iiiiine—encourage-ment. Offered—family—encouragement. Huh, right! Tell you—some-thing—sensual—about my-self. Can say—I love—cor-ner— hardware store! Notthefranchisedhomeimprovementmetropolises—huh, right! Not the—ones that—sell lug—nuts by—thous-ands and—particle boards—by

the—75’s—andupholsteryprotectantsbythejeroboam. Talk-ing ‘bout—Gene’s
Second—Av-e-nue— Hard-ware! Talk-ing ‘bout—Gene himself—be—hind—
coun-ter—next to—punch-key register—in front of—com-bi-na-tion locks—
arms folded—bi-focals—reflect-ing light bulb—in your face. And those—two
guys—workin’ for Gene. Those guys out front—no names— not im-portant—
those guys—you say to— “Ineeduhathingthatgoeslikethis—“

He makes rapid, vague hand gestures.

Tawdra: Someone hand me a sharp object.

Frothy: “—sothegizmonexttothewalluhdoesn’tmakethat‘bipbippuhbipbippuh
soundandflaplikethis—“

He makes other rapid hand gestures, accompanied by foot-shaking.

Frothy: “—whenIwalkbyit.” And you—give these a-nonymous—gentlemen—
infooooo—and one reaches up—over should-er—doesn’t look—pulls down
small box—takes out handful—metal imple-ments places them—on counter in
front—of Gene, who says, “Twodollarsandfiftyonecents.” I mean—how vast
the experi-ence—insight of—these peo-ple!? Howworthy
an institutionisthiscornerhardwarestorethatprovidespromptexactaffordable
servicegoingontheunintelligiblemutteringandsignlanguageoftheUnhandy?

Melissa:

Tawdra:

Frothy: And the smell. Oh, that—reassur-ing—mellooooo ar-o-ma—
oilkeysplywoodplantfood. Hea-ven—on earth. I think—GodsentGene
andhisangelstotheircornerhardwarestoretonotjustkeepurshelving
levelandcabinetrysqueaklessandextensioncordshazard-freebutto
keepusinhalingandremindingourselvesthatallwehavetodoisshowup
payasmallfeeandwe’llbegivencopiesofthekeytothedeadbolttothe
backdoortothesevicestairwellleadinguptoParadise!

Melissa: Wait.

Tawdra:

Frothy: And this brings me—deeper con-fessions. I’ve been hashing out—Unhandiness
with therapist—who suggested—I attempt a baby step—proactivity and ow-ner-
ship. Huh, right! So the—last time at Gene’s—did not shuf-fle—did not
twitch—for the two—nameless angels—marched straight up—to Gene him-
self—exclaimed—“GeneIwantaSwissArmyKnife!” And yooooou know what—
he said?

Melissa: Three dollars and thirty-two cents?

Frothy: Nooooo! He said, “GenediedabouttenyearsagoIboughtthestorefromhim threeyearsbeforethatIdidn’tchangethenameofthestore.”

Melissa: Oh.

Frothy: After that—handed me—Swiss Army Knife! Handinessgiven formingeniouslycraftedtofitinyourpalmandenableyoutoslicedice whittlepunchstabprysnipclipfashionelaborateicesculpturesinthe privacyofyourownhomeoroutinthepublicarena. Huh, right! Swiss Army Knife—re-nowned worldwide—myriad uses astound-ing portability. I took— Swiss Army Knife—home with me—lay it down—coffee table looked at it— looked at it—marveled how much it rep-re-sents Handiness— Ialmostexpectedittojumpupandseekoutthenearestdanglingscrew. But it didn’t— do that—inanimate object—a “tool.” A “tool” isn’t Handy—operator is the Handy one. So I—gird-ed my loins—

He girds his loins.

Frothy: AndIsetdowntowieldtheamazingSwissArmyKnife.

He pretends to handle an imaginary Swiss Army Knife.

Frothy: ItissodistinctivelySwissredandSwisscoolandSwissmoothtotheSwissandnon-Swisstouch.

He pinches his thumb and index finger together.

Frothy: AndItriedtoopenuponeofthesixhundredandfortyeightbladesand gadgetswhosepolishededgesprotrudeeversotantalizinglyonthe sidesandthentheSwissArmyKnifeslippedtothefloor—

He stoops down and resumes daintily picking at the air.

Frothy: Ha ha I kept—pulling digging —

He grimaces in frustration.

Frothy: —fussing yanking—damn thing would not o-pen. Nomatterwhich sideItuggedtheSwissArmyKniferemainedclenchedshutandsoof courseI gnawedatitlikeyou dowithshrink-wrap.

He gnaws.

Frothy: That did—not work ei-ther. I looked—for ma-gic button or knob—or some-thing—on the ends—of the—Swiss Army Knife was not one. Did not—have in-struction—man-ual or box. BecauseGenehadjusthandedmetheSwissArmy KnifenakedwithoutpackagingsoIdidwhateveryUnhandyMandoeswhenconfront edwithhisfutilitywhichheencountersoftenIsimplystoppedandtooka breather. Huh, right! Rested—always calcu-late brief respite—will change au-ra—or dy-namic sur-round-ing—task in—front of me—when that shift occurs—I’m in biz-ness. ButofcoursethiswasnottobesoIagain dugand

coaxed and pried and gnawed with my own body parts I probably performed 75% of the tasks the Swiss Army Knife can do for you and yet I simply could not open the tool. Faulty knife I—sur-mised. Asked self—could I re-turn it—to Gene for another one? Huh, right! How could I stand in front of Gene and hand over a brand new Swiss Army Knife and whimper “This doesn’t work”? Could not bear that—igno-min-y. Fortuitously fortuitously I tell you I happened to be absent-mindedly tunneling in my ear with a pen cap as these thoughts about the Knife tumbled through my mind and I looked at the pen cap wiped it off and engaged the first blade pronto! I had—used a tool to—open a toooooo! I was—Hand-yyy! And I got so excited I implemented that trusty pen cap like a surgeon and flipped out every blade scissor tweezers file bevel and bore buried in that distinctively Swiss red Swiss cool Swiss smooth casing! Huh, right! And the—Swiss Ar-my Knife—looked like boiled—lob-ster on its back—cracked o-pen for—din-ing—I got a little scared. Took it in hand—

He holds it up.

Frothy: And I felt something like “power” and I brandished it.

He brandishes it.

Frothy: Oh yes I brandished the Knife and then I saw my reflection in the mirror as I was brandishing this this this puny device with its miniature prongs and I yelled “This Swiss Army Knife is useless! How can I pos-si-bly—be Han-dy wiiiiith these nubs?” Had a—reve-lation about—Swiss Ar-my Knife.

Tawdra: Wrap this up for God’s sake.

