2011

THE COLLECTED LETTERS AND UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS OF KARIN PANKREEZ, NOVELIST ASPIRANT

Jason Shrontz
Northern Michigan University

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THE COLLECTED LETTERS AND UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS
OF KARIN PANKREEZ, NOVELIST ASPIRANT

By

Jason Shrontz

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2011
This thesis by Jason Shrontz is recommended for approval by the student’s Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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NAME: Jason Shrontz

DATE OF BIRTH: December 21, 1979
ABSTRACT

THE COLLECTED LETTERS AND UNPUBLISHED WRITINGS
OF KARIN PANKREEZ, NOVELIST ASPIRANT

By

Jason Shrontz

This novel contains the story of Karin Pankreez, an aspiring writer who gets caught up in the shady scheming of Bunsen Publishing representative, B. Hart, and his prized novelist, Finn Fien. When Karin is framed for the arson of the Baelb Library, he must prove his innocence by crafting a new narrative, one that exists in the world as much as it does on the page. With the help of an aging, obscure novelist, Karin begins blending fact and fiction to create a story in which he emerges as the hero. The novel is an exploration in storytelling, not as concerned with the narratives we write as it is with the narratives we create for each person we meet. It explores the defining qualities that places, memories, and mass media have on our lives, from the lies we intend to tell to the lies that just seem to slip out. Furthermore, the novel examines the defining nature of naming, in particular, the expectations or narratives we create when we give, or are given, a name.
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Jason Shrontz

2011
DEDICATION

For Stacey and Beatrice
ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Stephen Burn for his friendship, as well as his wisdom and devotion to this project. His guidance and careful reading have challenged me often throughout my graduate work, allowing me to grow as a writer and critic. Additionally, I’d like to thank Lee Siegel for his inspiration and encouragement. His advice and sense of humor have constantly helped this project to feel manageable. I’d also like to thank various members of the English Department for their support, particularly John Smolens, Kate Myers Hanson, and Rebecca Johns Trissler.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Guide* and the Department of English.
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INTRODUCTION

“Everything is artifice and mere appearance.”

-Don Quixote

The Conception

When I started working on The Collected Letters and Unpublished Writings of Karin Pankreez, Novelist Aspirant (TCLAUWOKPN-A) in the summer of 2009, it was quite another project altogether. I was interested primarily in creating a strong and visible plot, and populating it with lively characters capable of struggling through complex emotions and crises. Additionally, I wanted to use the structure of the novel to represent the role that chance plays in everyday life. Although as the creator, I would always be pulling the strings behind the scenes, I wanted the reader to be able to forget about my existence and experience the intersection of four disparate characters’ lives. The storyline, then, was simple: four characters from four different regions, all of whom were struggling in the current economic climate, would meet by chance on a train journey to Los Angeles. Their individual attempts to improve their conditions, as well as their numerous setbacks, would drive the plot forward. The intersections of their lives would allow them to share their burdens and move toward resolution. The novel was originally titled, This Monster Land, its title taken from a line in John Steinbeck’s Travels with Charley (1961): “So it was that I determined to look again, to try to rediscover this monster land” (5).

By the end of the summer of 2009, however, after struggling through several narrative problems, the novel took on quite a different shape.
The Problems

When working through the beginning of the novel, I discovered that I spent more time creating the individual lives of each character, than I did moving the plot forward. This was the first problem. There was neither beginning nor end. Each scene required a preceding and succeeding scene. (How will the reader accept that Ben is out of employment options if I don’t show him exhausting his options? How can I show him exhausting his options if I don’t show his desperation? How will the desperation be believable if I don’t also show him before the onset of desperation? Ad infinitum.) I was writing backwards at a very slow pace.

The second problem was that I quickly grew bored of the story’s didactic nature, and even more so of the pedantic and predictable devices an author uses to construct a narrative. An author must continually contrive and design a plot, and do so in such a way that prevents the reader from questioning the design; rather, the realist writer’s goal—at least as it seemed to me at the time—is to convince the reader that everything has actually happened, that it hadn’t been conjured in some ever-designing creator’s mind. The writer’s goal, then, is to manipulate the reader into suspending their disbelief. In short, I was disenchanted by the manipulation that takes place in narrative craft, though not nearly as much as I was exhausted by authors’ attempts to hide this manipulation.

In late fall of 2009, I found a way to deal with these problems. Instead of writing a novel about the fortuitous intersection of four desperate characters’ lives, I would write a novel about a writer trying to write a novel about the fortuitous intersection of four characters’ lives. The solution was in no way a novel one; many writers have produced such metafictional undertakings, including Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759-1769), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), and John Barth’s *Coming Soon!!* (2002). Even such
classics as Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (15th c.) and Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* (1605, 1615) use the crafting of narratives as subject matter.

A Possible Solution

With regard to the first problem, I recalled something Henry James had written, which my thesis director brought up during one of our early meetings. In the introduction to his second novel, *Roderick Hudson* (1875)—James wrote, “Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so” (8). Essentially, according to James, the character’s network of relations is infinite, and it is up to the writer to detach the narrative by inserting beginning and endpoints within the network. James continues to assert that “continuity of things is the whole matter . . . that this continuity is never . . . broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it (9). The infinite network, then, must achieve a precarious balance between remaining in the writer’s consciousness for the sake of believable continuity and being perpetually ignored in favor of advancing the plot. Without such a balance, the story could never be contained.

In his novel, *Once Upon a Time* (1994), John Barth addresses the same problem in a slightly different way:

Our lives are not stories, although we may make stories of them. . . . our lives are not inherently dramatical, not intrinsically meaningful. In most instances, our little victories and vicissitudes—even our mighty triumphs and disasters—are, from the dramaturgical point of view, meaningless, their only coherence the circumstance that
they all happened to us, the central character, with or without our agency. . . . And your death will not likely have significant bearing upon the life it ends. (169-170)

According to Barth, our life stories are created as an attempt to give meaning to our lives. Fiction, on the other hand, reverses that order by assuming meaning already exists, and that a story naturally contains and reveals that meaning; the assumption additionally suggests that each story inherently possesses a natural start and conclusion. When beginning This Monster Land, I forced myself to explore several important questions, as writers should certainly do. Perhaps the most important question I asked was why did this story matter? Does it contain any sort of intrinsic meaning or truth? The answer was, of course, no. It did not contain any meaning until I contrived the plot in such a way—a symbolic, empty factory here, a looming, dark sky there, and a couple teardrops at the end—that I created a previously non-existent meaning for my readers. To do this, I felt, was to assume that my readers were children, were in need of a fairy tale to teach them something. Such an endeavor probably has some value, though it is not in my interest to pretend I have something new to say about the economy, companionship, or heartache. These subjects, I believe, have been sufficiently and proficiently covered.

What I found more interesting was the exploration of how meaning is sought and created, particularly through the processes of writing. This required me to take a step back. Imagine an episode of your favorite crime drama being shot on location. If one of the many cameras were to shoot the scene twenty feet behind the other cameras, the entire dynamic of the program would shift. Instead of a crime drama, it would become a comedy, perhaps, or a documentary; the focus would shift from the solving of a crime to the construction and production of a hit television show. By allowing the program’s processes to enter the
viewing frame—in this case, television cameras, microphone booms, directors, and make-up artists would all be visible—the suspension of disbelief would be broken. The viewer would have to accept the contrivances of the story, from the use of make-up to show sleeplessness, to the individual placing of sponsored products. Such an experiment in fiction, then, has a similar effect. Not only does the reader now have the illusion of control—a dynamic shift in the reader-experience from *escaping into a text* to *participating in a text*—but the writer also gains freedom to develop rounder and more complex characters, to use E.M. Forster’s classifications, who are not limited to solely serve the advancement of plot (Forster 65). This isn’t to say that plot becomes dispensable, of course; rather, plot is less restrained by the stock of contrivances and gimmicks the writer possesses. In short, the reader is provided with a wider context: not only can they follow the plot, but they can also witness the processes the writer has gone through to craft that plot. Therefore, the contrivances lose their effect and the reader gains more immediate access to the complex consciousness of the characters.

**Critical Context**

One of the primary ways I’ve attempted to lessen the novel’s contrivances is through metafictional devices. Before I give examples, however, it is necessary to address the inherent paradox which occurs anytime a writer attempts to rid their writing of artificial means. It should be clear, then, that metafiction is certainly a contrivance in and of itself; it is a stylistic decision, made consciously by a writer in order to derive a particular affect from the reader. Metafiction functions primarily by disrupting the reader’s suspension of disbelief. As a result, it served my purposes in this novel by allowing me to turn the reader’s attention not only to the plot lines, but also to the processes through which the plotlines were
constructed. By utilizing this contrivance, I exposed the reader to several others throughout the novel. It seemed like a fair trade-off, to me.

In order to be clear about the functions of metafiction in *TCLAUWOKPNA*, I would like to briefly explore the effect and necessity of metafiction, as well as explore an example. In her book, *Metafiction* (1984), Patricia Waugh writes, “Metafiction, then, does not abandon ‘the real world’ for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover—through its own self-reflection—a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers” (18). The notion of re-examining the conventions of realism in order to engage contemporary readers was precisely the dilemma I felt I was facing in the early stages of the novel. Therefore, I began incorporating what I consider “metafictional moments” within the novel. This is to say, the novel isn’t a full blown study of how to write a novel; rather, it presents the reader with three primary plotlines, while also directing the reader occasionally to the artifice of the text. The effect is much like pausing, perhaps during the middle of an intense scene—the protagonist on a precipice deciding whether or not to jump—to inform the reader that what they are reading is imagined, that a trick is, indeed, being played upon the reader, and traps have been set to draw them in.

An extreme example of this type of metafiction can be found in B.S. Johnson’s novel *Albert Angelo* (1964), when three quarters of the way through the novel, he ends a chapter mid-sentence, and starts the following chapter as follows: “—fuck all this lying look what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing . . .” (167). Johnson continues to dispel the lies he’d established in the novel, causing his narrative to disintegrate in the process. While this application effectively critiqued traditional narratives and pointed the reader’s attention
toward the processes in *Albert Angelo*, I endeavored to employ the metafictional devices more subtly in my novel. I wanted draw the reader into the text with traditional conventions of fiction—inciting incident, rising action, sensory detail, climax, etc—while at the same time pulling the reader out of the story occasionally in order to remind them of the artifice of the text. This proved to be a complicated balance, as it wasn’t always easy to determine whether I had overstated or understated particular themes.

**Practical Application**

Throughout *TCLAUWOKPNA*, there are several thematic elements that are included to shift the focus from the primary plotline to the processes of the novel. Perhaps the foremost example is that the novel is about a writer who is writing a novel. The narrative challenges Karin faces in writing *This Monster Land* are often mirrored by the sequences of *TCLAUWOKPNA*. At the beginning, for example, when Karin is waiting to leave Prentice, he mentions on several occasions that if he could just move forward, his story would begin. Simultaneously, the characters in his novel also are waiting to depart on their train trip. It isn’t until Karin finally leaves Prentice, in fact, that his characters also get on the move. Additionally, there are minor themes throughout the novel that attempt to examine the relationship between a word and its intended meaning. This relationship is ultimately explored when Tabby tells Karin about the Arpoh Frey-Win, a cult whose higher calling is to stop the endless white noise that has distorted language, a result of signifiers’ inability to point toward a singular sign. Other explorations into a signs and signifiers include misinterpretations— in Chapter 41, Karen and Karin both assume the stranger, Jason Shrontz, is addressing the other— representations—in Chapters 24, 27, and 36, the symbolic representations of tombstone epigraphs are explored—and exclusions—the novel is
peppered with registered trademarks and copyrights to signify that certain words can be claimed and defined by corporations. The penultimate example of this is in Chapter 39, when B. Hart provides a list of words that Karin is not allowed to use in his novel, due to corporation’s ownership of the words.

In addition to thematic elements, I’ve also attempted to utilize formal and stylistic elements to address my initial problems of limiting the scope of the novel—containing it within an established beginning and endpoint—and resisting the urge to become didactic and pedantic in my writing. In this section, I will demonstrate how certain metafictional elements have been used formally and stylistically, to resolve these initial setbacks.

A crucial choice I made early in the novel was to create a cyclical pattern throughout the entire text. I felt that this would accomplish several things. First, the form of a circle represents a sort of infinite pattern. When the end is reached, and it appears eerily similar to the beginning, it suggests that the events could, and will, happen all over again. In terms of James’s assertion that the writer must draw a circle around infinite relations, the pattern both exemplifies the circle and the infinite relations. Second, since Karin’s adventure starts and ends in the same geographical location, I’ve established congruity between the start and end points. I attempted to establish this in a number of ways, all dealing primarily with form. To illustrate this, the novel’s structure can essentially be broken into ten sections, based on the opening and closing letters, and Karin’s position on the map. It looks like this: Opening Letter, Prentice, Boston, New York, Albuquerque, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Portland, Prentice, and Closing Letter. I chose this structure deliberately because of the roundness of the number ten: it is even and often represents completion. Even the “New” cities of York and Orleans mirror each other their order of appearance (four from the beginning and four from the end). In addition to the geographical locations of the novel, the events and setting
at the beginning and end are also very similar. In each scene, Karin is in a living room, watching his love interest (Anna at the beginning and Claire at the end) watch the snow accumulate while taking a break from his writing. Additionally, in each scene the characters sit amongst a mess of boxes, packing tape, and packing peanuts. Each scene culminates with Anna/Claire bringing in a letter from the mailbox, fixing a drink, and handing the letter to Karin. The congruity between the opening and closing scenes complete the cyclical form, and suggest the arbitrariness of beginnings and endings, they are determined by little more than the writer’s discretion in order to, as Barth suggests, create a story from which meaning can be derived.

The use of nonliterary matter—including letters, telephone and skype conversations, news articles, and budget charts—is another metafictional device that widens the novel’s scope and draws attention to its artifice. The multiple letters and emails within the novel both advance the plot and introduce the reader to a much larger fictional world, one with postal carriers and internet service providers. Furthermore, it places the larger narrative alongside common, everyday texts, suggesting that the creation of narrative is little more than the scrapping together of multiple texts. Narrative, then, can be created and altered by the omission and inclusion of extraliterary sources. The use of multiple texts to create a single narrative is meant not only to provide an array of perspective, but also to represent the multiple sources of information that must be sorted through in order to get closer to some semblance of truth. Each character Karin encounters in the novel is motivated by a unique desire, which simultaneously skews their interpretations and shades their accounts. Karin, like any reader of a text, must discerningly piece together multiple, often misleading fictions, in order to construct a single authentic narrative.
Stylistically, in *TCLAUWOKPNA*, I’ve also attempted to represent, as Waugh suggests, “a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers.” One way I’ve done this is through typography. The opening passage of the novel presented a difficult decision for me. On one hand, I considered opening with an account of the fire at the Baelb library. From a traditional narrative approach, this opening would drop the reader directly into the novel’s crisis, hooking them with the overarching plotline and compelling them to read further. On the other hand, I also wanted to immediately challenge the reader by questioning the novel’s authority. In order to do this, I opened with the following passage:

“Watching Anna watch the snow accumulate outside, I typed the words: “Anna stood at the window watching the snow accumulate outside, burying the lawn, the garden we had planted in the spring and neglected throughout the summer, the cars, the mailbox, and John, our mailman, who climbed our steps to exchange our Netflix movies and a rent check for a few envelopes and another movie. Everything outside was turning white so quickly, erasing all the detail we had known in our yards like, like, like an Etch-A-Sketch left atop a too-full washing machine during its spin cycle,” and then I read them back to her.”

Immediately, the passage opens with the protagonist watching a character watch something else. By having my protagonist collect his data and compose his silly narration through the eyes of another character, it initiates a sort of ad nauseam chain of collecting data, referring to the plethora of sources that information must be filtered through. Additionally, the protagonist is writing—struggling to concoct an awful metaphor—and the reader is introduced to the processes of writing which I discussed earlier. Finally, I chose to strike the passage through in order to represent the constant editing that takes place in the narratives.
we encounter on a day-to-day basis. In the final chapter, when the opening scene is essentially repeated, the passage is not struck through, and the metaphor has arguably improved; Karin has completed his revisions, having finally reached the end.

Another example is in the repetition of chapter 49. When Denison suggests that Karin start his novel in the middle, I, too, start in the middle. This stylistic choice is intended to represent Karin’s ultimate narrative struggle: how to draw a circle around a network of infinite relations. In the second appearance of Chapter 49, I’ve made some minor changes to once again suggest that the narrative is still in a state of revision.

Perhaps the primary stylistic choices I’ve made have to do with naming and word play. Often throughout the novel, I’ve included anagrams that refer to canonical pieces of literature or themes. Since it ruins the fun of figuring them out, I’ll only give away a few: In Chapter 36, the reclusive author D.J. Glinears is an anagram for J.D. Salinger; in Chapter 44, the Fien novel, Torah Done, is an anagram for On the Road; and the Baelb Library is a loosely veiled anagram for Borges’ “Library of Babel.”

More crucial than the anagrams, however, are the characters names. Often, the names were chosen to represent the role of the character within the narrative, as is frequently demonstrated by the order of the letters within the names. A prime example is Karin’s first love interest, Anna Bertreb. Her first and last names are both palindromes; the sequence of letters goes only as far as the middle of the word before returning once again to the beginning. I chose this to show Anna’s inability to ever move past the middle of a narrative. At one point, her sister, Abby, confides to Karin, “Anna starts at the beginning, but never makes it past the opening scenes. She gets to the end of the beginning, and when she discovers she is about to enter the middle, she finds a new beginning” (210). This tendency is also represented later when, after Karin arrives at the ending, Anna is no longer
in his life. Karin’s name represents his role in the novel as well. His initials K and P are both situated in the middle of the alphabet; there are ten letters before K and ten after P. While this suggests that Karin has difficulties with beginnings and endings, his problem is resolved with the last letter of his surname, Z, which illustrates his ability to eventually find an ending. Some other word play with names include Claire Ceily (a play on “see clearly,” which is her function in the novel), and Laurence Sleightor (the “sleight” in his last name refers to the work of a magician, who, like a novelist, is challenged to convince their audience to believe in something that is not there. The name is fitting for Laurence, as he is the ultimate storyteller at the novel’s end, having constructed all the final events).

*The Collected Letters and Unpublished Writings of Karin Pankreez, Novelist Aspirant* is in no small part an exploration of plot and narrative craft. Through the use of thematic, formal, and stylistic elements, I attempted to demonstrate the processes of narrative constructions, while also addressing the contrivances writers use to dupe a reader into suspending their belief for the duration of the novel. By putting these processes on display, utilizing several metafictional devices, I hope to engage the reader with a “fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers.” Moreover, I hope to thoroughly explore the relationship between truth and storytelling, while also engaging the reader with an entertaining batch of lies.
Our lives are not stories, although we may make stories of them. In this singer’s opinion, our lives are not inherently dramatical, not intrinsically meaningful. In most instances, our little victories and vicissitudes—even our mighty triumphs and disasters—are, from the dramaturgical point of view, meaningless, their only coherence the circumstance that they all happened to us, the central character, with or without our agency. “It was the culmination of all my labors,” this one declares; or that one, “It was the shattering of all my hopes.” Well, it was not: only of all our hopes and labors in that category, however principal, of your multifarious life, however “single-minded.” And your death will not likely have significant bearing upon the life it ends.

John Barth, Once Upon a Time

She said if love, if love, is a poison cup, then drink it up. Cause a sip, a sip, or a spoonful won’t do, won’t do nothing for you, except mess you up.

M. Ward, “Poison Cup”
Chapter 0: Before the Beginning, December 23

Watching Anna watch the snow accumulate outside, I typed the words: “Anna stood at the window watching the snow accumulate outside, burying the lawn, the garden we had planted in the spring and neglected throughout the summer, the cars, the mailbox, and John, our mailman, who climbed our steps to collect our rent check and drop off a few more bills. Everything outside was becoming white, erasing all the detail we had known in our yards like, like, like an Etch-A-Sketch left atop a too-full washing machine during its spin cycle,” and then I read them back to her.

“It’s an awful metaphor,” she said, and stepped around the boxes, tape, and packing peanuts that were scattered about the floor. Spilling the foam peanuts from her slippers, she slipped them on and went outside to get the mail. She was right about the metaphor, and I struck it through.

I had been at the computer most of the morning, going through some of the edits that Anna had given me on my manuscript, and Anna had been filling boxes with her belongings. We shared an ongoing joke since the week we met four years ago. One would catch the other unaware and softly narrate his or her actions. It had lost some of its fun since Anna became an editor.

Anna told me she was purging, and I believed her.

Anna reappeared through the front door, a dusting of snow on her shoulders. Cold air swirled around the room and after a couple dry coughs, the heater kicked on. Anna was hiding something. I asked her about the letter.

“Too early for a drink?” she responded. It was 11:30 AM. She carried a bottle of bourbon back in one hand; two glasses full of ice were pinched between the fingers of her
other hand. Anna’s wide blue eyes widened further with either anticipation or
disappointment. I couldn’t tell.

Without setting down the glasses, Anna leaned in and kissed me. The taste of coffee
and Colgate transferred from her mouth to mine. She set down the glasses and removed a
letter from her waistband. It was from The Whitmore Agency. The letter was not too thick,
maybe only a page or two, and for some reason I thought this was a bad sign. The ice cubes
shifted and shrunk as Anna poured the bourbon.

“Open it,” she said, and I did. As I read, her breath pulsed into my ear.

21 December 2009

Dennison Whitmore
Whitmore Agency
1478 Trunnel Blvd
New York, NY

Dear Karin Pankreez,

I regret to inform you that I am unable to find any publishers that are willing to bring The SauerKraut
Circus to print at this time. Though the account of your grandfather’s immigration to this country, and his
service during World War II is both tragic and beautifully rendered, the publishers that I have been in
contact with—and trust me, there have been many—find a few problems with the story.

The main issue with the book, according to the publishers who took the time to provide notes on the
manuscript, is that there seem to be several instances in which you take some liberty with the truth. For
example, how can you actually know that, on page 412, your grandfather was the last man alive at the battle
of Suceur, when he was killed minutes later after limping across a live mine? Also, it seems impossible that
you were able to reprint entire entries from his journal (dates 4 Aug 1943 on page 37, 25 Aug 1943 on
page 138, 1 Dec 1943 on page 643, and 21 Dec 1943, the day of his death, on page 712), particularly
when you state on page 713 that “Private Pankreez blotted the tip of his pen like a mother dabs at her
child’s scraped knee. He covered the pen in the hanky that Karen had given him before the war began and
that he had carried from front to front, cried into, bled into, screamed into, and he tucked it into his breast
pocket along with his journal and his tobacco pipe. It would be his last entry ever written into the journal.
Before the end of the night, yes, even before the rooster crows thrice, Private Pankreez, along with his journal
would be burned away and trampled into the German soil from which he rose, thirty-four years ago, and will never be seen again.”

Reading the above passage once more only increases the grief with which I relay this information, as such language as in the sentences above deserve to be, no, must be printed. With this letter, I fear that I rob the world of a story it must bear, of words it must read aloud. It is unfortunate, however, though perhaps not insignificant, that certain details of your book are simply not verifiable. Though I trust that you are telling the truth, that you have not so much as described a blade of grass falling to the left when in reality it fell to the right. Regretfully, I simply do not have the means, nor the influence, nor the power to persuade not only the publishers, but future readers who, contrary to the evidence provided by the New York Times Bestseller list, can be quite a scrutinizing and discernable group, and with much influence. Need I remind you of the recent debacle of author J. McFry, when a popular talk show host happened to discover that he had stretched the truth? Karin, she tore him into a million little pieces. We do not want such a spectacle to recur.

It is with much disappointment and grief that I inform you that we’ve come to the end of the road with this project in its current form. Unfortunately, I have nobody else to send it to. My suggestion to you is that you put it down for a while, travel, read, and start working on some of those new ideas that you’ve been putting off in order to complete this project. Feel free to contact me once you have the next one started. It is my most sincere hope that you will not let this minor setback affect our relationship in any way.

Your agent and your friend,
Dennison Whitmore

I went back to the computer. Anna set her glass on the floor and continued packing her boxes.

“Did you notice the discrepancies that Dennison wrote about?” I asked after too long a silence.

She didn’t answer.

“Why didn’t you bring them up?”

“There was nothing wrong with them.”

“It seems that their existence is what’s wrong with them.”
“Karin,” she said, “if you want your book to be real, like life, it needs discrepancies. It’s the discrepancies that make your grandfather a hero. They show your love for your character.”

“But he said they were lies.”

“So?”

“I can’t prove that they were not.”

“All stories lie, especially the true ones. How are you supposed to write the truth about something without lying? Even if you used pictures, and tape recorders, and printed them all on the back of the actual pages from your grandfather’s journal, you’d still need a narrator, someone to organize the events, interpret the things that can’t be reduced to a document.”

I stomped a pile of packing peanuts into floor. When I lifted my foot, they appeared as fresh as they ever had. Anna taped up the last of her boxes and stacked them next to the door.
Chapter 1: Chapters 1, January 20

This was where I lived. This white expanse, broken up and divided, splattered by black lines and curls of trees that look dead but were not, the underside of sod turned over by the plows, and the wet, shiny surface of the blacktop roads. Out the cafe window, a single light lit, illuminating a small corner of the empty parking lot. It was 9:45 PM. Soon after, another flicked on, and another. By 11:00 PM, I was certain that Anna Bertreb had forgotten to pick me up.

I pulled from my wallet a few dollars and set them on the table, reading once more through what I’d written, and then I closed my computer and began to walk home in the blowing cold:

It was that time of year in New York when the humidity rose and carried with it the stench of over-ripe fruit. Unlike the smaller cities of the Midwest, there were few alleys in New York City, and trash would often sit on the streets several days before getting picked up. Anybody who had a dime to their name found somewhere else to be this time of year. Ben had scrounged up a dollar-fifty in change for a tall can of beer in a black plastic bag and carried it in front of him, just on the inside of his summer sports coat. His only sports coat. His interview jacket is what it was. The jacket was light brown with a thin nylon lining. It was wrinkled in the back and the collar did not lie down right.

I didn’t like it. It couldn’t stand alone as a chapter. It’s much too short.
Chapter 2: The (non-metaphorically) Long Walk Home, January 20

As I left the café, another light hanging over the wet parking lot stuttered in the cold dark, and then flashed on. The sign above the cafe, The Chanting Hunters, hummed, and below me, down the hill, a car's tires splashed across the yellow line and spit up slush behind it. It was almost a three-mile walk to the apartment I shared with Anna. The air was cold. I pulled my hood up and shouldered my bag and began walking through the lot to the road.

I thought, as I walked along the grey slushy area between the black asphalt and the white banks of snow, about the first time I had arrived in Prentice, before I began working for the parks department, before I had decided to move here, and before I had met Anna. It was not winter then, inasmuch as there was no snow on the ground and night did not bring a patrol of plows and flashing yellow lights, but I had the feeling that winter never left this place, but rather hung in the air waiting for an opportunity to drop.

I was in Prentice then, very much by accident. I had been on a flight to visit my brother in Waterville, Maine. Somewhere over the Midwest, there was engine trouble and we had to land at O'Hare. The delay was going to be overnight, and I received a partial refund on the ticket and a discount on a rental. I was going to drive to the East coast and I was going to take my time. I took a Northern route through Wisconsin, Michigan, and Canada, and somewhere along the Michigan border, I managed to drive almost a hundred in the wrong direction. I pulled off at the next exit and looked for a hotel.

The town was called Prentice. It was not a large town, at least compared to the cities along the West Coast where I had spent the last three years, but larger than I would’ve thought existed this far north. There was a university, a Greyhound station, and a Walmart.
After I checked into my hotel and called my brother to tell him I’d be delayed, I bought some cigarettes and a bottle of beer, and headed back to the room.

In the lobby, when I returned, I met Carrie. The establishment was plain. The carpets were thin hotel-colored carpets and the shades were thick, hotel-colored drapes. Everything in the room had the suggestion of hotel: the over-stuffed couches that faced each other in the lobby, separated by a wooden table covered in pamphlets, yellow tri-folded paper with crooked print that advertised boat tours and zoos and annual festivals, the painting above the chairs of the Springer spaniel overlooking a pond full of mallards, the smell of burned coffee and carpet cleaner, and the manual push vacuum that leaned against the garbage bin near the entrance. The items seemed not to have a point of entry into existence, but have always existed, permanent. Carrie, too, looked fixed in her time and place, though I would eventually learn this was not true. She was standing behind the front counter, leaning over a paperback when I turned toward the stairs, carrying the bottle of beer; her light brown hair hung around the edges of the pages and curled just above the counter. She looked up at me and flipped the book closed, rustling the pages and marking her spot with a long, slender finger that was wrapped by a bronze ring. I immediately recognized the cover of her book and decided to talk to her.

“That’s one of my favorites,” I said from across the room.

She looked down at the two large letters that covered the cover, one on top of the other in ascending, alphabetical order. “You’ve read this? I didn’t think anybody had read this.”

“You think you’re the first?”

“I thought maybe I was in the top twenty, at least. I mean, that’s sort of the attraction of reading them, right?”
“Yeah, I guess. It’s part of it. I mean, we don’t read them with the intention of making any money.” She looked up at me; a smile, slow to start, spread across her face and she stood up straight and leaned her hips forward against the counter, planting her hands on top of it.

“You have read it.”

“Have not only read it, but devoted a year’s worth of my master’s work to writing about it.”

“Must’ve been a long year.”

“Yeah, but not unenjoyable.” She looked up at the clock. “Are you off soon?” I asked.

“Not until seven.” The short hand on the clock ticked past the eleven. She leaned back over the counter and extended a hand. “I’m Anna,” Carrie said.

“Your nametag disagrees.” She reached inside the top of her shirt and removed the magnet that held her nametag in place.

“Yeah. I guess I’m caught. It’s a thing I’ve been doing since I started working here. When I started they didn’t have any tags left and never got around to ordering more.”

“And you are Carrie while at work?”

“Just tonight. They have a drawer full of them from employees who quit showing up. I go through it and pick a new one each night. It’s become a sort of game, choosing who to be each night.”

“So, now that you’ve taken Carrie off, should I expect a change?”

“Naturally.” She pulled open a drawer and dropped Carrie back into it, rummaged through the pile and affixed a new one to her shirt. When she looked back at me, she was
Susan. “I was Steve all last week. A few customers even used it, commented on how they had never met a girl named Steve before.”

“Stevie Nicks.”

“Yeah, there’s her. At least she can sing. The whole naming thing baffles me, anyway. I mean, how do parents do it? They must think at first, we’ll give her a cute name, or a trendy name, something like Ella, Isabel, or Sofia. But really, all you’re doing is naming her after your own idea of what those names represent, an actress you like named Sofia or the tragic but graceful character you remember from a childhood story named Isabella. You’re setting up expectations for her, determining who she will become based on your experiences with the name, though her experiences with the name will be completely different than yours. It’s an awful game. It’d be better if we just named children like we name hurricanes; hospitals could simply ascend the alphabet, choosing a stock name each time, Amy, Brenda, Cindy, Debra, and parents would quit being disappointed when Ella did not turn out to be an Ella, and when Sofia still wets her bed until she was nine, dyes her hair black and cuts it short, and smokes Marlboro Reds in Junior High until she has a voice of gravel at graduation, her parents could never complain, late at night when the house lights are off, that Sofia did not turn out anything like we expected her to when we brought her home from the hospital. You see, it is very difficult for an Amy not to turn out to be an Amy, and a Brenda, a Brenda, but how is a girl supposed to live up to be a Sofia?”

I pulled the bottle of beer that I had bought earlier from its bag and asked if it was alright to drink it in the lobby. Anna said it was okay. “You like that name, Sofia, don’t you?”

‘I don’t know. Sofias seem like they’d be stuck up or prudish. I’d hate to become that way simply because of my name.” Anna refused the drink when I offered to pour her some.
“It’s difficult enough to stay awake during this shift” she said. “So,” she continued, “what’s your name?”

“Karin.”

“Come on. This is my game.”

I showed her my license.

“Boy,” she said. She wore the dilemma on her wrinkled brow and in her fingers as she tugged at a lock of curls hanging in front of her left ear.

“Perhaps there is nothing yet written down for me. No conclusions, no arc.” I attempted to bring the revelation back to its comfortable state of triviality.

“It could be unchartered territory.” she said, without changing her expression. “A boy named Karin. It must be unnerving. Your whole life, unnerving.”

“I don’t think of it that often.”

“Yes you do,” she said, almost defensively. She looked up at me. And then turned and disappeared throughout a doorway behind the counter, a move I would later become extremely familiar with. I sat down on the couch and drank my beer, thumbing through a pamphlet advertising the largest corn mazes in all of Wisconsin. I heard her typing away at a keyboard somewhere in the hidden parts of the office where I was not allowed.

After twenty minutes or so, she returned. She was smiling and twirling a washcloth in her right hand, as though we hadn’t just met. As she began wiping down the desk counters, she asked, “What brings you to Prentice, then, Karin?”

“A bad sense of directions. I took a wrong turn in Compson.”

“Compson?” she repeated. “That’s almost a hundred miles away.”

“Yeah.”
I stayed in the lobby until after three in the morning talking with Anna or Carrie or Susan or Steve or whoever she was. She asked about my schooling, and I learned that she was from Boston, originally, studied English at New York University, and was now working as an editor for a University Press. Throughout the night, I drank my beer and followed her around the room, assisting her in taking out the garbage, vacuuming the rugs, and folding sheets. I would not get an early start in the morning, I knew, though I did not know that I would end up staying in Prentice for eight days before I called and apologized to my brother and drove back to Chicago to return the rental, having spent most of my money on the hotel room, restaurant bills, beer, and gas money as Anna and I began driving each day farther and farther outside of Prentice.

Though things were not ideal between Anna and me as I walked home in the slush, along the shoulder of the dark road that night after being forgotten at the café, I do not regret taking the wrong turn in Compson and ending up at Prentice. I was comfortable with my schedule, now, working at the parks department. It was nice, working with a shovel in the mornings, and writing in the afternoons, often late into the evenings.

But that was about the only thing I could relish on the way home from the café. Water had soaked through my tennis shoes, and they squeaked and sponged with each step. Whenever a car came down the road, I was blinded by its headlights yet convinced the driver could not see me. I walked closer and closer to the snow bank each time I was passed. I thought about the slip of paper in my wallet that Anna had given me way back then as I brought down my suitcase to spend a final evening following her around as she emptied trashes, swept, and folded sheets. I promised not to read it until I reached Chicago, but read it as soon as I had an excuse for going into the lobby bathroom:
Karin,

Come back to see me.

Yours,
A.B.

P.S. 5 male Karens:
1. Karen Asrian: A male Armenian chess grandmaster. He died of a heart attack when he was twenty-eight.
2. Karen Demirchyan: A male Armenian politician. He was the First Secretary of the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic. He was assassinated in 1999.
3. Karen Khachaturian: A male Armenian/Russian composer. His mother was an actress, his father a theater producer. He lives into old age in Moscow.

Her number was on the back, but I was perplexed by her message. It offered no clues as to why she wanted me to come back to see her. No access into her thoughts of the previous week, the hours spent lying on our backs on the lobby couches sharing our own narratives, reading in the library during the afternoons, and driving along the country roads, listening to her impressive collection of tapes and stopping to take pictures of old barns. At her suggestion, I was to come to see her again. The request sounded more like that from a doctor or a geriatric than from a girl whom I cancelled my vacation plans for. But I imagine she knew that I would, and I did, and still I couldn’t get my mind off why she wasn’t there to pick me up.

It is possible that she had fallen asleep watching television. This had become a habit of hers lately. She worked long hours, read all day, and when she was finished, she often sat on the couch to watch whichever new reality show was on that night. She maintained that they were better scripted than most of the garbage she had read during the day. So, that was a possibility. It is also possible that something had come up and she had tried to contact me.
I do not bring a phone with me when I write. I am unable to ignore a call, and am easily and often distracted. Leaving a phone at home was actually her suggestion. It is also possible that her vehicle wouldn't start. When it is this cold out, the battery can be temperamental.

The walk home ascended a hill, the crest of which was the halfway point, and descended all the way into the driveway of our apartment. When I reached the crest of the hill, I noticed a funny thing. The sky was a hazy purple, and I could see the town of Prentice below me and to the east. From the center of town, a small tower of grey smoke rose from one of the downtown buildings downtown. I first mistook it for a spotlight, like the kind you’d see at a car lot during a sale, or from a circus. But there were no car lots downtown, nor was there a circus that I was aware of. It wasn’t until I saw the flashing lights followed by distant sirens that I knew there was a fire. I could not distinguish exactly which building the tower of smoke was rising from, just that the smoke rose high, eventually disappearing in the haze and dissipating in the starless sky. There was no movement to it. It stood permanently as though it had always been there and would always remain. I stopped for a moment and saw the entire town laid out as a grid. I could see everything, more than its participants could perceive, perched high upon this frigid hilltop. At one end of town, cars stopped at a traffic light were oblivious that ahead of them they would be asked to turn around and find another route. The fire trucks that headed toward the center of town were unaware that the snowplows were heading toward them in a rush to clear the streets for them. The vehicles that were just leaving the parking lot of the football stadium at the north end of town to crowd the downtown streets were unaware of the fire, and those attending the fire were unaware that the football game had gone into overtime and the attendees were just now leaving to fill the bars downtown. I watched as the flashing lights steadily made
their way to the tower of smoke, and then I started walking again. Soon, the road began its
descent and ducked behind some woods, and I could no longer see any of it.
Chapter 3: I Had Helped her Pack, January 20

When I reached the front door, it was cracked open. We lived on the first floor of a house that had been divided into three apartments—one downstairs and two upstairs. I hesitated before going in, looked down at my hands. They felt like glass, and would not follow the simple commands I gave them. I stuck them into the front pocket of my sweatshirt, which was as cold as the outside of my sweatshirt. Fuck it. Cold hands or not, I wasn’t going to stop anybody from doing what they came to do. I wasn’t even sure I could make it inside. The moisture from the slush had crept up my pant legs almost to my knees. I was in pretty rough shape. I could not be, I believed, in rougher shape. But when I managed to push the front door open, and I saw the suitcases lying next to the inside of the door, and heard Anna mutter, “Oh my-” in the living room, and peeked around the corner to see her sitting on the edge of the couch, hunched over her knees with her attention on the television, I saw that I was wrong.

“Anna?”

She didn’t answer. I repeated, “Anna?”

She didn’t look back at me, but she held up a finger as if to say, give me a moment.

Soon, as we stood there, Anna enraptured in whatever it was that was on the television, and me trying to prioritize the “hushing” gesture with the suitcases leaning near the door with being abandoned at the café, clearly not in control of this scene, the television flipped into commercial. I said her name again. This time she looked back at me.

“Shit. Why are you home already?”

“Wait. Home already? What do you- You were supposed to pick me up at the Hunters. Where were you?” I asked. She looked back at me. A lock of hair hung down the
front of her face, drawing a line down the middle of her right eye. She grabbed it between her thumb and forefinger, twisted it, tucked it behind her ear. I said, “Anna? The suitcases.”

“Karin, I’m leaving.”

“What do you mean leaving? The television. You’re watching.”

“How’d the writing go tonight?” she asked.

“What?”

“The writing. How’d it go tonight? Another paragraph written? What’s that make, a page?”

“Anna, you know this stuff takes time. The research, the planning, the, wait. You were supposed to pick me up almost three hours ago. What are you doing? When were you planning on leaving?”

“Well,” she looked past me at her bags, and then around the room: to the bookshelf between the bedroom and the television, into the kitchen where the carpet ended and the white linoleum began to curl upwards, to my desk that was buried under some cds and my winter coat, and a grocery bag full of other grocery bags that I’d been meaning to take back to the store. “I was going to be gone by the time you got home.”

“I walked home,” I said.

“That was quick.”

“Anna, it’s not even twenty degrees out there. Look at my pants, they’re soaked.” She glanced back at the television.

She said, “I figured you’d call somebody.”

“You know I don’t bring my phone with me when I write. And it’s impossible to find a pay— Damn it, quit changing the subject. Are you leaving?”
“I was just about to, but I got distracted.”

“Distracted? You’re here alone.”

“Just distracted,” she said. I looked around the room. It was quiet except for the tribal beat now coming from the television. Men in business suits stood in Times Square around a barrel that had a fire in it. It was snowing there, too, and the men had shadows of beards and gelled hair. Their ties were tied around their heads like bandannas.

“You got distracted watching television, didn’t you?”

“No.”

“Anna? Fuck.”

“I turned the television on while I was packing. You know, as a distraction from how tough this is. It is tough for me, you know. I was just about to leave, and NYC-Vivor® came on, and by the time I gathered my stuff by the door, I was hooked. You know I love this show.”

“Are you kidding?” I asked.

“You want to watch the rest with me?”

“Are you gonna stay?” I asked.

“Well, no, I have something—”

“Anna, if you’re going to leave, you need to do it. But, don’t do it. Stay.”

“I’m taking the—my—car.”

I sat down on the couch. The closet doors scraped against the floor as Anna dug for her coat, and her shoes squeaked on the fake hardwood floor. I asked her, as the wheels of her suitcase bounced off of the hardwood, over the door frame and onto the cement porch outside, “Can you leave your key?”

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She had to take off a pair of mittens in order to get the key off the ring, and she reached over and hung it, by itself, on the hook next to the door. “Karin,” she said, “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t respond.

She was almost to the driveway, and I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t slammed the door yet. She turned to me once more, and said, “I forgot to tell you. Another letter came for you, from Dennison. It’s on your desk.

“Anna. Fuck. What—” I started to say, but before I could finish she slammed her car door, which was just as well. I didn’t have an ending. When her taillights faded out of view, I closed the door and rummaged through the kitchen cupboards for the bourbon. I carried the bottle into the living room and collapsed onto the couch.

On the television, the show Anna’d been watching, a man was now being interviewed by the host. He had on suit pants that were torn at the knees. I couldn’t tell if he had won or been eliminated, or if anything had happened. They showed flashbacks of what I guess were previous episodes. He had dark hair and a square jaw, and in every scene, whether he was being slapped or was climbing into a hot-tub with a couple of young women, if he was being yelled at or they were counting money out into his palm, he had the same expression: left eyebrow slightly raised over squinting eyes, the right corner of his mouth slightly twisted up, and his chin shaded by a five-o-clock shadow. I don’t know how long I continued to watch. I remember hearing the car pull out of the driveway and its tires splash through the slush along the road, but that had been a while ago.

When the show ended, another one began. I slipped the strap of my bag over my head and I took off my wet pants. I sat and watched the show in my underwear until the end. And then another one began. When the fourth began, I was holding an empty glass. I
refilled it. When the real live contestants, chosen at random from over ten thousand applicants, laughed, I laughed; when they were sad, I was too. When male contestants left female contestants, or female contestants left male contestants, I could empathize with them. I mean, it isn’t easy. It isn’t fucking easy aligning your life with another person in a way that you can co-exist together, under the same roof. These people understood that. It was as though I were watching myself through these non-actors—except, of course, for the business suits—and whatever they did, I felt as though I had also done it, but they had a voice to narrate what exactly they were going through, and as I listened to this voice talk about dreams and careers and love and chances chances chances, the voice was also narrating my life; it was explaining to me what I was going through.

I refilled my glass and remembered the letter Anna had mentioned before leaving. It was buried underneath a pile of shit on my desk. I brought it back to the couch.

18 January 2010

Dennison Whitmore
Whitmore Agency
1478 Trunnel Blvd
New York, NY

Dear Karin Pankreuz,

I received a strange phone call today about your manuscript. A small publisher, one that you’ve probably never heard of (I hadn’t and cannot imagine how they got a hold of your manuscript in the first place), has read it and loved it. The problem is they were disappointed to find out that it was all true.

Naturally, I asked them if they considered publishing it. And to tell you the truth, Karin, the outfit sounded like real elitists, people with god-knows-what sort of agenda. The man on the phone, Mr. Harr, I believe, was his name, went on and on about what he felt was his role in the crucial propagation of storytelling, of fiction as the only true art. They could not, he assured me, possibly print such truths. He did, however, ask if you had anything else. A novel. I told him you did not at this time, to which he responded that, based on the
reading of your manuscript, he was willing to sign something, to provide you with a modest commission if you agreed to write one, provided that he got first dibs on it.

To be honest, Karin, the guy did not seem very trustworthy. Now, I am not one to advise my prospective clients to turn down money, but the entire deal reeked of deception. As the writer, however, I naturally leave this decision up to you. So, what do you think? Do you have a novel in you?

Yours,
D. Whitmore
Whitmore Agency

I carried my glass to my desk and sent Dennison an email. I told him I’d consider writing a novel, that some time had recently opened up in my life. I had, in fact, been working on a new idea recently, since the news about *The SauerKraut Circus*. It was fiction, the new thing. Plus, the money would be nice. Plus, I would like to travel, perhaps.

But a novel. I had an idea, a story, but I didn’t know what to do with it. I couldn’t figure out where to begin.

Before I shut off my computer, a message popped up alerting me of a new email. It was from Dennison, and it read, “Why don’t you start where all novels start? In the middle.”
When I found Anna in Portland, she’d been expecting me. It was the first time in a really long time I remembered her even waiting for me, let alone anticipating my arrival. The writing, well, I’d actually written some on the train, I mean really wrote; I didn’t copy anything. The truth is, it was a distraction from how shitty I’d felt about leaving Claire. But now that you’ve caught up, you know. Truthfully, the writing was terrible, and there seemed not to be a foreseeable improvement. You’ve made it here, so I suppose you know. After finishing things with Anna, who’d long since finished things with me, I’d head back to Prentice, on my own accord, and I would face the end, whatever it brought. Until then, you should take some satisfaction in knowing that you’ve made it to the near ending, the moment before the climax, the calm before the storm. I assure you, a storm is coming.

Anna sat at a brewery, alone at an outdoor table, and she was wearing dark sunglasses and a sleeveless tank-top I don’t remember ever having been in our once-shared closet. There was no color in her cheeks, and I dreaded to hear her speak. I’d much rather put my headphones back on and listen to a tape, the mix Claire had given me what seemed like years ago, though I know it had only been weeks, when I’d first left Prentice. Her tank top was yellow, sort of, though not the kind of yellow that you’d associate with the word; it was nothing like the sun, and it was not like a bottle of mustard; it was the yellow of faded pages and of drywall hung below a leaky patch in the roof, and it was stretched tight across her abdomen as she leaned back, craning her neck over her shoulder, and said, “Hey, Karin.”

“Can I sit down?”

“Of course,” she laughed, and set down the paperback she’d been reading. I glanced at the cover and recognized the title, Na’n Lure. “Welcome to Portland,” she said as she
crossed her legs and shifted her weight forward, onto her right elbow. It wasn’t until I sat down and placed my bag at the feet of the iron deck table that I realized her hair had been dyed a darker shade of brown.

“You look great,” I said. “This place, Portland, it’s not bad, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. I’ve only been here a day and a half.” She lifted her glass and took a long drink from her amber beer and with her thumb and index finger wiped the foam from her upper lip.

“Your hair is darker than it was. I mean, it’s a great color for you. When did you dye it?”

She pinched a curl and pulled it taut in front of her sunglasses. Her eyebrows rose and her nose squished upwards as she looked over her sunglasses to see the dark strand.

“Dyed it?” She looked surprised. “This is the real color, silly. I quit dying it after,” she paused, and then continued, “when I started traveling. You’ve seen it this color before, right?”

“Of course I have,” I lied.

“I’ve quit wearing those awful contacts too.” She raised her sunglasses and nested them high upon her head, revealing her hazel eyes which I’d always known as blue. “I’m sorry. I know your thing with sunglasses. Don’t worry. I’m looking at you when I talk,” she said as she looked past me toward the Willamette River. I reached in my pocket for something to hold on to, looking at the table, studying the way her tan wrists flexed as she lifted her glass once more to her lips. I gripped the handle of the knife I’d acquired shortly after the last time I’d spoken with Anna. Me, gripping the knife, by the way, foreshadows nothing. Since New Orleans, I’d just started carrying it again, and it was in my pocket, so I gripped it.
“So, what are you reading?” I finally asked.

She picked up the book and opened it to somewhere in the middle, holding her finger in a spot, perhaps chosen at random, and then closed it and looked at the cover. “It’s called *Ranger Em, The Best Side*, by N’an Lure.” I noticed my error; the actual title was hidden in the glossy purple cover beneath a pair of eyes that intimated fear and haunting, shrunken below N’an Lure, the author’s name.

“What’s it about?”

“What’s it about?” she repeated. “It’s about people, about cities and trains and long stretches of highway alongside soybean fields. It’s about deception and fucking and dying. What do you think it’s about? It’s about love.”

“Sounds accurate,” I said, immediately regretting my biting tone.

“So,” she said, setting the book back onto the table. “How’s this game work? I ditch you in Prentice, you ditch me in LA. I suppose it’s my turn, right? Is that why you so urgently insisted I meet you in Portland?” She wasn’t angry; rather, she smirked, fully engaged and ready to give this game her all.

“Anna, this isn’t a game. I met you here because,” I started to say, when the waiter walked by. I caught his attention and ordered a Rob Roy.

“Oh come on, Karin. A Rob Roy? This is the microbrew capital of the country and you’re going to drink that snobby sludge?” She flagged the waiter before he went inside.

“Scratch the Scotch,” she said. “Bring him the dopplebock.” She looked back at me. “You were saying?”

“Anna, I never sent you an email asking you to meet me in Portland. I received your email three days ago. I was meant to leave for Prentice the following morning, but I took a
chance and came here to meet you. In truth, I came here in order to,” I tried to say it, but

Anna cut me off.

“I’m confused,” she said. “Is this part of the game?”

“There isn’t a game, Anna.”

“I only sent my email as a response to the email you sent me.”

Anna and I’s meeting, here in Portland, was not chance. She had received an email, allegedly from me, and had only responded. There was no doubt Fien had set this up.

“Anna, I think this meeting was designed, a trick. What sort of communication have you had recently with Fien?”

Before she could answer the waiter came back with my drink. He looked down at Anna’s book. “Ranger Em,” he said. “Incredible, isn’t it?”

“I can’t put it down.” The waiter didn’t move. He looked expectantly at Anna.

“We’re kinda in the middle of something,” I said, slowly looking up at him, annoyed.

He glared back, challenging me until he was called by another server from somewhere within the brewery.


“I wasn’t protecting you.”

“Either way, I liked it. You’ve changed a bit in your travels.”

“It’s just, I’m exhausted. A lot has happened.”

“It’s a true story, you know.”

“What is?”

“The book,” she said, holding it up once more. There was such cheesiness to the way she displayed it, as though plugging a product in a film.
“I’ll check it out,” I lied again.

Foam swelled above the top of the glass and a thin line of dark liquid streaked to the bottom where it pooled at the table. Without warning, Anna swept her finger across the top of the beer, scooping up a dab of head like it was frosting from a cake and put her finger into her mouth.

“Is that a Portland thing?”

“Try it,” she said, and like most things she suggests, I did. It didn’t taste like much, but I lifted my eyebrows, regardless. “It’s not the taste you’re paying attention to, dork. Look at how the foam on top the beer stays suspended like that, even after you remove your finger. The higher the foam stands after you pull your finger away, the realer the beer is.”

“The realer?”

“The more authentic it is. The more natural and fresh.” I tried it again, but the head shriveled back when my finger came in contact with it.

“Anna, there is something else going on here. “Did you happen to mention the reading to Fien?”

She looked away, took a long sip from her beer.

“Anna?”

She flagged down the waiter to order another. He brazenly brought her one, smirking at me as he did.

Finally, after sipping at the foam of her fresh beer, she said, “It just came up, when he was in L.A.”

“He was in L.A?”

“Yeah, just a couple days after you left. He asked to meet with me, about the editing opportunity.”
I couldn’t believe it. He had known about the reading, and I was certain who had
told him, though I couldn’t figure out Laurence’s angle on this entire thing. He seemed to
legitimately hate Fien, and I didn’t think he was on that good of terms with Hart, either,
since he was so late on his third novel. “What did you guys discuss?”

“Not much,” she said. It was a very short meeting. That guy I told you about, the
security guard, Cory I think was his name, he showed up and started going at it with Fien.”

“What about?”

“It was something to do with some mail Cory was supposed to have sent to Fien.
Fien was furious. He knocked over a table at the restaurant. He kept threatening to burn
Cory down. They were kicked out immediately, and then I lost track of them. Later that
night I got your email, asking me to meet you in Portland.”

“The email wasn’t from me. It was from Fien. He has access to my email account. I
put a request in to cancel it, but it hasn’t taken effect yet. Either that, or he put in an
additional request, probably claiming that the initial request was phony.”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on between you two?”

I wanted another beer, but didn’t want to order from our waiter. I reached across the
table and grabbed Anna’s glass and took a drink. I tried to explain the story to Anna, as
briefly as I could. I left a lot out, and perhaps added a little as well. In short, I told her that
Fien had been staying in our, my apartment. That I was wanted for burning down the library,
and that Fien had actually done it. After doing the reading, I came across a letter that proved
my innocence, as well as Fien’s guilt, but the letter had been stolen. I explained that I was
going to go back to Prentice as soon as I could, and I would probably be arrested.

“So, if you knew I hadn’t invited you here, why did you come?”

“Because I knew you’d be here, regardless of who had invited who.”
“Karin, I don’t understand.”

From across the table I saw the woman I’d met in a hotel lobby several years ago. Despite her hair and eye color, despite that we were now in Portland instead of Prentice, I saw the girl whom I had loved until she wouldn’t allow me to love her anymore. “It isn’t a game,” I repeated.

She reached into her purse and removed some lip gloss. Deliberately slow, she twisted off the cap and dabbed at her lips with it. I knew this meant she was shutting down. That I didn’t have much time left. Whether intentionally or not, I’d brought too much drama to the situation, and she wasn’t willing to accept it, let alone become a part of it. She would keep moving on without me.

“Anna. Damnit! I hadn’t intended on going into all this. It isn’t why I came. It’s just that, I knew you’d be here, and I have to say something to you, but it’s all wrong now. I mean, fuck. Anna.”

“What?” she asked, casually tossing her lip gloss back into her purse.

“You know how I get. I never know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything” she said dramatically.

“Come on. You know that isn’t true. I can’t just sit here.” I took another drink of her beer, and it swirled in my empty stomach. It was terrible, and somehow fitting for my situation. “Can’t we just start over?”

“What, you mean like, metaphorically? Start it all over? Us?”

I paused. “Would you? Start it all over?”

“No,” she said.

“What I mean is,” I started, but wasn’t sure how to finish. I said, “I could leave and come back. So could you. We would come back, and I would say something else. You could
edit what I said when I first sat down. I’ll remove the sarcasm when I comment on the book you’re reading, or maybe you could be reading a different book, and I could sit down again and tell you that I’ve missed you so much, and that though I’ve come all this way to find you, and that everything has been miserable since you left, things have changed. We could talk without pretext. I wouldn’t have to talk about how my writing has been going or about Fien or about the past. We could talk about right now.”

“You mean lie?”

“I—”

“It can’t be the truth if we leave out the past,” she said, “but I’m okay with that. We can pretend.” She flipped her sunglasses down from her naturally darker brown hair, covering her hazel eyes. It seemed she was looking at me. She was looking in my direction.

“Lie?”

She stood up. “Okay,” she said, and then she walked into the brewery and I watched her emerge again from the front door that led to the sidewalk. Even as she walked past me I thought this was part of a game. She’d leave—I was used to that—and I’d also leave, and we would meet up here again in a matter of minutes. So, I too stood up and headed to the door, thinking of how I would restart the conversation when we sat again, just moments from now. But when I reached the door the waiter stopped me. He put a hand forcefully to my chest.

“Here’s your tab,” he said, pressing the thin piece of paper against me. “You have to pay it before you leave.”

“I’m not leaving. It’s just a, just a game. She’s coming back, and I am too. We’ll have another drink and probably some lunch.” At least I hoped to end things civilly with Anna. The bread in my bag had gone hard, and the lunch meat that I had taken from
Laurence’s house had not been refrigerated for almost seventy hours. “I’ll be back in a second. It is just some theatrics, a game. We’re starting over, you see, not metaphorically, but actually.” He continued to hold the bill against my chest, blocking the exit. I reached my hand to his, taking hold of the bill, and returned to my seat. I stretched to look back at Anna, in the direction she had been walking, just in time to see her step onto a Portland municipal bus, and then the doors closed and the air brakes released and the bus merged into traffic.

My wallet was empty. I’d used the last of my cash for Claire’s train ticket. I thumbed through my hiding places, the collection of Eliot poems, my journal. It was all gone, and even if I would have found a stray traveler’s check, I knew it would not be usable. I wondered where Anna would be headed to next. Glancing down at the bill, I realized that she had been waiting for me, not for minutes or an hour, but for most of the day, with guests and meals and drinks. As my mind drifted away from Anna, as she drifted away from me—I hadn’t had the chance, I realized, to tell her that I did not want to chase her any longer, that though I loved her, I was moving on—I began to think about Fien’s motivation for bringing us both to Portland. No sooner had the thought entered my mind, did the answer appear, as the scripted, timed out to the exact second, as only a fine-tuned novelist could do. I looked up from the bill and saw a black SUV skid up to the curb and stop. Two men jumped out; they wore black suits and dark sunglasses. I knew exactly who they were, and more importantly, I knew who they were looking for. They passed right by my table on the sidewalk, and then entered the restaurant. Through the window I saw them scanning the place. One of the officers poked his head out into the patio area and questioned the waiter. I heard my name mentioned, and the waiter pointed right at me.
And just at that time, by chance, or by some additional grandly scripted narrative—a competing plotline—a beer glass was dropped near the door. The officers’ path had been blocked by several drunk patrons who scrambled to simultaneously avoid and clean up the shattered glass. The waiter, my waiter, looked me in the eyes, and he tried to push the patrons out of the way. Desperately, I grabbed my suitcase and planted my left palm on the top rail of the waist-high iron fence that kept me contained, and I leapt over it. I was surprised at the fluidity of my sudden movement. It’d been days since I’d had anything more than some hard bread and salami, and I felt too weak to stand up, let alone be chased through a town I’d never before been in. Despite all this, I ran down the sidewalk, disappearing into the crowds of bikers and speed-walking hipsters. I ran until my lungs felt as though they could not process another breath of oxygen, and then I ducked into a shady brewery with dim lights and red leather booths. A sign at the bar read, “Tacos, 2 for a dollar.” On the carpet, behind a row of nearby barstools, a pair of yellow dogs lifted their heads lazily at my entrance and put them back down.

“What do you drink?” a painted, dark-haired bartender asked me.

I wasn’t worried about the money. I was certain that I’d be found before it ever came to that. “Give me your finest bourbon” I said. “A double,” and she turned to search for the right bottle.
I woke up on the couch and my fingers were wrapped around an empty glass, balanced on my chest. The television was on and it appeared to be the same fucking show. Shaking hands with the host, this normal contestant, this non-actor, turned and walked down Broadway toward Times Square with a beautiful girl at his side. Over his back, a voice narrated how much this guy, this normal, everyday-Joe from Omaha had accomplished in the previous three months. As he turned left down 45th Avenue, he looked back at the camera, eyes squinting, and the right corner of his mouth upturned. He waved, and then disappeared. The screen went black except for a few remaining credits, just letters in different arrangements referring to Nancys and Brads and Susans who helped create this non-scripted show of normal people.

I sat up. The apartment was still except for an alarm beeping in the bedroom. For a brief moment, I thought maybe Anna had slept in, but when I reached the bedroom and saw the unmade bed, the empty closet, the bare floor, the pieces of last night began to resurface. I shut off her alarm and sat on the edge of the bed. As the gaps in my memory were filled, a headache light lightning lit up through my skull. I slapped the top of her alarm, and when it didn’t stop, I unplugged it.

I opened the bathroom mirror and reached for a bottle of aspirin. Something hollow and soft rattled inside. I pried off the lid and found a piece of paper. The page was folded several times, and the handwriting meticulously precise and tremendously small. It was a note from Anna.
Karin-

You are reading this after I’ve left. I know this is not easy for you. It is not easy for me either. I mean that. You have questions. I don’t know if I have answers to them, but I will try. I’ve compiled a short list of questions that you want to ask, and I’ve tried to answer them.

1. Why did you leave me?
   a. I did not leave you so much as I chose to be somewhere else. Karin, I’ve always lived in Prentice, and I’m sick of the town, and of editing, and of snow. I’m no longer engaged in any of it. You should move on, write your novel. You are a good writer.

2. Do you expect me to believe that?
   a. No, but it is true.

3. So, if you did not leave me, then are we still together?
   a. No.

4. Will you come back?
   a. I don’t know. I don’t know where I’m going. You shouldn’t wait for me in Prentice.

5. Do you still love me?
   a. Yes.

I’m sorry you had to walk home last night, and I’m sorry I used the last of the coffee. You know how long car rides give me headaches.

-A.B.

I checked the kitchen for aspirin and when I couldn’t find any, I poured another glass of bourbon and sat at the kitchen table. When Anna left last night, as she shut her car door, ending the chapter, I said to her, “Anna. Fuck. What-” but she inserted the period before I could finish the sentence. That happens, I suppose, when you start something without an ending in mind. I considered the options:

“What—

‘-are you doing? I don’t understand.’ I stood up and walked slowly toward her, falling short with my arms outstretched, palms up. ‘Anna, talk to me.’ She didn’t say anything, but just stood there. Determined. The path ahead of her set, and mine just a handful of unrolled
dice. I reached out and wrapped my frozen, fragile fingers around her tense, bony wrist. ‘Just stay tonight,’ I pleaded. ‘I’ll sleep on the couch. It’s terrible out there.’ She looked up at me, and pulling her wrist from my fingers, she leaned in to me and pressed her body into mine, letting the wetness of my clothes soak transfer to hers. She ran her chin along the inside of my neck, and then she pulled back, kissed me on the cheek, and left.”

‘-do you think you’re going to do?’ I said, hiding the anxiousness in my voice. I looked around the apartment. The dishes balanced precariously in the rack. All these tasks had been done in conjunction with her departure. One well-planned action. ‘Anna,’ I said to her, and then shook my head, repeating her name down a musical scale, ‘Anna, Anna, Anna, Anna. Where are you going to go?’ And then by chance, or by obedience to some master script or grand narrative, the first few notes of the ascending bass-line, guided by the crack of the snare, and its subsequent, sizzling cadence crept through the speakers of the television. We looked at the screen. A man, one of the losers from the show was kissing the girl that the winner had walked away with. He was sitting on a couch, facing her. They were talking, and the man put his head in his hands. And then, as a voice eased coolly and confidently over top the simple, staccato rhythm, the man was shown once again, alone. Anna and I, a distant, neglected audience, watched this man sit in a more immediate and authentic audience, watching the winner and his girl walk away. Anna put her hand on my shoulder, and then ran her knuckles across the underside of my chin. I shook off her hands. She looked at the floor as I reached up and held her face between my hands, looking squarely at her, and I said, “Every breath you take, every move you make.” I paused and she pulled away from my hands. She tilted back her head and leaned forward so her neck was just inches from my lips, tempting me to taste the warm skin. I could feel her breath on my still-icy forehead, but
without warning, she leaned down, kissed me on the cheek, turned, and left. Before the
door shut, no longer with confidence, and no longer caring if the anxiety still coated my
words, I whispered, ‘I’ll be watching you.’”

‘-your problem is,’ I paused, walking into the kitchen to pour a glass of bourbon. I took a
long, dramatic drink and said, ‘Your problem is that you just get bored. You get bored, shut
down, and then quit.’ Her boots knocked sadly against the wooden floor, murmuring when
they reached the carpet, and she took my glass from me and downed it. The color
immediately rouged her face. She kissed me on the cheek, breath full of sour mash, and
turned and left without saying a thing.”

‘-is in those suitcases?” I walked over to where she stood, gripping the handles, and I took
one from her, testing its weight. ‘Baby, you don’t have enough things here to fill these bags. I
thought you sold everything.’ I looked around the room, stopping at the bookshelf that
rested against the wall between the television and the bedroom door. ‘You took some of my
books didn’t you? Open it. I want to see. I want to see,’ I repeated to myself. Leaning
against the wall that turned at a right angle from the front door, I slumped until I was sitting
on my heels. My jeans were soaked and a shiver rattled through my body. Anna leaned
down to me, kissed me on the cheek, and stepped out of the door.”

‘-my problem is, is that I just can’t finish this novel. You know I don’t write fiction, I can’t.
It’s just lies, all lies.’ I sat on the back of the couch, facing Anna. ‘But I have to do this. They
need a novel. He won’t even consider publishing the non-fiction manuscript until he gets a
novel. You see, Anna, they need the lies first, in order to print the truth. I know it’s off to a
slow start, but I can’t do it without you. You help me to see the whole picture, from cover
to cover. Without you, I am blind. I start in the middle, but I lose track of where I was and
where I am going. I start in the beginning, and I don’t know how it ends. I start at the end,
and I don’t know how it begins.’ I ran my fingers through my icy hair, each movement
deliberate and in anticipation of some reaction. ‘Your love helps me to lie. That’s what love
does, it teaches. Do you hear me? I will lie for you, for hundreds of pages. I will lie as long as
I have to, for you. Come on. Stay.’ Anna walked toward me and wrapped her arms around
me. The warmth of her body leapt into mine. ‘Okay,’ she said, and by the hand she led me
into the bedroom. She sat me down on the bed and grabbed a towel from the bathroom. I
could smell the soap left over on her skin from her evening shower as she towel-dried my
hair. Her fingers worked deftly at my clothes, buttons, waistbands, and zippers. Her body
covered me, and it was warm, penetrating me all the way through the center of my gut into
the base of my spine; I squeezed my legs around her, fumbling at her hooks, snaps, and
loops, slowly and gradually, until it was as though everything that had ever happened to me
from the night I walked in on Carrie tending desk at the Prentice hotel, her hands handing
me a brief but effective note, the move back, the deal with the publisher, her move into my
apartment, the rejection by the publisher, the re-acceptance by the publisher, Anna’s editing
job, all the way to when I was abandoned at the café earlier that evening, the walk home, the
tower of smoke, the descent down the hill and into the entrance of our apartment; it was as
though all these things were one part of, one half of, one thread of a story and the other
thread had been working, struggling in roughly the same direction, finding each other here,
on this page, in this room, in this bed, and though it felt as if they were going on forever and
forever without truly revealing their finality, their conclusion, it seemed at this exact
moment, when the smell of soap had been replaced with the smell of sweat, sweet and damp
from her pores, and when my hamstrings tightened up, and legs extended out to where the bottom of her feet grazed teasingly at the top of my feet, and her palms lay flat into my palms and she arched her back, that the threads were finally woven and the sentence could end. Anna rolled over and sat at the edge of the bed. Her spine ran like a set of railroad tracks down the length of her back and I followed them with my fingers from the base of her neck to where it detoured out of sight and my fingers, out of rails to follow, were suspended, unsure of whether to drop to the mattress or start again at the beginning. I must have dozed suddenly, because when I woke again, Anna was dressed and leaning over me. She kissed me on the cheek, and she walked out the door.”

“...”

I suppose “What-” is, perhaps, as sufficient as any revision I can put on it. I throw in the dash, and Anna the period. After all, this sort of thing cannot be scripted; it does not contain pages that can be shuffled back to the past, or flipped ahead to the end. It simply is.

The television was still on. I found the remote sitting on the edge of the bookshelf. Behind the remote, a row of books that had once barely fit into the shelf were now fallen over, leaning against each other. I didn’t have to guess which ones were taken. For each gap there was a small piece of paper with a title written on it. Another slip of paper hidden under the remote read, in the left-leaning style of Anna’s hand:

K-

I need some things to read. I will return them to you down the road.
I was not surprised at the succinctness. I had grown to expect this from Anna. She was an editor. I shut off the television and sat back on the couch, reading the two short sentences again, tracing my thumb along the penciled curls and lines, the black and white, until they smeared and blurred together. At least I knew I would see her again.
Chapter 5: Shelved in the Wrong Section, January 22

Taxi services are not available during the day in Prentice, and since Anna took the car, I had to walk to campus. The sky had cleared; the clouds had divided, and a striking streak of blue split the town in half. The sunlight was such that it was near blinding against the snow banks, and I had to go back inside for my sunglasses. Besides the snow and sun, however, I refuse to describe it further, lest my description is regarded as a metaphor for the metaphorical brighter day. I would prefer that it not be taken as such. In fact, if you pick up on any metaphor here, forget it. I will tell you what is. If it is there, I will say it in terms such as it was a brighter day, metaphorically speaking. So, the sky had some blue in it, but it was mostly grey; the air was cold. I was walking in tennis shoes still wet, and I had yet to hear from Anna, who had left me last night.

On the other hand, I spent the morning writing. I read it over again when I reached the University Library at the center of campus that lay perpetually in the shadow of the football stadium. (Again, not a metaphor. 8,000 people take up more room than 8,000 books. It just is.) It had been nine months since I received the phone call from Dennison about wanting a novel. This is what I had come up with:

Ben drank his concealed beer on the crowded subway. For a town that loses a good deal of its residents during the putrid month of August, the subways still seemed to get more and more crowded. A Puerto Rican woman in a business suit sat across from him and filled out a crossword puzzle. A young, black kid in a Baltimore Orioles cap with a perfectly straight bill wore headphones, and quietly spoke along with the music. A dangerously, thin white man with lots of hair and a yellowish beard sat next to Ben and had his penis draped over the top of his sweatpant’s waistband and was furiously tugging at it. Everybody pretended not to look and said nothing. Somebody at the far end of the car had spilled a can of processed lutefisk during a shoving match for the last available seat and it permeated the air like a spilled can of processed lutefisk.
The light flashed on the answering machine when Ben finally reached home. He peeled his sports coat from his damp shirt and hung it in the bathroom as he listened, trying to rid the rot of a Norwegian delicacy. The first:

“Ben, it’s Carol. Just wondering how the interview went. I’ve been sending good vibes your way all day. Could you tell? I know you did great. Are we still on for tonight? My treat. Call me.” The second:

“Yes, um, Benjamin Plesseck? This is a courtesy call from Fifth Third to inform you that you have an outstanding overdraft fee on your account in the amount of 132.54. If this is not paid in the next five business days, we will have to suspend all activities on your account and your credit card. During this suspension, late fees will accumulate. Thank you, have a good day.” The third:

“Ben, it’s, ah, Greg Stamp from Brooklyn Services and Works. Good news. We, ah, found some work for you. It’s a temporary position, but you can expect at least two weeks. Show up Monday at 6am. Ah, bring some clothes you don’t mind getting ruined. You’ll be painting. It’s a foreclosed apartment building in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Do you know the area? Also, ah, dress in neutral colors,” he paused, “if you have them.” And the fourth:

“Hey, Benjamin Prestik, this is James from Corning Community. Listen, I know we just spoke, and though the interview went well, and you are more than enough qualified to teach Intro. to Geography here at Corning, I’m afraid that I cannot offer you the position. Word just came down from the powers-that-be that the position will go unfilled this year due to funding shortages. I’m terribly sorry for making you come down here. Just awful timing, I know. Well, I hope that when the position reopens, you’ll be reapplying. Best of luck to you. Goodbye.”

Ben opened a window and sat in front of it. Then he shut it and turned a fan on. The narrow railway apartment was on the third floor, above a laundromat in Bushwick, and the air didn’t circulate well. He considered cleaning it up a bit before Carol came over, but left it at that. The apartment walls were funeral-home bare and had been ever since he moved in after graduating from NYU seven months prior. Despite the oppressive heat, Ben soon fell asleep. He woke to a pounding at the door. It was Carol.

“Hey. Sorry about the mess.” Carol looked around the room: the pan of spaghetti sauce on the stove top, the empty milk carton on the counter, the books that lay on the floor where his couch had been before he had to sell it. Her gaze ended at the cushion lines on his face and the unkempt hair, matted over his ear.

“The interview?” she asked.

Ben shook his head.

“I’m sorry, baby. This town just sucks for finding a decent job.” She reached up to him and combed out his hair with her fingers, tucking it sloppily behind his ear.

“I don’t know—” Ben started, and then stopped. He looked out the window. A stray cat was hanging from its front paws in his garbage can, its claws stuck on the bag and feet dangling.

“What?”

“I just wonder if it wouldn’t be easier to find something outside of the city. I know you love it here, but you have work. I just—”

“Baby, let’s go out. Come on. I’ll take your mind off things.” Ben turned and hesitated, then he went into the bedroom and undressed. He washed off the sweat that had dried on his face and put on some
deodorant and a new shirt. When he returned to the living room, he was sliding his arm into his sports coat, and Carol was waiting for him by the door.

“What’s that smell? It smells like,” she looked around for clues, and then continued, “old milk, or cheese.”

“It’s just the streets,” he said. “You have the door open. Let’s go.” Ben pulled his arm back out of the coat and left it lying on the chair next to the running fan.

I closed the draft. I had to find a book. Dennison had sent me an email earlier this morning, a forward from B. Hart, representative from Bunsen Publishing, the company that was paying for this novel, should it ever get finished. The short email stated that they had heard that I was having trouble with the novel—from Dennison, I presume. In order to “jumpstart the muse,” as Hart had put it, he had contacted novelist Laurence Sleightor, one of “Bunsen’s own.” Apparently, Sleightor, whom I had never heard of, had agreed to speak with me, encourage and guide me. He would be in touch, was how the email ended. As ominous as the ending was, I could hardly get excited. Nonetheless, I searched the catalogue for some of his books. I should, at least, be somewhat familiar with his work.

As I scrolled through the S’s, Shuster, Siank, Siegel, Skansley, Sledger, Sleint, Sleod. Sleightor wasn’t even listed. I checked at the reference desk.

“Hey Karin, how can I help you?” It was Jess, an acquaintance of Anna’s.

“I’m looking for something by Laurence Sleightor. I don’t even know if I’m saying that right. Have you heard of him?”

“Sleightor? Never. But I can tell you one thing, you have a much better chance finding him here than at the public library,” she said, smiling.

“Why’s that?” The public library was twice the size of this place.

“Unless you’re looking for the new Fien novel. Unfortunately, we don’t have any of those in right now, though I hear we’ll be getting them. Anyway, I’m not sure what the Public Library’s current policy is on checking out books.”
“I think it’s still three weeks.” Jess looked up, her smile dissolved and she studied my face.

“You need to get out more, Karin. Any word on your manuscript?” She asked, typing.

“Nothing yet,” I lied.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll hear soon. Sleightor. Here he is. Second floor, the last shelf on the left side, facing the windows. He should be about,” she closed her eyes; her lips counted silently the imaginary shelves. She wore a Weezer t-shirt underneath a white sweater and she lightly touched her long, thin neck as she visualized exactly where the book was. “Third shelf up, on the far right side near the bathroom.” She looked back at the computer screen. “It appears he has three novels out.” She clicked the mouse, and squinted. “Actually, I guess there’s only two. One of them seems to be unavailable.”

“Unavailable?”

“Yeah. That’s strange. Usually if something is unavailable, it will just say ‘checked out’ or ‘out of print.’ This one says, ‘recalled.’”

“Second floor, near the bathroom,” I repeated. “That’s the non-fiction section, right? Must be a different Sleightor.”

“Laurence? He’s the only one we got here. Check it out, if not, I’ll see if I can locate it somewhere else.”

I thanked her and left the desk to head to the stairs. Exactly where she said he would be, I found him. Two books: One and Two. Sure enough, they were published by Bunsen. Without even opening them I brought them downstairs and checked them out. I was at the door when Jess caught up with me.

“Are you walking home?”
“Yes,” I said, hoping she would offer a ride.

“You ought to grab a newspaper on your way. How’s Anna doing, by the way?” Jess looked up at me, sincerely. She was taller than I had remembered. Her fingers twisted at a button on her sweater.

“She’s happy, I guess.” Jess gave me the same look as when she asked about my manuscript. “She took a trip.”

“Well, call me sometime. I’d like to hear what you think of, what’s his name?”

“Sleightor. Laurence.”

“Yeah. Let me know. I’m looking for something new to read. And Karin, grab a newspaper on the way home.”

“I will. Thanks for your help.”

I stopped at the gas station for a paper on the way home and stuffed it in my bag without reading it. To be honest, I had forgotten all about the smoke I saw the night before until I finally got home, poured a glass of bourbon, and unfolded the newspaper across my lap as I sat on the couch. I looked down at the front page. Shit.
Baelb Library Burns, Fien’s Remain

Last night, during the overtime victory of the Prentice Panther’s season closer, the Baelb Public library suffered a tragic fire and burned to the ground. Two were killed in the blaze.

The cause of the fire has not yet been determined, though it is thought to have started from an act of arson. There are no suspects as of this morning, the Prentice Police Department reports. Early arrivers to the fire claim to have seen a figure in a long denim coat and a brown cloche hat. He was standing in front of the main entrance as Craig Loom and Glenn Bale rushed to see where the smoke was coming from.

“If I’d a known the game was going into overtime, I’d have never been there,” Craig said in an interview after the flames were finally put to rest. “I thought sure the Panthers had blown it in the fourth quarter, especially with Meyers calling the shots,” Bale added. “That goof in the long coat just took off and ran as soon as we got there. We didn’t see his face,” Loom finally said.

Lester Smith and his wife Alana are thought to have been on the third floor of the library when the flames reached them. Unable to escape, they are survived by their son, Justin, 47, who is coincidentally a librarian in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The fire consumed over 8,000 books, cds, and videotapes, head librarian Esther Wile estimated. “The streets were so crowded with the traffic from the game, that the fire trucks couldn’t get near the library,” she stated as she sobbed, watching it burn and answering our questions.

According to Wile, the only salvageable books were a series of novels by experimental novelist Finn Fien. According to Dr. Geoffrey Struben, the head of the English Department at Prentice University, “It is a (expletive) shame that that phony (expletive) of a writer never got a single one of his books burned up in that mess. Yet every other writer with any bit of talent had their (expletive) (adjective), expletive (noun) burned to (expletive, expletive) and back."

Fien is known for rewriting several classics novels, including Lolita, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, and Moby-Dick as anagrams. Contacted by phone, Fien told us, “Each sentence is in the same order, and contains the same letters as the originals. I switch the letters to make new sentences, and I make new stories from the old stories.”

When asked about the fire, he began coughing furiously, and the slamming keys of a typewriter could be heard in the background.
When I finished the article I picked up the phone to call Jess at the library. I must have seemed like an idiot when I didn’t know what she was talking about. I started dialing the number and put the phone to my ear, and then I stopped. The smell of coffee and Colgate emanated from the receiver. It was almost as though she were following me, now that she was gone. I hung the phone up and dug around under the bed for an atlas. She had taken the one from the bookshelf and replaced it with a small slip of paper that read:

*IOU: Randall McNally Road Atlas, 2008*

I sat back down on the couch with another glass of bourbon and found Prentice on the older, smaller map. Three major highways spread out of it, each heading in a different direction to another city, slightly larger than Prentice, and with slightly more highways leading out of them. Those highways led to larger cities, with even more highways reaching out across the map, some that hooked around Great Lakes, others that connected to other towns, and some that led clear and lonely paths straight West, across the miserable plains and bitter mountains until they merged into another network of highways that spread like an outreached palm through the desert and along the ocean, and somewhere they came to an end.
Chapter 6: Like a Message from God, January 23

Curious what 8,000 books (minus a collection of Finn Fien novels) looked like after they’ve been transformed from paper to ash, I woke the following morning and took the road that led downtown. The sun was shining, which means only that it was day and not night, the sky was clear and not cloudy. The ice and snow on the sidewalk crunched loudly underfoot, and my feet were finally warm again in the insulated down of my heavy winter boots and wool socks. It was Sunday. The streets and sidewalks were mostly empty. The only movement came from the tops of the desolate trees, planted in a row along the boulevard, their tops manipulated by the wind.

When I reached the library, it looked and felt as though I had walked into a different climate. The entire city block where the library once was had been roped off, and all of the snow within and along the ropes had melted. The banks of snow at its edges were crusted with blackened ice. It was two days after the fire, and the smoke still rose, though not as it had, and the smell of burnt carpet and bindings lingered in the heat, still wafting from the ashen remains.

The block had been leveled. I was surprised to discover a small crew working at its remains. The debris had been raked into long rows, lined straight as a cemetery’s headstones. Two men, dressed in blue jeans and yellow jackets, volunteers I figured since I hadn’t yet been called by work, started at the north end and slowly made their way down the rows. Behind them they wheeled a cart with two barrels, and with shovels they scraped clean the aisles of burned pages and debris, methodically, quietly filling the cart. Above the grounds, large canned lights had been set up, illuminating the grounds, even during the day.
“You should’ve seen it two nights ago. Pages everywhere,” a woman with a soft, faintly scratched voice spoke over my shoulder. “The whole sky, over the whole town, pages floating down, still burning like a message from God, obfuscated moments before it reached the earth.”

Halfway down the second row, a noisy crash echoed across the empty lot as the workers’ cart spilled over. The sound of the crash lingered long after the men had righted it again, the way a gunshot lingers in a quiet forest that seemed to have been forever quiet, only that one time disturbed.

“I have some of them,” the woman continued. I finally turned to look at her. She was much younger than her voice suggested, thirty-four maybe. Her auburn hair was pulled back behind her ears, and some loose strands framed, in near-perfect symmetry, her angular face. Her olive eyes, darkly painted, formed the top edge of a vertical line that ran straight down a thin, pointed nose, an elongated chin, the buttons of her burgundy plaid shirt, and the pleat of a denim skirt that ended just below her knees; her legs, meeting at the calf, parting slightly until they met again at the ankle, finished the vertical line, which was edged by the sidewalk beneath her worn, corduroy house slippers.

“Excuse me?” I replied.

“The burned pages. I have some of them. Some of them are not near as damaged as you would suspect, charred in the margins, maybe, or spotted with black and yellow scars.”

“You went out and collected them?”

“I didn’t have to. They floated down into my lawn. I live right here.”

Behind her a small, squarish house with white clapboard siding stood as symmetrical as its inhabitant. The door of the house was in the absolute center. Two windows
equidistant from the door and the roof were on either side of it. Against the door, though it was winter, leaned a beaten, wire-tined rake.

“Shortly after the fire was put out, crews were sent to clean up the neighboring establishments, to prevent more fires. Before they reached mine, I raked up what I could and took them inside. Come on,” she said, and before I could say no, she grabbed my hand and pulled me away from the demolished grounds.

The inside of her house was as neatly arrayed as the outside. The walls were papered with brown and tan vertical lines of varying thicknesses, and the floors were covered in beige tiles. I followed her to the back of the house into a small bedroom and sat next to her on the bed. She pulled a small record box from underneath the bed. When she flipped open the lid, the room filled with the smoky, dusty smell of a cellar. “Last night I read through them and ordered them. I sealed them in these Ziploc bags.” It was the first thing she had said since we were outside.

“Ordered them, how?” I asked.

She paused and looked at me, then back down to the box. She unsnapped a button on her chest pocket and pulled out a slip of paper, scribbled over with a steady, anxious hand.

“Chronologically, I guess. I put them in the order that made the most sense.” She plucked out the first page, handed it to me, and asked me if I read much.

“More than most, I suppose.” She plucked the plastic from my hand and put it back in the box. I studied literature in graduate school.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was mistaken. You shouldn’t see these,” and she stood up and started closing the box.

I looked at my empty hands.
She said, “The last thing I need is some literature student coming in and critiquing, rearranging my work. You should go.”

“No, I mean, I just like to read, is all. I won’t critique anything, I promise,” I pleaded, now, my curiosity piqued.

She studied my face, and then looked down my body to my shoes, and back up to my face. “You’ll have to remove your jeans.”

“What?”

“Your jeans. I shouldn’t have invited you in here, but I had to show somebody. I cannot, however, have you snatching up these pages from me. People will want them, I’m sure, but they cannot have them. These are my pages.” She hesitated. “This is my story. If I have you leave your wallet, you can still overpower me and take them, and then reacquire those items in your wallet. If I have you remove your shoes, you could still make it home in your socks. Without your pants, however, well, I’m willing to risk that you won’t leave without them.”

If this was a game she was playing, dragging me into her house, showing me a box full of disparate and blackened pages, and asking me to remove my pants, it was not, by her face, belied. Either way, I wanted to see the pages, now. I felt I had to. Had she simply stood in the front yard and asked me if I wanted to see them, I could have easily said no, and I would most certainly have. But the way she played it, the set-up, the mystique, the building of tension with minor setbacks that I was forced to overcome, I was too engaged to stop. She’d hooked me.

“I feel a bit strange taking off my pants in your bedroom without even knowing your name,” I said, as I unbuckled my belt and hesitated at the pant’s button.
“It’s not the first time.” She was bent over, reaching into the record box, as though looking for flaws in her collection of burned pages.

“Well, for me it is.”

She looked up at me, annoyed. “Claire,” she said, without offering her hand.

Satisfied, I took off my pants, clumsily pulling them over my winter boots; she watched me shamelessly. She took the jeans from me and held them in her lap. On her bed, then, I sat pant-less, with nothing except the cotton fabric of a pair of thankfully freshly laundered boxer-briefs between my skin and her bed spread.

Claire slid closer to me, holding again the plastic-covered page. “See, look at this one. This is the beginning.” She pulled out the first plastic bag and handed it to me. As I tried to open it, her hand grabbed hold of my thigh, tightly, and she inhaled. “Just look through the plastic.”

Page 73 was hardly damaged, save from some black smudging and a tear near the bottom where it had separated from its binding. It was larger than the others, and glossy (two Ziploc bags had been used, taped together and sealed at the top with more tape). Judging from the picture in the lower left hand corner of the page, which showed two well-built yet faceless and genital-less models performing what was labeled as, “The Sitting Bull,” the book was a guide for sexual positions.

“This is the start of your story? A sex manual?”

“Of course. It must start with sex, right? The only other similar narrative I could find was a page from a volume of women’s erotica, which, you’ll find, fits very nicely later on. Much later.”

It was the tone of her voice, perhaps, that made me realize, without feeling, that her hand was still on my thigh. One of her fingers worked slowly in a circle around my kneecap.
Without hesitating, I reached for the next page. This one was far more damaged. Only the left half of the page could be read.

“You recognize this one?”

I studied it. At the top of the page, I made out the name William, and there was a 3 at the bottom. So, it was the opening pages of a book by a William. Though if it was another guide, an introduction, a novel, or a collection of essays, I couldn’t tell. As I read the first paragraph, I recalled the Williams: Shakespeare, Burroughs, Gaddis, Golding, Pattison, Gibson, Saroyan:

*Sitting beside the road, wat the hill toward her, Le Alabama: a fur piece. All the a-walking, A fur piece.' Thin not been quite a month on t Mississippi, further from bo before. I am now further fro been since I was twelve year

“Faulkner. *Light in August.* Lena done walked a fur piece from Doane’s Mill.” I had unsuccessfully used the novel in a freshman composition course once. “So, shortly after your faceless protagonist engages in The Sitting Bull, she starts walking to Mississippi? What about the guy? Where is he?”

“You have to keep reading. And it isn’t Lena. This is my story.”

I read through the rest of the page. “How many pages do you have?”

“Twenty-seven. It was all I was able to rake up before the fire crew came to my yard and insisted that I relinquish the rest.”

“And twenty-seven was enough to complete the story?”
“It is complete, I suppose. I mean, there are gaps, but you can’t include everything, can you?”

“I suppose not. At least, I haven’t been able to.”

You’re writing too, then, um—I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.”

“Karin,” I said, though, with her hand still on my thigh, whether intentionally or not, it didn’t seem necessary to regress into a handshake.

“Karin?”

“With an i, yes.” She then stood up and looked down at me, sitting pantless on her bed with snow from my winter boots dripping into a puddle on her tile floor, and asked me if I wanted a drink. “Do you have any bourbon?” I asked, and she walked out of the room carrying my jeans.

While she was gone, I stood quick and straightened out my boxers. I thumbed through the box of pages, curious about what other pages she had managed to collect. The fourth or fifth page was missing its bottom half—not a funny coincidence—and started with the lines: “Loose! Loose! Open your hips, open your pelvis, open the way for your baby! Breathe! Throw a squat in there! Good!” In the top right corner it read, “Childbirth 101      271.” Another manual. With a whir, the heat kicked into the small house, and a vent at the floor exhaled warm air that brushed against the hair of my legs. In another room, ice cubes dropped into a glass. Still mystified by this woman and her strange project, I thumbed to the last plastic-covered page. At first it appeared completely damaged, whole, but covered in soot. I peeled open the Ziploc and ran my finger across its surface, expecting a smudge of soot to rub off, but it had not. I looked at it closer and could see that the page was not completely ruined; rather, it had hardly been touched by the destructive fire at all. The page was old, and a black, inked rectangle quietly filled the page almost to its edges, somberly.
The woman returned just as I sealed up the plastic bag. She handed me my pants and told me I could dress or not. She didn’t care. She handed me a glass of bourbon.

“What are you writing, Karin?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I’m trying to write a novel, but it’s not going so well.”

She looked at the page I was holding in my hand. “You’ve jumped to the end? That’s a lack of control, you know.”

“I have control.”

“I guess maybe you do.” She fingered a small, smooth patch of my jeans, then stopped and pushed the material away from her so it was not even leaning against her leg. “It doesn’t matter anyway,” she continued. “Right now, the end is just a page. It means nothing, is nothing but fibers and ink and soot. The end cannot possibly mean anything truthful without its beginning.”

“But I recognize this page. I know what it means. Your story is a tragedy.”

“You don’t know what that page means. Nobody, not even a fortune teller, can tell you what the end means, they can only tell you what is there. They cannot give it any significance. They cannot give you the entire story.”

“So it isn’t a tragedy?” I asked.

“No. It’s a love story. It is not sad; it is true.” Her voice was sad, truthful.

“Yeah.” I took a sip of my bourbon. I started to choke when the liquid hit the back of my throat. It was not warm in my stomach; rather it had no warmth, no burn. It was not, as far as I could tell, bourbon at all. I had no idea what it was, but I could taste apples, some ginger, and basil, I think. Definitely no alcohol.

“Is it too strong?”

“Yeah, perhaps a little. What kind of bourbon is this?”
“My own recipe.” Claire answered. She picked up the glass and plucked out an ice cube, popped it into her mouth, and started biting into it.

“You make your own bourbon?”

She nodded, crunching down on the ice cube.

“Isn’t that illegal?” She shrugged her shoulders, pursed her lips, and puffed her cheeks, shifting the ice around her mouth. “Do you make anything else?”

Claire crunched once more on the ice cube and swallowed it. “Whatever I want to, I guess.” She rubbed her temples. “You’re right, I did make that a bit too strong.”

The heat clicked back off. I straightened out my legs before me, in front of the bed. I slapped my hands on my thighs and stood up. I reached for my pants and Claire tucked her hands underneath her thighs, sitting on them as she watched me wrestle my awkward boots through my boot-cut pant legs. Once I got both feet through, she bent over and closed the record box. She slid it underneath the bed, and she stood up, facing me.

I was refastening my belt; Claire took the ends from my hands, her finger looping through the buckle and the loose, leather end clenched in her fist, and she pulled on it until I stumbled toward her. She fed the loose end through the metal loop and pulled it tight. She probed the small holes with her fingers, finding the hole most worn, and threaded the metal pin through it, tucking the loose end, again, through the buckle; I watched her, amazed, or rather curious at how deftly her fingers worked, without looking, at the simple process done backward. As Claire threaded the excess into the first belt loop of my jeans, she grabbed my belt in her small, clenched fist, and pulled me against her. I could feel the length of her small frame large against me, my thighs against her thighs, hips against hips, chest against chest, and she tilted her head just a notch and kissed me. It took a second for me to respond, and then I reached around her and ran my hand behind her neck, at the base of her hair line
where it was pulled up, dragging a finger along the inside of her collar, and I pressed her
mouth closer, firmer against mine, sliding my hand down that vertical line of her neck,
between her thin shoulders, feeling the railroad of her spine through the thin, flannel fabric
of her shirt, traveling south until my fingertips finally came to a rest at the small valley of her
lower back, and I stopped, stepped back.

“I have a girlfriend.”

Claire patted her hand against my chest, smoothing an invisible wrinkle from my
sweatshirt. “Where is she?” Claire asked, and I thought of the spider web of roads and
highways, circling and connecting and departing and reconnecting in layers and layers, each
connection spreading and layering farther outward, another possible way to get from
Prentice to New York, New York to LA, LA to Orlando, Orlando to Seattle how many possible
ways are there to get from Portland to Prentice? and from memory, seeing it, I realized the vastness
of the country, connected end to end an infinite amount of ways, and always circling.

“She’s out West,” I said, and being roughly in the middle of the country, there was a
fifty percent chance that I was telling the truth, but it didn’t matter. I had no way of knowing
whether or not it was true. “Or she’s East. I don’t know where she is.”

“Why don’t you go find her?” Claire asked. “I mean,” she stopped, leaned toward
me again, and then pulled back.

“Find her? There’d be no chance of finding her.”

Claire turned to the bedroom door and began to walk through it, hesitating in the
doorway. “Just pick a place you’ve heard her talk about, and go to it. Sit on a train, write
whatever you’re writing, look out windows, be deceived by those women that you’ll find
who’ll look just like her, listen to stories.”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start.”
“That’s easy. You have two choices, is all.” Claire said from the doorway, now walking back into the kitchen. I followed her through the geometrically balanced house, the right turns of hallways and doorways, through the end of the hallway until we reemerged into the open space of the living room and kitchen. “You’re already in the middle, so you only have to choose whether to go east or west, toward the beginning or the ending.” She hesitated, frozen in her step, frozen in her reach for a pitcher of the amber liquid. After a few seconds she resumed: “Or you could go south,” turning to me as she said it, her face belying her confidence, revealing something troubled with the addition of south to a scale that had once been only east and west. “Did you want another drink?” she asked as she held a pitcher of amber liquid in her hand.