Frothy: Consider the Swiss Army designation! Consider the Swiss Army itself centuries ago. You’rea Swiss Army Soldier laying in ambush in Alpine caves and crannies as a hoard of invading marauding Huns or Visigoths or Meanies marches along a trail below. And you burst out of your lair and drop down on none of the brutes and you and you—

He digs in his pockets and pretends to produce a Swiss Army Knife between his thumb and index finger.

Frothy: And you con-front—helmeted hair-y club-swing-er—with this laugh-a-bly dinky thing. Would you—have said—“Halt I shall prick—you re-peated-lyyyyy!?”

He pricks the air.

Frothy: Would you have shouted to the snow peaks “Always coundrely you may have a lancet twice my length but I shall annoy you to no end with this distinctive handy red weapon that fits in my palm!?”

He continues to brandish.

Frothy: Oh my vaunt-ed—Swiss Ar-my Knife. Is it an-y won-der—there is no Swiss—Ar-my today? This revelation made me see this “tool” this Swiss

ArmyKnifeasafgmentofmythforpracticalpeoplealonesoItellyoukindaudience
thisUnhandyMansleepswellatnight!

He bends over, feigning laughter, and the skit ends.

Melissa: Oh. That's it? Hm.

Tawdra: Never use that delivery in my presence again.

#

The house lights dim and the laser show recommences. We zoom in on Peter's face opening up with the gambler's renewable expectations then we fast-forward through an extended series of close-ups of claw and scales and jaw and tail and crimson pools taking over the pit. With each bout the winning bettors, seemingly everyone save Peter, shout and embrace (consider an exceedingly fashionable couple locked in a soul kiss, their chits raised high) and Dartie too beams as his earnings mount. Let the jungle soundtrack reign over this action-packed montage, eddies of chimes joining in and swirling faster and deeper, peeling Peter's abysmal misfortune.

Switch gears to real time for the main event, the unlimited title card, the evening's finale. With all the available multimedia fanfare, Strom and Dick, champion and challenger, are borne into the pit on the shoulders of oiled, loin-clothed Mundo Modo attendants. Each dragon is decked out in majestic finery. The elevated prize female, the grand dame-asaurus, threatens to break her leash as though she shares the crowd's anticipation.

Dartie: Look at that girl! She's bigger than me!

Peter: Bite your head off.

Dartie: Strom looks tough, though! Doesn't he? He's on a mission!

Pan slowly along the alpha dragon's length and move in on a pair of shut eyelids that open ever so slowly and bring us against the empty soul of the predator. Peter gulps and runs a shaky hand through his hair while studying his chit.

Peter: If I tried, I couldn't have picked all losers. Shit! You know how hard it is to pick all losers?

Dartie: Strom's gonna do it.

Peter: No way, this is my vindication. I bet the farm on this. Strom gets scratched and I blow this Popsicle stand with a little bit of ice cream. Come on, Dick.

Dartie: Strom, Strom! Just look at him!

When the lizard king plods free of the attendants who bolt dramatically out of the pit, his ornamental icons shimmer in a kaleidoscope of latent violence. Though formidable himself, the challenger gives away at least a hundred pounds, Peter estimates. Dick races around, kicking up sand like a drag racer burning his mags before a heat. Strom sits tight and shuts his eyes, one with the Om of dragon sumo.

Peter: Oh, do I need this.

Peter's Forehead: Beading sweat.

Peter: Oh boy. Strom must go down.
 Peter's Neck: Raging anxiety.
 Peter: Dartie, Strom's toast.
 Peter's Tongue: Lips, become moist again.
 Peter's Inner Audio (Lieu): Pay up, *petit con*, or else.
 Peter's Inner Audio (D'Angel): Craftcroft is dead.

Peter's Inner Video: Melissa perched frog-like on her swank sofa, opening holo-accounts of a hundred rainbows and dragging a skimpy stitch of digits into the brown bag icon (funny once) of his non-interest-bearing checking account. Shaking her little head, a vault of super-efficient gray matter, penetrating him with Mindy's eyes...

A blizzard of lasers and the roar of the crowd bring him back and he sees Strom mount a dispatched Dick, useless arms flat in the pit soup under the steroid-induced tonnage of the perpetual Grand Champion. Peter remains seated and stares at Strom's sneer while Dartie and the house patrons dance, embrace and raise the roof.

Peter: What happened?
 Dartie: He won! I won!

Peter regards the squashed mustard blunts at his feet. He decides to count the fattest ashes until the vascular event above his stomach subsides but he can't get past two. Before something drastic develops—tears or swooning—Dartie sits back down and pounds the table.

Dartie: That was awesome! One clinch and one fall! Wow!
 Peter: Never saw it.
 Dartie: I think he broke both Dick's arms on the fall.
 Peter: Never saw it.
 Dartie: I told you, Strom will never lose in the ring. Never!
 Peter: I missed it.

Peter's trusty peripheral vision catches the pit boss punching keys on his sleeve and approaching their table at a brisk pace.

Dartie: One fall!
 Peter: Dartie, go meet the pit boss and collect your winnings. Now.
 Dartie: What? Where?
 Peter: Go meet him! Go!
 Dartie: Why? He's coming here.
 Peter: Go meet him!

Dartie dawdles and the opportunity for obstruction, stalling and who-knows-what is lost. The table boss, who is watched from afar by another boss, stands next to Peter.

Boss: Mr. Matasavage, may I have a word with you at the Cashier's Office?
 Peter: I'm comfortable here.

Boss: I doubt that, Mr. Matasavage, if you took in the bouts tonight and recognized their impact on your account.

Peter: I said I'm comfortable right here.

Dartie: Hey, can you give me my winnings right now?

Boss: Mr. Matasavage—

Dartie: Can you pay me or do I have to go back to that long line of people?

Peter: Dartie, you have to learn when to recognize when things are fucked up and shitty—and act accordingly.

Dartie: What?

Peter: Shut up.

Boss: Mr. Matasavage, your credit is insufficient. Come with me to the Cashier's Office directly so this potentially unpleasant situation can be rectified immediately.

Peter: Watch your tone with me. Remember, I'm a guest and you're a wombat.

The boss yanks Peter's chair out from under him, spilling him to the sand. One of the spent stogies sticks to the seat of Peter's pants as he's pulled up and marched away from the table. Dartie downs Pataki suds and follows.

Peter: Stop manhandling me.

Boss: No more talking, Mr. Matasavage. We run a tight business here at Mundo Modo.

He shoves Peter past the throng of giddy extras at the Cashier's windows and into a side room, six-by-six and furnished with a folding chair and bridge table. A terminal and headset hum.

Boss: Sit down, Mr. Matasavage. I'm going to lock this door, which is programmed to open only when your account is whole and good. And if you think about trying anything funny, we're watching you.

Peter looks at himself at an apparently two-way mirror.

Peter: I have access to supplemental funds! My daughter is a teacher—at Quantico!

The door clicks shut and Peter thinks that even if he were riding a tricycle in a clown suit, he still wouldn't manage to do anything funny. Melissa's flashers, personal and home, are on speed dial in his unit back in The Shallows—he'd never learned the addresses. Muffled grunts behind the door, which clicks open and Dartie stands there talking to someone outside the jamb through a coughing fit.

Dartie: I'm—with—him! He's got—my medication! I'm—an—albino!

The boss peers in at Peter, who leans forward as his own windbags expel muck. Clamoring and screaming from the theater. A prickly extra reels by from a blow to his de-spined jaw and another blocks the boss out of sight. Dartie stops coughing, wipes his mouth and smiles.

Dartie: I was faking it.

Peter: I'm. Not. Faking.

Dartie: C'mon, let's go!

They dodge a melee of rampant collectors at the registers, dodging Taser darts from the tuxes. Down by the pit several escaped lizards rasp at the petrified. Gunfire shouts out as Peter and Dartie race under a vidwall showing Strom snapping at his newest mate. Out on the street, they hop into a limo. The driver snorts and looks at them through the rear-view window. The shooting inside escalates.

Driver: Are you with Don King?

Peter: Who isn't?

Driver: This is Don King's car.

Peter: Look, man, you hear that riot in there? I know you're not paid to catch any lead, so consider us Don Juan and Don Quixote and step on it!

Driver: Where to?

Peter: Just drive!

Driver: Where?

Peter:

Dartie: Midtown. I'll tell you when we get there.

Peter makes the skyroof hum back and sees a flock of sensor bats, the hideous machines programmed to swarm to sonic disturbances, their homing signals relayed back to the local security center. He thinks to look back someday on this escapade as the first time his life merited videotape. Dartie sits with his mouth open.

Peter: You did good back there, my man.

#

Tawdra: Yawn.

Frothy: Thank you, ma'am! You seem like a semi-intelligent sort—did you, did anybody, read/see/hear/download/intuit the news from the Space Shuttle mission today?

Melissa: I did!

Frothy: Of course you did! Because it's fucking fantastic, that fucking Space Shuttle! I mean, they send it up there every week or so and conduct groundbreaking experiments, don't they, those fucking Shuttlers! For example, today they tested the effects of zero gravity on algae and the other day they checked out the effects of weightlessness on the human immune system and, before that, they burned sugars to measure the effects of fire away from the earth's pull... Does anybody see a pattern here? I mean, our best and brightest astrophysicists hole up in a bunker and knock their heads together and these are the creative experiments they fucking come up with? I'm gonna tell you people here and I hope some of you know some of these Curies and tell them what I already

know: in Space, Everything Floats! Isn't it patently obvious? If these scientists can't figure this out, I propose they send me up in that solar-powered crate with a Swiss Army Knife to repair a space gasket! When the Unhandy Man unleashes his all-purpose tool you can be sure the sucker will float around his fucking head!

Melissa:

Tawdra:

Frothy:

Hold your applause. Please. OK, fine, the recurring Knife flops but it doesn't mean a damn thing because I am... On. So, let me talk about something that applies to all you peoples with straight hair. Right now the nappy-headed peoples are saying "Tell it!" and the bald peoples are saying "Talk to me!" That's right. I got straight hair myself, you see, but I'm not gonna bust on all us overcooked-pasta heads, no... See, I got a haircut today and during this harrowing experience it came to me, this revelation about haircutters, "hair stylists" as they would have you call them. And I call this revelation about one of the world's oldest and simplest professions, I call this truth Frothy's Law. And Frothy's Law says that the more you pay for a haircut, the more fucked up your hair ends up!

Melissa:

That's true!

Tawdra:

Frothy:

Now I told you I have straight hair. Or should I say, I had straight hair. I walked into this upscale salon—knowing full well I was looking at major wampum, but I'm a performer and my appearance is critical to my success so I rationalize this as a business expense—with a regular old do parted on the side right here, thinking I'm gonna get me a nice trim with a little attitude. Now I don't have a personal stylist, so I get assigned Mary Joseph who's got some peacock plumage kicking all over her/his skull but that's par for the course. All stylists look like they're from the Bad Hair Age. So the first thing Mary Joseph does is wash my hair in ice cold water then she asks afterwards while drying it, "How was the water?" I'm like, "It was f-f-f-fine." Then she musses it all up and starts pulling shit out here and here and snipping at weird angles like I'm an origami project, right? And Mary Joseph is looking out the window and snipping and Mary Joseph is chatting up the dude who sweeps all the trimmings into the closet—now there's a corner of the world I'd like to spend some time in—and Mary Joseph is snipping and pulling and just when I start to talk about the Space Shuttle, the wrap is pulled away—Ta Dah! And I look in the mirror. Now, you know how "friendly" that salon lighting and those salon mirrors are,

don't you. That's harsh Interrogation Room light they throw at you. I mean, I sure am not looking at the top of my head—I'm looking at every goddamn blemish and pus-head and structural oddity I got going on! Can you imagine trying to pick someone up in a bar that has salon lighting and mirrors? "Hi, I'm Joe Herpes Canchres. What's your name, Suzy Muddy Teeth?" So, I'm transfixed by Quasimodo in the mirror when I realize he's got a ratty broom on his head! And you know what I say to Mary Joseph? I say, "It Looks Great But Can You Just Part It?" And, after a look of mock horror, you know what Mary Joseph says? "Which Side Do You Part It On?" May I speak up for the pasta heads of the world when I say that "stylists" should remember where the Part was? So, I point to my disappeared part and Mary Joseph proceeds to carve this winding line starting from the top center of my head, where the bump that says you're smart is supposed to be, and she's meandering this way and that way and around the corner and swinging around and ending up somewhere around here by my ear. I mean, now I got the Mighty Mississippi goin' on! I think I've got some script letters up there—is this a W or what? Peoples, it seems to me a "stylist" should know how to part your hair. This is not unreasonable. But then Frothy's Law is not based on reason, it's based on the Absurdity of Fashion! So, after I tipped Mary Joseph fifty quid—I don't know what a quid is or what it's worth but it sounds hip—out of guilt, I walked out and down the street and touched the back of my neck and around my ears and realize I got tumbleweeds and straw like nobody's business! But I'm a better man for it, I'm styling now and I came up with Frothy's Law.

Melissa: That was good.

Tawdra: It's been done before. It's old hat, that "exasperated take on everyday life."

Frothy: Well, it needs work—or you do. Can I have a glass of water or another natural, refreshing beverage?

Tawdra slides over the stagnant gas.

Frothy: Now this glass here. Half full or half empty? Allow me to proclaim the singular solution to this dilemma once and for all: It's Fumpty!

Melissa: That's clever. Sometimes you're very insightful.