“No. Thanks,” I said. Claire filled a glass with ice and poured one for herself before putting it in the refrigerator and facing me.

“So, you’re going?”

“I’m going home,” I said.

“Wait.” Claire ran back through the hallways. After some time had passed she returned holding a plastic bag. It was one of the pages from her story. “My number and address are written on the back. I hope you visit me before you leave.”

I left Claire’s house and, from her porch, looked at the devastated lot across the street. The two men working on the rows of debris had made their way to the third row, silently pulling their cart behind them, quietly and methodically. I tucked the plastic-covered page into my coat and started walking home. I needed to make some plans. I needed to figure out where Anna was or where she was headed. I needed to write.
Chapter 7: An Analysis of Handwriting, January 24

The map was still open on the couch where I had left it the night before. A crease ran
diagonally through the middle of Wisconsin. The edge was folded over and West Virginia
peeked from behind it. I pushed the map aside and sat on the couch with my laptop. Shortly
after I had left Claire’s house, I began to feel uneasy in my stomach, and instead of bourbon,
I now chased some antacid tablets with a glass of ginger-ale.

I suppose that if I thought long enough, I could come up with several explanations
for the non-bourbon, bourbon concoction she tried to poison me with:

1) she was attempting to be funny;
2) she did not know what bourbon was—this is possible; it is—and attempted to
cover up this ignorance by mixing up ingredients that she thought sounded like they
should belong in something called bourbon;
3) she knows bourbon by another name, and the name of which I know bourbon by,
to her, signifies a concoction of apple juice, ginger-ale, and basil;
4) she, being a woman of a unique and seemingly strange disposition, was not trying
to be funny, nor unsure of what the word bourbon meant; rather she was simply being
strange, whether to solicit a reaction or make an artistic statement;
5) she was trying to poison me.

Either way, I now possessed a page from her story, and it rested on my coffee table. It did
not take long to identify it, though the top of the page, where the title is usually named, had
been burned away. The character’s names, however, had not been burned, nor had the line
numbers, 347-348, referring to Shade’s epic poem, or the strange commentary that followed.

I took another antacid and chased it with some ginger-ale.

I opened my laptop and read through Ben’s previous storyline: the filthy city, the awful subway ride home, the shitty string of phone messages. I wondered if I hadn’t been a little rough on him, maybe casting over him a shit-cloud, to ease the shit-storm of a weekend I’ve been having. I decided to pick up where I left off, leaving chapter breaks for later. I started typing, feeling okay, momentarily, about where the story was going:

Carol took Ben to a cramped, dingy bodega on the way to the subway and they split a philly cheese-steak sandwich and a beer on the way. They rode the 7 line until it ended at Shea Stadium and got off. The Mets were on the second of a three game, home against the Cardinals. They sat on a ledge that circled a planter and listened for over an hour. The vendors and scalpers and radio promoters were on break, not to reappear until the crowds reappeared. Carol had bought a deck of cards, and in the shade and slightly relenting beat of the late summer sun, they listened to the booming voice of the announcer, the cheering home crowd, and they played blackjack for drinks of the beer, and when that ran out, they played for hits from Ben’s last two Pall Malls, and when that was out, and the sun disappeared behind the grayish-pink skyline, they left.

The subway car was empty. Nobody headed west from Shea before ten’o’clock, and Queens did not look so sad with the sun setting beside it. At their first stop, Carol pointed out a boy with olive skin who, out the window, was trying to bounce an under-inflated basketball with a stick; rhythmically he beat upon its skin, until he lost interest and turned his back to them, walking away from the subway tracks, kicking the ball ahead of him, and the subway train also pulled away.

Carol leaned into Ben’s thin frame; on his bare arms he could feel where she had sweated through her shirt. The colors of the buildings, their height, markings, and condition distinguished the boroughs like a nametag. They rumbled toward America’s largest metropolis as though it were just another time-clock to punch in at, to punch out at, and what Ben really wanted, what he yearned for was to head permanently out of it. If he hadn’t have met Carol, he would’ve already left. He wondered if he could leave without her. He wondered if there really was only one person for everybody, or if there were more than one. Though he couldn’t possibly believe it, he tried for a second, for a fleeting moment, to imagine that he could love somebody the way he loved Carol, find somebody that loved him the way that Carol did, if he could find someone that would exist within his mind as much as she did outside of it. If he could meet someone, could be with someone that, that could- He wondered if there was only one- He-

“Fuck.”
Katrina lifted her eyes up to Jesus, hanging there on the side of the Copper Street Presbyterian Church. Her hands were worn raw from the heavy pieces of rusted rebar, but she had left her gloves at the farm. She scooped a handful of cool earth and rubbed it between her palms. Her hands coated, slightly soothed, she went back to the row of tomato plants and resumed the construction of the makeshift trellises. Before long, she got tired. She thought of

* * *

On her bare arms, Carol could feel the sweat that had soaked through Ben’s shirt

* * *

When Ben was younger, his family had traveled out west for a vacation. He was nine when he first saw the Pacific Ocean. He had chosen Columbia NYU for graduate school because he figured that the East ocean would have to be just as, if not more, majestic as the West ocean.

* * *

Olivia invited him in, attracting him indoors with the allure of a record collection that was for sale. She had placed an ad in the paper and the man responded the very day the ad was published. Inside the air-conditioned house, the sweat on the man’s forehead quickly dried. They knelt on the living room floor before the records as he thumbed through them. The records were not hers. They had belonged to her husband who had left her only three weeks prior. The divorce was not finalized on paper, but to Olivia, it was extremely final. Not just exclusively to her husband, but she considered it a divorce to men. That the words, the ceremony of marriage was obsolete, trite, and old-fashioned. She would use men as she needed, having been used herself.

The man, a tall man with a thick middle that billowed slightly over his belt, breathed through his mouth as he thumbed through the records. He smelled of the Old Spice deodorant that her husband had used when they had met in college.

So, you’re interested in these records for your son? Olivia asked.

My son? he responded, and then continued, No. I don’t have a son. I’m actually interested in them for my own collection.

Oh, so you collect records?

Yes. It’s a guilty pleasure of mine. Have collected them since I was in high school, almost twenty years ago.

It’s funny how those things happen, isn’t it? Collections, Olivia said, and she thought of moving into this place seven years ago with Duane, her almost-ex-husband. How he would not even let the movers touch the boxes of records. Those, he had to move in on his own, in his own car and with his own hands.

I’m Sean, by the way, he said, interrupting her thoughts as he thumbed through the alphabetically arranged album covers, stopping occasionally to pull one from the drawer, remove its plastic protection and with the care of an antique dealer, slide out the vinyl disc and hold it at various angles examining its grooves. Olivia watched the movement of his hands, the movement underneath the skin: the veins that flinched back and forth as his fingers rubbed the edge of a disc, the muscles of his forearms that contracted and retracted slightly as he flipped a disc over to examine the other side.

Would you like something to drink, Sean? she asked.

Sure, I guess. What do you have?
Olivia stood up from her place on the carpet, listing, as she did: water, ice tea, soda, coffee, or, if you’d like something different, there’s some gin in the cupboard, I believe.

Sean looked at his watch and up to Olivia. She smiled. His placement on the carpet in front of the drawer full of records was familiar, something she had seen several times a week for almost seven years. He combed his hand through his thinning blonde hair. He said, this might sound strange, but have you ever heard of a Compton Ice Tea? It probably sounds gross, but it’s exc-

I know it, she interrupted. Compton Ice Tea had also been Duane’s drink. The coincidences between Duane and Sean should probably have frightened her, angered her, or at least be the cause of some speculation. But Olivia was past that. In fact, she did not expect for Sean to be any different at all than Duane. For Olivia, Duane’s characteristics, from his meticulous method of trimming his mustache, how he always managed to be, without exception, ten minutes late, the way he held his breath during orgasm, his habit of keeping his wallet in his left pocket, and the way he drank his gin, were not his habits, but simply the habits of men, that unified and confident hunting club of a gender. Olivia did not walk into the kitchen angrily, then; with a composed step and dutiful, perhaps mischievous resolve, she walked into the kitchen and dropped three ice cubes into a lo-ball glass, Duane’s glass. She found the gin in the cupboard where Duane had left it—Tanqueray, three quarters empty—and reached past it to a bottle of Agave syrup. She poured enough in the glass to cover half of the first two ice cubes. She then mixed in equal parts rock’n’rye soda and that morning’s coffee, now cold. She sprinkled in a shake of cayenne red pepper and two shakes of garlic salt. She stirred them with a butter knife and smelled it. Still missing the gin aroma. Olivia looked around the kitchen until her attention was caught by the electrical potpourri warmer. It was pine scented, and she added a teaspoon of it to the glass, stirred it once more, and returned to the living room where Sean was in the same posture as before, looking through her husband’s old records.

How much did you say for these records? The whole collection? he asked.

Olivia handed Sean the Compton Ice Tea and sat on the floor next to him, with her legs stretched out in front of her. She smoothed the front of her denim skirt and leaned back on her hands. She said, Do you remember what I wrote in the ad?

I think it was two hundred and fifty for the collection, Sean said. He took a drink from his glass and coughed once, hard, and then he scraped his teeth across the top of his tongue from the back of it to the tip.

Is it too strong?

Yeah, perhaps a little. What kind of gin is this?

My own recipe, she answered. Olivia picked up the glass and plucked out an ice cube, popped it in her mouth, and started chewing on it.

You make your own gin? Sean asked.

I’ll give ’em to you for fifty bucks.

Fifty bucks? The whole collection? Olivia nodded. Sean continued: Are you sure? There’s some pretty rare stuff in here. I mean, I’m not trying to get you to jack up the price, but I’m certain that your husband must’ve spent twenty times that on this collection.

Olivia said, You’re probably right. How about twenty five bucks? But you have to have sex with me too but you have to take them out yourself. Today.
Deal, Sean answered. He stood up and took another drink, swallowed hard, and then wiped the back of his hand against his forehead, which seemed to be slightly damp with sweat. From his wallet he produced twenty-five dollars and paid Olivia. He continued, You’re husband isn’t going to be knocking at my door in a couple weeks wanting these back, is he?

If he does, you can have him too, she said. Olivia took the money from him and tucked it into her back pocket.

***

Ben rode the subway with Carol until they reached her stop. He walked her to her apartment, kissed her, and caught the next train to Brooklyn. Instead of going home, however, he stopped at No Name Cyber Café, and with his last eight dollars he bought an hour of time on the internet, which he used to find the cheapest train tickets to Los Angeles.

I closed my laptop and looked over the page Claire had given me. Her handwriting was nothing like Anna’s, which I had recently become more familiar with each time I reached for an object in the apartment that was no longer there, replaced by a slip of paper containing things like San Diego State University hooded sweatshirt or Bob Dylan, “Blood on the Tracks.” Anna’s alphabet curled and looped perfectly from the first A to the final Z, as though the design of the entire word was thought out from beginning to end before the pen was uncapped. Claire’s handwriting, however, was scratched mindlessly and blocky, with never enough room at the right margin to finish her name or to fit all five numbers of her zip code.
Chapter 8: I.O.U, February 1

A week later I woke up in the middle of the night. The clock read 3:27 when I crossed the room to flip on the light. I had dreamed that I was sleeping. In my sleep I rolled over, and the empty space beside me stirred my dream-self awake. The light was already on and I found a note beside me that read: I.O.U. Anna Bertreb, 27, 5’5” female, 132 lbs. Honest and seldom spontaneous, except for the time I left Karin. Usually have two cups of coffee in the morning before I brush my teeth. Once worked for an editor. Have never left Prentice for longer than two weeks. And the list went on until my actual self woke and crossed the room to flip on a light.
Chapter 9: Four Too Many Characters, February 6

I closed the first of the two Sleightor novels and set it on the coffee table. One, beginning at chapter twenty-seven, started with the protagonist, Laurence Sleightor, writing about the exact moment in which he wrote about that moment. In the opening chapter, everything is great: he speedily makes progress through opening pages of the novel; during a break, he wins three consecutive games of solitaire without cheating; his wife brings him midday coffee and his petition for afternoon sex is somehow successful; he receives a phone call that notifies him that he’s been asked to teach at a University in San Diego; and after he hits ten thousand words (in a single day!), his wife brings him a Gin and Tonic and insists that he calls it a day so they can eat Carne Asada fajitas and have a Wes Anderson movie-marathon. It then moved backwards until it reached chapter one, which started with Sleightor sitting uncomfortably in a seventh grade health class—the final session where the boys and girls were brought together in the same classroom to learn about safe sex—where he was caught writing the first thing he ever recalled writing unprompted by an authority: a love-letter to a female classmate. The chapter, and thus the novel, ends in a mess: the gym teacher (a cruel, stand-in, testosterone-driven, brute of a health teacher) forces him to read the note aloud to the class; the girl makes a public announcement that she’d rather perform sexual intercourse on an Ewok than kiss him; he gets pantsed in music class by the girl’s current boyfriend—an eighth grader—and then pushed into the back row of the trombone players (still pant-less); and then he misses the bus because of the detention he was given for writing notes in class and has to walk home where he knows he will be sent to his room without dinner, as is customary when he receives detention. The novel ends after he had walked home and swung angrily the front screen-door only to encounter his father at the kitchen table, to which he
yelled in the awkward voice of a seventh grade boy, “I wish you or mom had just minded what you were about that night I was conceived.” A story with a majestic and triumphant ending, then, is flipped and turned into a tragedy: a tale of a man at the top of his game, who by the end is simply a boy, torn down by his circumstances and his desire to write.

I had been waiting for Sleightor to get in touch with me since I spoke with B. Hart several weeks ago, but have yet to hear from him. During the meantime, I have been slowly working on my own novel, which was now a structureless mess with no direction, no sense of where it is going, and little sense of what had happened before its start. Perhaps, I thought, carrying One back to my desk and flipping open my laptop, that is why I prefer non-fiction to fiction: in non-fiction the end, however perceived or interpreted, is already there. The novel, on the other hand, is nothing more than a mirror of what you want to be there.

The hardest thing about writing a novel, I’ve found, is moving things forward. In my plans, Ben was on a train headed west by ten thousand words. Yet, there I was, pushing twenty-thousand words and, though he’s priced his ticket, he’s still in New York. The other characters—Olivia, Katrina, and Jacob (he’s new, and perhaps dispensable)—are sort of floating between segments about Ben. The problem is, I suppose, that anytime I get stuck with Ben, I invent a new character. I knew I was going nowhere this way. At this rate, I was sure, I’d be lucky to get Ben on a train by the hundredth page.

It had been two weeks since my dream about Anna. Since then, I hadn’t found a scrap of paper with her scribble on it. In the novel, Olivia and Sean have met once more, by chance, at the grocery store. He took her afterward to an Italian restaurant where she flirted with him for three hours and four rounds of drinks, even taking him up on his offer to pay the bill, before faking a stomachache and returning home alone. Katrina, whom you know
little about, is still working on completing the trellises in the garden she was contracted to build for the Presbyterian Church.

    Jacob, the new character, well, this is what I’d written at that point:

    Jacob sat at the table and looked at the faces around him. He recognized them all as people he used to know. It was not as though he hadn’t seen them for a while, but he did not recognize them as the old men they were; rather, he recognized them as the faces that had clocked in with him at the General Motors plant forty-two years ago, the faces that cussed at him for taking too long at Euchre during lunch breaks; they were the faces that had worn the stress of sleepless nights from too much drinking, staying up with a sick infant, and spending nights fighting with young wives. The faces that were around him now were wrinkled not from a sleepless night, but from sixty or seventy years of sleepless nights. If the faces had lost sleep from worrying about losing their health benefits or their pension checks, there would be no way of detecting it.

    When his whiskey tonic sunk beneath the ice cubes, Jacob looked around at the other’s drinks and he looked at the clock. He flagged down the young waitress and signaled another round. As he did, he pulled from his back pocket the bulky leather wallet, worn from too many years of sleeping in the same pocket. He flipped open the smooth leather fold and thumbed through the last bills. It was Tuesday and he would already have to break into the week’s emergency fund, a twenty dollar bill that was folded behind the sleeve of pictures of his wife: deceased two years now; his son: raising a family in Miami; his grandkids: Ethan, the starting nose tackle for his varsity football team, and Noelle, a sophomore at Virginia Tech, neither of whom he had spoken to since he called them last Christmas; and his brother, Caleb: living well in San Diego, whom he received phone calls from every Sunday afternoon during the Detroit Lion’s latest beating.

    The men gathered on a bi-monthly basis after each Union meeting. This particular gathering was sure to be a long one, as the subject of the new meeting was the renegotiation of the company’s recent contract revisions. Amongst several other cuts, the retirees’ once-secure pension and health care were now on the agenda. The men had spoken at the meeting and they had interrupted loudly, as though they believed something would change; they dramatically waved their hands and had even stormed out of the meeting early, but it would never matter, not in these times, how loudly they spoke or how angrily they waved their hands. It was no longer the seventies and eighties, and they no longer held the upper hand.

    The waitress returned with a tray of drinks. She set one each in front of the men. “I’ll tell you where them sons’a’bitches can put their new contract” one of them men sputtered in a voice of gravel and sticks, but Jacob did not have to listen to know the rest of the conversation. It’s all talk, he knew, as it had been for a long time. It’s all talk, he knew, as it had been for a long time. It’s all the same as it had been, and will be for a while before things get to start repeating themselves again. It’s all a cycle, and Jacob was tired. Again, he let his whiskey tonic sink below the ice cubes and he waved to the faces he had once known, sitting contentedly angry around the long table, pulled over his heavy flannel jacket, and pushed through the heavy wooden door into the midday sunlight.
And so, there are four characters who are not only unaware of each other’s existence, but are even less aware of what lies ahead of them. And even less so am I aware of it. A state of transition, perhaps, is what brings them together, I reasoned. But really, when looking at one’s life through a microscope, a microcosmic view of one’s immediate situation, who isn’t in a state of transition?
Chapter 10: I Don’t See the Problem with That, February 12

“I don’t see the problem with that.”

“What do you mean you don’t see the problem? It’s all a problem.”

“Karin,” Claire said, placing her hand upon mine, upon the bar, “dear,” she continued, “you are placing far too much emphasis on chronology.”

“I don’t think you understand what I’m trying to do here.”

“I don’t think you understand what you’re trying to do here,” she answered. And thus we continued to argue. Claire had found me, she admitted, by searching for Wisconsin men named Karin on the internet. A bi-monthly Prentice Newspaper eventually popped up, welcoming me to the parks department. She invited me back to her place to continue reading her story, but fearful of another such stomachache, I insisted on a neutral location.

When I arrived at the restaurant, I chose a table near the back to sit at, darkly lit and unbothered by much foot traffic. She showed up an hour late. I watched her search the floor for my table, impulsively sinking lower into my seat, as though our meeting were a sort of game of hide-and-go-seek. When she spotted me, she sauntered over—yes, she sauntered over, coolly, senseless of time, surroundings, etc. Her auburn hair hung in tight curls, held back from her face; its ends touched lightly her shoulders with each sauntering step. Her eyes were no longer darkly painted. In fact, it appeared she wore no makeup at all. Her loose-fitted, green dress contrasted the pale skin of her neck and arms, darkening her olive eyes, and fell almost to her ankles, revealing a pair of grey and pink tennis shoes. When she reached the table she almost sat at the outside chair, hesitated, then almost sat at the inside chair then stood upright again at the head of the table and asked, “where should I sit?”
“You can sit anywhere you’d like.” She studied again the arrangement of the four chairs, two on each side, me seated at the chair near the wall.

“I don’t like this table.”

“We can move if you’d like.” I looked around and suggested an empty table next to us. She examined it.

“No,” she said. “The chairs, they do not work. If we both sit on the outside, it will feel unbalanced, as though we’ll tip into the aisle. If we sit against the wall, it would feel as though the entire restaurant would also cave toward us.”

“We could sit diagonally from each other.”

She looked at me, sizing me up. “Come on, Karin. Don’t tease,” she said, as though to a child, and I indeed felt like one. “Follow me,” she said as she grabbed my hand. We walked through the aisles of the restaurant, her in front, me behind. Claire stopped occasionally at empty tables, placing a hand on her chin, inspecting them as one would inspect antique relics and finally settled on two seats at the bar, directly in the middle, with six empty seats on either side of us. We sat facing the barroom wall, lined with rows of bottles, their backs reflected in the barroom mirror.

The bartender approached us and Claire ordered two bourbons. He looked at me, I at Claire, and Claire at herself in the mirror, touching an invisible blemish beneath her eye. “One of those bourbons is for me, right?” I asked.

She pulled her hand away from her face, chuckled, and said, “If you’re lucky.” I reciprocated her chuckle, uncomfortably. “So,” she continued, “What time did you get here?”

“Um,” I looked at my watch. “About an hour ago. Did we say seven or eight?” knowing we said seven.
“Seven,” and she also looked at her watch, and then up to the barroom clock.

“Damn. Karin, I’m sorry. I’m an hour late! Why didn’t you say something?”

“Oh. It’s no big deal, really. I brought my notebook with me, anyway. I was working.”

Claire fidgeted with her watch, adjusting the time. “I guess I’m still on Daylight Savings Time.” It was February.

“Claire, not that you need an excuse, but if you insist on using one, that one is awful.”

“Excuse me?” She looked at me innocently.

“How is it possible that you’re on Daylight Savings Time three months after it has passed?”

“It’s possible, I guess.” The bartender returned with our drinks.

“Don’t you work?”

“From home. I work for a testing company based out of St. Louis.

“You write tests?”

“Well, sort of. You know how on all those standardized tests, in the Language section, the paragraphs with the grammar errors, that you have to find and correct?” I nodded. “I’m the one that puts in the errors.” She looked at my face in the mirror and continued. “Someone needs to do it, right? It is my job to find non-biased, interesting, and un-offensive texts, pristine from grammar and mechanical errors, and problemate them.”

“Problemate them?”

“Uh-huh,” she replied, as coolly as her saunter through the restaurant.

“Okay, besides work. Don’t you do banking? Shopping? Make phone calls? Engage in some form of social entertainment that requires the use of a clock?” She looked up at the
television hanging above the bar. The volume was off but the words scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

“"I can do that stuff from home," she trailed off, and then said, "What's with that guy’s coat?" I followed her gaze to the screen and saw that she referred to the man on the television screen, walking away from and towards the crowd.

“Have you seen this before?”

“What is it?” she asked, and then, as though prompted by some well plotted design or marketing strategy, the title flashed across the screen: NYC-vivor®. Behind the title, a familiar-looking man sat on some bleachers, his head in his hands. The shot panned across Times Square to follow another man, sided by two beautiful women, walking away down a crowded street.”

“NYC-vivor®?” she asked.

“It’s a new reality show. There’s like ten or twelve contestants, all pretty young, and they have to survive in this sort of awfully phony tribal society, where they live on the streets of Manhattan during the nights, while volunteering and competing during the day at a highly competitive and equally phony public relations firm.”

“Manhattan streets are all kinda lit up and lively twenty-four hours a day, right?”

“Yeah. Most of them. And this society they live in is essentially an outdoor campsite in Central Park. They sleep in tents and cook over fires. They’re assigned various tasks like creating new images for these small shady businesses off Times Square. The entire thing is fucking ridiculous. I mean, they portray these businesses as small and struggling, but if they can set up shop near Times Square, they must be doing something right, right?”

“So, what’s with the guy’s coat?” Claire asked.
“It’s fucking terrible, isn’t it? I don’t know how he could’ve even convinced the
people running the show to let him wear it.”

“I’m sure he didn’t have to convince anyone. I mean, do you really think he wanted
to wear that coat? I bet he was forced to by the producers, who were probably persuaded by
a sponsor. Wait until the credits role. I guarantee some apparel company will be listed near
the top, probably in larger font than the rest.”

“It seems like they could save money by creating less of a shitty-looking coat,
though.”

“It’s not really the point. They’ve already created the, ah, shitty-looking coat, and
perhaps have already mass-produced it. When they realized it was, as you say, shitty-looking,
they had to figure out how to sell them. At that point, it’s simple: on a large stage, exhibit an
attractive person wearing something unattractive, and all the unattractive people out there
will forget that it is unattractive, and thus imagine themselves as attractive in the once-
thought unattractive item. It’s quite an ubiquitous strategy, really.”

“Ubiquitous, huh” I repeated, trying to remember what it meant.

“Absolutely,” Claire went on. “Here,” she prompted, “find the most attractive
woman in this restaurant tonight.” Claire was, as far as I could tell, the only candidate, and I
wondered if she knew this when she asked, if she had somehow planned the entire
construction of this conversation to reach this point, whether to solicit criticism of her
tennis shoes, or to fish for a compliment (though that hardly seemed from what little I knew
of her, a goal), or to lead to yet an unexpected conversational passageway that she had yet
not unveiled, and I could not yet perceive. She continued, progressing slightly brisker than
before, moving from a lull to a saunter, and then to a driven staccato. “Look at what it is
about that woman that makes her attractive.” I looked in the mirror. “Is it the way the fabric
hugs her tone stomach? The way the neckline directs your eyes to that passageway between
her breasts, prompting your desire to explore further? The way her jeans—"

“Yes.”

“See, then? When you go to buy that particular item, it is not only available in the
size that it will look good in. It is available in all sizes. Unattractive people, then, can wear it,
and instead of looking into a mirror and seeing how the fabric accentuates their bloated gut,
or how the neckline flattens their breasts, they only see themselves as the original model
looked. It’s an ubiquitous strategy.”

“Ubiquitous,” I repeated Claire’s repetition. I faced her and hoped that, through
some form of rhetorical strategy to drive her point home, she’d clarify the meaning of the
word.

“Ubiquitous,” she said, stirring her straw into her bourbon. She took a drink, and her
face contorted sourly. “Something that is ever,” she paused and cough, wiped her mouth on
her forearm, and continued, “something that is always,” she paused again, this time wiping
her eyes on the shoulder of her dress. “Damnit,” she said, “I think this bourbon has gone
bad.”

I tasted mine. “I’m not sure bourbon can go bad.”

“Taste this,” she said, and pushed the glass towards my mouth. It tasted like bourdon.

“Maybe it’s just not as strong as the stuff you make,” I suggested.

Claire plucked an ice cube from my glass and put it in her mouth, as I had watched
her do only weeks before. She crunched it between her teeth, disapprovingly. “Well, it’s not
great, but I guess I’ll finish it since you’re paying for it.”

Paying for it? “Order something else if you’d like.”
She took another sip from her glass and inhaled deeply. “This will do. Anyway, you seem to know a lot about this show. Are you a fan?”

“A fan? No,” I said, thinking about sitting up that night, watching the NYC-vivor® marathon. “It was on while Anna was leaving. Afterward, I left it on, just looking, really, at the screen until morning.”

“Anna, huh? Have you found her yet?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to start looking,” I answered.

“Karin, we’ve been over this.” She looked ahead at me, through the tops of a row of Tequila bottles.

“Besides, I have to write.”

“Come on. Has she contacted you at all?”

“Sort of. She left a bunch of notes throughout the house. But I haven’t found one in several weeks.”

“What sort of notes?”

“I.O.U.’s mainly. Anything that she took with her that had belonged to me, she left a hand-written note.”

Claire seemed to think about it for a moment. Her eyes looked up and through the television. With her index finger, she scratched at the inside of her thumb knuckle. “It sounds like fun,” she finally said.

“Not really.”

“It’d make a great story,” she added.

“I don’t know if I’m the right writer to write such a story. Besides, I kinda have my hands full with the current story.”
Claire pulled a small notebook out of her purse, uncapped a pen that was hooked on ringed binding, and jotted something down. Besides my name, in the darkness of the restaurant, I couldn’t make out what else she wrote. When I asked her, she said she had just remembered something she needed at the grocery store. “What’s the problem with your novel?”

“I don’t know. Everything, I guess. I just don’t know how to get it moving.”

“You haven’t started it?”

“No, I’ve started writing, but I just don’t know where the story should actually begin.”

“We’ve been over this, too,” she reminded me. I thought about her story, the opening page of the couple performing the Sitting Bull.

“But even if I were to start with sex, I’m not sure where to go next. I mean, I’m a good ways into it, and I’m not even close to being where I wanted to be. It’s a chronology problem, I guess. There’s just too much that happens, and if I were to record it all, the thing would never end; I’m not sure it’d ever start. It’s a chronology problem,” I repeated.

“That’s not a problem.”

“What?”

“I don’t see the problem with that.”

“What do you mean you don’t see the problem? It’s all a problem.”

“Karin,” Claire said, placing her hand upon mine, upon the bar, “dear,” she continued, “you are placing far too much emphasis on chronology.”

“I don’t think you understand what I’m trying to do here.”

“I don’t think you understand what you’re trying to do here,” she answered, a single pale and forceful finger pointing downward on the smooth and shiny surface of the bar.
I thought that maybe Claire was right, but it turned out I didn’t know what she had meant. Her seemingly ontological query turned out to be less concerned with my existence in this cosmos, as it did with our existence in the restaurant. Actually, it seemed even less concerned with our existence in the restaurant as it did with her need of a ride home. She had taken a taxi to the bar and by the time she questioned my existence, the small-town taxi service had closed down. When I explained to her that I did not have a vehicle, and that I, too, would be walking home, she responded, but you do have a couch, don’t you? And I had already given that away.

Here’s the thing, I had told Claire as we left the bar. I do have a couch, but I also have a girlfriend, at least I think I do. And she said, I wish I knew what you thought you know, and I don’t mean this epistemologically, but as it pertains to what you presume to know about me. I didn’t know what she meant, but I offered her my couch and I offered her my coat, and I was cold on the way home.

When we got back to my apartment, Claire stood in the doorway for several moments, scanning the room as the snow from her tennis shoes snow melted into water and dripped onto our, my entryway rug. When I offered her a seat, she instead walked tentatively around the room and quietly pointed out how she had imagined the room to look from the way I had described it in my references to Anna’s departure, the television show, and my desk. She finally sat down on the couch, and I at my desk. I pulled out my Oxford English Dictionary, 2007, a gift from Anna when she had moved in, and opened it to the U’s.
Ubiquitous: Present or appearing everywhere; omni-present: 

- **a.** Of single persons or things. . .
- **b.** Of a kind or class of persons or things.

Claire sat at the corner of the couch, her hands in her lap, watching me. Her fingers twisted in the cotton folds of her dress. Her confidence at the restaurant and at her house, her sense of direction that had always seemed unchartered and searching, confident that it would take her somewhere, to some discovery which would be better than not discovering, was buried, it seemed, as though put on pause. I couldn’t tell if it was the remnants of Anna in the house—a picture of us standing on the porch in our winter gear that hung next to the doorway, a pair of woman’s slippers that still rested near the bedroom door, the stack of neatly scribed notes that sat on my desk—or if it was the bourbon we drank at the restaurant, or if it was simply a side of Claire that I had not yet encountered that caused her inward silence. But as she sat there, her knobby elbows tucked into her sides and her burgundy hair tired from the restaurant’s thick air, losing its resolve and now falling in lonesome pieces in front of her face and I at my computer desk, I realized that it wasn’t the loss of confidence, but rather the fear that something was missing and wouldn’t return, that caused me to first question whether or not there really was only one person for everybody, or if there were more than one. Though I couldn’t possibly believe it, I tried for a second, for a fleeting moment, to imagine that I could love somebody the way I loved Anna. As I thought that, I knew, also, that I was creating my own fiction. The moment that I had watched Claire pluck an ice cube from my homemade bourbon and crunch it between her teeth and when she handed me a page from her story and told me to go find Anna, though maybe I hadn’t yet recognized it, I had at least sensed that I could love somebody else. Maybe I could not love her in place of Anna, or the in the way that I love Anna, but I knew that I could love her.
I went to my bedroom and found a pair of sweatpants, a t-shirt, and some wool socks, and I waited in the living room while Claire changed. When she opened the bedroom door, she lingered in the doorway, my t-shirt hanging formless over her small frame and the socks bunched messily at her ankles and loose past the ends of her toes. I stood up from my desk. Thank you for the clothes, she said. I walked toward her, grabbed a blanket from the couch, and wrapped it over her shoulders. Claire grabbed the ends of the blanket, pulled it tight at its sides, and with a sudden flare of enthusiasm said, You should write. I hesitated, and she grabbed my hand, pulled me toward the couch, and with her arms still hidden beneath the blanket, nudged me into its corner. She handed me my laptop. At her request, I requested a glass of bourbon, three ice cubes, a splash of water, and a wedge from a Clementine orange, and she brought it to me. Minding her gaze, I opened to where I had left off and read it through. She pulled the Sleightor novel from my desk that I had finished just that morning and sat on the couch next to me, beginning it at the beginning; and as she did, I wrote:

Olivia climbed the steps in front of her house and pulled the mail from her box. She pushed open the lid and peered into it to make sure she hadn’t missed some small parcel or card. She hadn’t. It was dark and she had to face the street to find the correct key, dropping the entire in the process, and cursing loudly. She was a little drunk. She knew she shouldn’t have let Sean pay for the drinks and then fake a stomachache, but, fuck that. She definitely should have let him pay for them. She thought, as she fitted the correct key into its slot and turned it to unlock the door, she should have stuck around for two more rounds and then left him at the bar. He’s got a whole new set of records to keep him company with his Compton Ice Tea and his Old Spice deodorant (she had actually asked him—had asked him, who was paying for the drinks!—if he would refrain from the Compton Ice Tea as its smell was sure to bring unpleasant memories of her husband into the room with them, and he had obliged). Olivia dropped the mail onto the living room table as she entered the house, hoping that she could find something to drink.

She left her groceries in her car, except for a pack of Winston Lights that she had put in her purse. As she searched the shelves for a bottle of wine—there had to be one here; Duane would’ve never let them run out—she lit a cigarette for the first time in seven years (her first time ever smoking inside her own house), and pulled out Duane’s favorite coffee mug to ash in. In the turnaround, beside the dishwasher, she found a
cabernet, uncorked it, and sloshed it into wide-bodied wine glass. She carried the mug and the glass into the living room and set them on the table next to the mail. The empty shelves on which the television sat—those that had held a generation’s worth of records—seemed about ready to collapse in their emptiness. In the place of the records, Olivia had used the space to store her modest collection of CDs. It looked odd, a dozen CDs taking up the space where over two hundred records had once been stored. She stumbled to them, plucked out The Cranberries’ second album, No Need to Argue and put it into the player. The cigarette that hung from her lip clouded her eyes, though at one time, she used to be able to play an entire hand of cards without removing the cigarette from her lips. She turned the stereo up louder than she should’ve, then turned back to her mail.

Olivia sorted the bills from the non-bills, the personal from the advertisements, the unsolicited from the solicited, until she had narrowed the pile down to one relevant letter. It was from her sister, who lived in Chicago, in the neighborhood that they had grown up in, several houses down the road from where her parents still lived.

Claire tucked her knees underneath her. She propped her elbow onto the couch’s arm and rested her chin into her palm. With her free hand, she flipped a page in One, ran her hand over the page as though smoothing it, and held it into place with her fingers on its spine.

Olivia drank from her wineglass, letting the first track play through before opening the letter, at which time she also needed a refill of her wine and brought the bottle back into the living room with her. She tore the envelope open from the side and pulled out the letter—thrice folded and typed (Olivia hated typed letters)—and unfolded it. She lit another cigarette.

Olivia, 
Hey, dear. How are you holding up? I am thinking of you constantly and can’t bear to imagine you all the way over there in Oregon in that big empty house. I can’t imagine it. I miss you so much, dear. I know it is not like you to do such a thing, but I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t mean it with all sincerity, and as your older sister, I hope you consider it: Please come home for a while and stay with us. Mother is worried sick about you, and we all miss you so much. Please, come stay with us. Now that both our children are away at college, we have plenty of room. You’ll practically have the place to yourself during the days, but you’ll have family nearby if you need them. Please, Sweetie, we are all dying to see you. Come home. 
Love,
Jamie

Olivia had been expecting the letter for a while and was actually surprised at how long it had taken to arrive. Her family had only been to Portland twice since she moved out here with Duane, though she had flown several times to Chicago, usually alone. She put the letter aside and snubbed out her barely smoked cigarette.
on the inside wall of Duane’s coffee mug. She would have to get used to smoking again, as well as other things, if she planned on keeping up with it.

“Well do you mind?” Claire asked, as she moved to her back on the couch draping her legs over the far end.

“No.”

Her hair spread out beneath her head and against my leg, and a couple strands had floated onto my keyboard; I did not move them, but detecting a scent of vanilla, continued to type through them.

“I don’t mind.”

Olivia finished her glass of wine and set it on the table. She lay back on the couch, draping her legs over the far end, and spread her hair out from underneath her head. The music poured from the speakers. Chicago, she thought. The despair, the ubiquitous despair that crosses this country, the ubiquitous sadness that strangles this land like a set of railroad tracks shrinking in and in and in until our hearts explode.

The ice in my glass had melted, and I bit into the Clementine wedge and sucked out the remaining bourbon and orange juice from it. I stood, carefully, but without touching Claire, and refilled my glass. When I returned, she had flipped to her side and appeared to be sleeping. I sat gently next to her, reaching across her curled frame to pull her blanket to her shoulders. My hand lingered on her shoulder, feeling the pulse of her body as it transitioned into sleep. Her breathing was unsteady: a long inhale and a quick release, a slow swelling and an abrupt deflation. I continued:

Ben Sophia Jacob Katrina Katrina Katrina had already traveled across the country once, from Pennsylvania to New Mexico, and she was not eager to do it again. She plunged her shovel into the dirt, flipping over the hard clay and stabbing at it until it crumbled. But if Eric didn’t start managing this crumbling farm as he used to, she wouldn’t have a choice. She made her way down the row, busting up the dirt to make way to erect another trellis along the row of bean plants. Albuquerque, boasting one of the better economies in the country, was still no grocery line of opportunities, she thought. Katrina knew she was lucky to have even been hired at the job she had. It had been one of those rare days where everything had seemed to align: she had happened, by chance, to meet Eric, her boss (and, outside of the handful of volunteering interns during the summer, the
other fifty percent of San Viento Farm’s payroll) while hiking; when she met him she was wearing only a pair of shorts and a sports bra (not to say that Eric was a pervert—he was sixty plus years old!—but he was human); she had met Eric at a time when he needed help and he didn’t give much of a shit whether the farm prospered or sunk (he had made his money and could retire comfortably only if he were strong enough to pull the trigger, and he was, in fact, looking for a reason to sell it); and she had been fresh out of graduate school where she—by convenience more than intuition—wrote her Master’s thesis on ditch irrigation farming in the American Deserts.

Claire, in her sleep, tucked an arm underneath her head, pressing it also tightly against my thigh; her other arm mindlessly floated in front of her face, its hand resting so lightly on my kneecap that I couldn’t feel it through the fabric of my jeans. My hand, pulling from its position against my keyboard—where my palm had rested on the smooth, empty surface, and my fingers ascended and descended, ascended and descended: a s d f space, as if space was the end, that if I let the space grow too large between the keys and my left hand, whether to reach for my glass, to cup the blanketed shoulder of my couchmate, or to rub my monitor-tired eyes, i would become done, defeated, denouement-ed—to hover momentarily overhead of Claire’s burgundy hair, not quite touching it, and pulling back to, if only for my own need to go on innocently conscious of sleeping Claire, the home keys that had once been my own refuge before had I tried my fingers at fiction—

As day fastly faded, far and sad against safe, distanced Sandia Mountains, Katrina stayed, fearing falling behind schedule, and strafed the sun-formed earth, sans overtime pay. She busted the earth in even lines and hand-tamped rusty rebar into the earth, deep enough that the weight of the plants would not pull them inwards. Before long, Greg, who had been periodically throughout the day peeking out from the office window nearest the garden, approached her in the fading heat of the evening. He walked tentatively under a bald, sunburned head, his pear-shaped body somehow tucked into a pair of tight-waisted jeans and a white t-shirt; a rainbow and the words Rainbow Children’s Camp stretched between his thin shoulders and across his bulging middle. He walked with an air of business to attend to, though not business to be proud of. Katrina could’ve said the words before they left his mouth:

1 The importance of withdrawing my hand from Claire’s soft, vanilla scented locks and returning it to my left-hand home position in this last sentence: A’s: 23, S’s: 13, D’s: 12, F’s: 8, Spaces: 24.
“Hot enough for you?”
“Yeah,” Katrina said. “It’s pretty warm, I guess. It is New Mexico in August. You can count on the heat.”
“How’s the digging going?”
“The ground is tougher than I thought it would be, mostly clay and rocks.”
Greg surveyed the small piece of torn up ground between the highway and the Presbyterian Church. He said, “So, is this all of it?”
“No,” Katrina answered. “These are the beans. I still have to plant the tomatoes, beets, chard, and watermelon.”
“But that’ll be in today, right?”
“Nope.”
“When we discussed this little project with Robert, we had determined that it would be finished this week.”
“Yes,” Katrina answered, “but that was before the concrete guys took an extra week, and before you and Robert decided that it would be too costly to bring in proper soil.” Katrina walked toward her truck, parked along the curb, and took a long drink from her beaten-up milk jug, now filled with water. She picked up another piece of rebar from the pile and carried it down the row, past Greg. She put all of her weight into driving it only inches into the ground, then picked up the heavy tamp, slamming it down the pole until it sunk, stubbornly into the earth.

Claire tucked her knees closer to her body, and without waking, she raised her torso and head, muttered get lost, you creep; you and your dumb fucking coat, and lowered her head onto my lap only moments after I lifted my laptop to clear room for her. And then I sat there, holding my writing in the air, suspended above her sleeping face, her hair blanketed over my lap. My options:

1. Jostle my knee gently to wake her in a manner that would seem accidental, though emphatic enough to motivate to slide back off my thigh. Continue to write.
2. Close my laptop, run my fingers through her hair. Eventually fall asleep. Write tomorrow.
3. Rest my computer on the arm of the couch, continue writing. Think of Anna before she left. Her ability to read through the entire night, despite her heavy eyelids, if the story was good. The small frame of light that, in our not-quite-marriage bed,
illuminated her face, outlined by her quiet brown hair, and the edges of whatever book she was buried in. her ability to discard anything that was passed its use: old manuscripts, novelty mugs, winter coats that had lost their ability to retain heat, photos that did not fit into an album, phone numbers

The ice had melted in my bourbon and I had not yet sipped from its edge. I knew, though, that it’d be too watered down. I had waited too long. The ubiquitous task of waiting, I thought, had now been metaphor-ized in my watered-down bourbon and in the slight ache in my forearms from holding my laptop too long. There is too much to do before doing. There is too much to record.

My laptop balanced on the couch’s arm, my fingers kept at their home position, not just for ease of typing, but now serving the duplicitous task of typing ease and balance.

Katrina hadn’t trusted Robert, who Greg had hired to oversee the renovations of the old church. Her boss, Eric, had even warned her to do a quick and efficient job, even if it meant cutting some corners. There was a bit of labor-unease around Albuquerque lately. Nothing had been done yet, but a select few labor unions had expressed some grievances, especially with the nation’s ubiquitous economic troubles, about the hiring of non-union labor. Robert belied confidence in the matter with his own ever-constant grievances about the anti-capitalistic motivations of the unions. The truth was, Katrina believed, that Robert felt that if folks were losing their jobs, and they were willing to work non-union jobs for non-union pay, then the unions had no right to keep them from doing so. What he didn’t belie, however, was his not-so, though occasionally revealed, ubiquitous fear that the local unions may have the power to halt his lucrative labor designations by barring his once-union-yet-now-free-laboring-and-recently-credit-relying work forces from working via fear of a picket line.

“Well,” Greg continued, “delays aside, we still have a timeline, and our contract states that you will install a garden for the church’s youth to maintain during the school year, and if you do not have plants in the ground for our children to water and monitor and learn from, then you are in violation of that contract.”

Katrina could feel the old familiar pressure behind her sunburned cheekbones, the deep ache into her molars. She could feel the lower edges of her eyelids trying to give in and trying to hold back. She walked to the pile of rusted rebar and scooped up four of the heathy steel bars and carried them to the row she’d been working at, dropping them violently at Greg’s feet. Again, she put her weight into the next piece, forcing it into the ground enough to hold it while she drove it farther with the hand tamp.

Greg continued, “We have service tomorrow and were hoping to use the garden as an illustration for the children.”

“You have bean plants.”
Greg stomped at the ground. “You’re just leaving, then?”
“Once I finish this row, yes.” She drove the next piece into the earth. She faced him. “Hey, I have four more stakes to drive, and then I have to wrap them in chicken wire and clean up. I should probably get back to it, huh?”

Greg stood there, impotent. Katrina continued working, her back to him, and did not notice when he left, just that when she turned to fetch the wire, he was gone. Soon after, once the wire was attached to the stakes she swept the dirt from the sidewalk, sprayed the bean plants with the church’s spicket, packed up and left. She wouldn’t be returning the truck to San Viento that night, she knew as she drove away from the farm, down Central, toward the watermelon-colored Sandia range. The truck rumbled past Union station and under the tracks where the echoes of the engine scattered several pigeons from their nests. She passed the University of New Mexico, where she sometimes helped Eric teach his organic farming seminars, and passed the brightly colored stucco shops along Nob Hill that offered numerous options for those seeking tattoos, check cashing, or antique dealing, and finally reached sixty miles an hour as the shops gave way to one story houses, which gave way to trailers, and finally to por

My laptop began to slide from the couch’s arm and in my gesture to save it from crashing to the floor, I startled Claire awake. She looked up at me with mid-sleep heavy eyes, slats of olive searching my face for clues as to where she was and who I was—where I was and who she was?—and then she scooted farther toward me until her head was full on my thigh and against my stomach and her arms wrapped around my knee. I closed my laptop, and let it fall gently to the ground where it leaned against the couch. I pried my feet out of my house slippers without bending over and I leaned back into the couch, wedging myself into the corner. My arm, hovering still over Claire’s shoulder finally landed. Having crossed that threshold, I brushed her hair back off her face, tracing imaginary lines from her ear down to her shoulders, and rested again, against her side. I closed my eyes as though sleeping, and tried to synchronize the slumbering pulse of her body with the nervous beat of my own that moved from my chest to my shoulder to my arm to my hand to my fingertips in some ubiquitous, yet detached, rhythm.
Chapter 12: And When I Woke Up She Was Gone, February 13

and when I woke up she was gone
It seemed like my bad luck. I pulled back the curtain of the front door—a curtain that Anna had sewn shortly after moving in—and looked for her tracks, which I had assumed would’ve left traces from my front porch as they maneuvered my icy steps and sauntered down to the street before disappearing into the void of a taxi’s backseat. But even they were gone, buried in a fastly falling snow that had erased every detail that I had not yet seen like an etcher-sketch left face-down on top of a fully-loaded washing machine during its spin cycle.

As I looked out the window, the cold and wet assurance that she had been here seeped into my socks from the puddle her shoes had left on my rug the night before. I let the curtain fall back into place and went into the bedroom. Folded on my bed were the sweatpants and t-shirt that I had given Claire the night before, though the wool socks seemed to be missing. Also, to my surprise—and perhaps fear? no, that can’t be the right word—my laptop lay open at the foot of the bed. And then I noticed the ever-faint, valley-like impression on my bed where Claire must have laid as she did whatever she did on my computer. At the head, near the untouched pillow on my side of the bed—the left—the covers were pulled back and crumpled. I imagined my wool socks on Claire’s feet toeing mindlessly with the covers as she read a portion—certainly not all—of my scattered novel-in-progress. I set the folded clothes on my dresser and laid down next to her impression, and I moved the computer’s cursor to reveal a screen that she had left. It read:

*Coffee is ready. Really, Karin, go get a cup.*
Which I did not, given the nature of such mysterious notes, I chose instead to read on.

Karin, seriously, get yourself a cup of coffee before it sits too long on the burner. I wasn’t sure when you’d wake, so I made it just now, hoping that it’d be done by the time you wake. Now, I understand the nature of such mysterious notes, if that is what you consider this to be, but how much more mysterious would this note be if you couldn’t read straight to the end, but rather had to break early on to get up from the bed, walk into the kitchen and pour yourself some coffee, the entire time wondering ‘what comes next?’

So, I performed the aforesuggested actions, and lie once again on my bed, now with a mug of strong black coffee, and read on:

Thanks for letting me stay last night. I’m sorry if I kept you from writing. I did not use your toothbrush this morning, in case you worry about such things, though I did use some of your toothpaste and my finger. I guess you’ve already noticed, too, that I left your clothes on the bed.

No mention of the socks.

Now, though I hate to have created such suspense about the remainder of this really-not-so-mysterious e-note by making you get your coffee before continuing, I must be brief. I called a cab before I started writing it and thought that I’d have plenty of time to write in detail. Trying to find filters for your coffee maker, however, took far longer than I had thought, so I only have time to tell you to:

1) Check your email. Honestly, I was not snooping, though when I tried to check mine, your inbox appeared on the screen and two of the emails looked important (I did not read them).
2) Ben and Jacob need villains. Olivia and Katrina’s stories seem to already have villains—Duane and Robert, respectively—that personify the troubled economic times in which they live, though Ben and Jacob are merely fighting against themselves—also, it seems, a personification of their times. And Karin, I have to tell you with the most sincerest respect for what you think you’re trying to do: that story has been told. Give them a villain.
3) Stay in touch.

Thanks again, Karin.
Yours,
Claire

(Mine?)

So, she had read it, and maybe my email too, which I checked. There were several notes, mostly junk, but I quickly found the two of which I assumed she referred. The first was
from B. Hart, with the subject “the novel,” and the second was from Anna, with the subject, “love, then.” I read B. Hart’s note first.

Subject: The Novel
From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
February 11, 2009 5:32 PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin:

Hello! I trust the muse has been treating you well. I am writing about the novel, Karin. There are two matters to discuss.

First, I am a bit concerned that four months have passed since we first spoke, and we have yet to receive any update on the novel. Now, here at Bunsen Publishing, we pride ourselves in our low-pressure approach with our novelists. Perhaps you did not know this Karin, but though I am not necessarily a writer of fiction, I am a drummer, and within that detail lies a similar responsibility, one of communication. In order to be successful in my hobby—though I’ll be the first to admit that it is a bit more than a hobby, as I’m sure you’ll confess that writing is more than a hobby for you—I must be in constant communication with my bandmates. This is especially the case when composing or, as some call it, jamming. If I am not in tune with my bassist or keyboardist, then the rhythm suffers. Similarly, if, as a group, we are not in communication with our manager, we miss dates, lose momentum, and eventually slack on our practicing duties. Now, writing, like drumming, or any other art one hopes to compose for monetary gain must be well tended to, and any partnership can only survive through ample communication. Believe me, I do understand the challenges that face a first-time novelist. The foremost of which is motivation. Karin, I cannot emphasize enough that you must write, and do so frequently. We understand that you require both time and space to create an effective work environment, which will hopefully contribute to a long- and well-known piece of art. It is equally important to us, however, that our novelists are, in fact, being productive. All this to say, I think it is about time that one of our editors takes a look at your novel or, at the very least, we could receive a short synopsis and report on your progress. Remember, Karin, space is everything. You must be sure to stow yourself in an environment that is conducive to your work. Oftentimes, writing at home can be difficult when there are distractions. This brings me to the second reason for my correspondence.

As you may or may not know, Bunsen Publishing also has available a modest traveling fund for writers who need to conduct on-location research for their respective projects. The monies will be awarded as a percentage against your novel sales—a matter we can discuss in the near future. Now, often writers use this fund as a means to get away, to track down the muse, as some put it, or as I like to think, to woo the muse. Think of it as a romantic getaway with your novel. Take the time to get to know your new-found muse of fiction; romance her, fight with her, and in the end, allow her to complete you and the novel.
And, of course, before we can allot you said funds, we would need to receive, at the very least, a plot synopsis and a justification for travel funding. It is a mere formality, I assure you.

Please respond soon, Karin, so we can get this project rolling. Let me know if there is any way that I can assist you in the future.

Best,
B. Hart.

P.S. Has Sleightor contacted you yet?

I went to the kitchen for another cup of coffee, taking, as I did, Claire’s suggestion to prolong the suspense of a note by allowing myself to perform some other activity—pouring a cup of coffee, in this case—while thinking about said note. And, it worked. As much as the note from B. Hart weighed on me—I couldn’t possibly send him the slop that I’ve written thus far, let alone attempt to write a plot synopsis (maybe I should buy some corkboard with some index cards [why didn’t I need such things with the book about my grandfather (easy: truth, truth, truth [well, one should ask (or exclaim, rather [and they have], truth?!)])]?)—I couldn’t stop thinking about what Anna’s note would reveal: her location, hopefully; better yet, a note of return plans (does she need me to pick her up from the airport?); though, really, I would settle for an ‘I miss you, Karin.’ The truth was, I would settle for an email. I have. I mean, regardless of what happened last night (just me writing and Claire sleeping), receiving the email—yet unread—has made me realized that anything I assumed to have felt from the time I’ve spent with Claire, has been mere projections of what I do feel for Anna. For God’s sakes! She’s my girlfriend. For four years, with very, very, few exceptions, we’ve woken up next to each other, have pried deeper and deeper into who we are: who we were and what we will be. For those years we’ve taught each other how to live with each other, how to be me, and her, her, how to speak, and how to read. Certainly, there is only one
person for everybody, and my one person is Anna. I believed it, without even trying, and I couldn't not imagine loving Claire, or anybody, the way that I loved Anna, could not imagine being loved as much as Anna had—maybe still does?—loved me. There is nobody, I knew, that could ever exist within my mind as Anna does.

I carried my coffee back into the bedroom and sat on the bed. I put my coffee on the nightstand—Anna’s side—and pulled the covers up over my lap and leant against the headboard and lifted the laptop onto my lap. I clicked on “love, then,” and read:

Subject: love, then
From: “Anna Bertreb” Abba88@vmail.net
February 10, 2009 11:45 AM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: Normal

Karin:

“Is love, then, so simple my dear?
The opening of a door,
And seeing all things clear?
I did not know before.

I had thought it unrest and desire
Soaring only to fall,
Annihilation and fire:
It is not so at all.

I feel no desperate will,
But I think I understand
Many things, as I sit quite still,
With eternity in my hand.”

-Irene Rutherford Mcleod

Hey, Karin. Hello from Miami.

Miami? What is in Miami besides alligators and retirees?

It is so amazing. So much more than alligators and retirees, as we once thought. This evening, though, I’ll be heading north. Anyway, I’ve been thinking about you. I miss sitting on the back porch in the summer evenings; I miss having a regular place to sleep. But, I know I should be doing what I’m doing now. Karin.
Shit. I’m so sorry baby. I could only afford an hour at the internet café, and I’ve just a couple minutes left. I have one more email to write. I promise, I will write more later.

Take care of yourself. Keep writing.

AB

I burned the roof of my mouth with on my coffee, which, due to the brevity of Anna’s note, hadn’t even the time to fucking cool.
Chapter 14: Lies, Lies, Lies, February 13

Blocked by the memories of my small apartment—writing at the desk to the soft breathing and scratching of Anna editing on the couch, I decided to try to work at the Prentice University Library. It was late, and though they’d be open for another hour, the aisles were desolate. A lone student worker pushed a cart with a squeaky wheel up and down each aisle, stopping occasionally to shelve a returned book. I went upstairs and sat in a private room where the squeaky wheel would not disrupt me, and where I could hide a bottle of bourbon alongside my chair. The room was warm and carried a dusty smell. I cracked the window. I flipped on a table lamp, leaving shadows throughout the rest of the room, and then I unloaded the contents of my bag onto my desk. For a while, I just sat there in the sixty-watt glow, watching the large flakes of snow light up momentarily as they neared the window, and then smack silently into the pitiless glass.

I folded down the crisp brown paper from an unopened bottle of bourbon, cracked open the seal, and let it splash into a paper cup, which I dashed with some water from the drinking fountain. I locked the door on the way back in.

I opened up my laptop. I would have to think about traveling, I knew. But beyond that, I really didn’t know what I knew. I knew that Prentice, WI was north of Miami, as was Atlanta, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, Exeter, Fredericksburg, Gainesville, Harrisburg, Indianapolis, Jefferson, Knoxville, Louisville, Memphis, Nashville, Nantucket, New Orleans, New Albany, New London, New York, New York. Shit. That was it. Anna had mentioned New York. A week before she left, buried in her checkbook, adding and subtracting, crediting and debiting the money she had gained from selling all of her things (oh what the hell was I thinking when she was packing those boxes!), she had mentioned a cousin or an
old roommate that lived in New York. The roommate’s address had been on Anna’s list when she began sending out the boxes. I asked her about it, and she said they were books that her roommate (or cousin) had loaned her years ago that she had never gotten around to returning. Of course she was in New York. I could find her there. I think I could find her there. I took a drink and looked out the window. Icicles hung from the ledge above the window, and the flickering light from the parking lot below created a prism of yellow light through them. I opened an email and began writing:

Subject: RE: the novel  
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)  
February 13, 2009, 2:37 AM  
To: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)  
Priority: Normal

Dear B. Hart,

Thank you for your concern. I want you to know that I am working diligently at the novel, though you are correct about the distractions. So many things have been going on here, and it is difficult to truly get in touch with my muse. The thought of getting away from this harsh and wintery spell is really quite enticing.

I can’t believe I’m writing this.

I will send you a more detailed synopsis, as well as some drafts if you’d like, but for now I would like to briefly tell you the shape the novel has been taking. The novel, currently titled, Of course there was no title—there was hardly a novel—yet, believing that having a title would help to convince B. Hart of the seriousness and authenticity of the project, I picked a book that had been left behind in the room—Travels With Charley by John Steinbeck, as it turned out—and began thumbing through it. I was barely five pages into it when the sentence jumped out at me, opening up a fresh paragraph and underlined by a previous reader: “So it was that I determined to look again, to try to rediscover . . .”
This Monster Land, is the story of four characters from four disparate regions of the country, that are each equally burdened with the current state of the nation’s economic crisis. At the start of the novel, the four voices alternate in a seemingly random order, yet as the novel progresses, the characters begin stretching across the country.

Shit, I have a lot to do if he asks for drafts.

and as they do so, their lives, as well as the narrative structure of the novel, begin to fuse into one story, instead of the four stories in which the novel began. The first of these characters is a young man, recently out of a graduate program in Education, named Ben. Ben, unable to find work teaching, instead works at a day-by-day temp agency. He lives in the borough of Brooklyn, New York City.

I took a long pull from my paper cup.

Having only been to New York once for a weekend with my brother, I find that continuing to write without spending some considerable time in the Big Apple, would not only cheapen my story but also rob any prospective readers of the sort of authenticity that I feel they deserve. Even in fiction, authenticity is crucial, right?

The other characters of the novel are from Detroit, Albuquerque, and Portland. I’ve chosen these places because of their geographic location and where they are affixed in the economic scale. While Detroit is one of the hardest hit cities, Albuquerque seems to be, on the exterior, nearly unscathed by the economic crisis. The novel’s end (still in-progress)

[read: until the exact moment of the writing of this email, yet unconsidered]

) takes place in Los Angeles as a single long narrative, which progressively eliminates breaks of any kind, including chapters, white space, paragraphs, and eventually, ending punctuation (think Faulkner’s “The Jail” and section four of “The Bear”) until the last sentence when even the spaces between the words are omitted. In addition, it is written

(will be)

from the point of view of an omniscient third-person narrator.

Again, Mr. Hart, I want to express how grateful I am for the opportunity to work with Bunsen. It is true that I have found the business of writing fiction to be an incredibly different beast than that of writing non-fiction. The process, however, has not been an altogether unpleasant one. In fact, though it has been a challenge, it has truly been a wonderful experience. I am entirely confident that the pieces will soon fall together, and I will, as you say, learn to woo my muse and complete the project in a timely manner.

Lies. Fiction.
Thank you for your advice and your concern. It truly is an honor to be working with such a generous and understanding organization. My experience with your agency, thus far, has dispelled all the horrific rumors that have been passed on to me about the world of publishing.

Please let me know any specific information/application/format I should tend to while putting together my travel funding proposal. I assure you I will act promptly on such requests.

Sincerely,
Karin Pankreez
P.S. I have not yet heard from Laurence Sleightor, though I have finished the first of his two novels, One, and am excited to speak with him.

I opened the next email in my inbox and reread it. “Is love, then, so simple my dear?” It was a terrible poem. I steeled myself with another sip from my paper cup, and then I poured another, and then I clicked “Reply.”

Subject: RE: le vent ho
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
February 13, 2009, 3:17 AM
To: “Anna Bertreb” Abba88@vmail.net
Priority: Low

Dear Anna,
My limp odes: the Sirens, the love,
The novel: Plies so my dim ears.
(Imply desire: O the novel’s mass.)
Love, then, so plies my dim ears.
-KP (2010)

It sounds as though you are having a wonderful time. I’m happy to hear that you enjoyed Miami. I’m not sure that I would. I’ve actually really enjoyed the winter in Prentice this time around. It is so peaceful right now as I watch the snow gently kiss the glass of a library window, grazing softly with the glass and melting, dripping down its side briefly (as all time surely dictates), as one.

The novel has been going great. Really great. It sounds as though I may be traveling for a while to conduct some on-location research. The publishing company really loved the drafts I’ve sent them and offered to fund my research to create a more fictional authenticity. I’m not sure if this is common practice in the industry or not, though they did tell me that they rarely fund such young and inexperienced novelists. So, it seems as
though we both might be on the road. Funny, huh? Who knows? Maybe we’ll bump into each other. I can’t remember if you said or not, but where were you planning on heading after Miami?

Well, it is getting late, and I was supposed to meet a friend for a drink once I finished up here. It’s really crazy how quickly the time goes by whilst I sit staring at my computer screen, sipping on coffee. Lately, I actually feel like Mr. Prufrock, measuring out my life in coffee spoons.

Miss you and take care.

Yours,
Karin

After I hit send, I shut my computer, done writing for the night, finished the contents of my paper cup, and filled another. My chair mumbled something unintelligible, yet somehow consoling, as I leaned back and put my feet up at the corner of the desk, the soles of my shoes pressed up against the glass. I looked out into the night, not watching the flakes gently kiss the pane, stopping less than an inch from my heel, but couldn’t help but notice indifference of the pane’s surface. The flickering light below flashed brightly and went out.

In the surface of the glass I could now see only a face. For a quick moment, I turned, believing somebody else was in the room, but in doing so, faced only a room, empty as it was at this hour.

I looked back at the face in the window, and for the first time since Anna had left, I began deconstructing the days since: Claire’s novel, the lovemaking Anna and I shared the moment before she left, the burning of the library, the bagged can of beer that Ben and Carol shared while listening to the Mets game from the parking lot, the impending letter from this Sleightor character, writing all night with Claire’s head in my lap, the emails, the rows of bean plants planted off-location from San Viento, Jess mentally picturing the exact location of Sleightor’s novel mistakenly cataloged in campus library’s non-fiction section, homemade bourbon, Duane’s record collection, drinks with the retirees. Yet, it did not last
long. I could not seem to place time with space, and I couldn’t help but question which parts of the story were real, and which parts were merely stories.

When I left the library I did not head toward my apartment, but away from it, toward the remains of the Baelb library. But I knew I was not interested in seeing through a foggy mind the lit-up remains of shelves and shelves of once-books at four-in-the-morning, as I told myself; rather I was drawn to a story that I started almost a month ago, yet never had the chance to finish. It was cold and the snow continued to fall, covering all the things I had once recognized. When I knocked on the door of the perfectly symmetrical house, a light came on, dimly, as though from the back of the house. I pulled up my collar and waited.
A short succession of lights flicked on until finally, the porch light. Claire opened the door. We stood there for a moment facing each other, not in a dramatic way; rather, we were caught off guard: she by me, me by a back-lit Claire through a thin pane of glass, elevated by a small entrance step that placed her exactly at my height, auburn hair pouring over the front of her shoulders down a worn and loose, brown sweatshirt.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s late.”

She opened the door.

I followed Claire through her living room, down the hallway, and into the small bedroom where we had looked through her burned pages a few weeks earlier. Several books and loose pages were scattered on the bed spread. She sat at the top of the bed with her legs crossed, leaning back on a pillow propped against the wall. I dropped my bag on the floor, pushed carefully the pages toward the middle of the bed and sat at its foot.

“I know it’s late,” I continued. “I was out walking. Had been at the University Library, and when I left thought I’d come and see Baelb again, but I ended up here.”

“I’m glad you came. Were you writing?”

“Well, sort of. No. Just some emails. I think I may be traveling soon.”

“You’re going to find Anna?”

“No.”

Claire looked down at her wrist, turning her hand upward, back down, and up again, before letting it drop back onto her knee.

Chapter 15: Love is a Poison Cup, February 13
“I mean, maybe. I don’t know. I’m traveling in order to do some writing. Like you said, to see some of the places I plan on writing about. But, yeah. I guess I am curious about where Anna could be.”

“Her email didn’t say?”

“No. I’m not sure if I care,” I said. Claire looked up at me, and the room was very quiet. I was suddenly very conscious of my weight in the room. I unzipped my heavy coat and let it drop on the tile floor and kicked off my boots beside it. The heater rattled from somewhere just on the other side of the wall and settled into a hum.

“Karin,” Claire said, looking at me as though we’d known each other forever. “It’s okay. You should try to find her.”

“I think she might be in New York.”

“Good. When are you leaving?”

“Soon, probably.”

Claire picked up a page from the bed and looked it over, thumbing a charred edge between her thumb and forefinger. She placed it into a disarrayed pile and picked up another.

“Are these the pages from your story?” I asked.

“Some. I’m rearranging them. I don’t think they were in the right order.”

“There’s a lot here. More than last time. Where did you find them?”

“There was a sale. ‘Relics of the Baelb Library,’ it was called. They were selling a bunch of the books and materials to raise money for the cleanup.”

“So you’re adding to your story?”
“Well, that’s what I thought, but it isn’t working. I bought these pages here. I had to buy the entire book and rip out the pages. Some pages were sold in bundles, already separated from their binding, but they still don’t work.”

I remembered the bourbon in my bag. “Can I get a cup?”

“In the kitchen.”

“I’ll be right back.”

“Hurry. I have to show you something. And Karin, can you shut out the lights in the other rooms? I hate the empty, lit rooms.”

In the kitchen the sink was empty and the counters were spotless, shining in the dim room, lit only by a single, filtered bulb over the stove. I opened a cupboard, and then another until I found the glasses. I set a plastic, novelty Sea-World cup on the counter. The plastic surface was double-planed; in between the two surfaces tiny plastic dolphins rested at the bottom. At one time, further back in the cup’s history, I guess water floated the dolphins to the surface sustaining the illusion that they were swimming in your drink, that even when your drink was empty, the dolphins made the glass look full. A few too many times through a dishwasher and the illusion had crumbled.

I dropped some ice cubes into the cup (there was a bottle of bourbon in her freezer), filled it a quarter with water from the tap, and carried it back to the bedroom, flipping off lights as I made my way. Claire was now sitting in the middle of the bed. Pages bent and crumpled beneath her legs, burned edges turned sharply into the bedspread. She held a package in her lap, wrapped neatly in newspaper and two thick, brown ribbons. She sat up straight when I entered, and she tucked her hair behind her ears. I pulled the bottle of bourbon from my bag and, holding the cup in the crook of my arm, unscrewed its cap and
poured it. I handed it to Claire. “We can share this cup,” I said and sat down facing her on the bed.

“Just a little. I want to take a drive tonight.”

I knew Claire didn’t have a car.

She brought the cup to her lips. “It’s good,” she said, lightly smacking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “Better to drink it slowly, letting it wet your entire mouth. You can extract the sweetness that way, against the roof of your mouth. I think that’s what was missing from the stuff I made. I like this.”

I took a drink, too.

“Here,” she said and handed me the package. “I got this for you. For your book.”

I handed her back the cup and took the package in my lap. It size belied its weight, and the surface of the newspaper was warm. Hesitating, I examined the newsprint.

“Come on, open it.” She looked down again at her hand, rotating it up and down and up. I noticed the smeared ink on her palm and looked down at my own hand to find the skin also smudged from the short time handling the newsprint package. On the top of the package, in bold newsprint font was the headline, “Finn Fien, Novelist, Invited to Read at Baelb Library Fundraiser, Date to be Announced.”

I untied the ribbon around the package and tore back the paper. Four hardback and damaged books were held together by a piece of twine.

“What do you think?” Claire asked when I looked up at her.

I flipped them over in my hand; basement must seeping into my hands. Their titles on the spines were difficult to make out: Gain: A History of American Economics in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, MONEY!!!, Ride, Engineer, Ride!: The True Story of the American Railroad, and The Great Counterfeiters: The Post-War Demise of the Dollar. When I opened MONEY!!! the
smell of campfire wafted through the room, swirled about by the air pushing through the heat vent. I reached into Claire’s lap and wrapped my ink-smudged fingers around her ink-smudged palm.

“I thought they’d maybe help you with the writing, she said. I mean, now that you’re traveling, you ought to really be able to make some progress.”

“Yes, I think so. These are great.”

“Some of the pages are missing, and others are damaged, but maybe they’ll still work?”

“Definitely,” I said. The heater kicked off. The denim stretched across her knees like a second layer of skin brushed heavily against my own knees. Claire’s hand felt large in mine, overwhelmingly large. Too much to hold onto. I set the books down beside me and rested my hand on the meaty part of her calf. Claire licked her fingertips as though she were getting ready to turn a page, and then reached into the sea-world cup that had been balancing atop a book near her leg, and plucked out an ice cube.

“Finish it up,” she said, handing me the glass. “Let’s go for a drive.” She stood up and walked into the other room, re-flicking on lights as she went. I picked up one of the pages that lay in front of me on the bed. I looked at its white expanse, broken up and divided, splattered by black lines and curls of letters that looked dead, and maybe they were. I didn’t try to read them. My head was heavy from the whiskey, my hands displaced from their movement. I emptied the glass and swallowed, feeling suddenly very tired. I leaned back on the bed and closed my eyes.

I woke to Claire’s voice saying my name, her hand on my shoulder.

“The cab is here,” she said.
I looked at the clock. Twenty minutes had passed; it was after two in the morning. Claire was holding out my coat. She had changed. Her hair was tucked underneath a knitted winter cap, and she had pulled a wool coat over her sweatshirt. Bright blue mittens hung out of her coat pockets and her jeans were tucked into large white boots. She carried a green backpack. I put my boots back on and slid my arms into my coat. I shouldered my bag and followed her through the house, out the door, and into the backseat of the mini-van taxi-cab parked near the curb.

“Hey, Claire!” the man in the driver’s seat said. Grey wisps of curly hair darted out from underneath a plaid newsies hat. “Same place?” he asked.

“Yeah, same place. Thanks, Bill.”

“No problem. It’s another slow night. I enjoy the drive.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” She reached into her backpack and pulled out a cassette tape and passed it up to him. He popped it into the player and turned the volume up.

A soft and scratchy male’s voice sang, “One, one, one or two won’t do, ‘cause I want it all,” over top a steadily strummed guitar and a single sustained note from a violin string. The song grew larger and larger: cymbal crashes, tympani rolls, a snare and bass drum; a bass guitar ascended and descended the scale as the voice flirted between gravel and falsetto. The driver skidded down the main thoroughfare that sliced through Prentice. Snow fell steadily into the headlight beams. I leaned back into my seat next to Claire, watching the interior of the van light up and darken again as we passed underneath the street lights. The driver lit a cigarette and cracked his window. The smell was intoxicating, mixed with the dry and wintry night air. As we headed out of Prentice, the street lights were farther and farther apart.

I looked for Claire in the darkness between the streetlights. “Where are we headed?” I asked.
“To the lake. You should try to sleep.”

The displaced feeling in my hands had spread further through my entire body until I felt as though I was merely the reflection of myself in the van window, watching Claire put her hand over my shoulder as I put my head onto her lap. From my reflection in the window, I watched her look through my features into the night outside, the only light now coming as reflections from the heavy snow falling and the dotted lines that passed by the van tires.

This, too, was a part of Claire’s life that I hadn’t known. I knew there were so many parts of Anna’s life, too, that I did not know. That my experiences with Anna, or with Claire, made up an entire narrative, and it was false because it was never a complete one. Not even close.
Chapter 16: Then I Told Claire That I Loved Her, February 13

I woke for the second time this evening when I heard gravel underneath the tires. As the car came to a stop, the sound of gravel was replaced by a crinkling of a paper bag in the front seat. I sat up. The driver pulled a sandwich from a bag and rested it on his knee as he turned the lid of a faded, green thermos.

“You leaked on my knee,” Claire said.

A small ring of drool had darkened her jeans. I wiped my mouth and apologized. She rubbed it into the fabric with the palm of her hand, and then massaged the wrist of her right hand with her left.

“Are you sure you don’t mind waiting here for us?” Claire asked the driver.

“Not at all. The air up here wakes me.” He bit into his sandwich and turned and smiled at us, mustard collected at the corner of his mouth.

Claire reached into her bag and pulled out a mason jar full of a dark liquid and handed it up to him. “This should cover it, then?”

“You are too kind to me,” he said.

When Claire opened the door cold air filled the cab and rested its hands gently on my face. I slid out and stood next to Claire. It was very dark.

“The water is this way,” Claire said. She grabbed my hand and pulled me down the road, away from the cab. The engine still hummed, and just underneath it a woman’s voice discussed the day’s sports scores, and then moved to the weather, and then was drowned out by the wind. We turned a corner and though it was very dark, I could tell the water was ahead. The road seemed to empty out into a wide expanse of endless black where the wind blew straight at us.
I swallowed back the words to ask why we were here, though they were bunched urgently in the dark space behind my teeth. Claire’s mittenened hand in my bare hand was scratchy and warm. Breathing the cold air seemed to cut through the remainders of a half-ass whiskey headache.

“Listen,” Claire said, and she stopped. Just underneath the wind, the crunching of glass, seamlessly and ceaselessly pulsed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The ice against the rocks. Keep listening. It changes as you get closer.”

The grinding of glass slowed to a distinct knocking, each knock isolated and measured like a singularly wind chine. As we crossed the road and approached the darkness, a light scanned the road and the rocky beach to our left and moved out toward the water. We stepped after it as it panned across the uneven surface of the water, widening its reach and then disappearing behind a lighthouse. After a short stretch of sand, we reached some rocks and sat down. Claire sat and faced the water as though she was alone, and I wrestled to understand why she wasn’t. Yet in everything she did, in her movements, her voice, her silence, I felt as though she had expected me to arrive on her doorstep earlier this evening.

I thought about leaving Prentice.

Claire shifted on the rock she was sitting on and faced me. She asked, “Are you cold?”

“I am.” I pried the toe of my boot through the thin glass-like shell of ice and into the sand beneath it.

She took my hands and put them into her pockets. “Karin,” she said, and then paused, looking not at my face, but lower, at the collar of my coat. “Karin,” she started
again, “you seem to move side-to-side. You’re here with me, which is good, and you move in your empty apartment, which maybe is good, too, but you need to move forward.”

“To find Anna?”

“Or write. Find Anna. Make a story.”

“What about you?”

“This is forward for me. Creating a story with those pages. Sitting out here with you.”

“Claire,” I started to say.

“I know why you are leaving,” she said. The knocking of the ice against the rocks stilled for a moment as the water receded from the shore. Claire continued talking, but I was only aware of my hands in her coat pockets, and her mittened hands covering them. The warmth that started at my fingertips and (even though I probably imagined this more than it actually happened) slithered past my wrists and into my arms, shoulders, neck, flowed with a loud electrical hum that covered her words with static. Abruptly, the hum settled and Claire reared back, lifting her legs and resting her feet on the rock, on either side of me. I was too late when the knocking of ice chimes resumed, climbing the shore, between the rocks, over the sand and into the crevasses of my boots, through my socks, chilling my feet down to the twenty-eight bones in each of them. When I finally hoisted them, a cramp screamed out from my right thigh. I dropped them back into the water and stood quickly, limping awkwardly toward the shore until the cramp had settled enough to climb onto a nearby rock. My feet sunk into my soaked socks and the wet soles of my boots, leaking from their seams onto the rock. Claire stood and hopped from rock to rock until we shared a footing on the same rock.

Then I told Claire that I loved her.
She faced me, and for the first time since we left her house, we looked at each other closely. I reached out and touched her right wrist, and ran my hand up her forearm, shoulder, until it rested at the back of her neck and pulled her toward me. Her mouth had the cold and clean sensation of an ice cube that had just been plucked out of a gin and tonic, though I had never seen her drink gin before. We continued to kiss, almost without contact, save the points of our mouths and my hand tucked underneath her scarf. When I could no longer hold off the sensation of my feet freezing in my boots below our center, the sensation of the kiss, as these things do, dulled, and I pulled away. Claire leaned toward me as I backed away and put her dry, cool cheek against mine, and I found her hand at my side and held onto it firmly.

“Would you like me to carry you back to the car?” she asked me, finally pulling away.

“I think I just need to get to road and take my shoes off. I cannot feel anything down there.”

“Be more specific?”

“I’m gonna lose my feet,” Claire.

I watched the rest of the scene play out like two prisoners escaping from jail in an old film. I pulled Claire behind me, balancing along the rocks in the darkness toward the road, chased by the urgent, unaccompanied spotlight of the lighthouse, and again into blackness. At the road I took off my sopping boots and socks, and Claire gave me a pair of cotton mittens that I was just barely able to pull up over my feet. Walking gingerly on the balls of my feet, venturing onto the smoother surface of the blacktopped road, I tried to keep up with Claire.

We spooked Bill, who had been sleeping at the steering wheel of the cab, despite the awakening qualities of the night air. The inside of the cab was extremely warm, and it wasn’t
long before I could feel my toes again. I told Claire, as I rubbed my fingers between them, they may just be salvageable. Bill poured himself another cup of coffee from his faded green thermos, popped Claire’s cassette tape back into the player, and as the voice sang about a ro-oh-oh-llercoaster, the cab pulled back onto the road we headed in the direction of Prentice.

When we finally returned, forty-five minutes later, we didn’t bother making a drink, or turning on the lights, or even picking up where we had left off at the beach. We jumped forward, to the part where we were kneeling on her bed, the crinkling and crackling of burned pages under our knees, and then our elbows, as we tugged and pulled at each other in the dark. The burning smell of words filled our stomachs when we breathed. The bedroom was lit only by the glimmer of an alarm clock and an occasional flash from the lower vent of the heater. Claire’s lithe frame stilled next to me as I unbuttoned her shirt and untucked it from her jeans, and then she lay silent beside me.

A page of the charred economic texts was plastered to her side by a thin layer of sweat. I peeled it off and placed my mouth on her skin, midway between her breasts and her hips. Her skin did not taste sweet, nor did it taste like the lotion Anna had always smoothed over her torso after showers. It tasted like the salt and the beaches I had known in Los Angeles during my college years, and the musky bindings of long-neglected library books. As I moved my lips toward the center of Claire, to her navel where all things begin, she stretched her arms across the mattress. I followed the lines of her body—veins, stretches, wrinkles—outward to the almost-transparent blue superhighway of the insides of her wrists, as though entering a conglomerate of American population, an epicenter where decisions are made, past which I found her palms, fingers; twenty-seven bones make up such a small and compact, yet incredibly crucial and functioning portion of the body. After kissing her palm
and choosing an exit along the length of her index finger, I made it almost to the tip before the political force of the twenty-seven hand bones pulled all twenty-eight bones in my face toward hers, where again, I found her lips.

Claire’s mouth still tasted like gin, and I couldn’t get enough of it. Afterward, or rather during, the actual act of sex went on all too quickly. The entire experience—her body, our naturally unnatural sounds, the clicking on and then off of the heat, the dry mouth and exhaustion, the rustling of pages that had been written years ago, printed slightly more recently, and burned only a couple weeks prior, the noises of trash being collected outside and the noises of papers being delivered, the only unique sensation of the very first entrance into somebody else’s body, and the shame for somehow letting it all end too quickly—was, as usual, overshadowed by its beginning stages. Claire and I fell back afterward, and it was morning; the heat from our bodies revised the cold we had suffered through the night.
Dust-filled lines of light streamed into the room, imposing diagonal patterns on Claire’s body. In the light, we laughed at the black smudges that covered our bodies. She rolled into me and I put my arm around her. A page stuck to her side, underneath her arm, and another at the top of the thigh, her body modestly hidden, a modern Eve. I pulled the pages away; they were damp with sweat, the words obscured from the wetness of our bodies and the flames of the library.

Before long, Claire was sleeping on her side, her legs strewn like the blades of Picasso’s scissors atop the bed sheets. Her auburn hair partially covered her soft face and dampened the whispered murmurs of her sleep. Her lips twitched and curled inward, exposing the tiny white of teeth and pink half-moon of tongue, as though trying to nibble on a piece of chapped skin. I brought my face close to hers, and pulled a kiss from her troubled lips and then I traced my thumb across her cheek and underneath her ear, where it
took a switchback underneath her jawbone, down the rocky surface of her esophagus, a detour around the small, delicate space over her larynx, dragged them overtop the blacktop surface of sternum and rib-bone, navigating softly between breasts that leaned subtly to one side, and then followed the thin red line underneath her left breast to the top of her bicep and parked at the soft skin on the inside of her elbow. She hugged her shoulders forward, tucking her elbows in front of her, and I retreated.

Standing beside the bed, I pulled a blanket over Claire and tucked it under her chin. I pulled on my jeans, and stood back, leaning against the wall, watching her in the growing morning light. I had a sudden urge to replicate Claire flawlessly and truthfully through words, an urge to do it perfectly, with no room for interpretation; I did want to read the description later and add to it what was not there, or leave something out. I wanted to replicate Claire perfectly.

I poured something from a glass jar in the fridge into the Sea World cup that I had left in the sink the previous evening. I found my bag next to the door and carried my notebook and a pen back into the room where I sat on the floor and attempted to represent Claire, with no discrepant or abstract descriptions.

---

a jaw that curves, downward more than forward
auburn hair parted all over her head
a particular strand of hair dangerously close to lips that are dry and flecked with white
seventeen full pages of charred manuscripts scattered in full view on the bed
the edges and/or corners of three pages that are only partially in view
i can not know how many pages are not in view
a rectangular box of striped sunlight reflected from the blinds, and running perpendicular to the twin bed, projecting an inauthentic set of blinds that start at Claire’s navel and run to her knees, which are, of course, underneath the blanket yet very visible in my mind
round knee caps and calves with very slight curves and small feet with protruding lines of bone
soft stomach like a pouch rising
walls that are yellow
breasts that do not lean on each other that point independently very slightly tugged at by an unseen force— they move softly up and then they move down, resting on a sturdy tray of ribcage, held up by lungs that are taking in and releasing air
nipples small and dark, soft
eyelids that do not seem to twitch when she sleeps
a very thin blanket of soft dark hair on her arms the back of her neck around her buttocks
and under her arms a heat vent that starts and stops many times throughout the early morning sometimes emitting flashes of light brown carpetless floor hard underneath my butt and legs where i sit upon it and against a wall a not so exact triangle of tamed auburn hair soft and triangular just below the curve of her stomach earlobes that are small and connected just above a jawline though partially covered by strands of hair a nose that is straight as it protrudes out from between and below her eyes and curves sharply out only at its tip upturned slightly a neck that is thin and active even in sleep

a railroad of spine that I cannot cannot cannot seem to get off

It was impossible to be definite. I crossed it out and wrote:

supine female homo sapiens nude and asleep

I ripped a page from my notebook and wrote a note to Claire.

Claire,
Thank you for the drive. I want to see you later today.
I meant what I said last night, on the rocks.
Karin.

I taped it to her bedroom door, and shut it as I left.
Chapter 18: A Different Proposal, February 14

I couldn’t help but sense the remarkable oncoming of Spring; the most lovely sense that April’s showers will soon pierce March’s roots of March’s and replace the snow with sweet-breathing flowers. I bought a pack of cigarettes with my coffee and smoked one in the cold morning air. Something about the lonely crunch of the snow, the lack of sleep, and my inaccessible night with Clare. Like after any sort of surreal and pivotal moment that you can’t quite experience—can’t get any closer to it than the space directly above, watching yourself act—I watched myself, through a misty haze, make love to Clare and the haze lifted only when I eventually dressed and left.

The walk had the urgent sense of something new: Clare, foremost, but also Bunsen Publishing, the prospect of traveling, traveling to write, traveling to find Anna, even the chance, the most remotest of chances, that perhaps Anna is not the only one for me. The sky had cleared; the clouds had divided, and a striking streak of blue split the town in half. The sunlight was such that it was near blinding against the snow banks, and I wished that I had my sunglasses. It was a brighter day, metaphorically speaking. With the matches I took from the gas station, I lit another cigarette and crunched through the melting snow towards a Spring, even if it was an imagined one.

Inside, I poured a glass full of water, found a cereal bowl to ash into, and started a fresh pot of coffee. I threw the cigarettes onto my desk. It would be a writing day. All day.

7:42AM

I opened my computer and a blank document. After watching it for a couple minutes, the phone rang. I couldn’t place the area code.
Karin: Hello?

Mr. Hart. It’s great to-

Yes?


Mr. Hart, that is-

(He spoke quickly, without sentence ends.)

(A brief pause over the line, and then, harshly)

(I waited. I checked my email. Anna had already responded to last night’s email. [What was she doing, keeping in touch with me?!] On the other line I heard slurping from a spoon.)

Sir? (I clicked on Anna’s email.)


Yes. Great indeed. Now listen Karin, I must be brief. The notes you sent me last night on the novel-

Brilliant. Now listen, Karin. I want this book. Obviously I want it; that is why we are working together, and that is why we are paying you and want to make sure that you get on the road, immediately.

Yes, it certainly is. Now this is what I need from you Karin, you got a pen? good, pay close attention, this needs to be exact, it is imperative, in order to get funding, that you do exactly what I tell you, now, what I need are two pages, no more, these pages will give us a justification of what exactly we are funding, now of course I already know, but I need to sell this plan as well, so, in these pages why don’t you give me, lets see, a plot synopsis that is no longer than two single-spaced-

(To someone else): No, of course not. Yes, ten minutes. I’d like- Yes, you’ve read my mind. Thanks.

Damnit! The entire roof of my-

(to Karin): Yes, Karin. Just a- (to someone else): water- (to Karin): yes then its two paragraphs-
Paragraphs, sir? I thought you said two pages-

(The email was short and succinct, with a bulleted list. I scanned the first few lines: Karin, I must be brief, as I am en route on the train, and my internet connection will only last as long as we’re are stopped at this station. I miss you so much, in transit. Karin, its not always like this, but now I find myself trying to put into perspective what happened to us [that’s finally some real information, isn’t it? There was a something, at least, that happened, as opposed to an anything that happened to Anna as I was away one night, writing] and finally realize that things just grew tired between us. Everything we did was scripted; it all felt narrated, foreshadowed, and eventually fulfilled exactly as it had been plotted out, in the way, I suppose, my entire life has been. That is why-) 

Yes, ah, Mr. Ba-, Mr. Hart. Yes

Of course, sir. Just finishing copying it down here-

Of course, sir. The same page. Let’s see here (shit), if I could, um, just read my handwriting. It looks like two paragraphs, they, ah-

Yes, of course. That-

Provide a synopsis of the plot-

Karin, you must keep up with me, two pages, single spaced in 12 point font, starting with three paragraphs, no longer than 200 words, with the heading, “plot synopsis,” followed by two paragraphs, no longer than, you’re writing this down, yes? no longer than 125 words with the heading, “theme,” and of course that is total words, not per paragraph, and then I want you to divide the novel’s plot into three acts: set up, crisis, and resolution, and provide a list of four bullet points for each act that details the major moments of each act.

Karin?

Hello? Karin?

Did you get that Karin?

Excellent, why don’t you read that back to me, then, just to be sure that we’re on the same page-

Karin, it’s three paragraphs, less than 200 words, that
Provide a synopsis of the plot. Yes of course. Then, two paragraphs-
That provide a, ah-

Yes. Very sorry, sir.

Got it. (Really).

(Anna’s email: -I had to leave. Now, I don’t have an itinerary, per se, but here is a list of possibilities-)

(to B. Hart): I got it sir. The end of the day. That is manageable.

(Anna’s email: 
• I have an old roommate that lives in New York that I want to see. His name is Benjamin and he said I could stay with him. [Benjamin? An old roommate?] 
• I was thinking that after Boston [Boston?] I would go see my sister and her family. They’ve agreed to let me stay with them for a while before making my way West.)

(to B. Hart): Yes, of course. Sure.

(Anna’s email: 
• Maybe, if you are heading West, we could arrange something where we end up on the same train together, even if just a leg of the journey, like if we are traveling to different cities. It’s where I miss you most, Karin, in transit, during the meaningless

Karin, damnit, just listen. Write it clearly this time: Two paragraphs, less than 125 words that—

provide a description of the theme, followed by a division of the novel into three acts, with four bullet-points under each that plot the major actions of the story.

Ok. Karin, it’s imperative that this task is completed to the letter. No variances. This is not a time to get experimental on us. Simply write the prospectus as is, single spaced in 12pt font, and send it to me as soon as you can, preferably by the end of the day. Is that manageable, Karin? (mumbling, to himself): is there something wrong with this line?

(to Karin): Great. Now, perhaps we should talk briefly about numbers before I hang up, the research allotment is typically around four thousand dollars, which, of course, will be taken out of novel profits once the book is put to print, in some cases more money is allowed, though to start out, in this particular situation, I think it is best to start with four thousand, therefore, in addition to the two page plot synopsis, I will need a prospective budget that shows how you plan to spend the monies given you, and as far as detail is concerned, it is only imperative that the monies are accounted for in the budget for our accountants, as I certainly understand the impossibility of accounting for everything, with total accuracy, before such a trip is started, and on such short notice.
activities between meaningful chapters.

[There was a silence on the line, where, I assume, Hart and myself waited for different things.]

(To B. Hart): Yes, sir, of course. Sure.

Thank you, sir. I am more than ready to begin this, um, research.

Yes, of course. Thank you. Goodbye.

Okay then. Please get this all to me as soon as you can, and we’ll get you on the road.

Have a good day, Karin. We’ll be in touch. Oh, and you should get your phone line checked. There seems to be a terribly unnecessary delay.

8:53AM

I hung up the phone, and pulled out a cigarette from the pack. It was when I moved to a new apartment after college, one where I could not smoke inside, which prompted me to quit before. Now, I suppose, it doesn’t matter if I smoke in here. Though the taste was terrible, it was getting better. It wasn’t so bad that I couldn’t see myself from a distance doing it—troubled, stressed, hopeful, impatient, brooding like the rare author photo on Time Magazine—and the scene seemed accurate. I finished reading Anna’s email:

Keep in touch, Karin.
I love you,
Ann B.

Ann? Ann B.? I finished my cigarette wondering if the missing A was the result of a misplaced finger on the keyboard, or bump, perhaps, on the train, though I knew there was more to it. Ann(a), was careful if she was anything.
8:56AM

The phone rang again.

Karin

Hello?

B. Hart

Karin, it’s me again. Real quick, I meant to ask if Laurence Sleightor has been in contact at all?

Yes. I’ll make sure he gets in touch. I think he could be a very valuable correspondent for a first-time novelist.

Of course. Well, thanks. I’ll continue to look forward to it.

Goodbye.

Okay then. Goodbye.
8:57AM

I hung up the phone, and looked back at the blank document on my computer. At the top of the page, centered, I typed:

Prospectus for
This Monster Land
By Karin Pankreez

Plot Synopsis
This Monster Land is a fictionally authentic depiction of the struggle to survive in Modern America. Through the eyes of four worn, yet persistent

9:13AM

A sound shook the room, like the dragging of a heavy bag across a wooden floor, followed by a loud and deep thump. I looked toward the door, but it was undisturbed. I heard it start again and watched from the window as a large sheet of snow slid from the roof and collapsed on the ground. I checked my phone. Nothing. Claire would still be sleeping, and I should really be doing the same. Still, I anticipated her phone call with a nervous feeling of uncertainty in the center of my gut, much in the same way I had anticipated hearing from Anna. I wondered what her first thought would be when she woke. I tried to replay the night back in my head: watching us climb the rocks, sleep in the taxi, watching myself watch Clare sleep earlier this morning. A vague sense of shame overtook me.

9:17AM

Americans, each from disparate regions of the country, the reader is taken on a journey that epitomizes the experience of being American in the twenty-first century, a place where the prospect of finding a job in one’s youth and carrying it into retirement is now merely a part of history.

The succession of chapters in This Monster Land alternates viewpoints between Ben, a twenty-four year old college graduate from New York City who paints while seeking employment as a high school
geography teacher; Jacob, a sixty-three year old retiree from Detroit who is on the verge of losing his comfortable retirement package; Olivia, a forty-one year old lumberyard secretary whose recent divorce and company downsizing may require her to move away from Oregon; and Katrina, a thirty-three year old organic farmer from Albuquerque, NM, whose farm is beginning to feel the pressure of local Unions.

10:03AM

B. Hart said three paragraphs, no more than two hundred words, and I am at two paragraphs and 169 words. And just a shade under an hour to write it. I checked my phone again. Looked at the screen. Counted the words again. Checked my phone again. Opened the calculator on my phone and figured out that I had just averaged a shade under four words per minute. Roughly, a word every sixteen seconds.

10:10AM

In the time it took me to figure that out, I could’ve written another twenty-six words, which would’ve put me at 195 total words.