Frothy: Then we should make love right now on the floor.

Tawdra: I'll film.

Melissa: The hormones in you two—do they never lay low?

Frothy: I'm ready for you. I need you now.

Melissa: Tawdra's your mate. Why did you say you haven't been on her show?

Tawdra: He knows.

Frothy: Neither of us is a beggar.

#

An ocher field, liquid. Darker particles in suspension, moving up to us. Pull back: a green fleck bobs by. Silent, indeterminate motion. Then chaos.

Jomo lifts his spoon from his miso soup and slurps, bringing a smile to the waitress, profoundly acupunctured in both ears.

Jomo: Can you hear me OK?

Ears & Needles: Sure.

Jomo: All that metal doesn't affect your auditory senses?

Ears & Needles: What?

Jomo: Your hearing.

Ears & Needles: No. Why, did you say something before?

Jomo: What?

Ears & Needles: Did you order something?

Jomo: No. I mean, yeah, but you took it, right?

Ears & Needles: Special sushi and one extra spicy spicy tuna roll.

Jomo: Yeah, extra spicy. Tell my man Kenji it's for me.

Ears & Needles: You already told me to tell him that.

Jomo: Did you tell him?

Ears & Needles: I didn't put in your order yet. I find doing that much easier when I'm not answering stupid questions.

Jomo: When you do, tell him.

Ears & Needles: Do I look stupid?

Jomo: What? Oh, no, I'm sorry. Just tell Kenji that Jomo said "Yo."

Ears & Needles: Just Yo. What about your order?

Jomo: If I pull out one of those needles will something bad happen?

Ears & Needles: To you? Probably.

Jomo: I assume those needles are doing good things, keeping you, you know, balanced or something. Working on your Qi. But what would happen if I removed one? Would one little thing that that particular needle is all about—like a bad back—suddenly rear its ugly head? Or would removing that one needle bring all your pains and fears flooding in?

Ears & Needles: Don't touch my needles.

Jomo: I wasn't going to touch them. I was just asking. Tangentially, have you ever considered the relationship between acupuncture and voodoo dolls?

Ears & Needles: I never needed to.

Jomo: Both involve needles and their mysterious, you might say miraculous, effects on the body. One for the good for oneself, one for the bad for another's self. But what would happen if an acupuncturist made a voodoo doll in the shape of someone else's ear? When he inserts a needle, does the represented person suddenly feel his lower back pain dissolve, or does he scream out, "Shit! My ear hurts!"

Ears & Needles: You want me to keep this other chair open?

Jomo: I told you I'm waiting for someone.

Ears & Needles: I think you think I look stupid.

Jomo: No, no. No, I'm just slurping my miso and trying to make some conversation.

#

Frothy has been encamped in the bathroom for a long time with the fumpty glass. On his way he mentioned something about the creative benefits of drinking and pissing at the same time. Melissa dreads a scatological report when he returns. Many boys become comfortable with a girl and indulge in flatulence and flatulent commentary—a way of regressing and talking to Mommy. The ones who don't, the bottled-up ones, are distant from their mothers. Mindy may have told her this but her inability to envision the moment of the telling suggests this is just another of her poor attempts to approximate Mindy's sermons on the interpersonal. Mindy and her father kept separate toilets and it was never discussed.

In her lap she holds a shosetsu about a ruminative Japanese boy at the onset of the twentieth century. His father makes plain that he must cease dreaming and start fishing. The boy rubs a bowl in silent frustration, thinking he might like to design and craft earthenware rather than fish. Melissa yearns to grab the nearest pen and jot in the margins, "I Have Felt That Too" in spite of Mindy, who chastised her once for such banality. Writing in books is for cowards and small thinkers who compulsively latch onto facile communal gestures and expressions, Mindy told the young reader, the way an infant grabs a proffered pinkie. Thirty billion walk the planet—how meaningful can it be to encounter a similar thought? Keep yourself off another's page and preserve your illusion of inchoate individuality. Tawdra speaks up from the fridge.

Tawdra: I can't help thinking about that corndog in the head. I mean, I'm actively trying not to debate which urge he's satisfying. It's times like this I absolutely despise my interior monologue! The procession of the mundane—it never stops!

Melissa: Don't shout—I can hear you.

Tawdra: Don't you get tangled in that net? When there's no one around to speak to? You can't get out and the plain thoughts keep rolling by.

Melissa: It's all very complicated, like your mother's lingerie.

Down the hall water rushes into the earth.

#

Lavender swinging doors, lariats and stirrups and twenty-gallons—Steers ‘N’ Queers. Everybody likes ‘N’, Peter thinks, and O’ is equally enjoyed. You can make money on cute ‘n’ retro, full o’ coy nostalgia for the antemillennium. He chases his myst with birch beer he ordered after Dartie asked for one straight up. I know, I know, you get more with no ice, you little white weasel, he almost said, I did that too when I was a shaver. The line dancers shuffle through the sawdust, pahdnahs in crisp vintage dungarees and vests, gals in apartment-spun checkered floor skirts. Memorabilia of gay and “gay” cowboys clutters the wall and Peter focuses on a corner shrine to a familiar-lookin’ cowpoke gazing into his steed’s eyes. Trigger? Silver? Out west these days Peter’s parents smoke-um peace pipes and yearn for telltale comets.

Peter: I’m telling you, you did good at Mundo Modo.

Dartie’s preoccupied, sizing up a dose-y-do-er. God bless her, Peter thinks, as she esses across the floor, links arms with her big-handed beau, and sloughs off her frowning intent on keeping in step. There was a time when Gay Bars were exactly that, then there was a transition period into gay-theme venues for heteros, but Peter must not have been paying attention when that went down and now he’s amazed to see them everywhere. The music stops and the dancers pair off and take their seats.

Dartie: What?

Peter: What.

Dartie: You said something before, I think.

Peter: Oh, I was just rambling. Trying to express gratitude in my own diffident way.

Dartie: Huh?

Peter: Never mind. Let’s just enjoy ourselves and have a few drinks.

Dartie: Yeah. I’m buying since I’m rolling in the dough!

Peter: I wish I could say, “No need, allow me,” but given the state in which I presently find myself, I will gladly indulge your largess.

Dartie: No, I’ll buy.

Peter: Right. Forgive me for prying, Dartie, I mean, I hate to break from gamesman’s etiquette, but exactly how much did you win on the dragons?

Dartie: One hundred bucks!

Peter: One hundred. Bucks. One, zero, zero.

Dartie: Yeah!

Peter: Didn’t you win just about every bout?

Dartie: I won every one I bet on! All ten!

Peter: And you won a hundo for all that incredibly good fortune.

Dartie: Right! That was the best time ever! Thanks for bringing me!

Peter: Let me ask you a question: when you started winning, did it ever cross your mind to up your bets—ride the hot streak so to speak?