10:11AM

I wrote:

The four viewpoints eventually merge as the characters meet on a train trip to Los Angeles. Each has his or her own reason for being on the train to L.A., via Chicago: Jacob travels to see his prosperous brother in San Diego; Ben travels to a promising job interview at an L.A. high school; Olivia visits family in her hometown, Chicago, where she impulsively decides to spend part of her divorce settlement on a vacation to Southern California; and Katrina, who is returning from an organic farming conference in Milwaukee, is convinced by Ben to pursue a teaching opportunity in Los Angeles. The novel’s end, then, takes place in Los Angeles as a single long narrative, which progressively eliminates breaks of any kind, including chapters, white space, paragraphs, and eventually, ending punctuation until the last sentence when even the spaces between the words are omitted, representing, of course, the central theme of shared experience through shared consciousness.
Three hundred and twenty-six words, which I'll revise later. Thinking of revising caused me to think of Anna, which caused me to think of a night about six months ago. Just before Thanksgiving last year. I had finished *The SauerKraut Circus* just a few months prior, and Anna had been helping me trim down the 1,200 plus page manuscript to a manageable eight hundred pages. Anna had been reading through a recent draft, and I was working on a different section at my computer. She got up to reheat a cup of coffee in the microwave and, since we had also recently started using a space heater, a fuse blew. I stood up and went to the closet to put my coat on—the fuse box was in the basement, which was only through a door in the backyard—and Anna met me at the door. Fuck it, she had said. Let's call it quits for the night. Leave the lights out. I took my coat off. We felt our way to the couch and sat close together for a while; we said some nice, lights-out-sort-of-cozy things, and ended up on opposite sides of the couch, her legs resting on mine in the middle. As the night went on, we entertained each other stories, plucked from our childhood libraries, of sitting in the dark after the electricity-threatening thunderstorms of our past, and we told each other those stories in vivid and loosely-remembered detail, complete with the anticipation of a day off school and the excitement of staying up later than usual, even with no television to watch, and the knowledge that tomorrow the world would be thick with odor, lively and pulsing. And then, instead of retiring back to our reading, instead of going downstairs to flip the breaker, instead of retreating to sleep we dug through our camping gear underneath our bed, and found our headlamps, a deck of cards and a cribbage board. I walked Anna tentatively into the kitchen, as though it were the trench Wisconsin forest just beyond our apartment walls, to grab a bottle of wine. Doing so, we attempted to merge what we had remembered of our individual memories to create our own collective memory of the fascinating mystique
of a thunderstorm-induced power-outage. Even then, we talked about it as a memory that we could share together, and perhaps reflect upon together in the future. Perhaps someday we’d tell it to our children during their first power-outage; we’d tell them what we remembered of an event we had manufactured in simulation of a night we had individually experienced (and hardly remembered), in order to someday have a story to tell.

We had piled blankets on the floor and sat underneath them around the living room coffee-table. We turned on a battery powered AM radio and found a station that was featuring all Motown music, which eventually morphed to news, which eventually morphed to country music, which eventually, so late into the night, morphed to political opinion, and then just white noise. We played cribbage through the night, emptying a bottle of wine into paper cups, and then another bottle of wine. We ate peanut butter sandwiches in the dark, drunk, so as not to have to open the refrigerator for fear of letting out the cold air and causing the food to spoil. We ended up passing out on the living room floor after several games of cribbage, a quick and sloppy attempt at sex, our heads and shoulders burrowed roughly underneath the coffee table, several turns at reciting passages of our favorite poems to each other —Anna speaking Charles Bukowski and me, William Carlos Williams—and then we tried sex once again, much more slowly and deliberate, our faces touching coolly with the fading heat, elbows pinned to the floor, blankets sticking and then sliding and then slipping again softly over our bodies.

In the morning I woke first. I put my coat on and went in the basement to flip the breaker.

Of course, we didn’t ever entertain the thought that we’d someday reflect upon this shared and manufactured memory alone, from a thousand miles apart, me still at my computer and Anna on a train heading somewhere. Anna in transit, maybe also thinking the
same, or telling somebody anywhere right now, briefly wishing I was with her to fill in the blanks in her library.

10:33AM
I read Anna’s email again, and wondered how late Clare would sleep this morning.

10:37AM
I wrote:

**Theme Synopsis**
In *This Monster Land*, each character attempts to relieve the burden of economic hardships by escaping, only to discover that no matter where they travel, hardships pervade. The story, then, hinges upon the realization that relief lies in the powerful bond of their shared experience. The irony, then, is that their shared experience occurs only after the characters move away from their established existences, and enter into one of limbo, literally on a cross country train journey.

Throughout the novel, the characters come to terms with the painful realization that in twenty-first century America, financial security is a joke, and the beautiful realization that shared experiences can make that joke funny, even to its participants. Though not every character realizes the goal she had in mind at the start of the journey, through their interaction she discovers new ways to cope.

11:08AM
It’s over by sixteen words and “irony” is misused in the first paragraph.

Outside, as the sun climbed higher into the sky, more snow slid from the roof. The apartment was mostly silent; the chattering of grackles scavenging in the snow at the base of the feeder crept into the apartment.

● The origin of the feeder.
● The chores: one to buy bird seed, one to fill the feeder every other day.
● The sound of birds in the morning when we slept in too late. Coffee and colgate on her breath, in the phone, in the spaces of the rooms she’d been in.
Long winters, drawn out like easing into a pool too cold, slowly, gradually. Like easing into a relationship, slowly to avoid the extremes: to quickly attain an unfeelable temperature, no hots, no colds. Slowly, so as not to notice the time passing, to celebrate nervously when it does, looking at the things we’ve acquired: matching coffee mugs, wine stains on carpet, a bird feeder.

11:11AM

I dragged my socks along the floor on my way into the kitchen, pouring into my cup coffee that had been sitting on the burner too long, the burnt caramel smell rising in its steam. For quite a while, I stood at the front door, where I had stood weeks earlier, trying to remember how exactly Anna had left, and I watched the street—the place where the rear tires of her car had spun in the driveway. The taillights painting the snow red before washing over the side of the house, the road, and then nothing. I stood looking at the design of Olivia’s house, if she had lived here, my model entrance for a Portland house of a recently divorced woman intent on making sure her husband’s possessions were undersold and neglected. He did, after all, cheat. No, he didn’t cheat. He found other ways, equally hurtful ways, to neglect Olivia. Olivia who may or may not have deserved it. Deserved it for being so passive during the early stages of marital neglect. Guilty for being in a relationship and not caring all the time, as much as one can. So a taxi drops her off on this, my porch, and she goes inside and smokes for the first time in seven years, having faked an illness with thick-middled Sean, and she drinks some more on him, and she drinks some more on Duane, and she entertains the thought of visiting Chicago.

Outside, the guy that lives upstairs made a rare appearance to check his mail, a hood pulled over his head and slippers on his feet. Cars drove by, slowly and steadily, down
Wilshire Street, kicking up the brown melted sludge onto the once-white banks. The snow was definitely melting, it being almost Spring. Finally, I put my boots on, and a flannel, one that is heavy and red and dirty, that has the appearance of being worn in ditches and holes and underneath broken vehicles, and I pulled a winter coat over it. I slid my cigarettes into my chest pocket and grabbed my coffee, a journal, and Laurence Sleightor’s novel, *Two*, and went outside. It was 11:23AM.

I lit a cigarette while stepping off the porch. Wilshire Street was shiny and wet, the snow completely scraped off and pushed to the edges, where water flowed back and gathered in icy puddles. I stayed right on Wilshire, crossed Elm and continued until I reached Harlow. I had no particular destination in mind, nothing except for a break from the writing, and a break from my thoughts. I wasn’t even sure why I had grabbed the Sleightor novel; it was cumbersome in my hands, juggling it with my journal and coffee. I stopped at Harlow and looked to my right, breathing deeply on my cigarette. The sidewalks had been mostly cleared since I walked that route this morning. To my left, a small park, a grocery store, and then the end of Prentice. I took a left, sipping my coffee as I did.

The sidewalks were uneven as I got further away from the center of town. The concrete squares popped up out of the earth, tilted in a multitude of different angles as though situated on hidden pulleys and levers like in the children’s game Labyrinth. I passed over them as though controlled by the unseen knobs and larger, unsteady hands, sending me rolling toward the end, to one side and then the other, hitting the banks with a hollow knock, and then disappearing into a hole.

Water had pooled in the low spots of the sidewalk and created several obstacles for my weary feet. Also, as I moved from the center of town outward, the sidewalks had been
less and less cleared of snow. I could feel the cold moisture climb from the earth to my still-damp boots and up the legs of my jeans. I’m pretty sure I was heading west. I pictured a map of Prentice, and then of Wisconsin so as to get my bearings, and I imagined myself, shrunken and dropped onto the massive map, my tiny legs stepping over the green squares that represent parks, the surfaces that were rough to the touch that I knew to be hilly or mountainous terrain in real life, walking along a thin dotted line, and crossing several thick black lines, seeing grass and dirt only in the heavily walked areas—Chicago, New York, Los Angeles—where the surface of the map, like carpeting, had worn through to the earth.

Eventually, in a park just inside of the outside of town, I sat on a park bench. I was warm from walking and I unzipped my coat, pulled my cap back on my head, and took off my gloves. It was 12:21.

12:23PM

I wrote in my journal:

Set-up:

and I underlined it twice. And then,

- Benjamin has graduated from New York University with a degree in Geography and cannot find a teaching job, regardless of his qualifications. He works odd jobs through temp agencies that are barely enough to sustain him, but even they seem to be running out. The bills are piling up and his girlfriend, whom he is convinced is the only one in the world for him, insists he moves in with her to save money. Though Ben would love to move in with her, he is afraid that his teaching career will never develop. Eventually Ben has to borrow money from Carol to pay his rent.

- Katrina’s is an Agricultural Development Assistant at a small organic farm in Albuquerque, NM. The only other employee, beyond a handful of pot-smoking, hippie interns each summer, is her boss, a tough and aged lifetime farmer, who has been talking about retiring since his sixties. Though Katrina’s education has prepared her for the agricultural aspect of the job—and truly, this is what she loves—most of her tasks involve community education, distribution, and grant-writing. In order to raise money to keep the farm in operation, she also picks up small installation contracts from local organizations. Elsewhere in the city, the local unions are putting pressure on all non-union contract workers in order to ensure jobs for their people.
Though her nonplussed, boss believes it will amount to nothing, Katrina sees that the sweeping hand of the Union is headed her way.

- Olivia is devastated by the recent split-up with her husband. Though she believes in the many events that led to their divorce, what troubles her most is that he never cheated. Olivia feels that this would have, in the mind of her blue-collar family who are both traditional and religious, at least justified her separation. Weary of justifying her actions to a family whose ideals quit being idyllic when the Cold War ended, she reacts by selling all of her ex-husband’s things before he can claim them, and uses the money to retreat into a familiar pattern of solace, including much wine and manipulation of the men around her.

- Jacob, a General Motors retiree from Detroit sits in a ill-lit bar with the men he used to work with, and he listens to them gripe about each and every new contract change that threatens their pension, their health benefits, their livelihood long after they’d retired. They meet on the first Tuesday of every even month. Outside of this bimonthly gripe-fest, Jacob splits up the majority of his time between afternoons, and occasional evenings, at the Tigers’ Stadium and responding to the letters he receives from his grandchildren who live with their parents in Miami. He ignores the letters he receives from his brother in San Diego.

Crisis:

Two underlines, again.

- Benjamin’s college professor and mentor contacts him about a teaching position at a large high school in the Los Angeles suburbs. The professor has even gone to the extent of setting up an interview for Benjamin, buying him a train ticket, and setting him up with lodging at a former colleague’s place. Ben, who has just moved in with Carol, explains to her that it would be rude not to at least go to the interview. If he is offered the job when he gets out there, he can always say no.

- Katrina’s future at her farm is threatened when the pressure of the local Unions begin picketing every organization that employs non-union laborers. Though her aging, hardened partner does not yet realize it, she knows that the lack of contract work means that the farm will no longer be able to support two employees. She ponders over the steps that have brought her from Pennsylvania to New Mexico, and begins to realize the steps ahead of her. This realization motivates her to purchase a train ticket and give a notice at the farm.

- Looking for a way out of her downward cycle, Olivia finally decides to acquiesce to her family’s many requests to leave Portland, OR for Chicago, IL. After only a week of living with her sister, a recreational motivational-speaker, Olivia begins to view her move to Chicago as a moment of weakness and impulsively uses the rest of his money to embark on a self-serving joy-ride out West.

- On the way home from a Detroit Tiger’s night-game, Jacob is mugged, and though the mugging isn’t altogether violent, he panicked and eventually ended up in the emergency room. During the drive home, Jacob takes a much-visited detour and passes by the many sidewalks and abandoned buildings he and his brother, Caleb, used to trespass in their youth. That evening, after hearing a violent argument in the apartment next to his progress until an ambulance arrives, Jacob quits listening to the idle talk of his friends, and decides to pay his brother a visit in San Diego.
I read through the list again, the bullet points. The dampness that had accumulated at the cuffs of my jeans had crept nearly to my knees, and I could feel the skin of my face drying harshly in the indifferent wind. Me, pinned down to a park bench, scratching a plot into a journal. And all of it was terrible. I zipped my coat back up over my chin and pulled my hat down until it was almost covering my eyes. I retracted my hands into my coat sleeves, journal and all, and as I stared at the wooded lot across the street, I reexamined the artificial bullet points now scratched into my mind. Time seemed to pass without increments until I found I was working hard, struggling to recall some lines of poetry that I had studied a while ago. A man at a party, pinned down like a bug under the scrutiny of all those around him, wriggling against a wall, like a patient etherized upon a table? That couldn’t be. The etherized man couldn’t be wriggling. What I could remember was a certain night when I had first read the poem, sitting in a smoky all-night diner called The Gristmill, and when I reached the end I wasn’t crying but I had pressure behind my eyes and I was close. Though now I couldn’t exactly remember the end of the poem, either. But between that poem and all the bullshit that I’ve compressed to 8 bullet points, I saw a parallel, not of aptitude, of course, but of melancholy. Or perhaps of hopelessness. And regardless of the conventions of fiction, I found myself now feeling the same way I felt in that diner. These terrible lines meant to map a plot that was far more fictitious and unlikely than even the worst works of fiction would allow.

And so I sat on that park bench, in the cold, now fullout crying. And how worse off I was now than when I had only mapped out the bullet points (sans resolution) of a story I not only couldn’t believe, but dreaded to write. Because now I was crying. Into my wool collar the collected tears and mucus quickly froze and chilled my chin. And if it is such a
gimmick to have your characters cry at tender and melancholy moments, what then can a critic say about an author that cries while creating those characters, forcing myself to force a resolution on that character in a way that will be in no way authentic? But it must move on. I must. Something must happen; it must move on I move on

(It struck me, between sobs, short moments of clarity, that it was the first time today, this week, that I’ve thought about the novel. Thought about it as something created to move on and not to serve. And it stung. I buried my face further into my coat collar and lay on my side on the otherwise snow-covered bench, my feet curled up behind me.

I hate fiction.
Chapter 19: The Seemingly Never-Ending Valentine’s Day, of which our Protagonist has yet to Acknowledge, February 14

February is the cruelest month to wake up on a park bench with your coat collar frozen to the hairs on your chin that you’ve been too aimless to shave. It took a few moments before I realized what had stirred me awake. Then I felt it again, my cell phone vibrating in my pocket.

1:43

It was Claire.

“Hey, there. I hope you’re well-res—”

“Karin, you need to come down here, now.”

“Come down? What? To your house?”

“No. To the library. Its happening all over again. The explosion. There’s another fire.”

“I don’t understand. Are you okay? How can there be another fire? What’s left to burn?”

“You really should just come down here. Look for me at the corner near my house, okay?”

“Yeah, of course. It may take a while, though. I have a bit of a walk ahead of me.”

“Can’t you drive?”

“I’m a ways from my car. I’ll explain when I get there, in about an hour.”

I hung up the phone just as a fire-truck sped past the park, its sirens blaring. I resolved to solve my characters’ resolutions when I got home, no matter how contrived they seemed. I needed to leave Prentice. I will tell B. Hart that. I need to get out of here if the narrative is ever to move on. I half-jogged most of the way back to my apartment. Well, not really most of the way. Only a little way. Actually, just at the outside of the park I tripped
over a clod of lifeless grass that emerged through the snow between the cracks of the uneven sidewalk. I landed prone in the snow, as though attempting to make a face-down snow angel and I was pretty sure my knee was bleeding through my wet jeans. I looked back at the patch of grass, hidden until my clumsy foot loosened it from the snow. When I rose I kicked at it two or three times with the toe of my boot, unearthing it from the hardened dirt beneath it, which was rich and black, an even starker contrast from the white, linen-like layer that covered everything else. After I picked up my books from a snow bank several feet in front of me and brushed them off, I turned once again to see my imprint left on the layer of snow and the rich, lively spatters of dirt unearthed and sprinkled around the sod that my boot toe had loosened. I would resolve my plot this evening and send it promptly to Bunsen.

When I arrived at the library, I was surprised to find the flames left unextinguished. I looked nervously around for my boss, hoping I would not be called into clean up the mess yet, hoping, with only some guilt, that the flames would take care of most of it, hoping there would be no damaged books left to sell in the coming weeks, no pages to scrape up with a shovel, to stop and read and try to make sense of. Firemen scurried around the ruins of the library stringing out waterless hoses, though urgent with the duty of looking dutiful. Claire came up on me from behind. I recognized her voice and turned to embrace her, but didn’t. I’m not sure why. The look on her face belied any sense that we had been together the night before. That those pages had been omitted, removed from her narrative. We greeted each other, and still struggling with the question of whether or not to embrace her, reason won out and I did. She was startled by it and responded gingerly. It was awkward as hell, really. Also, the crunching of crisp paper underneath her coat and the look of worry on her face told me I was about to be used, that my bulky coat would be needed, that I would be up late tonight, writing.
“Karin, you need to take these,” she said, while lifting up my coat and transferring a handful of crumpled, wet pages from her waistline to mine.

“Claire, you’re crazy. I wok here. There is no way that I can get caught stealing all these pages. It is still library property.”

“Karin,” she said, but didn’t continue. The pages were already soaking through my clothes.

“I’m gonna get fired for this Claire. I work for the City of Prentice! Not some exam company that ‘problemates’ questions. They take stealing city property pretty seriously.”

“Do you really think they’re going to cease trying to put out this fire in order to begin searching people for stolen, wet, burnt, pages from what use to be books that were never checked out in the first place? Seriously, Karin. Oh, and on a side-note: I wanted to tell you something crazy. Some of the pages that I bought at that charity sale, which is something else I totally need to tell you about. I can’t use them. They don’t fit, and I’ve finally realized that it was because they were attained by designed means and the other ones by chance. I need to use the ones that happen to fall in front of me due to fire or explosion, or something of the sorts.”

“Wait,” I said, suddenly very aware and worried about the pages in my pants. I grabbed her wrist tightly and forced her to look at me. “Claire, you didn’t do this, did you? This fire? Please tell me you didn’t do this.” And though I heard how crazy I sounded, I also had a very clear sense that Claire was capable of such things.

“She shook off my not-so-tight grip. What are you, crazy?” she asked. Setting the building on fire in order to force burned pages to fall in my yard really wouldn’t be that much different than buying the pages, right?”
Claire was certainly crazy enough to do it, but her logic was sound. “So what was your first side-note?”

“First side-note?” She was pulling more pages out of her pockets, some folded, sound rounded into small balls, some already shredded from the moisture.

“The first digression, before you got into that second digression about not being able use the pages that you bought.”

“Do you still have the books that I gave you? The ones on economics and history that I bought you for your novel?”

“Yes. Well, I think I may have left them at your place last night. I was—” I hesitated, then resumed, “a bit preoccupied when I left.”

“Okay, good, you can bring them home with you tonight. You can still use them. They are not artificial for you, because you did not set out to attain them; rather, I just dropped them in your lap. Oh, but I think some of them might have gotten a little wrecked last night.”

“The burned pages got wrecked?”

“Yes, I woke up with lines of economic texts stained onto my skin and sheets. I believe some of them tore, but I can’t be sure if they were like that before we slept last night.”

Slept. Before she slept. “Oh, well, good. I’m glad I won’t be breaking any rules by using them. So, before you get sidetracked, right before the side-note about me still being able to use the books, which sprung from the digression about you not being able to use them because of their artificiality in the way you attained them, you were about to digress into something. What was it?”
Claire looked off to her left, which many psychoanalysts believe is a sign for lying, and considered which digression I was referring to.

“Oh yeah: the reason why it is okay to steal these books. This is hardly a digression, Karin.”

After I finished college, I remember reading a book that, among other things, broke its narrative plot to deliver a chapter on chapters, and another on trimming one's beard in order to stave off writer's block.

Claire punched me in the shoulder, supposedly, I believed, to avoid furthering the pages she continued to stuff in my clothes (she had not yet filled my sleeves with pages).

“Pay attention, Karin. We don’t have a lot of time. All I was going to say was that it isn’t a big deal to steal these pages because when I was at the “Relics of the Baelb Library” charity event, apart from selling almost-unburned and partially-burned books, that is to say, there was always at least a binding, they were selling bags of random pages. ‘Choose Your Own Mis-Adventures,’ they called them. I chose a couple of these mis-adventures and you’d be surprised what I found.”

“I’m sure. Listen, Claire, not to be crude, but I’ve been outside for a while, I fell down, and now my underwear is—”

“Some of the pages,” she continued, “were those end pages in library books. The ones that are thicker than the rest, and have all the recent checkout dates for that book. Karin, it would break your heart. Some of these pages’ most recent dates were before I was even born! Me, gathering these pages in the snow one night wasn’t a case of stealing them, it was the only way the pages could ever get read. I mean, imagine it: a book sitting there for over thirty years without ever being read. Why not burn it? It seems a better end than to let
them sit there for so long. I mean, its more dramatic this way. Isn’t that what we’re really
talking about?”

“Damnit, Claire, I don’t know what we’re talking about. All I know is that these
pages are cold and wet and in my pants. Are you positive you didn’t,” I hesitated, thought it
through. “No, I know you didn’t. Claire, why aren’t they putting out this fire?”

Throughout our conversation, or whatever it was, it was difficult not to notice the
firemen running around, hooking a hose up to one fire hydrant, cranking hard at their tops
with a large wrench and waiting around while no water filled the hose, and then moving to
another one, doing the same, with the same results. At some of the hydrants, tow straps
were tied to the wrenches and hooked at the ends of the trucks that were attempting to pry
open the hydrants with their diesel engines. Even then, the hydrants didn’t budge, though
several wrenches either snapped in half or broke free from the large nuts and flew hundreds
of feet into deep snow banks where they wouldn’t be found until the snow melted, which,
here in Prentice, would be a long time from now. After it seemed that none of the hydrants
worked they walked around, straightening hoses, busily trying to look busy without really do
anything.

Claire finally said, “I overheard one of them say that the fire hydrants had been
sabotaged, right around the same time as the fire. Apparently somebody had welded shut all
of the caps shortly before the blast.”

“Had welded them shut? Claire? What the fuck? So there’s no doubt that the library
burning was arson, right?”

“Well, the second one, it seems, was arson,” Claire said.

“Why would somebody intentionally burn down an already demolished library if they
weren’t trying to hide something about the first burning?”
“Karin, I don’t know. Can you please help me?”

“I really don’t feel right about stealing these pages, Claire.”

“Listen: quit being such a baby. You’re not stealing the pages, okay? I’m stealing them. All I need you for is to come out and take them from me after I collect them, and bring them into my house for me.”

“So I’m your mule,” and, to Claire, apparently a baby.

“Yes, please be my mule. I would appreciate it forever, Karin.”

“Well, if you would appreciate forever, then, I guess, I—”

“Mules don’t talk, Karin. Could you please take those inside for me and set them on the floor,” she asked, and then she leaned in and gently kissed me on the cheek, pulled back from a moment and looked at me, and then sunk in and kissed me deeply on the lips. Her mouth was wet against my dry tongue. I noticed, then, that I was thirsty. “Have you been smoking?” she asked.

“Yes,” and then I turned away from her toward her house.

Claire’s house was as it had been. Before unloading the pages, I poured myself a glass of water. I hadn’t realize how thirsty I was. Despite the sound of the heater running, the house was unbelievably quiet, especially compared to the chaos outdoors. I started in Claire’s bedroom, where I had started my day off earlier today. In the small row between her bed and the far wall, I began pulling pages out of my pants, my pockets, finding them places where I didn’t remember Claire had stuffed them, and I began laying them out next to each other on the floor to dry. I made it to the end of the bed and then started laying them in the thin row between her bed and the near wall, and finally at the floor space near the foot of her bed leaving only a small pathway of floor to walk out through. I made it through the door and into the hallway when I ran out of pages. Then I went outside to gather more.
Claire had another batch ready for me. She faced me and discreetly shoved them into all the available places on me she could find, pretending the entire time to be talking to me, touching me. I brought them in and continued to lay them out until all her floor was covered, save for a small pathway the led to her kitchen, her bathroom, and her bedroom. On my final trip out I brought with me all the destroyed books she had bought for me. Claire was talking to the some men I knew from work, and I pulled my hat down and collar up and turned my back to them until they were gone. Claire told me they were looking for someone who was gathering all the pages. As I was talking to her I felt my phone vibrating and saw my bosses name on the screen. I looked across the street and saw him, his back to me, on the phone. I hit “Ignore.”

Claire saw my arms full of books, and hers were empty. “Thank you,” she said. What are you going to do now?”

“I have to go home. But, I want to talk soon. I want to see you.”

“I'll be here. I’m here now if you want to stay.”

“No, not now. I have to go. I have some resolutions to, well, resolve, I suppose. For the B. Hart.”

“Well,” she said, “you know where to find me.”

“Sure,” I said. “Soon. I’ll be by.” I embraced her and this time it was not at all awkward. It was like I imagined it should’ve been when I first saw her this afternoon, but not at all right for a goodbye. I looked down at my watch.

5:57pm

I walked down the road to my house, as I had earlier this morning, though this time my arms were full of books.
Chapter 20: A Determined Proposal, Still February 14

By the time I made it to my street, the sun was already sinking beyond the wooded hills to the west of Prentice. The air, much warmer near the library site, was chilling quickly. I could still taste the smoke in the air, though I wasn’t really sure if it was coming from air or from my clothes, or from the pages that had been stuffed into my clothes.

Once indoors, I didn’t waste anytime copying the bullet points I had written earlier in my journal onto my computer. It was 7:17pm and I resolved to work on the proposal for Bunsen until it was finished. First thing:

**Resolutions:**

- Ben leaves New York and soon connects with Olivia. For the two days it takes to get to LA, they talk often about relationships, have a few adventures at the late-night train stops, and promise to meet up sometime when they land in Los Angeles. He is offered a job, and must decide whether to accept.
- Katrina leaves Albuquerque for Pennsylvania, and eventually to Salinas, CA. On the train, she meets Ben. Though she is offered a temporary position in Salinas, she foresees a struggle ahead of her: the chance to live out the remainder of her twenties, to rewrite the portions of her life where she has passed on opportunities.
- Olivia, intending to drink her way all the way to Los Angeles, listens to Ben explain his inability to balance the work happiness, placing her struggles in a manageable perspective. She buys a ticket back to Portland, where she is determined to bury the pieces of her past that constantly appear in her future.
- Jacob visits his brother, Caleb, in San Diego, where they disperse of their father’s ashes in La Jolla. Caleb takes Jacob to an interleague baseball game between the San Diego Padres and the Detroit Tigers. When it’s time for Jacob to leave, Caleb lures him into staying for just one more week by purchasing tickets to the final two games in the San Diego and Detroit series.

9:11pm

I glanced through the document, made a few slight changes, formatted it, and to be honest, I didn’t think it was half-bad. I mean, beside the fact that, single-spaced, it was already at three
full pages and I had yet to include a budget and itinerary. I thought about changing it for a moment, looked at the clock on my computer,

9:37pm,

and realizing that this prospectus had to be in tonight, opted not to revise it much. I did, however, shrink the font down to 10pt, first looking over my notes from my conversation with B. Hart to see if he mentioned anything about font-size. Nothing. This brought the end of the resolution bullet-points to just at the top of the third page, leaving plenty of room for a budget without going over to the fourth page. After all, B. Hart, having read *The Sauerkraut Circus*, must expect my prospectus to run a little long.

Before starting the budget, I checked my email, thinking maybe there would be something from Hart (nothing), and perhaps hoped there’d be a note from Anna (nada). Instead, I was surprised to find an email from Laurence Sleightor. I supposed that Hart had finally convinced him to contact me. The email read as follows:

*Subject: fiction and grants*
*From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)*
*February 14, 2009, 9:10PM*
*To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)*
*Priority: Low*

Karin,
Hello.

Preface #1: I’m writing to you because B. Hart asked me to. (B, gentleman that he is, reserves that job, of course, for his most prestigious clients.) Not that I wouldn’t write to you otherwise, but since I haven’t met you, you must forgive me for the lack of small talk. I hope you’re doing well, etc.

Second Preface: please forgive me for the brevity of this note. Perhaps we will continue writing, get to know each other, etc, but right now this pretentious asshole—and perhaps you’ve heard of him, so I apologize for revealing the truth about him—Finn Fien, stormed into my house today demanding—asking, really, and I suppose he didn’t storm in, nonetheless, etc—that I put him up for a few nights while he figures some shit out. I don’t know what he’s doing here. From the looks of it, he’s come here simply to pace in front of my
bookshelves and critique the books I’ve cherished for so long. (You may be interested to know, in fact, that Fien—though he won’t admit it, I can’t, can’t, can’t believe that is his real name, unless his parents were also assholes—was the author that B. Hart set me up with some twenty years ago to guide me through the writing of my first novel.) I guess I only say that to warn you that by replying to this email, you may also enter into a non-contractual obligation to answer the door in the middle of the night to my pounding, and you will be obliged to let me in and serve me gin while I critique the books on your shelves, the brand of gin you serve me, and the pictures you display of your family. Fuck. Hold on a sec.

Okay. As far as I can tell, there are two things that I really should address here, Karin. First off, the proposal you need to write for Bunsen. Don’t sweat it. They’re going to fund you. As long as I’ve worked with them, I am not aware of them ever offering a stipend to a promising, young writer (I assume they’ve read a previous manuscript of yours and promised to fund you if you would simply put that manuscript to the side and focus on writing the great American novel) only to turn away and reject him. Seduce them, Karin, but don’t spend too much time laboring over it. It is perfectly appropriate for you to write the most convincing and seductive grant proposal you can and then, after getting the cash, it’s just as appropriate to be detached from what you proposed, not to be constrained by it, to freely write whatever seems right to you regardless of what you said, promised, and swore you would write. That may not hold true for the hard sciences (“Okay I said I was going to cure cancer and all I’ve come up with is a new gin cocktail recipe”), but it’s normal in the arts and humanities to plan one thing and do another. Just doing the “westward ho” and “go west, young man,” is a balled enough American literary tradition that might put you in the right frame of mind to write about none of those places you’re visiting. If, by the way, that itinerary is going to place you in New Orleans, let me know.

Second, Hart told me you were struggling somewhat in your attempt at fiction. Simply know this: having never read this manuscript you’ve given Hart, this supposedly non-fiction doorstop you’ve invested years of your life into and shopped around, I can tell you with utter certainty that it was just as much make-believe as whatever you’re trying to write now. Trust me, you’ve never written anything but fiction. Very few people have.

Damnit. I have to go. I just heard the oven click on and Fien seems to be in the garage reciting at the top of his lungs MacBeth’s soliloquy, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . .”.

I can assure you, Karin (that is your real name?) that when I crash your house, binge on your booze, and repeatedly insult your intelligence, as this correspondence now implies that I will, I’ll find something much more interesting to recite from your garage. Something French, probably. Something Russian.

I got to go.

Until tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow;

Yours,
Laurence Sleightor.

So that is Laurence Sleightor. Friends with, or at least an acquaintance with Finn Fien, apparently. I made a note in my journal to contact Jess from the University library tomorrow
about Fien. Being, I supposed, the sort of author that B. Hart would support, I should check out his stuff.

10:13pm,

So, for the budget. Seductive, seductive, seductive.

Budget:

After spending over an hour on my dial-up internet, I realized that trying to accurately figure out a budget for a trip in which I was not even sure where I’d be going or for how long, was futile. Hoping that B. Hart had as much faith in me as I it seemed, I decided to take a few liberties. This is what I came up with:

45-day Pass on Amtrak: $749
Food ($20/day for 45 days) $900
Lodging ($60/night for 30 nights—other nights to be spent on train): $1,800
Research-Related Activities (tours, museum entrance fees, etc) $300
Emergency Fund (equipment, internet expenses, clothing, etc) $250

TOTAL $3,999

And then,

Itinerary (Specific Dates to be Determined upon Acceptance of Proposal)
Days (omitted days denote travel)
3-9 New York City, NY
10-15 Boston, MA
16-18 New Orleans, LO
19-24 Albuquerque, NM
26-30 Portland, OR
31-34 San Francisco, CA
34-39 Los Angeles, CA
39-42 San Diego, CA
44-45 Chicago, IL

Of course, this is all bullshit. But, seductive enough, right? I read through the document once more and made a few more minor changes. It was already
11:09pm,

and I had to get it out to B. Hart. I poured myself a glass of bourbon and lit another cigarette (from the new pack, which I bought during my second trip home from Claire’s this evening). Reading through my bullet-points one last time, I finally thought, this is doable. My characters are resolved. Now, I only have to get them there. And in thinking that, I checked the clock once more—

11:12pm

—and felt the urgency to send this out. The truth was, I could still go see Claire again tonight, and maybe tomorrow I could stay a bit longer. I could recline on her carpets, assuming she has at least dried and organized her narrative into piles, though knowing Claire, which I think I was starting to, she would already have the pages ordered and bound. I thought that maybe tonight, though a late start, albeit not as late as last night, I could talk to her. Get a feel for how she really felt about me, about me leaving, if she felt anything at all about it. I thought about her ink-lined skin, the existence of it something a printing-press operator had never fantasized about, and I wondered if she had yet washed those lines off. Tomorrow morning, I could call in sick—surely the city would need me to help clean their library, but fuck them; I won’t be here long, and according to Sleightor, the trip is mine to take. Claire and I could go back to the lake and I wouldn’t misstep and I wouldn’t drink; I would make that experience the most authentic experience I’ve known.

I will not think about how it will be retold.
Chapter 21: An Electronic Conversation, February 14-15, Finally

I sent the email out to B. Hart at

11:23pm.

As soon as I saw that the email went through, I shut down my computer and got dressed once more for the walk to Claire’s. I put on a clean sweater, one that didn’t smell of burned pages, packed my bourbon into a bag with Sleightor’s second novel, put on my coat, hat, gloves in pocket. I was feeling okay about the novel, better than I thought I would. I even brought my journal with me, and a pen, in my outside coat pocket so I could scribble notes if needed as I walked. I thought maybe Claire would be interested in looking them over, too. We could share our stories, offer advice, talk like writers. I was just out the door when I had the sudden feeling that I was missing something. I held on to the knob, debating whether to head back in or not, wondering if being back indoors, in that stale, familiar living room would remind me of what I was forgetting. I believed that much, at the time, in the power of place. The door knob in my ungloved hand was cold and dense, almost electric. The frigid air had a brightness to it, like an unshaded lamp.

Back inside I paced the living room floor, looking over my bookshelves, looking for something that would point to what I was forgetting. Among my books, the gaps were still there, each missing book replaced with a small, folded IOU from Anna. I went to the kitchen and opened a cupboard, as though what I was forgetting would be among the clean cups, far too many for someone who lives alone. In one of the bottom cupboards I found a bottle of wine that Anna must’ve left behind. I put it in my backpack, though I was sure it wasn’t what I was forgetting. And then, as though schemed, as though my entire day had
been planned out since the moment I stepped out of Claire’s house this morning, as though all of it led to this one terrible decision, I succumbed to the completely satiable urge to check my email. I convinced myself that in the time it took me to fire up my computer, what I had forgotten would come back to me. So I fired it up, opened the browser, and typed in my username and password. As soon as I saw the email, though, I knew I wouldn’t be going to Claire’s. On the screen, way too immediate to be chance, suspicious, even, was a response from B. Hart. It was

11:25pm,

and the email was brief.

Subject: RE: This Monster Land, funding proposal
From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
February 14, 2009, 11:25PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

Are you still there? Please, if you’re there, respond to me. I would call, but at this hour I’m afraid of waking somebody. Since you just sent me this document, I hope you are still at your computer and able to talk. Please contact me yet tonight, via email; otherwise, I will be in touch tomorrow. Though, as time is always an issue in this business, I would much prefer you contact me tonight.

B. Hart.

Fuck. I took off my hat and pulled the bourbon out of my bag. I left my coat on, though, for the small hope that the correspondence would be brief. I hit “reply,” refilled my glass, and wrote,

Subject: RE: RE: This Monster Land, funding proposal
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
February 14, 2009, 11:27PM
To: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
Priority: Low
Mr. Hart,

I’m still here. You can go ahead and call. You run no risk of waking anybody.

Karin

I hesitated before hitting “send.” He would have no way of knowing if I ignored his request. Claire, at home shuffling through wrinkled pages, perhaps ironing them softly to the crackling workings of another mixed tape before placing them in plastic bags and arranging them. But then I considered the coldness she had greeted me with earlier today and I knew that by even imagining our night tonight, I had already falsified it. I’d already retold it without it yet happening. I hit “send,” and pulled a cigarette from my coat pocket. I let my coat fall from my arms and slide down the back of my chair like snow being swept from a roof. Within minutes a notice popped up on my screen, alerting me to a new email.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: This Monster Land, funding proposal
From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
February 14, 2009, 11:28PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

Great! I’m glad I caught you. I’m currently reading through your proposal, and I love what I see so far. Great stuff, Karin. Really. You are a promising writer, son.

As I previously mentioned, it is imperative that we get the ball moving on this project. The muse is not going to wait for you. You must keep going. There are some things that I need to talk to you about, and I think we should have this conversation face-to-face. Or, at least, as close to the proximity of face-to-face that we could manufacture. Karin, by any chance, do you ever use the program Skype on your computer? If so, could we discuss these matters yet tonight?

Forgive me if I hesitate to speak over the phone. Judging from our previous conversation, there seems to be an incompatibility problem with our lines.

Please respond promptly.
I took a sip of my bourbon and suffered a sudden pang of regret that I should’ve listened more closely to Dennison about this company.

Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: This Monster Land, funding proposal
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
February 14, 2009, 11:30PM
To: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
Priority: Low

Mr. Hart,

Oh, we are in luck! Apparently my old roommate had Skype installed on this computer while she was still living here. Let me check to see if I can still use her account.

Okay, the screen name is Anna.Grama (not my own account). I’ll go ahead and sign in and wait for your call. I should warn you, however, that my internet connection is dial-up, and the images will be choppy at best.

Skype me when you get a chance. I’ll be waiting.

Karin

It was immediate. The chime sounded from my computer, and a small window appeared that stated, “You are receiving a call from Bunsen.Bhart: Answer, Answer With Video, Ignore.” I clicked on “Answer with Video” and pushed my bottle of bourbon out of view from the camera mounted at the top of the computer. As soon as his image appeared on the screen, the video froze with the color skewed. A distorted Hart appeared on my screen, motionless. But, I could hear his voice.
B: Karin! It’s great to see you. Is there something wrong with your screen? You’re frozen.

K: Yes, sir. Good to see you too. It’s just my internet connection. It freezes all the time.

B: Okay, no problem. I can hear you alright. This will work fine. I must say, Karin, you look nothing like I imagined you.

K: Well, I hope it’s not too much of a disappointment. If it’s an author photo you’re worried about, we could always do a distanced shot, maybe a from-the-behind shot of me looking over a river through a field or something. Or we could always touch it up in photoshop. It is fiction, after all.

B: (laughing) No, no, that’s not it. Your author photo will not be a problem. It’s just, I don’t know, I suppose I pictured you to look a little more, well, I had imagined you to have longer hair, maybe higher cheekbones. Maybe a bit more Armenian-looking, if that makes sense. I hope that isn’t offensive, Karin. I don’t——

K: Sure, sir. That makes perfect sense.
B: I’m sorry, Karin. I didn’t mean to offend you. I was just, well, honestly Karin, I’ve been at the office for a goddamn long time, and I suppose that in these late hours, I may have had just one too many glasses of Sherry. Please forgive my brashness. Here, let’s create an even playing field. Do me.

K: Excuse me, sir?

B: What did you expect me to look like? Like the image you see?

K: I’m not really comfortable with this. I’ve also had a couple drinks tonight, sir, and honestly, you look nothing like I had imagined you.

B: Karin, I refuse to go on without you first proceeding in describing how you imagined I look. We will be working together, hopefully for a long time. Such preconceptions must be out in the open. It’s a Bunsen policy.

K: I suppose, if you insist. (I poured another glass of bourbon and deliberately set the bottle in the view of the camera as a reminder to Hart that I am, in fact, impaired.) Sir—
B: Please call me B. I can’t abide with this “sir” business.

K: Yes, B. I was simply going to say that you look much better than I expected you to. Not that I expected you to be deformed or anything, of course. Just, I suppose, I had imagined that you were balding, with glasses. I guess I imagined your face a bit rounder, too.

B: Hm.

K: (There was a long pause.) Sir, I mean B, are you still there?

B: I’m here.

K: I didn’t mean to offend you—

B: I’m not offended.

K: (I took a drink, and on the screen, in a slow movement of distorted squares, representing Hart, I think I saw him do the same.) What is it that we need to talk about?

B: Right. Let’s get to it, Karin. I like that about you. I’ve read your proposal, and I’m going to be honest: Karin, it shows a lot of promise. The plot lines are so vivid, so honest, so seemingly contrived, that is, in a way that can be nothing but authentic.
K: Great, that is to say (That is to say, I'm stunned), I am very pleased.

B: The themes, the plot synopsis, all of it represents just the sort of ambition and writerly style that we'd like to represent. We're going to fund you.

K: (Sleightor was right.)

B: We're prepared, even, to up your stipend by another thousand dollars. Not that this is your business, but one of our lower-end avant-garde writers has recently gathered quite a bit of non-literary attention recently, attention that his had no small impact on his sales.

K: That is really great. Don't you have to run this by a committee or something first, though?

B: Don't undersell yourself. You have made quite an impact on our humble company. You've won the whole crew over already with your first submission, *The SauerKraut Circus*.

K: Really. Wow. I guess I sort of thought that was a waste.

B: Speaking of that, how has that been coming along?

K: Excuse me?
B: *The SauerKraut Circus*. Have you still been working on it?

K: Well, no, actually. I’ve been working on this current project mostly.

B: Ok, well. Don’t forget about it Karin. Put it aside for a while, sure, but make sure you get back to it. It is really a masterpiece.

K: Thank you.

B: Okay, what I need to talk to you about, what is so urgent (Hart paused, poured himself a long, slow pour from a crystal bottle of Sherry, and continued) was the departure of your trip. Karin, we need you out on the road sooner rather than later.

K: How soon?

B: Well, we were thinking the end of next week. The beginning of the following week at the absolute latest.

K: Wow. That is really soon.

B: It is imperative to get you out in the field, Karin. With the momentum you have behind you, now is the perfect time to jump. Judging from your proposal, I can tell that your plan is well-thought out,
and it is clear that you are as eager as we are to have you out on the road and writing.

Depending on the success of your research, and I’m sure it will be successful, as well as the progress you’ve already made on the novel, there is a fine possibility that we could get this book to an editor by the end of the summer.

K: I don’t know what to say. That all seems really quick.

B: It must be this way. We’ve agreed to fund your research based on a promising attempt at non-fiction, and you have no previous books out. Karin, you must understand that this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. But you need to go now.

K: I understand, and trust me, I am very thankful for the opportunity. I don’t want to seem like I’m not. Well, (I took a long drink of my bourbon, emptying the glass, and reached for a cigarette.) Yes sir. I suppose I could leave at the end of next week. (Slow down.) Yes, I’m certain I could leave next week.

B: Excellent. We will be overnighting your stipend check. This should give you plenty of time to make the necessary arrangements. Now, there are just a few other things we need to discuss. First, did Sleightor get a hold of you?
K: Yes, actually, he finally did. He gave me some great advice.

B: Good. Did he happen to mention anything about our Author-Sit program?

K: Your Authorship program?

B: No. Author-Sit, Karin. Author-Sit. Pay attention, now.

K: I'm sorry, sir, I mean, B, he didn't. What is an Author-Sit?

B: Okay, this is a program that we offer our more established and trustworthy writers here at Bunsen. Now, as some writers need to get away in order to write, others simply need a peaceful, unfamiliar place to work in. So, what we do, and this of course is entirely up to the discretion of both authors, though I should remind you that we are funding you five thousand dollars without a previous book, what we do is try to make an arrangement to house a struggling author in the lodging place of a traveling author. This would be you, the traveling author. Would you consider allowing a quiet, reclusive author to take up lodging at your residence for the forty-five days you are gone? Of course this means that you won't have to worry about rent or upkeep, either.

K: I live in an apartment.
B: That is perfect. Well?

K: I suppose that would be okay, as long as there was some sort of contract.

B: Of course. We have the perfect writer for you apartment. A recluse, low-maintenance.

K: Who do you have in mind? Would I recognize him?

B: No, I don’t think so.

K: What’s his name?

B: (Hart hesitated, looked at a piece of paper.) It’s slipping my mind right now. No bother.

K: He’s going to be in Prentice, Wisconsin?

B: You live in Prentice, Wisconsin?

K: Yes. I have for several years now.

B: Shit. I thought you were in Prentice, Illinois.

K: There’s a Prentice, Illinois?

B: Apparently. Hm. This may change things. Just remember, however, to mail us a key and any information you might need us to know about your place. I’ll get back to you on this matter. Okay,
the second matter to discuss: I noticed New Orleans on your itinerary, yet, it isn’t mentioned in your plot synopsis. Why New Orleans? Of course, I don’t need to tell you that we can’t allow you to visit friends and family or go binging somewhere on our dime. This is, of course, a business, and I know that certain writers tend to have their indulgences.

K: Of course, not. (Shit. Why New Orleans?) Why New Orleans? (Because that’s where Sleightor lives). Because, sir, well, I have this old college roommate that has an apartment in the French Quarter. And, well, when I mentioned that I’d be traveling soon, er, that I may have this opportunity to conduct some research and write, he offered me the use of his place.

B: Karin—

K: He won’t be there. He’s going to be away for the few days that I’ll be in Louisiana, and I thought it would be a nice time, er, a strategic opportunity, near the middle of my research, to compile my notes and make sure I’m moving the novel forward. You know, just to write.

B: Hm. (A pause; Hart, again, reaches for his Sherry, letting the silence build to the point of exposure.) Well, I suppose that is okay. We need you to move forward. Actually, it’s a great idea, Karin. Very prescient. Finally, the third matter: *The SauerKraut Circus.*
K: You already did.

B: Did I? Well, perhaps I did. Anyway, have you ever thought about perhaps fictionalizing the events in order to sell the book? I mean, no disrespect to your grandfather, of course. In fact, I think it would be a true honor to him. What is non-fiction, anyway?

K: (Fictionalizing? Like problemating?) Well, the truth?

B: A very loose definition, there. Very dangerous.

K: Sorry?

B: Well, just give it a thought. It is never too early to start thinking about one’s sophomore work.

K: (What if one’s Freshman work hasn’t even been written yet?) Sure. I will give it some thought. But for now, I really should focus on the novel at hand, right?

B: Absolutely. So, we’re agreed, then Karin? You are to leave, let me look at my calendar a second, today is the fourteenth of February, goddammit.

K: Mr Hart?

B: Happy Valentine’s Day, Karin.

K: (Damnit.) Actually, I think we’ve already pushed into the fifteenth. (12:22 A.M.)
B: Shit..

K: (a pause, and then a shuffling of paper).

B: Okay, sorry about that. I have penciled in here that you will be boarding your train no later than February 22nd. Does that sound right?

K: Yes. That sounds doable.

B: Alright, Karin. Great. I will be in touch soon. The check should arrive at your apartment, in Prentice, Wisconsin, no later than Monday of next week. Do you have any questions?

K: (huh.) Not at the moment, sir. I think I'm pretty clear on things. I'll let you know if anything comes up?

B: Like what?

K: Oh, nothing. I mean, I'll let you know if I have any questions.

B: Great. I'll be in touch.

K: Goodbye.
I waited for a while before clicking on the “End Call” button. I wasn’t sure why. No, I was certain why. I was hoping to catch this charismatic publisher in a charismatic moment. I was curious what he did when he finished talking with clients. I was curious what I could make out from the blurry, pixilated squares on my computer screen. But, then my screen went black. B. Hart hung up.
In Prentice, the winter typically lasts until mid-April. Oftentimes, however, we get a thaw sometime in mid-February. This change began earlier this week: the temperature spiked to around 45 degrees, the piles of snow melted into the street, and every passing car announced itself with a winding hiss as their wide-treaded snow tires sprayed a stream of slush onto the curbs. One learned to be careful when walking on the sidewalk during the mid-February thaw. The abrupt change of weather has a strange affect on the citizens: boys are seen competing on the basketball courts wearing athletic shorts and tank-tops—though by the end of the summer the 45 degree weather often kept them indoors—high school girls sat on benches and huddled around each other’s phones; and old men shoveled the slush from their driveway edges, knowing from experience that the following week would change that snow into dangerous patches of ice.

A week had passed since I had talked to Hart about the trip. As he promised, the check arrived just after Monday. I’d mostly split up the time during the past week between conversing with Claire and preparing for the trip, often combining the two. Since time was limited, I hadn’t been able to book lodging past my second stop—New York—but as I was sure my itinerary would change as the trip progressed, I was hesitant to book anything too permanent. I looked around my apartment and the lack of clutter, the lack of proof that someone was living in the place reminded me of the day Anna and I moved in. Sure, there was now still a couch and a desk, some bookshelves with books stacked neatly on them, but the apartment looked more like a model of an apartment than an actual apartment. It carried in its dusty air a sense of completion, lacking all the unfinished projects that typically clutter a dwelling: a pot of spaghetti sauce simmering on the stove, a half-read book laid split-open
on the arm of the couch, a television flashing commercials into the busy room, and a novel unfinished, a book unsold.

I checked the rooms once more, and I checked the clock. I’d be leaving in less than a half hour. Claire was going to pick me up, presumably with her taxi-cab acquaintance, and drop me off at the bus station, where I would catch a bus to Chicago, and then start my great train excursion to Boston. I expected Claire any minute, hoping that she would come early. I wanted to see her alone before I left. There were a couple things I wanted to talk to her about. Over the last week, we’d spent most of our time talking about the trip, packing, and arranging and rearranging the pages we’d stolen from the library grounds during its second attack. We hadn’t slept together since the first time, a week ago. I hadn’t wanted to, and I wasn’t sure how she felt about it. The truth is, that’s what I wanted to talk to her about. I knew that I was leaving to find Anna, and knowing this created in me a renewed sense of loyalty to her. Sure, she had left me, but I knew I would find her, and we would come together once again; I was prepared to be with Anna wherever it was she wanted to be. As much as I had grown to love Claire over the past couple of months, I was convinced that Anna was the only person for me, that there was not second or third in waiting. I had found Anna once and would find her again, drifting somewhere along the intersecting lines of the map. I knew that this trip, the distance, would allow me to believe in my feelings for Claire for whatever they were.

Whatever they were.

As I was closing my suitcase in the bedroom and getting ready to haul it and my computer bag into the living room, the doorbell rang. Knowing it was Claire, I yelled for her to come in.

The doorbell rang again.
I yelled again.

Finally, I walked into the living room and opened the door. Two men stood at the door in black suits. One of them held out a badge. My look of confusion flashed back at me four times in the men’s sunglasses.

“We need to speak with Karin Pankreez, please.” As he spoke, he looked past me, seemingly committing the apartment’s layout to memory. Finally, his shaded gaze dropped to my face.

“I’m Karin.” His brow furrowed.

“Identification?” The man who wasn’t speaking slid past me and walked directly to my bookshelf. As I fumbled through my wallet, trying to ask what this was about, the officer behind me pulled out several of the books on my shelf. One by one he opened them, sniffed them deeply, and returned them. He inspected the empty spots on the shelf and studied the notes left in their place. I handed the first officer my driver’s license.

“What is this about? Can I help you guys with something?” I finally asked.

“Karin, do you know a Ms. Ceily?”

I thought about the name, certain I had never before heard it. “No, sir. I don’t believe I do.”

“That’s funny,” the man said with a straight face. “She let on that she knew you pretty well. She claimed that you, in fact, was with her while she smuggled city property into her apartment. I take it you don’t remember this either?”

“Wait. You mean Claire?” Had I really gone on all this time with Claire without knowing her full name? Claire Ceily. “I do know Claire. I’m sorry. I’ve never heard her called Ms. Ceily before.
Behind me, several books dropped to the floor. So much for the completed look of the apartment. The officer in front of me snorted, and waited for me to go on, though I still wasn’t sure what he wanted.

“I met Claire about two months ago, near the library. After the library burned down, I received a call from my boss—I work for the city—that I’d be helping to clean up the site. I went down one night and she was standing out in her yard. That’s where I met her.”

He snorted again and looked past me. The second officer was now in my kitchen, looking through my cupboards. I looked back at the first and he was looking at me again, through through his dark sunglasses. I didn’t have time, at the time, to recognize the cliché, Hollywood-esque nature of the moment. I’d always assumed these things didn’t quite happen like this.

“Can I ask what all this is about? Is Claire in trouble?” As soon as I said that, I saw Claire drive past the front of my apartment in the passenger seat of a taxi cab. The cab kept driving.

“Karin, we have reason to believe that the library fire, well, actually both library fires, were arson.”

“Well, yeah, I would assume so. Weren’t the fire hydrants welded shut?”

He raised his sunglasses and held them at his forehead; his eyes narrowed into thin slits. “Yes, the fire hydrants,” he said, lowering his sunglasses. “How do you happen to know about the fire hydrants?”

“I was there at the second burning.” The officer took out his notebook and began scribbling. I continued, “I mean, once I heard about it, I rushed there. I saw the firemen struggling to open the hydrants. It was clear somebody had tampered with them.”

“How did you find out about the second burning?”
Thinking about Claire’s phone call, I lied. “This is a small town, sir. I could see the smoke. I was out for a walk and the traffic was piling up. As soon as I discovered where it was coming from, I rushed to the site.”

The officer once again raised his glasses to his forehead and studied my face. I started laughing. Nervously, uncontrollably. I could not stop. His lips and eyebrows remained razor straight, and he exhaled slowly and measured. The smell of his stale coffee-breath stole the laughter from lungs.

“Mr. Pankreez, your name has come up on several occasions during the investigation of this arson.”

“My name has come up? I mean, how? In what capacity?”

“I mean,” he repeated, and I had to dodge the breathy emphases he placed on his words, “your name has come up on several occasions during the investigation of this arson.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

His partner came back into the doorway and stood directly behind me. I was bewildered, trapped between the stale breath of two suited officers. Finally, the first officer said, “we’ll be in touch as the investigation continues.”

“Sir, I can assure you,” I said, panicking as though the room was suddenly shrinking, “I have had nothing to do with this fire. I mean, this is preposterous. I’ve been writing a book.”

“Yes,” he interrupted. “We know.”

“You know? I mean, how? I’ve been here, alone, in my apartment, ever since.” How long ago was it since Anna had left? I could feel their impatience like dry skin. “Ever since my girlfriend left me. I’ve only gone to once or twice, to walk or to see Cla- I mean, Ms. Ceily. I’ve had no time, honestly, to burn down a library. No time at all.”
“But if you had time?”

“No reason to burn down a library. Damnit, look at my shelves. I love books! I- I’m trying to write a book!”

“Trust me. We’ve noted the shelves, as well as the missing books and IOUs. You can rest assured they’ve been carefully documented.”

I took a step back, exhausted. An unseasonably warm breeze slithered between the two men and touched my face. “Is there anything else?”

“Just one more thing,” the second officer standing directly behind me spoke for the first time. The timbre of his voice was identical to that of the first officer. “Do not make any plans to travel.”

The officers met again at the doorway, and gave me one last stoic look through their dark sunglasses, as though to convince me of my own guilt. Then, they turned and walked down the steps. I stood in the doorway until their cruiser backed out of my driveway and sped down the road, spraying water and slush past the sidewalk and into my yard.

As I was about to close the door, I heard another splash of water and looked back out to find a taxi cab pulling into my driveway. I hesitated a moment, and then hustled into the bedroom to grab my things.

I threw open the cab door and without looking tossed my bags into the back.

“Hey,” Claire yelled. She was squatting in the space between the passenger seat and the back.

“What are you doing, Ms. Ceily” I asked her.

She lifted her body up slowly, peeking out the windows. “I just want to make sure they’re gone. Get in.”
I closed the door and Claire remained hunched on the floor of the cab. She was staring intently at a street map of Prentice, and as she did, she said, “it’s pronounced Ceily, like See-Lee.”

“But the officer said-”

“I know. Everybody mispronounces it. I didn’t have the nerve to correct him. He seemed so certain.

As we sat in my driveway, I repeated for Claire what they officers had told me. Apparently, they had said pretty much the exact same thing to her, except they had said that a Mrs. Pankreez had given them her name.

“Mrs. Pankreez.” Claire suppressed a laugh.

“One of the perks.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m headed to Chicago,” I said. “And then I’m catching a train to Boston. From there, who knows?” and the cab driver put the car into reverse and backed out of my driveway.
Chapter 23: The Slow Business of Busses, February 21

Claire hadn't gotten out of the cab at the Prentice bus station, for fear that the officers may have, somehow, been watching her still. Instead, she kissed me from where she sat on the floor, gave me an envelope, and wished me luck. I told her I'd call her when I got into Boston and she said okay.

The bus was near capacity when I boarded. I could not figure out where all these people had come from. Prentice is in the middle of nowhere, and the nearest big city (Minneapolis) was still three and a half hours away. I took a few minutes to scan my surroundings. If you have ever travelled on a public bus, have taken a trip longer than, say, an hour, then there is no reason to describe it. That is to say, I believed it was full of interesting people, but I was not in the least bit interested in them.

In fact, since nothing exciting happened on the trip to Chicago, and I feel an obligation to document a bus trip, I'll tell you a bus-story. It is short. I was a sophomore in a writing program at a Southern California. During my summer break, I decided to take a bus out East to visit my family. The bus departed late. I'm not sure when, but it was dark as we headed East across the desert. I was near the back of the bus. There was only one bank of seats behind me, intended to hold three, but at the time supporting only two: a guy and a girl. I could judge from their conversation that they hadn't known each other when they boarded the bus. From the blanket they shared, I could tell one of them was trying to change that. During the night, somewhere between Eastern California and Western Nevada, I overheard her telling a story about the first time she had sex. According to her, two men held her down and forced it. The guy underneath the blanket with her assured her that her sexual experience, indeed, sucked. Certain that I had stumbled upon a story that was
authentic, something intensely real and unforgivably human, I jotted parts of their conversation into a notebook, which, as a sophomore in a writing program, I carried with me as if it were a passport. I knew that I would transform this experience into the most fuck-all-else veracious human story imaginable. When I finally got the nerve to nonchalantly turn and look at my characters, I saw her giving a blowjob to the guy underneath the blanket.

I wrote this down, too. I was hurt and troubled in a very general, humanly, weight-of-the-world, sympathetic way. I wrote it down. I wrote down their postures, their noises that scratched across the metal shell of the bus’s walls, as though I would forget it. The ache that I felt, coupled with pride, only served to convince me of the importance of the story I would write when I got home, and eventually hand out to my class in a workshop.

I never wrote the story.

Nothing like that happened on this trip. Mostly, there was snoring, and computers open with movies on their screens; there were headphones and heels grinding gravel onto the floor’s dull surface; two not-quite-old women, layered in bulky coats, held their handbags like Christmas butter dishes and talked solicitously about food; a young father fought earnestly to keep his young boy from laying in the aisle way before finally relenting; a girl in a loose and heavy sweater and a long grey skirt, who I guessed to be close to my age, read a book.

I had expected a sort of grandiose release the moment I heard the hiss of the bus’s air brakes, but there was no such moment.

In order to eat up the six hour ride to Chicago, where I was convinced this trip would start, I decided to get my things in order. I brought with me, in my computer bag, a document folder which I would use to store all the documents and correspondences that I
would gather throughout the trip. This is where I started. I unsealed the letter Claire had
given me and read it. The writing was sloppy but the note was brief.

Karin,

I’ll be thinking about you as you travel. I know I am going to miss you. While I hope that you are
successful, there is a not-so-small part of me that selfishly hopes you’ll return to Prentice with everything you
need to write your story, except for Anna. I hope that you’ll forgive me for not conveying these feelings while
you were still here, but I didn’t want to distract you from what you must do. Please keep in touch with me
while you travel.

Love,

Claire

I placed the letter in my folder, and before I put it away, I read it once more. On a whim, I
wrote “1: Correspondence—Claire,” at the top of it. I was determined to treat it as nothing
more than a piece of information that I would soon add to with other collected pieces of
information.

After I put the folder away, I took out the journal that I would use to jot down notes
for the novel, observations, and trip planning. I unbound the elastic strap that held its covers
shut and opened to the first blank page. I wrote at the top:

February 21,
To do while in Boston:
-Get local map, find transportation, settle in at hotel
-Find Anna’s sister, Abby.
-Learn from Abby of Anna’s whereabouts.
Make plans to find Anna.
Find somewhere to write. Boston Public Library?

I looked over my notes to make sure that I didn’t leave anything out, and then put it back into my bag. Despite the sloppy, half-frozen world outside, the sun bore down against my window and I was uncomfortably warm. The man next to me was sleeping and his legs had drifted heavily into my floor space. With five and a half hours left before I arrived in Chicago, I bunched up my coat against the window and tried to sleep. I tried not to think about the officers that had been at my apartment earlier, though I suspected I would hear from them soon. Perhaps there was some way B. Hart could help me out. Contractual obligations, or something.

Sometime during the night we stopped at a rest stop in Southern Wisconsin. I took a short walk around the frozen parking lot to stretch my legs. I could see my breath in the towering lights of the parking lot. Though we were next to the highway, the world seemed empty, void of people. There were very few vehicles on the road at this time, and when semi roared by, heading to or away from Chicago, it was startling and alien. The sky was cloudless and a million stars pulsed light as though one thing, one electrical grid.

As the passengers mulled around the bus, smoking cigarettes and passing the thin cups of vending machine coffee from hand to hand, I tried to make conversation with the girl I saw earlier reading the book. She leaned against the cold metal of the bus with her book pulled up to her face. I said something about the bus being uncomfortable, and she nodded without looking away from her book. When I asked her if she lived in Chicago, she looked at me like I was a pervert and got back on the bus. I looked around to see if anybody
else had noticed the rudeness of her departure, but then it occurred to me that nobody was talking. They stood in groups, pulling on their cigarettes in the cold air and looking at the ground. The words, “these are strangers” kept repeating in my head. One by one, without saying a word, they snubbed their cigarettes and followed the girl back onto the bus. I stood there next to the bus, then, alone.

Finally, the bus driver yelled out at me from inside the bus, “You plan on staying here?” I realized I was the last person in the parking lot, and the entire bus was waiting on me. He popped his head out the door. “Jesus Christ,” he said. “You ain’t even smoking. Get on the bus ‘fore I leave you here. What’s a matter with you, son?”

I sheepishly climbed on board, muttering apologies to the driver and passengers, who were all staring at me, all the way down the aisle. When I finally returned to my seat, I pretended to sleep the rest of the way to Chicago.
By the time I got to Chicago I was exhausted. I boarded the train with no troubles, and since I was traveling such a long distance, the conductor sat me next to an empty seat. I had never travelled by train before, and was unsure about their empty seat policies. I had a hunch, though, that stretching into both seats couldn’t be tolerated. The seats were much taller and wider than on the bus; they were soft and reclined, and I soon made myself very comfortable, relieved to finally have the room to stretch out my cramped legs. I took out Sleightor’s second novel and began reading with the intention of falling asleep.

On the front cover of the novel, two dice stood on edge, as though poised between twos and fives. Below the dice was the title: *Two: An Autobiography*. I didn’t read far, just beyond the first section, which was called, “Me and Mrs. Jones.” During the chapter, Larry, an anxious high-school sophomore who lived alone with his mom, was left behind while his mom went on a single’s cruise in the Caribbean. Larry was under the care of his mother’s close friend, Anne. After a few awkward scenes of eating waffles and playing Yahtzee with Anne, an attractive Mrs. Robinson-like woman who drank endless martinis and seemed to own nothing but silk robes, the section ended with Larry poised at the bathroom door, waiting to brush his teeth before bed. On the other side of the door, Anne, whom Larry had already figured out was in the bathtub, asked him to come in. There, the narrative stopped, and the reader was presented with two options: “If you would like Larry to wait until Anne is finished before entering the bathroom, please continue on to the next section. If you would like Larry to enter the bathroom to brush his teeth, turn to page twenty-four.”

Out of the practice of reading choose-your-own-adventure novels, and completely unfamiliar with them as an autobiography form, I flipped to the next section. The pages
were uniquely crisp, unread, while some of the other sections were smudged with a random fingerprint, a drop of coffee, and a misplaced pencil stroke. I read the first few sentences, in which Larry went to bed without brushing his teeth. Then, I too began to drift into sleep as the station outside of my window began to move behind me, and was quickly replaced by the back-lit south edge of Chicago where the trains disappeared to make their connections.

When I finally woke, my mouth was dry and the faint orange light of morning drifted into the car. The iron façade of the city had been replaced by the vast fields of snow. The tips of neglected cornstalks poked through the snow, rusty in the early light. I watched them for what felt like a long time. The window was cool against my arm and I was calmed by the slow, uneven rocking of the train on the old tracks. Since it was morning, many of the other passengers were also awake and roaming the train. Though a handful of them were dressed like me, dressed as though about to walk through a city, I was surprised at the level of comfort so many of the other passengers had. Many wore sweatpants and slippers, baggy sweatshirts and loose t-shirts. A bearded man walked past me wrapped in a blanket and nearly fell into my seat as the train crossed a bumpy transfer and shifted hard to the left. Before long, I stood up, determined to find a cup of coffee and a bathroom. I brought my bag with me, but left behind my sweatshirt in order to keep my seat.

It took some time to get used to walking on the train; I had a strong sense of anticipation as I walked toward Boston on a train moving toward Boston. The labyrinthine stairs and metal passageways between cars, the mysterious, metallic gurglings and grumblings that rattled off from somewhere behind the scenes, made me feel like I was an unaware participant in some vaudevillian production. The feeling heightened when I stumbled unexpectedly into a viewing car that advertised a downstairs lounge with coffee and drinks and sandwiches; the vendor behind the counter told jokes and flirted with his patrons as he
heated up breads and filled coffees and teas. I bought an expensive cup of bitter coffee and climbed back up the narrow staircase to the viewing car. Most of the seats were taken by couples, hoping to catch glimpses of what I had guessed was the Indiana sunrise. I found an empty table and pulled out my notebook to update my trip expenses. At the table next to me, a father pulled some bagels and small tubs of cream cheese and handed them out to his wife and two young children, who looked around the train silently with their mouths open softly and sleep still in their eyes. I hadn’t thought ahead to bring any food with me on the train, and would remember this before I boarded the next one. Two middle-aged women with slept-on hair sat across from each other at the table ahead of me. While I finished by budget, I listened in on their conversation, peeking up every once in a while to catch one of them looking out the window or blowing into her coffee. I realized that they had just met. As I surveyed the rest of the room, I saw more of this: a man with tight jeans and a cowboy hat sat next to a young couple and spoke dramatically with his hands, twice rapping his knuckles against the smudged windows that made up the entire walls on either side of the viewing car; a well-dressed middle aged couple—who appeared to have slept well— instructed a nervous-looking man with a thin mustache on how to play a game with dice. The car was full of strangers speaking to each other about their families, their adventures, their lack of sleep; it was like nothing I’d ever seen. Mere hours of daylight had accumulated and it seemed that every notion of being a stranger, of being quiet and intimidated, or intimidating and quiet, had been left behind in the lines at the station. I wrote something like this down in my journal, and then put it away, intently watching those who passed by my table, eagerly anticipating the one who would slide in across from me and ask me where I came from, where I was headed.
It didn’t take long before a man did just that. He was wearing a suit with a red bowtie, and I knew I was fortunate to have him single me out. He had already taken his place across from me, setting his marbled leather bag between him and the window, before he asked if I was expecting anyone. I nonchalantly told him no and complimented him on his bowtie, telling him that I had always desired to wear one, but had never found the right occasion. Plus, I told him, it wasn’t very appropriate attire for City Park work. He chuckled and touched the edge of his tie with a fragile, veiny hand, before setting it on the table, tapping his ringed finger to the rhythm of the tracks.

Before long, he let out a long, weary sigh and said, “it sure does feel good to be headed home.”

Looking at his ring I asked him if his wife was traveling with him.

He looked out the window for a few seconds, a contemplative look etched across his face. His hair was grey and dark; the spotted skin loosely hung around his eyes suggested that he’d been traveling for years. A long, slow smile scattered the lines on his face and he tapped his chest, just below his bowtie, and said, “she always is.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to bring it up. I didn’t mean to,” I trailed off, picking up my coffee cup and setting it down a couple times, before thinking of something else to say. “Where have you been traveling, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Oh, just about everywhere.”

“Was this vacation?”

“Yes,” he said, the contemplative look returning. “Yes, it was. My wife and I, over fifty-three years of marriage, had accumulated a long list of places to see before we die. After our kids came along, though, well, you know how it goes. Getting away becomes more and more difficult with the little ones. And then later, it is equally difficult to get away with all the
school summer events, job responsibilities, and whatnot. We figured we’d put the list aside, add to it now and then, and finally get to it once the kids moved out. But then, of course, there’s college to be paid for, and soon after, grandchildren.” He scratched at the back of his hand. “Before long, it became our retirement list, and we just kept adding to it. Any time we saw a beautiful place we hadn’t been to on a television show, or heard about vacations from our friends, we added it to the list. But,” he stopped, as though he couldn’t remember the rest.

His eyes grew glassy as he looked out the window, past the fields and snow and ski; or at least I imagined them growing glassy. It is difficult to tell with old people. Their eyes seemed to perpetually leak. Harry Chapin’s “Cats in the Cradle” started creeping into the back of my head, and I tried to distract myself. “It’s not easy,” I told him, as though I had walked in his shoes, and could speak man-to-man with him on the matter.

He reached in his bag and I expected him to pull out the list, to see the youthful curls of his wife’s handwriting spelling out places like the Royal Gorge and Mt. Rushmore evolve slowly to the uncertain hand of an old woman scratching less adventurous, more thoughtful locations like The Japanese Gardens in Portland, the Korean War Memorial in Washington D.C. Instead, he pulled out a traveling coffee mug and set the lid on the table. Out of my view, he retrieved something else from the bag and the anything-but-subtle smell of Canadian whiskey filled the car. He looked up at me, winked, and then looked down to my coffee cup which by now was almost empty. I wasn’t ready for a drink, but I hated to let the moment slip by. The train had a feeling of timelessness to it and I figured it would help me sleep later. I slid my cup toward him and he filled it, too.

“Yeah,” he said, “I set out to see all those places that were on that list. I did it for my wife and now I am headed home to do whatever the hell I want to. It took nearly four
months, but I visited every last one from Seattle’s space needle to Ellis Island. I even went to Montreal,” he said. “That’s in Canada.”

“Sounds like quite an adventure. You did this all on your own?”

“Mostly. I stayed here and there with my kids, visited a couple old friends, but yes, the bulk of it was on my own.” I took a drink from my cup and choked. He had filled it to the top. “Would you like to see my pictures?” he asked.

I was thankful for the whiskey, even though the slow rising sun seemed to bark at me as like B. Hart’s round face, reminding me that I was traveling on business, not pleasure. Before long, though, I acquiesced, and the man pulled a photo album from his bag and slid into the seat next to me, opening it to the first page.

“Every time I completed a roll of film, I brought them to a one hour photo place and filled the album as I traveled,” he explained. I half-expected his hot, pungent breath to set off a smoke detector.

I looked down at the first picture.

“This is Arlington Cemetery. I had to set up the camera on a rock and use the timer to get this shot,” he explained. In the photo, he stood next to a large marble sign in front of an iron gate. The sign displayed in bolded white letters, “Arlington National Cemetery” and had its visiting hours listed below.

I turned the page, expecting to see the rows of white headstones I had seen in other pictures, but instead saw another picture, similar to the first, except this time he was standing next to a smaller, tall rectangular sign that said, “U.S. Capitol: Capitol Visitors Center.” Below the heading were some arrows that pointed to the visitors’ lot, handicap entrance, as well as the visiting hours. I flipped back to the previous page. “Did you go into the cemetery?” I asked.
He looked puzzled for a moment. “When you get my age, son, you don’t just go wandering through a cemetery.” He slapped the table and exploded into a laughter that ended with a coughing fit that he suppressed with a large gulp from his mug. “I suppose I’ll be there soon enough.”

I chuckled back in agreement. “Yeah, I guess you don’t want to rush things. What about the capitol building?” I asked. “I’ve heard that its dome is pretty impressive from inside.”

“Look close at that picture. What do you see?”

I looked. “Well, I see you standing next to a sign welcoming visitors to the U.S. Capitol building.”

“That’s right. And about a million steps directly behind the sign. Shit, I thought I’d have a heart attack walking up the steps to get to the sign. I certainly wasn’t about to test my ticker with the rest of them.” He slid back across the table and refilled his cup. I turned down his offer for more. Before sitting back down, he said, “say, I think I’m gonna head to the bathroom. Will you keep an eye on my things for me? I’ll give you some time to keep looking through those photos.”

I agreed and watched him stumble down the viewing car aisle. As soon as he went through the doors, he reemerged a couple seconds later. He foolishly walked back and, as he passed me, grumbled something about the conductor not letting him pass through the dining car to the sleepers. Heading in the other direction, he fell into at least one other booth, and several seat edges before finally disappearing through the opposite door.

I continued to flip through the pages, but it didn’t take long. Every picture was nearly identical to the one before it, except for the words written on the sign and the clothing on the man: A man standing next to a sign that welcomed visitors to Central Park,
Ellis Island, the French Quarter; the Mississippi River, Deadwood, Yellowstone National Park, the Grand Canyon, the Redwood Forest, and finally ending, as he said, at the Space Needle in Seattle. An entire photo album full of only signs, without a trace of the sights the signs attempted to describe.

I closed the book and waited for him to return. Outside it appeared that we were heading into another city. The seemingly endless fields of untrampled snow gave way to towering smokestacks and billboards advertising the hottest adult entertainment in town. A layer of soot sank down upon the city like a lonely man’s fingerprints, and I knew we were headed into Gary, IN. The train slowed as it passed through the city and I watched the dilapidated buildings creep by my window, imagining that the air out there tasted much like the bitter coffee and cheap whiskey in my cup. Before long, the train stopped. A voice came over the intercom and announced the stop, allotting fifteen minutes for passengers to board and depart, and allowing those wishing to have a cigarette a chance to step outside. “We will not hesitate,” the voice warned, “to leave you behind.”

The whiskey in my near-empty stomach screamed out for a cigarette, but I was burdened with the old man’s things, responsible for them as if they were my own. The thought of a cigarette, however, immediately left my mind as I pictured my sweatshirt draped over my empty seat. I tried to count the passengers boarding the train against those departing. I rationalized it in my head: surely more people would be eager to leave Gary than to arrive at it. The unfamiliar faces gathered around outside the train seemed to support my presumption. I estimated that by the time I returned to my seat I would either be missing a sweatshirt or, at the least, lose the luxury of a double seat.

Then I saw the sad, drunk, bow-tied man stumbling through the throng of travelers, trying to bum a smoke. I wanted to abandon his stuff; I felt justified in abandoning my
responsibilities which extended only to guarding his things while he found a bathroom, but I couldn’t do it. With the entire trip ahead of me, I worried often that my things, too, would at some time need tending. So, I watched the man stumble around from stranger to stranger, before finally picking up the remainder of a cigarette that had been impatiently flicked away. He pulled a plaid handkerchief from his front sport coat pocket and dabbed at the end of it before placing it between his lips, sucking hard to keep it lit.

I looked back through his photos and tried to see beyond the signs, beyond the man whom the signs seemed to hold up, but it all looked the same, just different colored ground: dusty and brown, green and carefully clipped, hard and grey; and in each one the same shoes stepped ahead of or retreated behind the frames of the photograph.

On a fresh page of my journal, I started writing a letter to Claire, realizing only shortly after starting it, that I was actually writing to Anna. I wrote about how difficult I imagined the coming miles to be before I found her. I told her I didn’t care about Prentice or writing and that I just needed her back, that our night at the lake was perfect. Realizing I was writing to Claire and I rolled with it, about how she helped me to see so many things in a new perspective, and that I was worried about the officers who were at my door just two days ago, but that I worried most for her, and that she was right: I missed her most when I’m traveling. And then I realized I was writing to Anna. Before I could finish, though, the old man returned, smelling of cigarette smoke and whiskey, and plopped down carelessly in the seat across from me, placing his head in his folded arms.

“Did you find the bathroom? They’re all downstairs, right?” I asked him.

He slowly looked up to me. “Shit,” he said, and stood up again, this time taking the viewing car stairs down to the nearest one.
I called out after him, garnering a raised hand and a downturned face. I could wait a little longer. If my sweatshirt was gone, my dual seat taken, I would live.

When he finally returned, and began pouring himself yet another drink—I imagined a suitcase full of duty-free whiskey, purchased impulsively during his trip to Montreal—he looked me square in the eyes and asked my name.

“Karin,” I told him.

“Karen?” he repeated. “That’s a girl’s name.”

“Usually.”

“My son, he named his first daughter, my first grandbaby, Karen.”

“Well, it’s a good name.”

“Nah. I don’t like it. I wanted him to name her Beatrice. He said it’s too musty of a name. Too old-fashioned,” he slurred. “Goddamn kids.”

I reached for my bag and started to slide out of my seat.

He put his hand on my arm. “Wait, wait. You didn’t tell me about your trip. Where did you come from? Where are you headed?”

“I’m just getting started. From northern Wisconsin. I’m out to do some research for a novel I’m writing. I’m on my way to Boston, and then I’m gonna make my way West to Los Angeles, stopping several places on the way.”

He lowered his chin and asked accusingly, “What’s your book about?”

I hesitated. “Love.”

He laughed. “I got some stories for you then. Let me pour you another,” he paused, looked around the room, and continued, “coffee.”

I apologized and told him that it would have to wait for another time. I was beat. I was worried about my sweatshirt, and I was a little bit dizzy. I stood up, which only
amplified the effects of the liquor in my empty stomach, shook his hand, and told him that I’d catch up with him later. After all, we wouldn’t arrive in Boston until the following evening. He asked me if I had a good camera, warning me not to miss anything. I lied and assured him I did; we wished each other luck and I stumbled back to my seat.

Back at my seat I was relieved to find my sweatshirt where I had left it. The seat next to mine, though, was filled with an overdressed, middle-aged woman with long black hair and dark eyes. She was reading a paperback by Nora Roberts; which one didn’t matter, since the author’s always bigger than the book title, anyway. When I squeezed through the space to get to my seat, she looked up at me and smiled. I smiled back. Without saying anything to her, I dug my headphones out of my bag and found a playlist Claire had loaded onto my iPod before I’d left. I recognized the first song as Charlie Parker’s “Hallelujah,” and I closed my eyes trying to force myself to sleep. The woman’s perfume mixed terribly with the taste of whiskey on my gums. It reminded me of my mother and her large-breasted, hair-sprayed friends drinking wine in our kitchen when I was young.

The train picked up some speed and began rocking slightly more aggressively as we followed the crisscrossed lines east. To Boston.

**Trip Expenses**

**Prentice to Boston**

*February 22 - February 24*

- $5,000
- $(749.00)—45 day rail pass
- $(55.00)—bus fare from Prentice to Chicago
- $(2.50)—train coffee
- $(2.50)—train coffee
- $(2.50)—train coffee
- $(2.50)—train coffee
- $(2.50)—train coffee
- $4,183.50
Chapter 25: The Indoor City and Ultra-Green Hostel, February 24

The brightly-lit subway car was full of twenty and thirty-year olds acting much older. It was as though every university across the country used Boston’s transit lines to get to their dining hall. I stood in the aisle, my suitcase between my knees and my bag around my shoulder, and acted in poor simulation of a Bostonian. My grip on the bar overhead was so tight that my arm had started cramping several stops ago. I tried to pull it off it at first—the no-hands subway stance that so many others used—but I lacked the balance inherent to those who live in big cities. With my free hand, I carried Sleightor’s novel and tried to read, but felt miles behind my fellow passengers who, without holding on to anything, rolled cigarettes, typed endlessly on cell phones, and flew through the page-less pages of their digital readers.

I marveled that, during the four hours that I had been in Boston, I’d travelled close to 25 miles and have yet to step outside. The tracks and tunnels, the concrete-lined passageways that connect the city to its appendages was unfamiliar. After stepping off the train into the system of tunnels underneath Boston’s South Station, I was so exhausted from two days of constant half-sleep and so hungry from my neglect to pack food and my refusal to spend eight dollars on a microwaveable hamburger, that I finally collapsed at a table in the South Station food court. After a few moments of sitting on something that wasn’t moving, listening to the cavernous sounds of hard-sole shoes on uncarpeted floors, electronic beeps and indiscernible voices murmuring into electronic devices, with my eyes closed and fingers working on my temples, I began to feel a little better. The information desk provided a map that would make locating my hostel easier, as well as guided me back down some stairs in search for the “T.”
It was during this process, though, when I learned the importance of being able to recognize the final destinations of each line. That is, if a traveler situated in downtown Boston wanted to get to Davis Square, he or she should hop on a red line headed to Alewife, not Braintree, as Davis Square is the last stop before reaching Alewife. A traveler not familiar with this system of travel may, perhaps, end up on a train to Braintree, and being so eager to reach his or her destination and/or excited to be off a train, actually compound his train journey with the additional two and a half hours it takes to travel from South Station to Braintree and back to South Station again, before ever decreasing the distance between his or her original location and Davis Square, ultimately heading for a full hour and fifteen minutes away from where he or she thinks he or she should be traveling.

As I did.

When I finally stepped outside of the labyrinthine subway tunnels, I wasn’t prepared for the gusts of snow that blew sideways across the evening-lit, grey streets; Boston, it seemed, was in a constant attempt to wrestle me from my sense of balance. And when I pulled upon the handle the heavy oak door of my hostel’s entrance, I realized I had to push.

The hostel lobby smelled like incense and gas-station burritos. One of the Indiana Jones movies was playing in the television room adjacent to the office to the entertainment of lounged travelers sprawled on couches, nursing large glass bottles of cheap beer. After the third time ringing the bell at the desk, a thin man with a chin shaded by a two-day stubble, sauntered in behind the counter. He touched the top of his black-rimmed glasses, moving them almost to the tip of his nose, and with a stern, annoyed glance to the door, shoveled a spoonful of some grilled pasta and vegetable mix so pungent that I had to take a step back. After chewing for some time, excessively working the pieces of food from between his teeth with his tongue, and then his fingernail, he said, “We’re full,” and then took another bite.
As he was stood there chewing, I shuffled around my bag for my documents folder. “I made a reservation a week ago. The guy on the phone said you had plenty of room.” I pulled the folder out, dug out the reservation and slapped it on the desk.

“Can’t be. Maybe you mean next week.”

“Well, the reservation is for this week. Three nights, and I was told I could add additional nights with a day’s notice. You think you could at least look at the paper?” I looked at the boarders on the couch, expecting something of an audience. I mean, can you believe this guy? But they had Indiana Jones and bellies full of Schlitz. Outside, the wind howled between the buildings. I couldn’t see past the front porch where the snow whirled in circles in front of the window. I imagined walking through it to find another place to stay. I imagined sleeping in it.

The desk worker set his plate on the counter and licked his fingers before wiping them on his jeans and grabbing my reservation. Pushing his glasses back, he said “this is for a private room.”

“Yes.”

“All the private rooms are full.” He picked up his plate and shoveled in another forkful. A withered spinach leaf didn’t quite make the transfer and stuck to his stubbled chin until he dug it out with his tongue.

“So you’ve said,” I raised my voice. He looked at me over the top of his glasses. “Well, why the hell would you make a reservation if you didn’t have any room?” I looked back into the television room. On the screen, Harrison Ford hunched over an old, stone alter, atop of which stood the Holy Grail. In his right hand dangled a bag of sand. He stood, poised to exchange the bag of sand for the cup, wary of triggering a snare.

“I can put you in a bunk.”
“So you do have room?” He leaned over the counter and examined my suitcase. A couple oily noodles slid off his plate and onto my reservation. “Is there a size limit on bags, too?”

“The room is a coed dorm. Where did you get that bag,” he asked.

“It’s my wife’s. I mean, it used to be. I just,” I paused, suddenly incredulous that I was even answering this asshole. “Why did you just tell me you were full?”

“We just had something open up.”

“What, just now? Between bites? Between the time you told me you were full and you dropped pasta on my reservation?”

He took another bite, leaned over the counter again and checked the television. A large round stone chased Harrison Ford through an old cave. “Do you want the room? It’s thirty bucks a night. You’ll have to pay your first three nights upfront,” he asked.

I looked back out the window where the snow glided gently into the pane. “I’ll take it.”

After paying and receiving a free map of Boston, he gave me a towel and some sheets and offered to give me a tour of the hostel. He insisted on carrying my suitcase, asking once more where I’d purchased it. He stopped in the television room to watch the climactic finale of Indiana Jones, and then took me through the kitchen, pointed out the showers, and showed me to the room, explaining as he did, how environmentally efficient the hostel was.

After putting the sheets on the last available bed, a top bunk, I showered and changed out of my train-weary clothes and set out to find a meal. I asked the desk worker of a place and he told me there was plenty of stir fry left over. I lied about some allergies and he finally gave me directions to a place nearby. After dinner and a couple drinks at an empty
dive called the Mad Dog, I returned to the hostel, waded my way through a room full of
dazed travelers, now watching *Wayne's World*, and made it back to my room. I’d designed to
get some writing in tonight, but only got as far as updating my budget and finishing the letter
I’d started on the train. I’d figure out whom to send it to in the morning. I slept more solid
than I had in several days. That is, until the rest of my roommates finally retreated to bed.
Throughout the rest of the night I went back and forth between fits of sleep and trying to
keep from falling off the bunk as the bed rocked from what felt like at least a dozen people
sharing the bunk below.

**Trip Expenses**

**Boston**

*February 24*

4,183.50

(63.42)—3 nights at Boston Hostel
(20.40)—Commuter Rail Pass in Boston—12 rides—11 rides left
(19.47)—Sandwich and two beers at Mad Dog, Davis Square
(3.53)—tip at Mad Dog

4,076.68
I was awake pretty early and made my way into downtown Boston by 8:30 AM. In the morning light, I was immediately enamored with the city. Where I had expected high rises and skyscrapers, I found spacious parks and the sort of small buildings and apartments you’d find in a midsize, Midwestern city. Around the area that my map identified as Beacon Hill, the streets were narrow and steep; the brick apartments were draped in snow-covered ivy and icicles hung from window ledges. I felt certain that in the forty-five minutes since leaving my hostel I’d walked out of a Goethe novel and into a Dickensian landscape. From my map, I judged the distance from the downtown area to the public library and decided to walk it.

My first order of business was to find Anna’s older sister, Abby. From Anna’s most recent email, I knew that Anna was traveling to New York as recent as a week ago, and I figured that sometime during her trip she would have to stop to visit Abby. Abby was Anna’s only sibling, and they had been close their entire lives. Of course, it was my hope that Anna would still be here, but if not, I’m sure that Abby would be able to help me find her. Though it felt a little early to go tracking down my estranged wife’s relatives, I planned to kill some time at the library working on my novel. I figured I could find a phone book there, as well.

The library stood towering over Boyleston Street with its massive grey façade. It took me twenty minutes to find the proper doors, and when I finally did, I had to present my id, walk through a metal detector, and finish my coffee before proceeding to the second floor. Eventually I made my way to the second floor to a musty, cavernous reading room where one of my college professors had once told me he’d written most of his first novel in. The
room was as tall as it was wide, accommodating at least twenty rows of large oak tables that
spread out more like a dismal banquet than a study hall. An identical pea coat and grey wool
scarf seemed to be draped over every chair back, as their occupants leaned into dusty
volumes and occasionally types notes into their laptops. The rounded ceiling captured every
sound: the scratching of a pen sounded like a carpenter sanding a staircase railing, a cough
sounded like an excerpt from a blockbuster war film, and the sound of my chair as I pulled it
out to sit in sounded like an ambulance screeching its brakes at a busy intersection. Roped-
off balconies suspended like turrets twenty feet above the busy readers spurred progress
through a Bentham-like fear of being scrutinized.

The panoptical quality of the balconies seemed to have a positive effect on my
writing. Throughout the morning I made progress on each of my character’s plotlines. After
several pages, I made some notes in my journal. I was determined to have Ben, Jacob,
Katrina, and Olivia on their trains and headed west before I left Boston. If the story was to
be realistic, they had to, at least, be on the road quicker than it took me to leave Prentice, but
not too quick, so as to have them arriving to places before I had a chance to see them.

Around noon, I packed my things and set out to find a phone book. I crossed
through a quaint courtyard with a fountain and some chairs under an awning. A shoveled
brick pathway led across the open space to a separate part of the library. The courtyard, too,
had a series of balconies placed high around its perimeter. More and more, I found myself
gazing at these balconies. After over an hour of trying to find a phonebook, including twenty
minutes convincing a librarian that I was, in fact, looking for a current phonebook of the
Boston area and not a history on the phonebook or an archived copy of the original New
England phonebook—which was, I learned, located on the second floor of the library,
beyond a small art gallery, showing a series of black and white photos of the Boston area in
the 1970s, and through several series of long vacant hallways adorned with plastic sheets and the sense of perpetual reconstruction, and finally into a cozy den that housed their most rare artifacts—I was turned away empty handed and sneered at for being so simple minded as to go to a library for a phonebook.

Across the street, I found half of a phonebook chained to a payphone. Fortunately for me, it was the A-L half, and within minutes I found “Abby Bertreb” listed with an address and a telephone number.

After calling and explaining who I was—Abby knew, as Anna had left Boston only two days before—Abby still wasn’t sure why I was calling. Thinking quickly, I told her that I had some of Anna’s things with me, and due to the weight of the memories these items carried, Id rather they be with Anna’s family than with me, where every day they reminded me of Anna and our brief stint of love. Abby bought it and agreed to meet me the following morning. She asked me where I’d been in Boston, and I told her the library, so we agreed to meet there at 9:00 AM the following day, just as soon as she got her kids off to school. I hung up the phone, knowing that Anna couldn’t be more than two days from where I was standing—less than six inches on any map. Walking back to Boston—I now had some shopping to do—I started to devise a timeline in my head. Most likely, I figured, Anna was still on the east coast; from the few details she’d told me, she hadn’t yet been to New York to see her old roommate. In addition, knowing her careful and meticulous planning, Anna would not begin heading west until she had soaked up the East. So, if she departed Boston two days ago, that would still put her a day’s travels away by that evening. Since after the day’s travel she would need a night’s rest, her experience of wherever she traveled to would have begun yesterday. By now, mid-afternoon on February 25th, she would be halfway through her second day. If Anna was heading to New York, I figured she would need at least
a full week, including her first short day—to see the sights and catch up with her old
roommate, meaning that I had only five days to get Anna’s whereabouts from Abby, travel
to the discovered location, and win back my wandering wife.

But for now, I had some shopping to do. I needed some items that, to Abby, would
seem to hold sentimental value between Anna and I, items too powerful with collected
memories, too weighted with shared meaning for me to hold onto a second longer.

I thought about these things as I walked back to old town Boston. By the time I got
there, I decided to reward my productive morning with a midday drink, which would give
me the time I needed to come up with what I needed to win Abby over. I took a short cut
through a long, white park, scattered with statues and monuments. Though it was midday,
the park was sparsely populated, and the city around it seemed small. I stopped for a
moment and sat at a park bench. There was a pond nearby that I hadn’t noticed earlier. Like
the rest of the park, it was mostly covered in white, though I now noticed several gaps in the
ice where the snow was a darker color, caused, I assumed, by where the ice had thawed and
the pond water had begun its tedious process of reemerging to the surface. A single set of
footprints stretched across the pond despite the fence that marked its borders. The
footprints looked as recent as this morning. I couldn’t fathom who would dare to walk
across the pond when its icy surface looked so uncertain. What, I wondered, could have
been on the other side of that pond that the pedestrian so desperately needed to tend to?
Who could’ve taunted him so that it wouldn’t do to take the extra five minutes to walk
across? I considered the possibilities: would someone be more likely to chase after
something across the treacherous ice or be chased across it? The former option provided a
small window for a decision to be made, while the latter left little or no room for a decision;
rather depended on impulse. So many times, long before I had ever moved to Prentice, and
certainly once I had moved there, I had envied the ability to act on impulse, to not have to take so much caution when making any decision. Is this why Anna had left me? Many people have said that women need a man that can act impulsively. So long as their impulse was profitable, I added. I recognized that there was some impulse to my trip, to search out Anna under the pretense of writing the novel, but not so much that I had no desire to write the novel. And it wasn’t as though I had just left. Though I had indeed left. More than a month, that is, after Anna. Hardly impulsive.

I stood up from the bench and walked toward the pond, stood at its edge. I looked around before stepping over the faded orange, mesh fence, careful not to catch my bag on it. Once at the pond’s edge, I took a step forward, and the pond let out a low, painful creak. Keeping my weight upon my back foot, I measured my boot print to the one that had traversed across the ice. It was a perfect fit. I eased the weight of my back foot, still planted on the shore side, and to the sound of another low creak I placed it into the next footprint until all of my weight was held up by the suspect ice. A Boston police cruiser crept by the park’s perimeter. And then I turned around. I crouched at the base of a massive spruce whose limbs hung over the ice. When the cruiser was out of sight, I hopped back over the fence and crossed the park. I emerged at the southwest corner of Beacon Hill, crossed the street, and ducked down a stairway that descended below Beacon Street and into a crowded barroom.