Dartie: No. I knew I couldn't lose more than twenty for the night. Why would I bet more than I could afford to lose?

Peter:

Dartie: Did I do something wrong?

Peter: Oh no, no. Not at all. Waiter!

#

Full Frontal doffs a new Sirocco cap, a door prize from Astrid, and rubs his head, smiling like you cannot believe.

Jomo: Oh, man. Look at you.

Full Frontal:

Jomo: Look at you, bro!

Full Frontal:

Jomo: Like the kitty cat who ate a whole nest of canaries, man.

Full Frontal: I'm still feeling the rush, J, like an hour after the fact. I mean, I'm coming down but I'm still feeling it. They're awesome, those women. I'm telling you.

Jomo: Yo, Kenji's hooking me up proper with a spicy spicy roll. You want to order?

Full Frontal: No, man, I'm good.

Jomo: Snap out of it, Country! You ain't at the 'ho'-down no more.

Full Frontal: That reverence is something smooth. Yo, why'd you check out so soon? Xunta was all into you.

Jomo: Aw man, she's fine and whatnot, but I was so pumped to hang with Roxanna and then when I got hit with that optical shower I couldn't get her out of my head. I had this thought that she wouldn't approve.

Full Frontal: Roxanna?

Jomo: Yeah, slick. I heard her voice or something so I had to blow that clambake pronto.

Full Frontal: You flash your girl, bro?

Jomo: She ain't my girl, bro, she never even came in the room.

Full Frontal: No, man. Your girl. Melissa.

Jomo: Aw shit. No, I didn't. I will, after the sushi.

Ears 'N' Needles sets his tray down and leaves without looking at Full Frontal.

Jomo: Let me tell you something, bro. The Sony service is downright bullshit. I'm flashing their HQ tomorrow.

Full Frontal: Maybe you'll get something free. What you got there?

Jomo: This food? It's all good. Have some unagi.

Full Frontal: Looks funny, bro, I can't play that.

Jomo: It doesn't look funny, bro, it looks like a Johnson. Just pop it right in but don't tell your folks.

Full Frontal:

Jomo: I ever tell you about my circumcision?

Full Frontal: No man, you never did.

Jomo: I was like 16 or something. It was one of those summer trips I made to Baba's ranch in Kenya. Anyway, I was having a good time eating up all the food his wives were cooking and running around with my half-blood, just whylin.' Then one night there was one of these parties, African-style you know, drums and dancing and whatnot. And this old shaman rounds up the boys including me and leads us out past the bushes and the cattle. And he takes out a big-ass blade, like some crazy Maasai metal, and makes each youngster drop each his drawers. Bro, I saw some knees knocking down the line and I was ready to roll out of there! So, the old head is standing in front of me—he's got the paint on his face and he's grinning and his eyes are bugging in the moonlight—and I present and his mouth opens and you know what he says? He says, "What happened to the rest of your manhood?" See, they don't shorten over there, bro, they're all natural!

Full Frontal: What happened, he let you go?

Jomo: No bro, he drew blood just like his baba taught him!

Full Frontal: That's crazy. I don't know about that.

#

Melissa had taken Jomo's flash in the bedroom and languished in the sultan to get away from Tawdra and Frothy for a while. Now she sits with her back against the swansdown, unacknowledged, and waves up an ambient track of looped pygmy chants and waterfalls over a bass synth. She swears to herself the boas are stirring. Frothy cuts camaraderie on the coffee table and stretches it into burnt orange streaks with Melissa's tortoise-shell comb.

Melissa: What are you doing?

Frothy: Me first.

Tawdra: Gentleman.

Frothy: Then hurry up.

Tawdra plucks the bendable straw above Frothy's ear and snorts her trail quickly. Frothy inhales with gusto, like an industrial vacuum. Melissa spies residue on the comb and pulls it through her hair.

Melissa: Will this work?

Tawdra: If you think shallow thoughts.

Frothy: That's my gig!

Melissa's nostrils, sinus and windpipe burn then numb out. She sits back.

Frothy: Wait ten minutes. It gets good and kicking then, trust me.

Melissa waves off the lamp and regards its outline. She thinks of a singer's silhouette in a limited edition Seurat print she almost bought but, instead, it had to be the Klimt that day. She was with Jomo. Tawdra sets out a platter of mozzarella, tomatoes and onions in extra virgin olive essence. They dig in.

Tawdra: These onions are from Vidalia, so they're good.

Frothy: They are good.

Melissa: Sweet.

Tawdra: I told you they're good. They're from Georgia.

Frothy: Never been there.

Melissa: Me neither.

Frothy: It's on my mind, though. I heard Stone Mountain rocks.

Melissa: Oh, I forgot to tell you. Jomo flashed that we're meeting at This Mortal Koil tonight. Some kid Kwirt is spinning.

Tawdra: Now I'm excited.

Melissa: The creep who shot me is going to be there, too.

Tawdra: He's a friend of Jomo's?

Melissa: No. He flashed earlier, I forgot to tell you.

Tawdra: I haven't danced with you in ages.

Melissa: You never want to go when I ask.

Tawdra: I'm sorry. I get caught up in my own deal.

Frothy: Jomo doesn't like me.

Melissa: Why do you say that?

Frothy: He doesn't think I'm funny.

Tawdra: Neither do I but that's rock 'n' roll.

Frothy: You're not in my target market. With him, I think it's a competition thing: two budding stars can't share a stage.

Melissa: He likes you fine. You're off base.

Tawdra: I'm in space.

Frothy: I'm gaining face. Notice that people always refer to the losing of face? Me, I'm adding on!

Tawdra: I've thought that too.

Melissa: Yes!

Tawdra:

Frothy:

Melissa:

Frothy: This is great. I mean, how can a fella beat this? A voluptuous naked vamp serves me sweet onions and a famous-on-the-side-and-madly-successful teacher wants me desperately!

Melissa: We're gonna have a blast tonight. I'm gonna let loose!

Tawdra: I'll be at your side, Itty.

Frothy: And I'll be at your sides.

#

Unshaven yet not ruggedly so, shoulder-conscious in a festive serape, stroking a dead jackrabbit dangling from his belt of roadkill armadillo, the MC taps the mike and clicks his boots while the barn hushes.

MC: Gents and gentettes, gauchos and gaucherinas, Steers 'N' Queers is pleased as the dickens to present a one-man prairie fire from the skittle of Texas: the rip-roarin' rodeo stud who thrills 'n' chills us by punchin' the durndest doggies, who makes us all wish he'd saddle us up, the wildest and most exhilaratin' flower of the West, the Lonesome Glove himself—Tanner Acrew!

Acrew strides to the mike, receives a peck on the cheek, tips his hat and waves to the extras as though they were at the far ends of a mile-wide corral.