I ended up having to go upstairs to a separate barroom, eliminating the allure of having a drink in a Boston bar whose staircase descended below the streets. Even the upstairs barroom was crowded, though, and the only open seat was at the corner of the bar. After I sat down, I noticed not a few people watching me. I looked about my person, examining the alignment of my shirt buttons, smoothing down my hair, and discreetly
checking my zipper. Then I noticed a bronze name-card on the bar in front of my seat that said, “Norm.” I stood up and looked around the bar for another seat; I looked for Norm, perhaps a famous local or a recently deceased regular, someone on their way back from the bathroom just finishing their shift. Nothing, so I sat back down and ordered a drink.

I hadn’t realized until several strong beers later that the barroom had thinned out considerably. Without all the bodies blocking the windows, the waning light outside became more obvious. As I motioned for the bartender to settle my tab, a stranger entered the room. He had a curiously long beard, which hung at least to his belt buckle. He stood behind the stool next to me and with his aged-bent hands, swept his beard over his right shoulder. Then he took his seat. We were, it became suddenly apparent, the only patrons remaining in the bar. When the bartender approached, I told her to hold on the tab, and to bring me another drink. The stranger removed his coat and scarf and settled into the chair with impeccable posture. He also ordered a drink. Before long, he asked me where I was from, and from there, we began a discourse on the most strange and peculiar things, to be recounted immediately.


“I know it,” he said. “I was there once, ages ago.”

“Really?” I laughed. “You don’t come across many people that know of it. It’s really out of the way of, well, everything.”

“I travel a lot, Mr.,” he paused. “What’s your name?”

“Karin.” I surrendered my hand to his surprisingly strong grip.

“Mr. Karin. Pleasure to meet you. My name is Morris Uncle Sam Ekols.”

“It’s just Karin,” I explained. “That’s quite an impressive name, by the way, Morris ‘Uncle Sam’ Ekols. Uncle Sam, is that why your words are in red?”
He looked at me, puzzled. “Excuse me?”

“On your hand, there.” I pointed out the scribbles in red ink on the back of his hand.

He looked at his hand. “Oh, these are just some reminders for me, things I have to pick up today. You’re very observant.”

“It’s all I’ve been doing for the last few days, watching people. Trying to write.”

“So you’re a writer? Is that why you’re sitting here by yourself, brooding in an empty barroom?”

“Well, something like that. Do you mind if I ask how you got the ‘Uncle Sam’ part of your name?”

“It’s a funny story. In fact, it’s not really a story at all, but I suppose it’s funny, nonetheless. My parents just named me it. I think they thought it’d help them get their citizenship.”

“Did it?”

“Well, they did get their citizenship, but I doubt my name had anything to do with it. I mean, they’re just words, after all.”

We ordered a couple more drinks. I traced the “Norm” name-plate with my fingertips.

“So, if it is not being a writer that’s causing you to eat up the Boston day in the most famous bar in America, what is it?”

“The most famous bar?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t recognize it?”

I looked around, shook my head.
“You really got to stay in more,” he said. “Why else would the beers be nine dollars apiece?

Shit. I tried to remember how many I’d drunk, but could only remember the last two.

“So, you’re in Boston, writing, but there is something else. Tell me the extent of your adventure that has led you to such a stupor on this day.”

“I’m looking for somebody.”

“A woman? A parent? What are they doing in Boston?”

“My wife. And she’s not in Boston.

“No wonder your face hangs. Why don’t you go after her?”

I explained the situation to him, all of it: Anna, the novel, and the arrangement I’d made to meet Abby with the hopes that she’d tell me where I could find Anna. “They’re really close, though,” I said. “I can’t think of any situation where she’d tell me Anna’s whereabouts.”

“Karin, if you don’t mind me saying this, you are going about it all wrong. You can’t focus on Anna in this situation. I mean, if you’re going to get the information from Abby, you have to win Abby over. Now, let me think.” He pulled his grey beard from his shoulder and combed his fingers through it, staring, as he did, past the bar to a photo on the wall of a group of men and women reclining over a bar, the same bar, in fact, that we sat at. In the photo, their large smiles revealed rows of brilliantly white teeth. I imagined a company holiday party. One where, obviously, large bonus checks had been received.

Finally, Morris looked over at me. “I like the plan you devised to get Abby to meet with you. Your quest, now, is to use that same sort of thinking to win her over. You have to earn her favor, you see. You’re a writer; you have to think like one.”
“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Think about the quests of the great characters of Literature. What would, say, Don Quixote do?”

“Wait a second. Don Quixote? I’m not sure I see the connection between my situation and Quixote’s. He was delusional.”

“No. Don Quixote wasn’t delusional.” He took a drink and brushed his beard over his shoulder. “Well, I guess he was, but that isn’t the point. The point is he wasn’t a fool. He only wanted something so bad, that he was willing to act impulsively and look foolish to others in an attempt to attain it. What would he do in this situation?”

I thought about ordering another beer, but remembering what Morris had said about the prices, resisted. “I don’t know,” I answered, “attack some windmills?”

“No, unless the situation called for it. He would act chivalrous. He would win her over with bravery and honor. That is what you must do, Karin. You must act with chivalry. Woo her, win her over, and get the information you seek.”

“You mean seduce her.”

“No, absolutely not. That will come later, if such crude tactics are needed. What you need to do is to win her over with bravery and honor. Where are you meeting her?”

“The Boston Library.”

“Hm. Not a great venue for bravery and honor. You’re going to have to find a way to prove your worth to her, sometime during the visit. Coax her out into the city. It’s a shame this isn’t Detroit. There’d be plenty of options to prove your bravery there. Boston is, unfortunately, rather boring in regards to dangerous adventures. At least those within walking distance of the library. Well, good luck,” he said, throwing a few bills on the bar and putting his coat and scarf back on.
“Wait. You’re leaving?”

He pointed to the ink on his palm. “I have to. I still have to pick up these things. Boston won’t wait up for you, Karin. I have a feeling we’ll meet up again. I look forward to hearing the recounting of your adventure tomorrow. Remember: bravery and honor.”

I looked at a clock on the wall. It was already after nine! Somehow I had been in this bar most of the day. I worried about where I would find the items I’d promised to Abby. The bartender brought me my bill and examining it, I handed over my card, feeling sick to my stomach. I hung tightly to the staircase railing as I descended downstairs to the main barroom and then ascended the exterior stairs to the cold, empty Boston streets.

I returned to the hostel, scarcely in control of my movements. I’d managed to fall into the right subway car, and fall back out of it at the correct stop. In my room, I kicked off my shoes and dropped a “Boston Bookstores” bag into the corner. When I found two people sleeping in my bed, I went back to the lobby and sat down between two other travelers who had fallen asleep watching some epic, medieval film. I watched the lone knight traverse the labyrinthine castle stairs in a fury. He looked ahead nervously, behind anxiously. I didn’t know if he was running away from an enemy or toward his queen, and the spinning angles of the spiraling staircases made the hostel living room spin. With my feet firmly planted on the dingy floor, I soon fell asleep.

**Trip Expenses [must be figured out]**

**Boston**

*February 25*

3978.70

(4.75)—one hot dog from street vendor
(2.79)—coffee from Boston Public Library
(84.75)—x beers at downstairs/upstairs bar
(5.00)—shameful tip left at upstairs/downstairs bar
(27.45)—items at *Boston Bookstore*
(17.00)—total bill at someplace called Xanadu Palace, which I assume was for food on the way home from the bar
3,836.96

**Notes for This Monster Land**
- Before leaving Boston, get your characters on their trains.
- After an especially difficult day painting for his temp job, Ben makes the decision to leave New York. He meets Carol at her apartment and stands at the door as he tells her. He does not go in.
- (Ben buys groceries before getting on the train.)
- Jacob agrees to travel to San Diego, convincing himself that he is doing so in order to get away from the Detroit winter and improve his health.
Part I

In which Karin prepares for what will be the most amazing adventure ever told, when it does in fact happen, after, of course, another smaller adventure, though no less amazing.

Fortunately, at 7AM, I was kicked awake by the same desk clerk that had given me so much trouble earlier. He told me guests weren’t allowed to sleep in the lobby. I tried to explain that my bed had been taken. This wouldn’t be the first time they’ve removed somebody from the hostel, he told me, and from the way he was eyeing me, arms crossed, patchy beard jutted in my direction, I was certain he was referring to me, and not the guests who were sleeping in my bed.

After showering and returning to my room, I found the couple still asleep in my bed. I stood up on the ladder, trying to find my suitcase—I’d left it on my bed to keep it out of sight of the others. It bulged underneath the covers, trapped between the legs of a tall, wiry-built guest, who was tangled in the arms and legs of a much shorter, stockier guest. I was due to meet Abby in less than two hours, and I needed a clean shirt. Yesterday’s clothes, which I had put on after my shower, were wrinkled and stretched, and on the shoulder of my shirt was a dark, oily stain that I didn’t remember getting. I strategized for a bit, testing the situation by tugging lightly at the corners of the blanket. I felt like a child, playing a game of Operation on Christmas morning, as I picked and poked around, angling at the best way to grab my suitcase. Carefully, I flipped up the blanket far enough to expose the handle of my suitcase, and slowly lifted it; the edge was caught underneath the crook knee of the guest’s hairy, bare, knee. When I finally pulled the suitcase free of the knee, the lightened suitcase
threw off my balance and I slammed the corner of the suitcase into the upper thigh of the other guest, and then fell off the ladder.

“What the fuck?” I heard, before the fierce, squat face of a woman peered over the edge of the bed. “What are you trying to do, you perv?”

I was sprawled over some piles of clothes and bags, my suitcase on my chest. “You were sleeping in my bed. I didn’t have anywhere to sleep last night.”

“This is our bed, asshole.”

The face of the tall, wiry guest whose legs had held my suitcase captive now peered over the edge of the bed. His shaved head was covered in tattoos. When he turned to scan the room, I noticed he had a face, proportioned to his own, tattooed on the back of his skull. He looked mack at me with his actual face. “Yeah, this is our bed, you perv. What do you think you’re trying to do?”

“This was my bed,” I repeated. “I just needed to get my suitcase.” I started to stand up.

He repositioned to his knees, his long back and neck crouched beneath the ceiling until he looked like he was about the leap from the bed. “Am I gonna have to kick your ass?”

“Kick this pervert’s ass,” said the squat-faced woman. “You kick his ass, and then I’ll kick his ass too. Fuckin pervert.”

He started down the aluminum ladder of the bunk bed, angry, though he seemed to have trouble expressing it while climbing down from the child-sized bed. I rose to my knees, clutching my suitcase in front of me. “Listen,” I said, “I just wanted my suitcase.”

Finally down from the bunk, he stood in front of me wearing only a pair of checkered, bikini underwear.
“Listen,” I repeated, and he kicked the front of the suitcase, sending me tumbling backwards into the lap of another guest who sat on the edge of his bed watching the progression. He nudged me back toward the wiry guest. “If it was your bed, why was my suitcase in it?”

“What did you say, pervert?” He took another step toward me and the bedroom door flew open. The desk clerk stood in the doorway, holding a large, pronged fork. He stared right at me.

“Why were your legs wrapped around my suitcase if it was your bed?” I asked.

“Fuck you,” he answered, and took another step toward me.

The desk clerk jumped between us, pointing his fork at me. “Jim,” he addressed the wiry guest, “put some clothes on and stay in your own bed. You,” he said, slapping the fork into the palm of his other hand, then prodding me gently in the shoulder with it “you should probably get on with your day. And if you plan on staying here any longer, you should start respecting the hostel rules.”

He stood in the doorway and watched my next move, which was to change my clothes under the watchful gaze of the rest of the guests, looking on from their perches on beds, chairs, and the floor. I leaned my suitcase against a wall, since there were still no open beds. After grabbing the bag from Boston Bookstore, I left the hostel. I had an hour to get to the library.

*Part II*

In which Karin continues out of the hostel, into the maze of Boston’s public transportation system, and examines the glorious objects, recounting the story of each.
On the subway headed downtown, I examined the items I bought to give to Abby. I didn’t remember much about the purchases, and that was made clear by the actual items. My task, then, was to convince Abby that the items that I had to give her, the items that were so important, held so much sentimental value to me, so purely symbolized my love for her sister, Anna, were the following three things: a long-stemmed smoking pipe—with a black stem and a cherry-wood tobacco chamber—an inspirational poster with a photo of penguins standing at the edge of an iceberg, with a single penguin leaping off its edge and the inscription, “COURAGE: Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear—not absence of fear; and finally, an outdated Kama Sutra calendar representing a new position for each day, illustrated with stick figures, wrapped in plastic with a bright orange “clearance” sticker on it.

Shit.

I needed to create a narrative for each item, to convince Abby that the objects alone held no significant value; rather, the story behind each object was what mattered. I started by ripping off the plastic from the calendar, as well as January through March, and half of April. A stick figure bent into an impossible posture stared back at me from April 13. I slipped the torn pages into my computer bag. For good measure, I also flipped through the calendar and dog-eared several of the more intriguing positions, namely July Seven, September Six, October One, and December Twenty-One. I dipped my thumb into my coffee and smeared it on November Thirteen. You see, Anna and I had diligently made it through the middle of April—not consecutively, of course, but relatively, sometimes taking a lazy Sunday to make up on the days we had skipped—before getting into the first of many day, week-long arguments, negating the use of the calendar. I had attempted to entice her by bookmarking certain dates, as she did for me, but once the momentum was lost it was difficult to regain. The beginning of the end: April Seventeen, “The Yawning Position.” Then, I opened the
inspirational poster and tore off a small, triangular piece from each corner, and one rip up
the middle, about three inches long, to split the phrase in half. I wiped the backside against
the bottom of my seat, and smeared the dirt into the print. This damaged poster was not a
result of a fight, as it seemed; rather Anna and had bought the poster together at a book fair,
as a joke, and had hung it up on the wall over our coat rack. The tears and the smudge
occurred one night when we had some friends over for a New Year’s Eve party—the day
before day one of the Kama Sutra poster—when Anna, dressed as a beekeeper, had drank
too much spiced rum and had some trouble seeing through her mask when she tumbled
over a pair of somebody’s cowboy boots and tore down the poster as she dragged her hand
down the wall. Later that night, once Anna had passed out, I cleaned the poster as well as I
could and taped it to the bathroom mirror. Anna and I laughed about it together in the
morning over coffee and breakfast in bed.

As I got to my stop, I took the items out of the Boston Bookstore bag and put them
in my computer bag. I left the pipe out, examining it as I walked toward the library. I pulled
it out of its packaging and rolled it over in my hands. It was pristine. I put the end in my
mouth and inhale; my mouth was filled with the taste of plastic. I checked my watch and still
had fifteen minutes left before I was to meet Abby. I looked around the area. The sidewalks
were crowded with Bostonians in pea coats and thin wool scarves, stepping quickly through
slushy sidewalks on their ways to work, breakfast dates, and locally-owned niche markets.
There seemed to be an eminent thaw in the air, and I thought about the steps across the ice-
covered pond in the park yesterday. It was bright, and the sun shone at angles from the
windows of busses and black SUVs with tinted windows.

I hurried across the street to a convenience store and bought a pouch of pipe
tobacco and a book of matches. I stuffed the tobacco chamber with the dry, organic, leafy
shreds, savoring the smell in the brisk morning. I hadn’t ever smoked a pipe before, but have seen it done in movies enough times to feel like I knew what I was doing. I checked my watch again, and held a lit match over the chamber, packed tightly with tobacco, and inhaled deeply. The harsh smoke—absent of the chemicals from the cigarettes I had been smoking—stung my lungs, and I began coughing violently. I took a sip of my coffee and tried again. I looked at my watch again; I had five minutes left. Furiously, I smoked, inhaling as deeply and frequently as I could, until the chamber was empty except for a few shards of resin. I was mildly hungover from the last night and now light-headed from the tobacco; I was certain that even one more puff would have made me sick. I packed the pipe hard against my palm and smelled it. Immediately, I was brought back to the moment when Anna and I had first bought the pipe, on vacation in Northern Michigan, at a lumberjack festival. It was an impulsive purchase; we hadn’t intended on smoking it. But later that evening, under the spell of blue grass music and the Michigan summer air, cozy beneath the awning of a beer tent, we smoked it to fit in with the new friends we had met. We told them that we’d run out of tobacco earlier that day, and they lent us some. That was the night when Anna proposed that I moved in with her. I stuffed the pipe into my bag with the other things.

Part III

In which Karin meets Abby and is met with yet another amazing happenstance, which will be described more brilliantly in the following section, than it could ever be in this subheading.

I walked back across the street, my head intent on jogging and my stubborn, sea-sick legs refusing, and approached the library entrance. There were several women hanging around, though none met the description of Abby. I feared, for a moment, that Abby had
talked to Anna sometime during the night—perhaps as soon as I got off the phone with her, she turned to Anna who may have been sitting next to her, even listening in—and had explained my proposal. I feared that Anna had talked Abby out of meeting with me, explaining that she had sold all of her things before she left, replacing anything that held significant value with an IOU note, that there was nothing in the apartment that could painfully remind me of Anna, not the remote control, her Colgate toothpaste, or her green, clay coffee mug she drank from every morning. Not a stack of IOU’s with beautifully balanced handwriting, her favorite editing pencil she had left behind, or the box full of magazine subscription cards she refused to throw away. But then, as a red-hatted woman with a blue ski-jacket sauntered down the sidewalk, blonde tufts of loosely curled hair poking from beneath her stocking cap, heading directly toward me, smiling at me and waving, I was convinced that they had, in fact spoke. That Abby had convinced Anna to meet me instead. She held up just before reaching me, and I straightened, stepped toward her.

“Karin, right?” she spoke.

“Yes,” I said. “Karin. Abby, how are you? It’s been what, over a year, right?” I held out my hand to her, disappointed, and she shook it in her mittenened hand. I watched her watching me, putting me in a line-up with Anna’s others. The guys she’d dated, loved, and fucked in the past. As Abby catalogued me, I tried to figure out the subtle differences between the sisters. They were, unbelievably, identical, except for a span of at least three years in their birthdays. It was difficult to be exact, as Abby was dressed for winter, and I had known Anna in all seasons. When it seemed as though Abby had placed me into her catalogue of Anna’s romantic life, we ceased shaking hands and told each other how nice it was to finally meet the other. That Anna had talked constantly about her/me. I wasn’t
convinced that Abby was lying, but since I was lying, I at least suspected it in her. “There’s coffee inside,” I finally said, and we headed to the door.

I was still a little light-headed when we went through security, as well as I was in the habit of passing through security checks of all types without trouble, so after I gave my name to the security guard, and scanned my identification, I never saw the red light flash, or the harsh buzzer emit from the scanner. I think Abby may have paused a moment, but I took the hitch in her step as a gesture to allow me to lead the way to the barista. A gesture I, at the time, admired tremendously. By the third time the security guard barked, “Sir,” into the cavernous atrium, he left his station, and followed after me, his dress shoes reaching, clik clok, up the stairs, down the blocked off hallways, and into the shelves and shelves of books. Finally, he spun me around.

“I can’t let you in here, sir.”

“What do you mean?” I looked up at the walls, searching for a clock. I was relieved to find people handling the books inside. “I know we’re not too early.” I looked at Abby. “Why can’t we go in?”

“She,” he said with emphasis and a nod in Abby’s direction, “can go in. You, however, cannot. You’re on the list.”

“On the list? What does that even mean?” I looked at Abby to see if this was some sort of Boston thing I was not privy to. If it was, her face did not reveal it.

“The list,” the security guard explained, though it wasn’t much of an explanation. “You’re on it. Let’s go.” He grabbed my elbow and tugged me toward the door entrance.

I thought about what Morris Echols had told me last night. That I needed to impress Abby with my bravery. I considered tugging my elbow back from the security guard’s grasp and making a bee-line for the stairs. The stairs appeared to climb endlessly, though, like an
Escher illustration, and I had been smoking a lot lately. I looked for another route of escape, but a crowd had begun to gather. I stumbled in the guard’s direction. “What is this list?” I demanded, being pulled to the door.

“The list of people banned from the library,” he answered.

“But I’ve only been here once. I read a little, took some notes. What could I have possibly done to earn a barring from the Boston Public Library?”

“It ain’t just this library, boy. All libraries. The list comes from up above. Is wired in each morning with a list of people who could potentially pose a threat to libraries. You’re on it. Let’s go.”

I looked back at Abby and shrugged my shoulders. What could I do? I followed him to the door, and Abby followed me.

“Don’t come back,” the guard told me.

Once outside, I apologized to Abby. “I have no idea what this could be about,” I lied. “There must be some mix-up back at home.” I explained to her the tragedy of the Baelb Library in Prentice, leaving out the part about the police officer’s visit to my apartment the day I’d left town.

“Anna told me about the library,” Abby said.

“She did? When?”

“Last time we talked.”

“She’s here, in Boston, isn’t she?” I asked.

“Karin, let’s go find somewhere to get some coffee. I only have a little time. You want to go to the park? We can pick some up on the way.”

Part IV
Abby and I picked up some coffee and walked to the park I had visited the day before. I used my sleeve to clear off a bench and we sat down. We cupped our coffees and faced the pond I had faced alone the day before.

“So, Karin, what exactly are you doing in Boston?”

“I’m here to write. I’m conducting research on a novel I’m working on.”

“It takes place in Boston?”

“Sort of. Well, parts of it does. I mean, it’s a good place to start, I think, for the story.”

Abby looked at me suspiciously. “Karin, she said, “I’m not going to lie. Anna thinks you might be trying to find her.”

“What? That’s crazy. I’ve told her I’m writing. When did she tell you this?”

“Are you? I mean, I think it’s sort of sweet if you were.”

“Well, no. I mean, I’m writing. That is, I’d be lying if I haven’t thought about running into her.”

“But I don’t think Anna would find it so flattering.” She brought her cup to her lips and blew awkwardly into the hole in the lid. She took a sip.

“Well, I’m not. I,” I looked down at my watch, “don’t even have a lot of time here. I have a lot of work to do in Boston. I just wanted to give you these items.” I lifted up my bag and unsnapped the top. A waft of pipe smoke filled the air.

“It’s okay if you were,” she said. “I’m not going to run and tell Anna everything you’ve told me. I think we’re a little past that. It’s not like she’s waiting for me back at my house or anything.”
“So she isn’t here? In Boston? I mean, not that I thought she would be. I just think, I mean, it’d be crazy if she were, right? It’d be silly not to see her if, by chance, we somehow ended up in the same city together, right?”

“Me and Anna are really very different.” Abby set her coffee down and stretched her legs out into the snow in front of her, leaning back into the bench. I followed her gaze over the bare treetops and the modest skyline beyond them.

“Sure, but you’re close.”

She looked at me, puzzled. “Not really. I mean, she’s my only sibling, so I guess we talk sometimes, but it’s not like we were ever really close.”

I looked out over the pond in front of us. The footprints I had seen yesterday were gone, either blown over or melted into the surface. I decided to change the subject by asking Abby about her kids. They were five and seven, boys. I didn’t ask, but she told me their father had left two years prior. It wasn’t a surprise, she said, nor was it angry or devastating. Just really difficult sometimes. I didn’t know how to respond. Even when she spoke, when she talked about her kids, her family, her past, I couldn’t separate her image from Anna’s. I saw them both, at times, but predominately, perhaps subconsciously, I caught myself speaking to Abby as though she were Anna. The deception had the effect of seeming to speak to Anna in the future. I listened to Anna on that park bench, speaking adoringly about her children, matching word-for-word a conversation I had long ago imagined having; I recognized the facial tics I’d become use to and anticipated the same anxious hand gestures: scratching underneath her knee and thoughtfully caressing the bridge of her nose.

Finally, when the imagined transformation was almost complete, in an attempt to comfort her and move the conversation forward, I foolishly said, “People put too much
stock in doing things in order.” I could tell by the sudden shift in her countenance—I was
definitely looking at Abby, now—that she did not appreciate my observation.

“Doing things in order?”

“Yeah. I mean, you being the younger sister, you know, having children so ear-,” I
hesitated, and tried again, “having children before Anna, having, you know, so much life
experience, being the younger sister.” I fucking blew it. I didn’t even know what the hell I
was saying. I was so caught up in imagining Abby as Anna, that I had simply stated what I
thought was a mindless, harmless affirmation, like ‘yeah, the weather is really crazy,’ or ‘being
married can be a lot of hard work.’ Instead, I’d spat out the wrong thing, and knew that in
trying to justify it, I further offended her.

“I’m doing things out of order?” she asked. Her eyebrows went up, feigning shock.
“Whose order is this? I have to wait for Anna to have children before I’m allowed? I’ll tell
you what, Karin, that would never happen.”

“Abby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I’m sorry.”

Abby pulled off her stocking cap and mittens. She ran her fingers through her hair.
“What makes you think I’m the one out of order, anyway?”

“You’re not out of any sort of order.”

“You mean that since Anna is the oldest that I have to wait for her to get married
before I can? I have to wait for her to have children before I can? And if I don’t then I’m the
one out of order? Let me tell you something about Anna. Something I’m surprised you
haven’t yet figured out. If anyone does things out of order, it is Anna. You see, Anna starts
at the beginning, but never makes it past the opening scenes. She gets to the end of the
beginning, and when she discovers she is about to enter the middle, she finds a new
beginning.”
I wasn’t sure what Abby meant. I wasn’t sure if Abby knew what she meant or if, like me, she was just talking.

“I can tell you don’t believe me. Take a look at Anna’s life. She grew up in Boston, spent her formative years here, and then when things started to change for her, she moved away.”

“But lots of people move after high school.”

“Sure, but then she went to school to study writing. Did she become a writer?”

“No, she’s an editor. But that is hardly a beginning.”

“It isn’t? Anna studies and edits the properties of words. She never got past that to the part where the compilation of words leads to anything.”

“Now, Abby, that sounds a little nitpick.”

“And what about her relationships?”

Relationships?

“She goes through the beginning stages, the first couple years, and then bolts. She leaves her editing job and her boyfriend just as soon as they are no longer new to her.”

Had I been boring to Anna?

“And I know what you’re thinking.” Abby paused, supposedly allowing my thoughts to match hers.

She’s not coming back.

“You’re thinking about her handwriting.”

Her handwriting?

“It’s beautiful. It’s perfect, isn’t it? Someone with such lovely handwriting must have, at some point, moved past the beginning to the middle, where things really start.”

“Where things really.”
“Well you’re wrong,” Abby interrupted. “You learn proper handwriting in the second grade, and then, through too many rushed assignments, cramming to get things done, you develop shorthand, a quicker, sloppier way to progress. Anna never got to that point.”

“I don’t think I know what we’re talking about.”

“Karin, you want to know where Anna is, right?”

“Yes.”

“That is what we’re talking about.”

“So she’s here?”

Abby stood up and pulled her cell phone out of her coat pocket. She flipped it open and checked the time. She drank the last bit of her coffee and walked down the path a ways to a trash can where attempted to toss it in. The cup bounced off the rim with a dull thud. She picked it up again and dropped it in. When she returned, she sat down and faced me. She said, “you have some things to give to me, right?”

Part V

In which all the previous adventures build up to the most dangerous and entertaining adventure yet revealed in Karin’s history, and in which Karin recalls the advice of the peculiarly named (perhaps, questionably named) Morris Uncle Sam Echols.

I lifted the flap of my bag. I tried to think of a way to get out of giving these things to Abby, but I also didn’t want her to leave just yet. To be honest, I wanted her to like me. I didn’t want her to think of me as her older sister’s desperate and estranged boyfriend. I told her I really appreciated her meeting me, and apologized again for suggesting that she had disobeyed some sort of narrative order, of which I truly did not feel she was obligated, in any
way, to follow. Her narrative was her own. She smiled and said it was okay, but that I must hurry. She would need to pick up her children in forty-five minutes.

She said, “Should I be ashamed for feeling excited to see what these objects are?”

“Ashamed?” I repeated. “Perhaps a little, though I can’t blame you for it. It’s only natural to be curious about someone else’s story, right? I’m afraid the items won’t make much sense to you, though. I mean, I don’t think they carry much meaning on their own.”

I looked into my bag and pulled out the pipe. Abby took it into her hands with a puzzled look etched across her face. “I didn’t know Anna smoked a pipe,” she said. “It’s difficult to imagine.”

“She only smoked it once,” I assured her.

“And I suppose there is a story for this pipe?”

“Yes. Quite a story, indeed.”

She waited.

I reached back into my bag and pulled out the torn poster of the penguins. I handed it to Abby. She held out the poster with one hand while turning over the pipe in her other.

“I fucking hate these posters,” she said.

“I know. They’re terrible and phony. Whenever I see one it makes me feel miserable.”

“Except for this one.”

“No, this one, too. Just for different reasons.”

“So, are you gonna tell me the stories behind these things?”

“You know where Anna is, don’t you?”

“You have one more item right?”
I looked into my bag. A stick figure from April 13 stared impossibly past me. “No, it was just those two.”

“On the phone yesterday, you said three items.”

“No. You must’ve misheard me.”

Anna pulled out her phone once more and flipped it open. After pushing a couple buttons, she handed it over to me. On the screen, it read, “February 25: Collect three things from Karen.”

“Karin, with an ‘I’,” I told her. “Not an ‘E’.”

“The third item?”

I reached into my bag and pulled out the calendar. “This is really silly,” I told her. “It was more of a joke than anything. A gag gift Anna had purchased when we moved in together.”

Abby set the poster on the bench and started thumbing through the calendar, stopping occasionally to analyze the different images. She said, “There are a lot of pages missing.”

“Must be the wear and tear from traveling.”

She checked the time once more. I could tell that I didn’t have a lot of time, either.

“Abby, please, do you know where she is? It is so difficult, traveling, doing anything without her. I can’t stand it. I know that if I just see her and talk to her, that we can move past all of this. You can help her move past the beginning by helping me find her. Everything relies on it, relies on me finding Anna.”

Abby didn’t seem to hear me. When she finally looked up, a large gust of cold wind pushed hard against it and whistled over the pond and through the bare trees. The poster sitting on the bench lifted into the air and, caught between currents, was suspended in front
of us. Neither of us attempted to reach out for it, amazed in the way it broke the rules of
everything we had learned, magically hanging in front of us as though held by a puppeteer’s
string. Suddenly, I thought about what Morris had said to me the day before: that if I am to
learn from Abby Anna’s whereabouts, I must win her over through chivalrous acts. Just
then, a torn edge of the poster flipped upwards and the sheet flew away in front of us,
heading toward the pond. I stood and followed it, slowly at first, and then faster until I was
moving at an all-out sprint, racing the page toward the pond’s edge. I hurtled the plastic,
mesh fence and landed in a deep drift of snow, bouncing back up with a physical grace I had
not known myself to be capable of. Just as I reached the bank of the pond, I held out my
hand, touched the poster’s edge, and watched it drift halfway out into the pond where it
settled neatly on a wet patch of snow. I stood there, waiting seemingly for the page to lift
once more as it had and float back toward me. But it didn’t. Abby appeared at my side, out
of breath.

“Karin, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for my negligence. I know that poster meant the
world to you. That Anna means everything to you.”

I held up my hand, the hand that had touched the edge of the poster. “It’s okay,” I
said, remembering what Morris had told me. I would woo Abby with my bravery in this
adventure. “I got this.”

I took the first step out onto the ice. A loud groan surfaced from beneath its surface.
The ice seemed to bow underneath my weight, and some water crept up from around the
edge where the ice touched the shore. I took another step. Another low moan and a soft,
high-pitched crack.

“Karin, don’t. It’s silly. It’s just a poster. Once you find Anna, and you will find her,
you can buy a new poster, craft a new memory.”
I looked back at her sternly, and then took another step. One by one I made my way to the middle of the pond. I focused. I stepped. I stared at the sheet, trying with all my energy to pin it to the ice, worried that the breeze would once again resume. I stepped again. Below me, the water grumbled close beneath the layer of ice. In front of my, stretched clearly to the pond’s edge, the ice shifted, settled unsettlingly, and sighed angrily at my presence. Abby stood at the edge, frozen in time. I imagined her holding her breath. I took another step and a crack like a rifle shot blasted across the pond. I turned once again to the shore, and I from this distance, I saw Anna standing at the edge. Not Abby. She held her hands folded underneath her chin. She mouthed, ‘save the poster. I love you.’

I was only three feet from the poster, just at the edge of the dark circle of snow, the poster in the middle. I crouched down onto all fours, hoping to disperse my weight. I reached, but it was too far. I scooted forward, careful to place equal weight on each limb, posturing each limb an equal distance from each other. When I was completely within the dark, wet patch of snow, I reach out and clasped the poster between my frozen fingers. I had it. I turned to the shore, held it up high in the air. Anna/Abby did not move. I scooted backward until I was outside of the circle. And then, as I pressed my hands onto the ice to rise to my feet, the ice gave underneath my right hand, in which I held the poster. My arm, with the poster firmly clenched in my fist, broke through the ice and I slammed hard onto the ice. My chin took the brunt of the fall, and I bit my tongue. I scooted back a little farther, shifting the weight into my legs as pulled my soaked arm out of the ice. I back up farther, clenching the poster in my frozen hand, my frozen arm in the other. I stood and noticed a drop of blood drip down onto the snow in front of me. I panicked. I took another step. Another drop of blood. A crack. Another step. A crack, louder this time. I locked my eyes into Abby’s at the shore, and began running wildly to the shore, slipping left and right,
falling down twice, imagining a cartoonish crack chasing behind me like the boulder that chased Harrison Ford in Indiana Jones. Finally, several feet from the edge of the pond, I imagined the crack catching up to me, dividing the ice between my legs, and I leapt. I landed on the shore, inches away from Abby. I handed her the poster. She took off her red hat and pressed it against my chin, which was bleeding pretty steadily, now.

“You’re an idiot,” she said, and neatly folded the soaked poster until it fit into her coat pocket.

I was colder than I could ever remember being. I wasn’t sure if I could speak, and when I tried, I was only able to say, “Annaswhere?”

It took Abby a moment to interpret. She smiled and asked, “You’ll tell me the story of these items?”

“Imsfucknold.”

She checked the time. “You want to meet tomorrow?” she asked. “My kids are going to their grandparents house tomorrow, and I could use some social time.

I nodded.

She took out a notebook and scribbled an address on a page, and then tore it out and handed it to me. “Meet me here. Let’s say, 1:00 PM.”

I took the paper from her and examined it. I could barely make out the address. I tried to stuff it into my pocket, but couldn’t seem to get my frozen fingers to work. Abby took it back from me, folded it neatly, and slipped it into my pocket. Then, she walked away.

Part VI

_In which Karin recounts his adventures to the wise and respected Morris Uncle Sam Echols, and many other conversations also recorded at that time by your engaging and eloquent narrator._
Since I was right there, anyway, and I needed to warm up—I did not trust my subway know-how to get me back to my hostel before my frozen arm was permanently damaged—I decided to go to the downstairs/upstairs bar which I had visited yesterday. Just for a drink. A warm-me-up. Again, the main bar was crowded so I headed upstairs, took Norm’s stool, and ordered a double shot of ‘cheap’ bourbon on the rocks. I used the air dryer in the bathroom to dry out the sleeve of my coat. By the time I took my seat, the bar had begun to clear out, the ice in my drink had begun to melt, and Morris was sitting in the stool next to mine. He brushed his long beard over his shoulder and nodded dramatically in my direction.

“Karin, with an ‘I,’” he said. “I thought I might find you here. Please, tell me you’ve found the whereabouts of your wife. Abby was her name?”

“Anna. Abby is her sister, who I met with today.” I had some trouble lifting my drink to my lips. Bourbon dribbled down my chin. “I’m surprised to see you here. How did you know I’d be here?”

“It’s a boring story. Instead, why don’t you tell me about how you were able to woo Abby.”

“Yes, I’d love to. But the truth is, I believe I failed.” I told Morris about the day’s happenings, leaving out the part about getting expelled from the library, and perhaps exaggerating a bit the part about the crack in the ice chasing me to shore. When I finished, Morris drank deeply from his beer and contemplated it for a moments. He ran his fingers through his beard, and then brushed it once again over his shoulder.

“Karin,” he said, “I thought we went over this yesterday. You went about it all wrong. You did not try to woo Abby with your bravery. What does it mean to Abby if you foolishly crossed the thin ice of a pond—one that is barely a foot deep, mind you—in order
to save a silly poster that meant nothing to her? If anything, all you managed to do was show her that you’re not at all interested in wooing her; rather, you are merely willing to act hastily for a woman who’s left you. Who doesn’t act hastily in that situation? Think it over.”

I thought it over, rubbing my right hand into the palm of my left.

“You need to woo her, Karin. Abby, not Anna.”

“I’m not sure she wants to be wooed, Morris.”

“She wants to be wooed. Everybody wants to be wooed.”

“Do you want to be wooed?” I was getting sick of his holier-than-thou speech.

“Yes, of course. Now, what are your next plans?”

I looked out the barroom window. It was early, yet. I could get some writing done, though it obviously wouldn’t be happening at the library. I didn’t hold out any hope for writing at the hostel. Maybe I could go back to the Mad Dog. I would drink coffee. Decaf, if they had it, and then go to bed early, securing my own bed, wake up early, and explore Boston before I met Abby in the evening. I also wanted to call Claire to see if she had found out about anything. Finally, I turned to Morris. “I’m meeting her tomorrow.” I handed him the piece of paper she had given me. “She told me to meet her here;” I said.

Morris pulled a pair of thin, wire reading glasses from his coat pocket and squinted at the piece of paper. “Her handwriting is terrible,” he said.

“Yeah. It has something to do with seeing things through to the middle.”

“Yes, of course. It is never wise to trust somebody with neat handwriting. It shows they are never in a hurry. People who are not in a hurry rarely have lives that must be dealt with urgently. Those without urgency lack it because they have no intentions of seeing things through past the beginning. When things get urgent, they pack up their neatly labeled belongings and and move to another beginning.”
“Whatever.”

Morris pulled his glasses down and glared at me over the top of their wiry frame.

“I’m sorry. It’s just been a rough day. Filled with urgency. Look,” I grabbed the drink stirrer next to my glass and pretended to sign Norm’s name. “I can barely hold a pen.”

“Yes, I see.” He took the stirrer from my hand and set it down next to his glass, just out of my reach. “Did she say why she wanted you to meet her here?”

“No. Do you know it?”

“Yes, of course. It’s the capital building in downtown Boston. It’s just down the road from here. This is excellent. She is playing right into our hand. Karin, she wants to be wooed. Trust me on this. Listen close this time, and I will tell you what you need to do. Feel free to write it down if need be,” he said, and passed back the drink stirrer.

I listened as Morris advised me on strategy for my follow-up adventure, as he called it, with Abby. Since I failed at showing her my bravery, I must woo her with my wit. Tomorrow’s adventure at the capitol building would provide a perfect opportunity. Morris told me that I would need to become an expert on Boston overnight. That as Abby and I sat during the congress proceedings, I would need to impress her with my vast knowledge of Boston’s political history, as well as its clever tales of folklore. The wit, he explained to me, was not simply a matter of knowing things; rather wit, as William Shakespeare exemplified, was a showcase of the complex functions of humor, knowledge, history, the arts, and language, when used in conjunction with each other. He gave me a list of books to look at through the night, and then, using the excuse of a restroom visit, he left, sticking me with his bar bill. This was not only a disappointment because I was already spending too much money as it was, but also because I had hoped to suggest a less expensive place to mysteriously rendezvous, if that was, in fact, to continue.
When I left the bar—downstairs, upstairs—it was still early afternoon. I went to the
Boston Bookstore to look for the books Morris had recommended. To my dismay, the
cashier recognized me from the previous night. She made a snarky comment that had to do
with the upgrade of materials I was purchasing. She wondered if I had found a good place to
keep my outdated calendar. I looked at her

(b) and I told her why don’t you mind you own business. I mean, what is this place? Who do you think you
are? Why don’t you get a real fucking job? What do you make? Seven bucks an hour while you sit behind
the desk and write a load of bullshit into that journal. Anyway, if you must know, those items I bought
yesterday were not even for me. They were a gag gift for a young man I know who I’ve recently met while
volunteering as a Big Brother. Happy? Geez. I mean, he has cancer, too. And you’re gonna stand behind
that desk on your high-fucking horse, and critique my purchases? Fuck off. And then I swept my arm across
the desk, knocking over a dozen copies of N’an Lure’s latest bestseller, Ranger Em: The Best Side,
which apparently had just been released yesterday

(a) sternly, and walked away without creating a scene. Finally, with my books in hand—
Revere’s Boston by Si Enyaun, The Ghosts of the Old City, by R.U. Kuidenme, Local Folklore, by
Les Ismore, and 1,001 Boston Nights, by Faye Kerr—I navigated the tunnels back to my
hostel. I was anxious to get out of my clothes. When I entered the hostel, there was a new
clerk at the desk. I nodded at him, exhausted. He nodded, hesitantly, and looked at
something that hung on the wall behind the desk. When he looked back at me, his face had
gone blank, and he watched me suspiciously as I walked past the desk toward my room.
When I got back to my room, I was relieved to find my bed empty. Before changing, I
climbed into and lay my head back onto the pillow. It smelled like marijuana smoke and
indigestion, but I soon fell asleep.

Part VII

In which forces unseen by Karin trouble him deeply, and he takes solace in the lesser literature of
Boston and cheap ale.
I woke when the door slammed. I quickly surveyed the room; it was empty. A cold breeze was dampened by the flowing window shade. My suitcase was gone. I leapt out of bed and chased after whoever had slammed the door. All through the hostel, the lights were out. When I reached the top of the stairs, I saw a silhouette peer back at me from the bottom of the stairs, and disappear. I took the stairs three at a time and plunged into the dark kitchen. The glow from the television in the other room tossed flickering shadows onto the walls. I whipped around the corner and slammed into somebody, who dramatically fell to the floor and moaned. When he looked up at me, I realized I had run into the clerk who had poked me with the prong fork earlier that morning. Next to him, splattered onto his shirt and the hostel walls, was a plate of pungent stir-fry.

He looked up at me slowly, as though about to deliver the final lines of an action movie in which everyone except the hero and his heroine has died and said, “Well, I guess you have made up your mind, Mr. Pankreez,” enunciating every word with the utmost care, particularly my last name, which was said with an eerie tone of familiarity. For a moment, I wondered if he had anything to do with my expulsion from the public library.

“My suitcase is gone,” I said. “Someone took my suitcase.”

“Did they break into your locker? Did they pry off the Master Lock which the sign on the front desk clearly states that if purchased and used properly, the hostel will replace any stolen items?”

“What? You kicked me out this morning. I didn’t have any time to lock up my suitcase.”

“I advised you to start your day. I did not kick you out.” The clerk sat up and used his bare hand to scoop the fallen pieces of rutabaga, parsnips, and turnips back onto his
plate. He stood terrifyingly close to me. “You can stay tonight,” he said. “Consider it your last night.”

“This is bullshit! I paid for five nights.”

“I will explain your situation to the person working the front desk tomorrow morning. They will refund you half price for the remaining days, which is more than you deserve, considering the chaos you have brought to this place.”

“What about my suitcase?”

“It’s a shame. It was a nice one. I hope you didn’t keep anything valuable in there.”

“Fuck! Why are all the lights off.”

He pulled his glasses down to the bridge of his nose and looked at me over the top of them. “This establishment is the greenest hostel in all of Massachusetts. We do not waste energy by keeping lights on during the middle of the day.”

I looked out the window and then toward the clock on the wall. “It’s hardly the middle of the day. I mean, the sun’s been down for a quite some time.”

“Not according to weather dot com. The sun sets in about seven minutes.”

“According to weather dot com? You people are insane!”

“Don’t push it, Mr. Pankreez. You are lucky to have one more night here at the greenest hostel in Massachusetts.” He then walked past me, reeking of garlic, and proceeded to wash his dish in the dark kitchen.

I went back to my room and grabbed my computer bag and the bag from the bookstore and headed out into the night with the only clothes I now had with me. I went to the Mad Dog and spent the rest of the night working on my Boston wit and drinking the cheapest beer I could find. When I woke the following morning, my arms wrapped around
my two remaining possessions, a teenage girl stood at my bedside holding tightly to a pillow and some sheets.

Part VII

Which recounts Karin’s adventure at the Boston State House and the most brilliant discussion to date in this cleverly and ingeniously crafted narrative, yet not the most brilliant one to come, as it would be counterproductive and anticlimactic to use the most brilliant conversation too early on, causing the rest to pale in its illustrious light.

I walked to the capitol building the following day, after receiving a fifty percent refund for the remaining two days at the hostel. I wasn’t sure where I would stay the next night or two, but I was hoping to leave soon. The sidewalks oozed grey slush, and the sky was grey. My grey tennis shoes were soaked through and my feet throbbed a pale cold pathway in the map behind me. Abby was waiting at the State House entrance precisely at 1:00 PM. Her hair was nothing like Anna’s; her eyes were nothing like the sun. I ran through the folk stories and clever anecdotes of Boston that I had memorized the night before, while also making sure the books were carefully concealed within my bag to be certain not to reveal my sources. Failing at bravery, I would woo her with my wit, and leave her for Anna.

“You look rough,” Abby said as I held the door open for her. It was true. Though I had avoided the bathroom mirror when I prepared, my clothes wore worn, had been dry, soaked, frozen, and then dry again, without ever have being removed. They draped over my sickly frame—I was indeed developing a cough—and the pockets were stuffed with toilet paper I had taken from the hostel for when my nose started running.

I was shocked when, after walking through a metal detector and showing ID, I was allowed entrance. The guard smiled at us, and I didn’t believe him.
“It’s been a terrible twenty-four hours,” I explained to Abby. “I haven’t been completely warm since falling through the pond yesterday, and I’m no closer to finding, I’m no further on the novel than I was when I arrived.”

“Karin, I have something to tell you.” Abby grabbed my arm and we stopped in the cavernous lobby of the State House. “It’s really shitty, and I am so embarrassed.”

I expected some sort of news about Anna, that she had never been in Boston, or that she had told Abby to make sure that I never try to contact her.

Abby continued, “The poster you gave me, of the penguins. Remember?”

“I remember.”

“Well, when I got home yesterday, I laid it out on the counter to dry. Charles, my youngest, he saw it lying there while I was making dinner, and without me noticing, he colored all over it.”

I fixed what I believed to be a look of understanding discouragement on my face.

“I’m so sorry. He didn’t mean it. It was my fault. I never should’ve left it out. Please forgive me.”

I rubbed my temples. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “It’s just a stupid poster, anyway.”

“But the pond. All you went through. Honestly,” Abby said as she put her hand on my chest, staring into my eyes, “it was so cute that you went to such lengths to retrieve it, for Anna’s sake, and then my son destroyed it.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “Enough about Anna. Come on, let’s find somewhere to sit down.”

Anna held back for a moment.
“Did you know,” I asked, “that all the mileage markers along the Massachusetts turnpike refer to the distance from where the sign is to the dome of this state house?”

“Huh. I didn’t.”

We walked around the building for a bit until we found a marble staircase. We weren’t sure where we were headed, so we kept climbing until we reached a final staircase, somewhere between the third and fourth floors, that was roped off. Stopping at the turnaround halfway between the third and fourth floors, we peered up the empty staircase. I looked below us, and then above us. I lifted the rope slightly.