Tanner Acrew: That's a mighty fine greeting there, I must admit, and I sure am appreciative of the hospitality you folks are showin' me tonight.

Tittering applause. Peter groans and slouches.

Peter: What is this all about?

Tanner Acrew: I hope y'all can join me tomorrow evening at the rodeo. I promise they'll have to cut my hand 'fore I let go o' that big ol' nasty!

More applause. Peter crunches an ice cube and recalls a malicious aunt on his father's side encouraging him to chew it hard in order to strengthen his teeth.

Peter: Kid, you want to leave? I don't want to be here anymore.

Dartie: What?

Peter: Nothing. Just rambling.

Tanner Acrew: Folks, before I ride under the lights, I like to get inspired, you know, find something in town to set my hair on end. I plan on a catching a volleyball game, folks, and my bones are telling me the Amazons are gonna give that Sirocco a good ol'-fashioned what-for!

Raucous cheers all around except in the far corner, Peter notices. Under a black Stetson a masked desperado in black leather tosses down two shots. He stares at Peter across the room and lights up some tumbleweed. A silver six-shooter glistens in front of him on the bar.

Peter: I don't want to be here anymore. Word travels fast around this town and I'm a marked man by now.

Dartie: What did you say?

Tanner Acrew: Folks, it sure is a pleasure for me tonight to introduce a singer and musician who simply tears out my heart and makes me think of my dear ol' stepmomma who raised me from a tadpole. Let's give a big ol' New York City welcome to Hooey Druthers! C'mon—make him feel at home!

An unassuming man carrying a guitar that just looks like it was born to twang steps up on the stage. Peter sneaks a peek over at the desperado and shudders.

Hooey Druthers: Hi. You know, I'm from Texas. You ever notice that people from Texas always tell you where they're from? I should tell you that that was not an original line right there. I stole it from a dear friend of mine—actually I don't know why I used that phrase “dear friend” seeing as everyone knows how phony sounding that is and how it makes everything about the person what said it phony and certainly not “dear.” If you were in love with a phony woman, say, you probably would love her because you felt like you were the only person who saw past her phoniness, saw her with her make-up off and understood her vulnerability. Love isn't blind; it's partial. And understanding that would make her public phoniness not “phony” but real. It seems to me sometimes that we ourselves act phony in certain situations and we hope against hope to catch that knowing glance at a party, from over by the buffet table, a glance from our lover what says “I know you and I understand why you're over there acting phony, waving your drink around, and I love you anyway.” And it also seems to me these days there sure are a lot of people happy to tell you that they hate phony people and they hang around only “real” people and therefore by association they themselves are “real.” So, you ever notice how both real and phony people always tell you what they are? Anyway, that's just me talking out loud and it's all well and OK. Where was I? My dear... my friend Lyle Lovett used to use that line about Texas. May even still—after all, it's his right. Myself, I hit the road north out of my hometown at an early age; not because of anything the place did to me but just because. You know how that is, maybe. And there was a time in my early something's when I found myself by Flathead Lake in Montana with a woman and a dog named Cody Joe and a pick-up truck and some trusty fishing gear and I was not unhappy. That sounds like a funny phrase, “not unhappy,” but those very words got hung up in my mind like the message on the Elks Lodge marquee about Friday Night Stew. “Not unhappy”

just would not disappear and the words ate at me the more I dwelled on them.
You know how that is, maybe.

Peter: We should leave.

Dartie: Huh?

Hooey Druthers: The woman who graced me with her daily presence at that time, actually took me into her home and made sure I ate enough and wiped my mouth and tied my shoes, the woman who worked and laughed and made love harder than I ever did—she knew I was not unhappy. Of course, we did not discuss that, probably because I didn't know she knew—I only know it now looking back. Sometimes you attribute more wisdom to yourself and to old flames when you reminisce fondly. Sometimes, when you remember in anger, with recrimination, you attribute less wisdom. That's all well and OK, too.

Peter: This guy is unbelievable. Shut up already.

His nape registers Warm and Wet. The MC bats stardusted lashes and gives him the Shh-or-I'll-lick-you-all-over-in-the-kitchen look.

Hooey Druthers: To make this long story longer, I left this beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair and freckles for ten and I drove north to Kalispell, where I checked into a motel owned and operated by a fella named Jim who'd relocated from San Francisco on account of the good fishing. He shared a pot of gas with me that night. And when I went back to my room I was all het up, what with the gas bubbling in my belly and the regret about leaving my woman and my huskie Cody Joe, and the excitement about trekking through Glacier National Park, which is just past Kalispell. So, to calm my nerves, I downed a fair amount of whiskey and watched the big night sky and picked up my old battle-ax here and wrote this song, "Kalispell."

Druthers looks down and the guitar sings first, deliberately and plainly. Peter grinds his last cube into water, wondering why his father let his aunt feed him that small but harmful lie. He shuts his eyes and a sun-beaten tenor walks into his mind.

Will someone call to wish me well
On my journey north of Kalispell?
My time away begins today
As far as I can tell.

The Flathead dawn arrives in gray,
Lightning weaves ten miles away.
If the rain moves into Glacier

It's a berry-pickin' day.

But if the sun comes disengaged
And glorifies God's blank page,
I'll stroll an hour through wildflowers
To the unretreated Ice Age.

First time I've laced up these new boots
And worn these gloves to dig up roots.
No bear has ever sized me up—
We must be in cahoots.

An Elk talked tall about a lake
Where he thinks my shiny lure will take
But if the fish don't bite it,
It isn't his mistake.

I'll hang some fire on Going-to-the-Sun
Where rainbows first and fattest hung
And mountains face each other
Like their business isn't done.

I'll hike until my feet fall off
Where cascades feed a mirror trough,
Then pitch my tent and listen
For silence speaks enough.

I'll learn standing still from evergreens,
Decisiveness on eagles' wings.
I never hit a moving target,
I don't remember dreams.

Leaving Cody Joe behind
Was just my way of being kind.
Even though he smells like me
I hope you didn't mind.

Will someone call to wish me well
 Before I check out of Jim's Motel?
 My time away is up today,
 I won't return to Kalispell.

#

Arm in arm in arm, three silhouettes walk jauntily past a discontinued, labyrinthine foundation, sectors of which support exteriors. Incongruous signage announces the beginnings of an IFA! Residential MultiDorm. Having run out of decrepit ware/slaughter/whorehouses to glamorously renovate in Manhattan, the school had turned to the new construction of an aesthetically significant complex. Selecting a design had proved daunting, compounded by changes in the administration. As a result, the project's inertia was halted and the lot lay still for a year during which makeshift residences appeared then multiplied. Hammocks hang from girders. Elevated huts threaten the stability of the wobbly scaffolding. A band of raggedy extras approaches the trio solicitously. From her Quantico handbag Melissa produces empowerment lollipops, the kind with the chewy center, and distributes them with a kind word. Tawdra and Frothy are honored to be in her company.

Like a disco ball, This Mortal Koil spins reflected rectangles out over the sucking extras and the scaffolding. Its double helix rotates around a sleek needle. It's early, so the three walk up to a vacant rung and plop down on transparent floor cushions containing goldfish. They light up currants, capers and catnip. Drinks arrive in the darkness.

#

Out on a strand, where gravity and centrifugal force compete, Jomo and Full Frontal stagger forth, searching for the DJ booth. Anonymous house music shakes the quaking floor, which is empty. It's early.

#

Whether Dartie had enough coin for a few more rounds, whether the desperado awaited him outside on the concrete, whether his parents beamed him binary e-mail, whether the sensei raked his name in a mile-high Zen garden, whether Melissa would accept his flash, whether his fog-bound heart could remain resolute—these cards turned over then back as Druthers's call from the campfire resonates through Peter poignantly, bringing him to the edge of meaning to change his ways.

#

It's less early and the strand is jumping from top to bottom. Ing presides: shaking, bumping, pushing, grinding, popping, hopping, stepping, licking, hugging, clapping, convulsing, sweating, twirling, posing, flexing, stripping, shouting, piercing, lifting, drifting, wafting, purring, om-ing... Melissa breaks

away from Tawdra and Frothy and escapes to the nearest rung. A goldfish swims up between her legs and she kisses it through the plastic.

Between the beats and bass and thunderdents, she hears a nearby metallic drone. On one cushion sits a drop-dead lothario, pasted sparingly with eggshells, and flanked by winged future-goth vamps. A semicircular keyboard juts out from the middleman's belt. From a neck strap a flat screen says HE'S NOT YOUR PRINCE. I AM. Melissa realizes the drone she heard was a vox-speak of that statement. Also, the prince referred to is the goldfish.

Melissa: He's not a frog. Wrong fairy tale.

Hands interlocked, all three tap almost imperceptibly on the keyboard. There's another drone but she can't make it out.

Screen: LET'S MAKE OUR OWN SINCE WE'RE ALL FAMOUS NOW.

Melissa: You! My boyfriend will be here in point-five seconds, you creep!

Tapping and babble.

Screen: YOU WERE THE BEST SHOW I EVER SAW. WHAT FORTUNE THAT YOU'RE HERE WITH US NOW.

Melissa: You mean it's not your show? You're not the creep director? Are you lying?

Screen: DO YOU LIKE THE MUSIC I'M PLAYING FOR YOU NOW?

The electronica thumps, soars and beeps.

Melissa: It sounds like the same stuff as before. What do you mean, you're "playing"?

Screen: I'M FEEDING THE TURNTABLES THROUGH THIS BOARD WIRED INTO MY NEURONS.

Melissa: You're the DJ while you're sitting here?

Screen: YES!

Melissa: That's something. You should do something about that voxbox. I can't hear you—I have to read what you say.

Screen: I'M WORKING ON IT.

A shower of silver sparkles bursts from the ceiling and mechanical churning undercuts the house beat.

Melissa: Was that you? I hear that! Work! And the lights up there—like welding!

Screen: THE INTERFACE IS VERY GOOD AT SOME BASIC INTERPRETATIONS. CHECK THIS OUT. FROM ME TO YOU:

W E L C O M E !

#

It's not so early and it's definitely not late and both strands are jumping (and mutually peep-able through portholes). Jomo and Full Frontal stand against a wall. Between them a sticker says DOMINANT/REGRESSIVE under a stylized line rendering of the Koil itself.

Jomo: Hell if I know where he is. Anybody, is there a DJ in the house?!

Full Frontal: This joint is jamming, I tell you. Jamming.

Jomo: I saw ya jammin' in ya—

Jomo & Full Frontal: Jammies!

Full Frontal: With the—

Jomo: Ring around the—

Jomo & Full Frontal: Collar!

They high-five for Smirk USA. A drenched couple, lip-locked, starts a wall tango next to them. Jomo looks down at the girl's skunked tail and yanks it.

D'Angel: You wanna— hey, tall guy!

Jomo: I knew I knew that tail! What's going on, girl?

D'Angel: Oh, Viktor and I—this is Viktor—are just, you know, we thought it'd be a good night to Koil, so here we are! Haven't seen you in a long time!

Jomo: I know it! You know Fronty, right?

D'Angel: Hey Fronty! I didn't see you behind the tree!

Full Frontal: Good to see you!

D'Angel: Where's that precious little thing you keep? What's her name?

Jomo: She's here, she's here. Gotta find her. I tell you, we're trying to find her and we're also looking for the DJ booth—do you know where it is?

D'Angel: Huh. I don't recall ever seeing it. I mean, I've only been here, what, a million times?

Jomo: That's what I'm saying, where the hell is it?

D'Angel: I'll go find out for you.

Jomo: You don't have to do that.

D'Angel: No, now you got me super curious! I love missions—we'll be back!

They dissolve into the Ing and two smiles follow them.

Jomo: Always loved that girl. She's got spirit.

Full Frontal: Can't dance a lick.

Jomo: No, never could. She can work that tail, though.

Full Frontal: Most definitely. I saw her clock some cat over the bar once—thwap!

#

Back from the floor, Frothy and Tawdra embrace Melissa and go supine over the goldfish. Frothy does a little backstroke, orders a drink and fires up some catnip. He blows smoke dolls over his head.

Melissa: I never understood how you do that.

Tawdra: That's good.

Frothy: It's a state of tongue and palate.

Tawdra: I've never eaten tongue. I mean, I've bitten a few live ones but I never tried one that was cooked.

Melissa: I'm surprised you haven't pierced yours yet.

Tawdra: Good.

Frothy: OK, do you wanna hear about my new project, the one that will elevate me into a man of letters? The one that will bring my name, Frothy, into every living room and salon of worthwhile intellect? Can I tell you, can I tell you, can I tell you?

Melissa: Go ahead.

Frothy: Maybe this isn't the right time—I'm still On. I should wait for an awkward period, a rainy Saturday between vids, when something needs to be said.

Tawdra: You're bringing out the violence in me. I'm going to have to hurt you.

Frothy: Oh, I'll go for it then! The project is: I'm going to road-trip cross-country and visit an eclectic array of authentic dive bars and take photos of the walls of every men's restroom!

Melissa: Bathroom walls. So what is this, challenging the public/private boundary? The unwinnable fight for sanitation against filth and decay?

Tawdra: Pretty puce tiles and the vagrancy of caulk?

Frothy: No, no, no! Haven't you ever used the Gents? The graffiti—scribbled, amended, crossed out by hundreds of unwashed hands—is phenomenal! It's all there: argot, anatomy, doodles, music critiques, bigotry, your-mother jokes, your-wife jokes... It's a lifetime of fascination for the therapist, historian, sociologist, linguist, political scientist, and comedian in all of us!

Melissa: You're going to go around America and take pictures of toilets.

Frothy: Every state and province will be represented at least once. The right side of the book will be a full-page glossy photo of the wall. The left side will have a small, quirky shot of the bar's exterior, accompanied by some witty notes by yours truly.

Melissa: A coffee table book of bathroom graffiti.

Frothy: A true compendium of today's American male.

Tawdra: In all his stunted vulgarity. There's a big market for that—I know.

Melissa: I think you should triple-check to make sure it hasn't been done yet. When are you leaving? Who are you going to go with?

Frothy: I'm not worried about that part yet. Isn't it great?

Melissa: Do people still by coffee table books? I don't have one.
 Frothy: Will you buy mine?
 Melissa: Of course.
 Frothy: There you go! I got one, I got one! And you, Miss Pepper Sucker, you will be number—

Squawking from the voxbox across the rung drowns him out. Several hollow-eyed extras kneel in front of the DJ and the vamps, suggesting a Live Action Role Playing ritual is taking place. The screen says NONGAMERS ARE MEAT.

Frothy: Who is that so-and-so?
 Melissa: The DJ. He's got a wireless uplink to the beat center and the mix is processed through a portable on his belt. The software interprets his mood swings and the messages he and his buddies convert into aleatory grooves.
 Tawdra: How long did you talk to him and how can I get introduced?
 Melissa: I didn't get his name, so I'd feel a little awkward—
 Frothy: Let me just finish about my book: it's not just an oversized, elegant conversation piece, it's—
 Screen: IS MY PRESENCE IMMEDIATELY DESIRED?

Liquid synth riffs eddy around the rung and Melissa feels the rotation of the entire helix for the first time. She looks at the goldfish between her legs to clear her head.

DJ: My name is Kwirt.

Melissa looks up at a mouth and its extended tongue. K is emblazoned near the tip and W, I, R and T trail back to the base.

Tawdra: I'm Tawdra.
 Kwirt: Of course. I know your webcast. I was complimenting your gorgeous friend on her performance this afternoon before you arrived.
 Frothy: We were all over those beats, man. Great vibes—you're the DJ, right?
 Kwirt: And you are?
 Melissa: He's Frothy.
 Kwirt: Do you have a show?
 Frothy: No, but I'm huge in Japan.
 Tawdra: So, are these your brothers or sisters? I can't tell.

Kwirt smiles at each vamp.

Kwirt: This is Az and this is Zix.
 Melissa: Tawdra, Frothy, Melissa.
 Az: Loved the show today.
 Zix: What magazine did you buy?
 Tawdra: That's what I asked her! I'm her roommate.

Melissa: She's my favorite tenant.

Tawdra: Her only tenant. We live in her apartment.

Zix: Do you shoot the pepper segment there?

Tawdra: Usually. I can go on location.

Az: You'll have to have us over sometime. We'd love to be a live audience for the jalapeño!

Frothy: You all have letters on your tongues.

Melissa: I was going to ask about that.

Kwirt: We're the Keyboard Triplets. Our parents were into AI when it was cool and exciting to conflate random and programmed communication. We were christened Qwert-Yuey-Op, Azdah-Fig-Hij-Klulh, and Zix-Kivbuh-Nim—but then all the keyboards changed. We adapted and amended the spelling of our archaic names. Our new tags are spelled on our tongues.

Tawdra: I don't get it.

Kwirt: Look at this old keyboard and pronounce each row.

Tawdra: Oh. I feel like Helen Keller, water spilling over me while Annie Sullivan spells it in my palm.

Screen: WHAT A RUSH FOR YOU!

Frothy: I'm an up-and-coming comedian or did I mention that already.

Zix: You don't seem funny.

Frothy: That's OK. Cuz I am On tonight.

The LARPing slaves loom behind the triplets, hoping for a crumb of authority. AWAY! says the screen and they shuffle off to a far rung in the Koil.

Tawdra: You three don't seem like sibs. I mean, you do but you don't. There's a mix of something else. It's in your eye language.

Kwirt: How's that?

Melissa: They look alike to me. Not identical, but alike.

Tawdra: There's too much reading of each other. You're active when you look at each other's face—too active.

Kwirt: You're an old soul.

Tawdra: I've been told that many times.

Zix: So are we. I was on Leif Ericsson's longboat to the New World.

Az: I introduced Diego Rivera to Freda Kahlo.

Kwirt: I loaned Diogenes a lantern.

Melissa: He never did find an honest man, did he?

Tawdra: Light brings out dishonesty, I find. Think about it: both cinema and theatre rely on bright, hot lamps. It's acting, it's lies. Truth is in the audience, in the black.

Zix: In the dark everyone is honest: sleeping, crying, coupling.
The club lights dim and the beats soften to a pitter-patter of thousands of fingers on thousands of book covers.

Kwirt: Each night, before the Koil opens, when it's quiet and the house lights are on, I think of this place as the Void and the first beat as the Big Bang. In fact, we have a little ceremony of sorts to reflect on the entrance of rhythm into the silence—the Big Beat.

Az: Tell them where we first met.

Zix: Well. This is the first cycle in which we're related, which accounts for the conflicting messages you're receiving, Tawdra.

Tawdra: Ah hah.

Zix: We were guests at de Sade's chateau one vivid summer. You would have adored the regression when we discovered it.

Tawdra: Uh huh!

Frothy: I'm sorry, but why is it that people into reincarnation always have "old souls" with fascinating "past lives" linked closely to the most intriguing historical figures? Why doesn't anyone say, "I had twenty lives, each as a hideous, boring ditch digger?" Why doesn't anyone say, "Well, I had only one past life and it was as a Quaker cobbler who watched a lot of TV?" Why doesn't anyone say, "I'm really into past lives but I didn't have any?" Has anyone ever said that?

Tawdra: He's feeling left out.

Zix: He's a raw soul. But that's OK—a newborn cries and chokes on its first air.

Az: Begging for a spank.

They tap on the keyboard.

Screen: LET'S DANCE!

Strobe and smoke, elbows and knees, hair in every mode of assertion and denial, clinging and draping fabrics, decorative and dangerous jewelry—everywhere Melissa looks on the spinning strand the message is mixed. Above in a ceiling mirror she watches herself, one protozoan on a crowded lab slide. Zix and Az have sandwiched Frothy and scratch his torso as Tawdra windmills and writhes in front of Kwirt's screen, which says I'M A PEPPER. Unselected, alone in her groove, Melissa wonders if the voyeur also gyres in this blender. She closes her eyes and tilts back her head into two enveloping mitts and there Jomo is, above her, just when she wants him, and every little care whirls away and Ing infuses them both.

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