Abby asked, “Karin, do you dare to go up there?”

“No,” I answered, letting the rope fall from my hand. “I don’t.” Bravery was yesterday’s game. “It’s amazing, though, that this building was built between 1795 and 1797 on what used to be a pasture owned by John Hancock”

“Yes. Amazing. Boston has a lot of old buildings, and I’d guess that most of the area back then was owned by someone.” Abby said, uninterested, still peering up to the fourth floor.

“Charles Bulfinch, the architect, also built state houses for Connecticut and Maine.”

Abby turned and began walking back down to the third floor. We found a small library nestled into the cold, white walls and spent some time there, running our fingers along the spines of political narratives, our presence ever-monitored by the ghostly echo of our steps. When the narratives no longer served us, we snuck into a gallery balcony where several old men in dark suits and ladies in red pantsuits leaned against tables discussing unintelligible things while a man behind a mahogany podium read from a folder. The man behind the podium seemed so bored, so unnaturally comfortable with the others’ ignorance of him, that I imagined the man on a busy street corner, standing on a soap-crate, rattling off
the same sentences as streetwalkers hurried anonymously by. The gallery was terrifically ornate, beige, musty and dim. A ring of names taken out of a high school course on the American Revolution circled the base of the dome, just above a series of age-damaged murals that portrayed the “Milestones on the Road to Freedom in Massachusetts.”

I asked Abby, “did you know that State House’s dome was painted black during World War II in order to make it difficult to identify from sea?”

Abby turned to me. “Did you memorize a brochure on the way here or something?”

“I just really like history, that’s all. I believe that history—literature and the traces of men and women’s intellect throughout history—is foundational to our understanding of, well, everything.”

“Yesterday you were kicked out of a library and broke through the ice of a frog pond. Today you’re a Boston Historian?”

I sat back in my chair and put my feet up on the chair in front of me. Abby took a piece of gum from her pocket and chewed it loudly. I tried to isolate a single speaking voice from the floor below us, but could not; rather, the cumulative voices made up a non-deconstructive hum. I began to doubt Morris’s advice.

Finally, Abby commented, “It’s amazing that I’ve been in Boston for most of my life, and I’ve never been in here before. It’s really a beautiful building. Peaceful, up here, away from everything.”

I decided to give it one last shot. A showstopper. I said, “The architecture in Boston really is, on the whole, powerful. The old buildings affect me, to paraphrase New England writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, ‘like a human countenance, bearing the traces not merely of outward storm and sunshine, but expressive, also, of the long lapse of mortal life, and accompanying vicissitudes that have passed within. Were these to be worthily recounted—’”
“Excuse me, Sir.” I turned around and faced a Boston Policeman. “Get your feet off the railing,” he said. “Have some respect. And keep it down. They’re trying to conduct important business down there.” He walked to the top of our section and watched us. I looked at the people below. A man in a grey suit sitting at a table next the laughed quietly at a video he watched on his phone.

In a whisper, I resumed, “Were these to be worthily recounted, they would form a narrative of no small interest and instruction, and possessing, moreover, a certain remarkable unity, which might almost seem the result of artistic arrangement. But the story would—”

“Damnit Karin. Is this what you’re going to do all day? Try to impress me with your knowledge of Boston? No wonder Anna,” she started saying, and then stopped. She picked at a piece of lint that hung off her coat collar. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to say that. It’s just that, I didn’t come here to listen to you regurgitate these stupid facts about the state house. Anna used to always brag about you, about how you tell such funny stories and how endearing you could be. I just thought that maybe we could hang out tonight, and I could see what she was talking about. You know, hang out like normal people without agendas.”

“But we have agendas. We have to have them, or we wouldn’t be hanging out.”

“Couldn’t we pretend not to have them?”

“Could you?”

Abby loosened the piece of lint from her jacket and flicked it over the balcony rail. It floated slowly down before disappearing in the whirls of dust below. “I would probably need a drink first,” she said, standing up. I followed back up the stairs and through the swinging door at the top of the section. It took us a while to find the right staircase down to the first floor, and much longer to locate where we had entered. Finally, when we left the building it
was snowing hard. I followed Abby down the road, resisting the urge to tell her that in 1897
Boston built the first subway system in the US.

Part VIII

Rather, which exhibits Karin’s supreme wit in abandoning his display of wit to win over Abby to
eventually win over Anna. I mean, which recounts Karin’s decisiveness and sharp intellect, a
sparkling virtue unparalleled among all protagonists (ahem, of the same name).

Abby walked like most Bostonians drive, fast, recklessly, and with no turn signals. She didn’t speak to me during the walk, and I struggled to keep up. When Abby rounded the
corner from Tremont to Beacon Street, I was nearly a half-block behind her, and then was
prevented by traffic from crossing the road. I was at the edge of my map. From the State
House to this intersection, there had been, at least, a line of red bricks paved into the
sidewalk which I could follow; when Abby veered off the brick trail, I knew I would become
lost. It occurred to me, then, that Abby may have been trying to lose me. Or at least trying to
test my knowledge of the town, facing off my memorization of its larger historical
happenings with the ability to traverse its winding maze of modern-day streets. Finally,
without alternative recourse, I yelled out to her. She turned to face me, and something
changed in her face, perhaps in the way she saw me. I stood at the curb in two-day-old
clothes, weighed down by my bag and heavy, wet shoes. I held my arms out. “No more facts
about Boston,” I told her. “I promise. I don’t know shit about this place except for some
things I memorized in a book last night.”

“The Hawthorne quote? No more quoting?”
“The Hawthorne passage I knew,” I lied, “but you can trust me to tuck Nathaniel away for the remainder of the evening, as long as you don’t intentionally try to lose me.”

Part IX

In which Karin puts into place a new plan to let Abby believe she is the wittier of the two, exhibiting the multiple layers of Karin’s wit to attain the information he desires and set forth on winning over his love, suffering unimaginable humiliation in the process, thus displaying his capacity for humility, a characteristic present in only the greatest of romantic heroes.

Abby waited for me to cross the road. When we crossed, I thanked her. And then, in an impulsive, last-ditch effort, I said to her, “What’s red and smells like blue paint?”

No answer.

“Red paint,” I said. Abby looked at me sharply. “It’s a terrible joke, isn’t it? I overheard the desk clerk at the hostel saying it to a bunch of travelers last night, and they were cracking up. So stupid, huh?”

We walked along the edge of Beacon Hill, past the Athenaeum and alongside the Boston Common, which was constructed in 1634 and was the first public park in the US. The only figures in the park were tall and bronze, held up by plaques and shaded by trees. From a distance, I could see the frog pond, covered deceptively with a fresh layer of snow. We were headed toward the bar where I had met Morris, and I was relieved when Anna turned left on Charles Street.

Anna stopped from time to time, tolerant of my presence, though still not speaking to me. She looked into store windows, and at each one, she turned away and looked off into the distance. Finally, stopping in front of the bookstore where I had purchased Anna and mine’s objects-too-loaded-with-memory-to-hold-on-to, as well as the books about Boston folklore, Abby said to me, “Karin, before we go anywhere, you’re going to need to change. I
hate to be rude, but I have friends in Boston, and should we run into them, I don’t want them to think I picked you up off the street.”

I looked down at my clothes and said nothing.

“Furthermore,” she continued, “you don’t smell that great.”

Through the window I made eye contact with the rude cashier from the previous night. “Okay,” I told Abby. “I completely agree. But don’t you think we can find somewhere a bit more appropriate than this bookstore?” The cashier raised her eyebrows at me and waved, her grin malicious.

“Karin, we’re in downtown Boston. There isn’t a Walmart nearby, nor is there a thrift store open at this time. Unless you want to pay seventy-five dollars for a designer t-shirt, I think this is our only option. Besides, this is my treat.”

“Your treat? That’s ridiculous,” I protested.

“Clearly,” Abby said, “you’ve spent enough money at this bookstore.”

“I haven’t—”

“You’re such a fiction writer.” It was the first time I’ve been accused of that. Abby continued, “I was mad at first. In fact, it was why I tried to ditch you earlier. But then I realized that this must all be part of your research. Frankly, I’m happy to be a part of it. So, we’re going to go have a drink, or some drinks, and you’re going to tell me all about the novel. I can’t wait to see where I fit in. Is it about Anna? About how your, um, protagonist,” Abby looked at her feet and interrupted herself, saying, “that’s what they’re called right?” I nodded and she resumed, “about how your protagonist wins a girl with all the likings of my older sister back into his arms? Wait, don’t tell me. I wanna hear it all at the bar. I have somewhere special in mind. A real writerly place called The Sevens.”
Inside the store, with Abby’s back to her, the cashier held up a large book. I looked closer and saw that it was an illustrated copy of the Kama Sutra. She set it down and held up an accompanying calendar. With her other hand, she waved a finger at me to come in. I said to Abby, “wait, I don't know what you’re talking about. What do you mean research? I simply wanted to give you some things that had belonged to Anna and I.”

“Karin, you don’t have to keep making things up. I tested you earlier today, with that story about the inspirational poster that my son ruined. Seriously, it is not a big deal. I’m glad I’m able to be a part of your Boston research experience.”

Abby bent over and folded the cuff of her jeans. I motioned at the cashier violently to put the books away. How do you clear up a misunderstanding with a hand gesture through a plate of glass? How do you explain that shit is at stake, here? Unsure, I held out both hands flat and slapped them down through the air, as though slamming a table, or signaling an illegal procedure call on a football field. She smiled and mimicked my gesture. Then she pointed at Abby, who was rising, and made a motion like she was opening a book.

Abby continued, “Though I’m only a little ashamed to admit it, last night when I got home and after I put the kids to bed, I started flipping through the calendar you gave me yesterday. You really did a good job of smudging that thing up. I was just getting into September, I believe, the position was the Crab, which by the way doesn’t even look possible except maybe for circus contortionists, and this fell out.” Abby reached into her pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. I looked it over. It was a dated sales receipt for the items. “I couldn’t figure out why you chose these items,” Abby continued. “Then I realized that they must’ve been carefully chosen objects selected to gauge my reaction, in some sort of grand test for your research. Either that or you were drunk when you picked them out,” she said,
laughing. “I’m only kidding, Karin. I believe in your devotion to your writing. Seriously, I’m very flattered to be a part of your research.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but was only able to emit a couple syllables before Abby interrupted me.

“Plus,” Abby continued, “when we were at the State House, I saw into your bag, the books on Boston History and folklore. Don’t bother explaining them now, out here in the cold. Let me go in and see if I can find you something to wear. It’s starting to get dark, and you’ll be able to change in one of these alleys.” She snickered, her face bright. “That seems like a writerly experience, too.” Abby turned and opened the door of the bookstore. She said to me, “wait out here. I want to surprise you.” She left, and through the glass I watched her exchange pleasantries with the cashier. She stopped and they chatted for a few moments. Then, the cashier doubled over laughing. She was shaking her head when she rose and peered out the window at me. I darted to the other side of the window. After a couple seconds, I peeked again and the cashier was leading Abby to the back of the store, where the novelty t-shirts were kept.

Part X

In which Karin, against all advice, indeed, against the advice of Morris Uncle Sam Echols, against the advice of his Boston experience’s subheading author—whose patience is being sincerely tested—abandons his plan and determines to wing it, to roll with it, to take what happens on his chin and improvise, showcasing, perhaps, his ability to act spontaneously under pressure, which though he may not remember, his narrator remembers very well, is not Karin’s strong suit. What follows should be amazing, surprising, adjective, and amazing; I feel strongly about this, that is.

While I waited, I seriously contemplated ditching Abby. I was pretty sure that I could find the train station, and I could stay there until I found a train heading to New York. I couldn’t be certain that I’d be able to find Anna there, but who was I kidding? I would never
be certain of where I’d find Anna. Besides, if I ditched Abby, and then did find Anna, I
don’t think Anna would appreciate me ditching her younger sister in downtown Boston, as
safe as they say it is. I’ve read Infinite Jest, and I know that behind the cleanest of facades,
heart-stealing transvestites may lurk.

Before Abby returned, my cell phone buzzed in my pocket. Digging it out with
frozen hands, I realized that it was the first phone call I’ve received since leaving my trip.
But it wasn’t a phone call. It was a voicemail.

“Um, Karin? Hey. How’s Boston?” her sarcastic laugh followed. “It’s Claire. Um, I
just wanted to tell you that, I mean, I wanted to warn you that you’re, um, you’re being
sought after. I don’t have a lot of information, and I don’t have a lot of time. Yesterday I
was taken to the Prentice Police Station and was questioned about the library being burned.
They confiscated my book, Karin. Fucking went through my house and just took it. They
asked me a bunch of questions, and most of them were about you. They let me leave, but
told me to stay near. That even if I was innocent, I’d be in real trouble if I left Prentice. And
then, after leaving the police department, I walked by your apartment. I thought you should
know, Karin, that there was a car in the driveway. The porch light was on. I don’t know.
Maybe it was Anna? A police cruiser drove by, though, and I wasn’t about to stick around.
I’m pretty much just staying at home, lately. I’m focusing on my work. I’ve been
problemating a lot of perfectly written essays. Getting a lot done. Anyway, I need to go.”
There was a long pause in the message. And then Claire’s voice started up again. “Karin, I
don’t know if it’s just this situation that makes me feel compelled to say this. I don’t even
know what it could mean. But, I just felt that I should tell you that I miss you. You told me
once that you loved me. I know it was just the situation, the water, the knocking of the
broken ice against the rocks, but I was thinking about it while I was in custody. And, well, I
love you, too. At least, in this moment, I do. I gotta go. Call me when you get a sec. If I
don’t answer, it is because I am around somebody who shouldn’t know I’m talking to you.
Wait an hour and try again.” There was another pause, and then Claire’s voice was replaced
with another woman’s recorded voice, prompting me to press seven to delete the message,
nine to save it, four to replay it, and zero to relist my options. I pressed nine and stuffed the
phone back in my pocket. When I did, Abby walked out of the bookstore.

“Did you know that cashier recognized you? She tried to talk me out of going out for
a drink with you, that you were some drunken pervert.

“Well, I’m—”

“It’s alright. I explained to her that you’re a novelist. Come on,” Abby said, and I
followed her down the road and into an alley. “You can change back here. I’ll stand watch.”
Abby turned her back to me and, over her shoulder, handed me a plastic bag that read, The
Boston Bookstore.

We emerged from the alley a few moments later, my old clothes now in the plastic
bag, which for the time being, would be my new suitcase. Abby tucked her arm into mine
and explained that we were almost there. Abby’s countenance glowed in the old city light.
She still wore her blue ski jacket, with a red knit scarf that dangled past her waist. I did not
speak to her, though. In fact, I was pretty certain that she had picked these clothes out with
the intention of embarrassing me.

“Come on, Karin. Quit dragging your feet. We’re almost there, and it’s fucking
freezing out here. Besides, you’ve got a beautiful woman on your arm. I mean, I must kinda
remind you of Anna, right?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Are you mad about the clothes?”
“Do you even have to ask?”

“There wasn’t much selection.”

“No? This was the best? Look at me,” I demanded.

“Karin, you look fine. And it’ll be dark anyway. Besides, we’re almost there. Hey,” she stopped and looked at me, “at least you’ll be comfortable, right?”

In the mirrored front windows of The Sevens, I looked at my reflection. Every inch of the bright hooded-sweatshirt was covered, from the front to the back, with a diagonal replica of the flag of the original thirteen United States colonies. Thirteen stars were in a circle, centered over my chest. Red and white stripes wrapped around my torso and across my back. For pants, Abby had purchased me pajama pants that were designed to look like denim jeans. The tag had even said, “PajamaJeans®.” On the back, however, where the pockets should be, was a bright pink handprint and the words “Boston, Baby!” sketched across the ass in pink, cursive font.

“You’re punishing me,” I said.

“I’m not punishing you”

“You’re tormenting me.”

“I’m testing you.”

“Testing me? For what?”

“I’m seeing how bad you want information on Anna.”

“With PajamaJeans®?”

“They’re the closest thing I could find to regular jeans. Besides, Boston is a college town. Everybody wears pajama pants around. Either that, or pea coats and short red dresses with tall winter boots.”

“So you know where Anna is?”

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“Wouldn’t it ruin the novel if I told you?”

I turned away from my reflection. “What novel?”

“Karin, don’t be a defeatist. Come on now. My parents have the kids. Let’s go get drunk and tell stories. I assume you have one of those little recorder things right? Like journalists carry?”

I did.

“You can just use that to record our conversations. Study your research later, on a train or something.” I followed Anna into the small crowded bar, down the long aisle past the bar on the left and the booths on the right, headed straight toward a group of men playing darts at the back. It was surprisingly quiet for a crowded bar. Schools of men, and a handful of women, sat rather slumped in barstools with painfully concentrated looks on their faces and terrifically unkempt hair—hair that appeared to have been tugged at for hours—and they flipped through hardcover books and argued quietly, fiercely. Nobody, as far as I could tell in the dim light, wore pajama pants.

Abby led me to the lone remaining booth just before the group of dart throwers, and we slid in, before a slew of empty beer mugs and an unfinished plate of nachos. It occurred to me that I hadn’t eaten since last night at the Mad Dog.

Abby greeted the bartender by name and ordered us both Manhattans. She stressed that while she would take her usual Manhattan, mine should be dry, made with rye whiskey. House rye would do. Then she looked at me, a troubled look across her face. “Where’s your little recorder thingy?” she asked.

“Has the interview officially begun?” I took out the recorder from my computer bag, and pressed record. I showed it to Abby for her approval.
“You’re missing gold, here, Karin. I mean, I’ve ordered two Manhattans. Manhattans,” she repeated. “How is that for unusual? A girl with information ordering a drink for a guy. Have you had a Manhattan? You can use this in your novel, you know. If you, I mean your protagonist, ends up meeting a mysterious girl, that is.”

I didn’t reply. I thought about Claire. I was angry with myself for missing her call, for not calling her yet. I wasn’t sure how long Abby was going to keep this up. All I could think about was that I did not have a place to stay tonight. The train station, I suppose, was still an option. Though I was incredibly comfortable in my PajamaJeans®, I didn’t feel right sitting in a barroom booth in them; the way the fleece fabric slid around the booth, I felt situated nowhere, and a little chilly. When the waitress finally brought our Manhattans, though, I tasted it and started to feel a little better. Just a little.

“So,” I finally spoke up, “you are really going to tell me where Anna is?”

“It’s too early. Karin, it’s been a long time since I’ve been out on the town. I wouldn’t want you to get your information and then leave. How’s your Manhattan?” she asked and smiled.

“It’s really good,” I said. Knowing that it would not be easy to get Anna’s whereabouts, I added, “thanks for the clothes. I’m sorry I acted the way I did earlier.”

“Yup. It’s my pleasure.”

A sudden burst of noise exploded from the area near the dartboard. The guys playing slapped each other’s backs, shook hands, and ordered another round.

We ordered another round and Abby talked about her children.

We ordered another round, and I told Abby about the fight I had with the hostel clerk, though I didn’t tell her that I’d been evicted.

We ordered another round. Abby said, “So, tell me about this novel.”
I looked into my drink. “I don’t know what to say about it.”

“What’s it about?”

I wrestled between telling her what I had actually told B. Hart in order to sell it, or to actually tell her the truth. “The truth is,” I told her, “I really want to find Anna. And I’m not just saying that to get you to tell me where she is. I mean, that is why I am out here. To find her. I’m not supposed to be telling you this, according to my plan, according to Morris.”

“Your plan? Who is Morris?”

Part XI

In which Karin, despite his thus-far ill-advised actions, remains firm.

“It’s not really my plan. It’s Morris’s plan. I ran into this long-bearded old man named Morris the evening after I called you. I had a few drinks and started telling him about Anna. I told him about you and our meeting the following day. He advised me on how to deal with getting the knowledge of Anna’s whereabouts.” Anna sat back in her chair. She reached for my Dictaphone, didn’t press any buttons, just turned it over in her hands. Eventually, she held it up to me, like a microphone. I continued, “He told me that I needed to try to win you over.”

“Win me over? How?”

Part XII
In which Karin overcomes a brief moment of weakness, and resumes the most brilliant and effective plan set forth by Morris and AGREED upon by Karin.

I took a deep breath. The liquor had caused my tongue to swell slightly, and I had grown comfortable. I pulled my feet up onto the booth seat and sat with my back against the wall and felt the soft seam of my PajamaJeans®, as though reclined on upon my own couch. With an elbow on the table, I faced Abby again.

“Morris advised me, and I listened to him, to focus not on Anna. Rather, in order to get the information I needed, I would have to woo you.”

“Woo me?” Abby said, amusedly.

I held up my hand. “That’s right. Woo you. At first, I set out to woo you with my bravery and spontaneity. Thus, the dangerous trek across the ice. When I found that didn’t work, I went back to the bar. Morris was there again, and he advised me to try a second time, this time wooing you with my wit.”

Abby set the Dictaphone down, with the microphone end facing the middle of the table. She said, “that explains the trivia lesson on Boston today.”

“That explains the trivia lesson on Boston today, I repeated. And I can assume that didn’t work either, right?”

“Right. Karin, this is all ridiculous. What do think? That this would be like some novel you read? I mean, what was to be next? Were you going to try to seduce me?”

Part XII

In which, I give up. Karin is on his own. Subheading-authorless. Fuck him. If he wants to do this on his own, let him be. I’m off to find another protagonist, if you can even call Karin that.
I caught the waitress’s attention and signaled for two more. The area near the
dartboard had cleared. “Do you play darts?” I asked.

“Karin! How far was this seduction to go?” Anna asked, with an exaggerated look of
shock on her face.

“I don’t know. I haven’t really thought it through. I haven’t thought any of it
through, as I guess you can probably tell.”

“And the novel? Is there one?”

“Yes, there is a novel. But it’s slow-moving.” I shook the ice cubes in the glass.

“I think there is a novel.”

“I suppose now you’re going to ask me if you can stay over tonight. What is it? Is the
hostel booked tonight? Is it too uncomfortable? Did you get kicked out?”

I stood up. “I was just going to ask you to play darts and see how it went.”

“I’ll play.”

I put some quarters into the machine and Abby retrieved some darts from the bar.
As she lined up to throw her first dart, I said, “and yes, I did get kicked out of the hostel.”

Abby, unfazed, posted a triple twenty and looked down at her watch. “The bar closes
in three hours,” she said. “You better make this seduction quick.”

“Do you have any advice?”

“Advice on how to seduce me?”

“Sure. I mean, if time is a factor, it’d help to have the inside scoop.”

Abby lined up her second dart and dropped her elbow as she threw, landing a single
three; her third dart missed the board entirely. “Well, I suppose you could start with an act
of bravery, then maybe you could woo me with your wit.”

“Not my strong suits.”
“Clearly. How about a story?”

I lined up to throw my darts, waiting while a barroom employee stepped in front of the dartboard to adjust the thermostat. As I threw them, I began to tell Abby the story of the objects I had bought to give her. She interrupted me immediately and grabbed the Dictaphone, holding it to my face as I spoke. I told her the story exactly as I had planned on the subway, and though she already knew the truth, she played along. When I finished, Abby told me that this Anna must be a really lucky girl, one who doesn’t know what she’s missing. I threw some more darts, and so did Abby.

She said into the Dictaphone, “has Anna ever told you about her friend, Brooklyn?” She held the microphone to my face as I threw again.

“I don’t remember her mentioning anybody named Brooke.”

“Not Brooke. Brooklyn. She met her during her first job as an editor. When she was living in Boston.”

“Anna fist editing job was in Prentice.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was here. Just down the road actually, on Beacon Hill. She lived with a coworker, named Brooklyn.”

“I thought you’d told me that once Anna left Boston after high school that she never returned.”

Abby thought about it for a second. “Maybe I did say that,” she said. “If I did, it was only because it didn’t seem that she had ever returned. She wasn’t here long. It didn’t really work.”

“What happened?”

“I can’t believe she never told you.”

“Come on, just tell me what happened already.”
“When Anna first got the job, Brooklyn, who had worked there for a while, needed a roommate, so Anna moved in. It was a great place, right on Beacon Hill. Lots of money, but Brooklyn paid the bulk of the rent since Anna was just starting out. Anyway, after a few months, Anna started telling me that Brooklyn was really giving her the creeps. Anna had said that sometimes when she’d wake up at night, Brooklyn would be in her room, just sitting at the edge of her bed, looking through a magazine. Anna let it go on for a while, it was a really great place. But one time, Brooklyn fell asleep while looking reading a magazine, and when Anna woke up in the morning, Brooklyn was asleep next to her.”

“That is really creepy. So, she left?”

“Well, Anna confronted her about it, and Brooklyn played dumb. Said she was a chronic sleepwalker/reader.”

“That isn’t real.”

“Ask Anna.”

“Sure. I’ll just call her up real quick. I’ll use the phone number that she didn’t give me when she moved out.”

“Sarcasm is a sign of insecurity, Karin. And anyway, Anna doesn’t have a phone anymore. At least, not that I know of, and she stayed with me for three days.”

“Recently?”

Abby pulled her darts out of the board and ordered another round and a glass of water. The waitress brought them over. Abby took a sip and stumbled backward. “We’ve had a lot to drink in a short amount of time, haven’t we? This should make your seduction of me a bit easier,” she laughed.

“Was Anna here recently?”
“She left the day you called.” Abby handed me the darts. I stood at the line, but I didn’t throw. I watched Abby guzzle her glass of water, hoping for more about Anna.

Finally, she said, holding up the recorder, “I didn’t tell her you were in town. I promise. That isn’t why she left. She was worried she’d run into Brooklyn. Now,” she said, handing me my glass, “drink your Manhattan. That’s where she’s at.”

I threw my darts.

“What will you do if you don’t find her?” she asked me, seriously.

“If I find her?” I repeated. “If I find her I guess I’m going to talk to her, try to get her to—”

“No,” she interrupted. “If you don’t find her. What will you do?”

“This isn’t part of the seduction, is it?”

“No.”

“If I don’t find her, I guess I’ll go back to Prentice. Maybe try to write seriously. But, I don’t know. I guess I already tried that and failed with my first manuscript. Maybe I’ll try to teach. If I don’t find Anna,” I repeated. “I haven’t really even thought about that. Haven’t even considered it as a possibility.”

“Maybe you should,” Abby said. “It’s a big country, lots of people. The map makes it look a lot more manageable than it really is, you know. Think about all the spaces in between the cities. All the possibilities.”

Abby stood next to me as I threw three more darts. I walked to the dartboard and thought about the possibilities, slowly pulling each dart out of the bristle. When I faced her again, she said, “but I’m sure you’ll find her. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be a downer.”

When Abby threw her next darts, I went up to the bar and paid our tab. I still had two hours left to complete the seduction, but I’d given up. I returned to the dartboard and
Abby wasn’t there. I found her at our booth. She sat with her elbows on the table, cupping the Dictaphone in her hands and trying to whisper into it while hiccupsing violently. I sat across from her. “Are you ready to go?”

“I need to eat.”

“Me too. We can grab something on the way.”

“On the way to where?” Abby asked, looking up at me.

“To your house. Boston’s dangerous. I can’t let you travel all this way, in your condition, on your own.”

“Oh, so we’re back to bravery?”

“Yes,” I said, and I stood up too quickly. When I regained my balance, I helped Abby up and led her out of the bar. A group of men were standing at near the entrance. They ogled Abby as she walked past. I tried to put on a stern look, but failed miserably.

“Nice clothes, asshole,” one of them said as I walked by.

Abby turned to see my reaction. I moved around him and walked out of the bar.

“We’re done with bravery here,” I whispered to her as I grabbed her elbow and we walked out into the blustery Boston streets.

Abby and I grabbed some greasy tacos—and way too many of them—on the way back to her townhouse in Forest Hills. We ate on the T, and Abby slept the rest during the rest of the ride, her mouth open and head bouncing against my shoulder. I woke her up at the stop she had told me, and we made the short walk to her place. It was a small, two level townhouse near a large cemetery. The presence of children was evidenced in the disarray of the place: videogame controllers were unraveled out of the television, two small pedal bikes hung against a wall near the front door, and two scribbled pictures were displayed on the refrigerator. I recognized one of them as the back of my penguin poster. Abby let me take a
shower and set out a faded pair of men’s jeans and a sweater on the bathroom sink. She explained that they had been left behind by a friend, and she thought they would fit. I could wear them tomorrow, since I already had pajamas for tonight.

Once I was cleaned, and I felt better than I had in several days, albeit still consciously drunk, I went downstairs and found Abby sitting on the couch watching television. She wore a long t-shirt and striped socks, and the faint scent of apples emitted from somewhere along her skin. “Karin,” she said and shut off the television, “do you want to go to bed?”

I sat down next to her. I looked around the room, to see if she had laid out blankets for the couch. There were none. I was pretty certain she meant her bed. Should we go to her bed? I thought about it for a moment, wondering how long I could sustain the illusion of Abby being Anna. If in the morning when I woke up, I would, for mere moments, believe I was waking up next to Anna.

Finally, I said, “I think I am ready for bed, too. If it’s alright, I’ll just sleep here on the couch.” I waited for her reaction as a puzzled look stretched across her face.

“Where else did you think you were going to sleep?”

“Abby,” I said. “I was just kidding. Of course I’m sleeping on the couch.”

Abby put her hand on my leg and said her kids would be home at 8:00 AM, and that I should probably be out by then. I said goodnight, and once I heard Abby shut her upstairs bedroom, I flipped on the television and muted it. Even without the sound, I immediately recognized the show as the one Anna had been watching the night she left. It was a much earlier episode, though, of NYC-Vivor®. The cast of real, live people-actors had expanded, had not yet been eliminated, had not yet developed the skills needed to set up a tent in Central Park. One team of fresh, real people fumbled with tent poles near the pond. Another
clip showed a young woman in a business suit unsuccessfully distract a hot dog vendor while her accomplice attempted to steal a handful of buns.

I watched for a few minutes and once I thought Abby had thoroughly passed out, I took out my phone and dialed Claire’s number. She didn’t answer. I wandered through Abby’s kitchen, searching for something to drink. A nightcap. I found a half-filled bottle of gin in the cupboard above the stove, and though I detest gin, I poured myself a small glassful and added a few ice cubes. I turned her son’s drawing on the back of my penguin poster around so that the poster showed. When I sat back on the couch, I looked through my computer bag and inventoried the things that had been taken along with my suitcase. Besides my clothes, I was also out my toiletries—except for the spare deodorant I kept in my computer bag—a pair of tennis shoes, two empty notebooks and some brand new pens, a water bottle, and the Prentice University’s copy of Laurence Sleightor’s second novel, which I had only been a few chapters into. I put my notebook down and reclined on the couch, blanket-less. The springs could be felt just below its surface, and I had trouble getting comfortable. As I lay there, I noticed the lanyard of my Dictaphone hanging out of Abby’s coat pocket, which hung over the arm of her recliner. I took it out and lay back down with it. It was still recording and I had to stop it in order to search for the moment when Abby had been whispering into it, hoping it would contain Anna’s whereabouts. This is what I found, in a whisper, layered slightly in front of the muffled music of the bar, and the voices of the patrons, bleeding together like one collective hum:

“Allright Dictaphone, now that I (unintelligible) you, hic, to myself, I have something very, hic, (unintelligible) to tell you. Here goes. Hic. One afternoon, an engineer, a physicist, and, hic, a someone else was traveling on a passenger train through (unintelligible). The, hic, train passed
a (slurred, but sounded like ‘black’) cow. The engineer, hic, said ‘oh, I guess Nebraska cows are black.’ Hic. Then, the physicist (unintelligible), and said, ‘no, all we,’ hic, ‘know is that some Nebraska cows,’ hic, ‘are black.’ (At this point, it sounds as though the Dictaphone was dropped and kicked at least once. Before resuming the story, at least one person from the bar shouted for Abby to ‘watch out.’) And then, the somebody else looked out the (unintelligible, though given the context I assume it to be ‘window’) and said, hic, ‘you’re both assholes. All we know,’ hic, ‘is that at least,’ wait, it was the mathematician, hic, and the mathematician said, all we know is that only one side of that one sheep is,’ hic, ‘black.’ That is a joke, Dictaphone, just for you. Happy birthday and I’ve drank too much. I hope you someday get to hear my sister tell you a joke, too. Shoot, Karin is watching us, we better quit it.”

Then, I heard my voice asking Abby, “Are you ready to go?” Abby responded, “I need to eat.” After a brief dialogue, and a voice calling me an asshole, the recording went quiet except for the brushing of nylon against the microphone as we walked home. I let it play, trying to pick up something else, but heard only the following, over forty minutes, in this order: the sound of two people walking and talking unintelligibly, two people ordering tacos, some more walking, the white noise of a subway with brief intervals of biting into crunchy tacos, some more walking, an industrial truck beeping, keys unlocking a door, then two people talking quietly, a shower running underneath the noise of a television, two people talking about sleeping arrangements, somebody rummaging through a cupboard, somebody rummaging through a bag, somebody approaching, getting louder, and then pressing a button.

I rolled over on the couch and started the recording back from the beginning, to when Abby had first insisted that I record it. I hoped that she had left me a message about
Anna when I hadn’t noticed. It wasn’t until the third time listening to it that I had figured out Abby’s riddle: her insistence on using the Dictaphone, even when we were just ordering drinks. Her insistence on ordering for me. Her story about Anna. I sat up from the couch and opened my computer. I was able to pick up a weak signal from some neighbor’s unprotected internet. I waited as the page slowly loaded. I read the subtitles on the television screen as the man with the necktie tied around his forehead—the man I knew to be the show’s eventual winner—was scolded for stealing a teammate’s contraband breakfast shake. There was a prolonged close-up of the MorningQuickie™ breakfast shake, which eventually zoomed out to show a tan woman who carried a clipboard and was inexplicably wearing a two-piece swimsuit. She scolded them both and threatened to kick them off the show. Then, the show broke into a sixty second advertisement for MorningQuickie™ Breakfast Shakes, now made with quintuple the cafFiene of a pot of highly cafFienated coffee, and showed a playground full of children smiling and running and sweating profusely. Upstairs, a light went on. I heard the bathroom door open, a muffled trickle, a flush, and then another louder trickle of water. The light went out, and Abby belched loudly. The page had loaded. I questioned, briefly, if I had imagined Abby’s riddle. If there was no actual riddle, and I was simply misinterpreting a coincidence, reading into it something that wasn’t there. It was definitely possible, but I had nothing else to go on, and I was ready to leave Boston.

I bought a ticket for a bus that departed Boston for Manhattan at 4:24 AM on February 28.

I looked at the clock. I had an hour and a half to get there. I changed into Abby’s friend’s clothes, removed the books from my bag and set them on Abby’s coffee table with a note that said “thank you.” I also left her the remaining two rides of my Boston Commuter Rail Pass. I
stuffed the PajamaJeans® and sweatshirt into the *Boston Bookstore* plastic bag and quietly left her townhouse. Though it was close, I made it to the station just in time to pick up my ticket and board the sparsely populated train.

**Trip Expenses**

**Boston**  
*February 26, 27*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Cup of Gas Station Coffee, surprisingly good</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Hot Dog from Street Vendor</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Pouch of Tobacco, across st. from BPL</td>
<td>7.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 cups of Coffee, near Boston Commons</td>
<td>7.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Hot Dog from Street Vendor</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books from <em>Boston Bookstore</em></td>
<td>34.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half sandwich and cheap beer at Mad Dog, Davis Square</td>
<td>17.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refund from getting Kicked Out of Hostel</td>
<td>32.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Cup of Gas Station Coffee, surprisingly good</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Hot Dog from Street Vendor</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darts at <em>The Sevens</em></td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinks from <em>The Sevens</em>, including tip</td>
<td>84.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greasy Tacos</td>
<td>12.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megabus Ticket to New York</td>
<td>32.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3,603.04—MUST BE MORE FRUGAL WITH EXPENSES IN NEW YORK!!!

**Handwritten Note From Abby:**

*Meet me at 206 Washington Street at 1:00pm*

*Abby*

((xxx)) xxx-xxxx
It was still dark when the bus rumbled out of South Station and merged onto the expressway. There were only about thirteen other riders and I was excited to have a block of seats to myself. I stretched out my legs and I realized that, though I was on a public bus, this was the most privacy I’d had since leaving Prentice. I was only a week into my trip, and I missed having my own space as much as I had missed companionship when I had my own space.

When I arrived in New York, I would try Claire again.

I had four hours before I would arrive in Manhattan, so I thought I’d try to get a little bit of work done; at least, I would attempt to organize things. A sign above the bus driver—and at the back of the bus, and billboarded across the side of the bus, and on the back of each seat—advertised the bus’s free internet. So, the first thing I did was to check my email. Besides a bunch of spam emails—at least ten of which were advertisements to increase my stamina and to add length to my manhood—there were a few worth reading. First, was an email from B. Hart. He expected me in New York in two days. He gave me his address and told me to meet him there sharply at 7am on March 2 with a detailed plan of the novel, as well as my Boston progress. In addition to Hart’s email, I was surprised to find a notice from the Prentice University Library notifying me of fines. I opened my bag to check the due date on the Sleightor novel before I remembered that it was now with whoever had stolen my suitcase—which I had little doubt was the hostel clerk in Boston. According to the Library’s notice, though, there were several books that had been recently returned damaged. I was expected, of course, to reimburse the library in full for their costs of the damaged books, as they were in no condition to return to the shelves.
After checking my email, I decided to transfer my trip expenses from my notebook to a word document. When this was finished, I opened up my recent work on the novel and found the list I’d made from the 25th. I had written nothing since then. In fact, I hadn’t accomplished anything in Boston. I would have to get my shit together if I was ever to finish this trip. I mean, maybe Abby was right; realistically, what were the chances that I’d ever find Anna? What were the chances that I was following riddled advice from Abby, or merely chasing a misinterpreted coincidence? When I originally organized this trip, as you may remember, I had based my destinations on the ten to fifteen major U.S. cities in which I could possibly have found Anna, while also being able to justify visits to these cities to B. Hart under the guise of novel-research. I still believed the idea to be, in fact, novel, though far from practical, let alone wholly thought-out. The conditions of one goal—to find Anna—drastically imposed upon the conditions of the other—to research the novel. I made a list of the cities I had planned to visit. I made a list of the cities I could think of in which Anna could be, based on a reason why she might have chosen that place. The list included, to my knowledge, just about anywhere except for the following cities (with explanations):

1. Prentice (I might be there)
2. Miami and Boston (has already been)
3. Gary IN; Detroit, Saginaw, and Flint MI (hates the smell of industry)
4. Anywhere in Ohio (had a bad relationship with a guy from Ohio and is afraid to run into him)
5. Lincoln NE (the Bruce Springsteen song had, for a spell of two months, given her nightmares)

There were surely others, of which I estimated at around fifteen percent of cities with populations over 10,000, which I have not listed because I either remember the name but not the reason, or I remember the reason but not the name. On the other hand, I was very limited in the amount of cities in which I could justify traveling in order to conduct research on the novel. The formula here was slightly different. Based on what I had already written, I
could justify going to New York, Detroit, Chicago, Albuquerque, Portland OR, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Kansas City (layover on train trip). In addition, I could reasonably include at least three other cities for research/novel writing reasons that I’d be able to justify to B. Hart; among these, of course, include, Boston, New Orleans, and one other regardless of reason, if I so chose. When I looked at these two lists, and I factored in the literally hundreds of places Anna could be where Hart would never consider allowing me to travel, I drew up a chart. It looked something like this:

After examining the chart and shading it in with whichever pens I had, I made the decision that though I would, indeed, move forth on trying to find Anna, the chance was clearly so slim, regardless of what Abby could tell me—or hint to me, or what I could misread into a coincidence—that I would place a stronger focus on trying to complete the novel, so that when I finished the trip and did not find Anna, I would at least have somewhere to continue from. To start, after reviewing the chart and, more importantly, my experience in Boston, I decided to make a list based on the mistakes I made while in Boston in regards to areas which stifled my progress, both on the novel and in my quickly depleting stipend. I called it, “rules concerning things not to do anymore while traveling.” It would be an ongoing list.
The list was so successfully drawn that I decided to make another. I called it, “items that were taken along with my suitcase that I would need to replace, including items that I did not bring but have realized that I would need.” Then, based on my forthcoming meeting with B. Hart, I made a third list. I called it, “things to accomplish, concerning the novel and related activities,” before meeting with B. Hart on March 2, and 7am. At the top of this list was to buy a battery operated alarm clock. The second item was batteries. Due to my rapidity of compiling these lists, there may be some overlap. By the time I finished the third, my battery was running low, and I was exhausted. It was a good day of work. Outside the bus windows, telephone poles stretched along the spaces between the cities; fence posts along the maps’ dark blue lines. The sun rose gray and abused over an unimportant, and from the view of my rear-bus seat, uninhabited place. Of course, I didn’t believe that.

**Trip Expenses**

**En route to Manhattan from Boston**

*February 28—up until final hour of bus trip to Manhattan*

3,603.04

(1.25)—Chili-Cheese Fritos from South Station Vending Machine

(1.00)—Terribly bitter cup of coffee from Rest Stop Vending Machine

3,600.79—Remaining Balance

**Email from B. Hart**

*Subject: Research on This Monster Land*

*From: “B. Hart” ([bshart@bunsenp.org](mailto:bshart@bunsenp.org))*

*February 27, 2009, 9:13PM*

*To: “Karin” ([kpank@vmail.net](mailto:kpank@vmail.net))*

*Priority: High*

*Karin,*

*Good night to you Karin. I imagine you, after a long day of writing and designing your magnificent plot for This Monster Land, that you are, at this time, perhaps enjoying a single glass of quality bourbon, closing your notebook for the evening—shutting down your computer, if that is your style—and preparing yourself for a night of rejuvenating sleep. After looking over your schedule, I’m excited to see that you will be arriving in New York on March 1. This will, at last, give us a chance to meet face to face, without the use of electronics.*
You will find my offices located on the 13th floor of 234 42nd Ave. I have cleared out a slot at 7 am on March 2 for us to meet. I assume that you will not have anything planned for this hour, so I will expect to see you promptly. There are a few items, of course, that I would like to discuss during this meeting, which I expect to last no longer than 45 minutes. Among these items include the first one hundred pages of your novel. Given the information you’ve given me, as well as particular rules of novel writing, in regards to plot arc and character motivation set forth by the likes of John Gardner, E.M. Forster, and Stephen King, I expect this to take us to the point of the novel when your characters are ready to board their respective trains to a railroad of shared companionship and experience. In addition, I would also like to see a more detailed pot synopsis of the next one hundred pages. This, according to the aforementioned sources, should take us through the point of the characters’ serendipitous acquaintance of each other. Finally, I would like you to be, upon meeting at 7 am, prepared for a couple preliminary Author Photographs. It is not certain that we will use these, but at Bunsen Publishing, we prefer to have photographs of our authors on file, in case of some unexpected emergency. As of now, that will do.

Follow the muse,
B. Hart.

Email from Prentice University Library:

Subject: Notification of Missing/Damaged Products and Accumulating Fines
From: “Lib.Auth” (Lib.Auth@pu.edu), CC: JKoehler@PPD.net
February 27, 2009, 9:14PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Mr. Pankreez,

This email is to inform you of compensation needed for the following items, which have been returned in an unacceptable condition under your name, Karin Pankreez. The exception is Laurence Sleightor’s novel, Two, which has not yet been returned, though we have, based on years of library experience, doubt its condition will be any different from the others, given the gruesome habits of certain sick individuals. The list and their respective conditions are as follows:

Sleightor, Laurence. Two. Checked out: 12.17.2009—Condition: Not returned. Overdue fee of $0.27
Sadgid, Bill. The Arsonists. Checked out: 2.25.2010; Returned: 2.27.2010. Condition: Several burned pages; matches seemed to have been lit, and then extinguished by closing the book upon them. Extinguished matchsticks also remain within pages; spine damaged from being closed upon matches. Replacement fee of $117.00.
Clawale, F.D. The Laughter Doesn’t Have to End. Checked out: 2.25.2010; Returned: 2.27.2010. Condition: Final 96 pages have been torn out and replaced with 48 blank notebook pages. Replacement fee of $312.00.

Faulkner, William. Absalom, Absalom! Checked out: 2.25.2010; Returned: 2.27.2010. Condition: It appears as though somebody used the pages as a spittoon; wet, dark smudges taint the pages, and flecks of what appear to be long cut tobacco leaves—placed between lower gums and cheek, where the tobacco is then infused into the lip via a pressing of the inner cheek against the gums and teeth—are dried and impressed upon, surprisingly, practically every page, that is, every page until page 216, in the 1964 Modern Library Edition, when Quentin explained to Shreve that he went out to Sutpen’s farm and found Clytie and Jim Bond living out there and Shreve exclaimed, ‘Wait then . . . For God’s sake wait (216). Replacement fee of $137.00.

The grand total of these damaged and unreturned items totals: $613.27.*

*The overdue fine of Sleightor’s novel, Two, will continue to increase at a rate of $0.09/day until returned, assuming it is returned in the condition in which it was received.

The Prentice University Library accepts cash only, and will be open to receive payment on M-F from 7am to 10pm, Saturday 10am to 5pm, and Sunday 10am to 1pm.

If you have any questions concerning these charges, please contact us at Lib.Auth@pu.edu.

Sincerely,
Prentice University Library Authorities

List #1
Rules concerning Things Not to do anymore while Traveling:

1. Regardless of the weather, do not stay in a place in which an employee compliments your suitcase.
2. Stay off the ice.
3. No more than $15 dollars may be spent on alcohol purchases within a single day.
4. On any day that the $15 limit has been met, there is to be no drinking the following day.
5. In the event that you are purchasing an alcoholic beverage for somebody other than yourself, the debited amount may be deducted from a future day’s $15 alcohol allotment, though if the purchase is not reciprocated by the freeloader, you are to cut off all ties with them. Exceptions include: Anna.
6. After $15 worth of alcohol has been consumed, no more purchases are to be made that evening. If food will be needed after $15 worth of alcohol consumption, it must be purchased beforehand.
7. Upon waking up each morning, no alcohol may be consumed at any point in the day until the novel has been progressed by a minimum of ten pages.
8. No alcohol is to be consumed before or during writing hours. Exception: a single, light beer during dinner, before evening writing session.
9. A typical day should adhere closely to the following schedule:
   8am: wake up
   8am-10am: get coffee, eat light breakfast, walk for 45 minutes, find a suitable place to write
10am-2pm: write
2pm-6pm: explore/research/eat/etc
6pm-10pm: write
10pm-12am: read
12am: sleep.

10. If invited to participate in a social activity, it should be accepted based purely upon its benefits of familiarizing yourself with the socio-economic climates and physical landscape and layout of a city. Time should be broken down based upon the following scale that takes into consideration the potential and usefulness of the social activity:

- Invited by a lone traveler: time may impede on up to 1 of your research hours, 1 of your 2nd session writing hours, and up to ½ of your reading hours.
- If invited by two or more fellow travelers: same as above, except that you may sacrifice all of your reading hours, though not more than once/week.
- If invited by a lone local: Up to ½ of your research hours, ½ of your 2nd session writing hours, and all of your reading hours may be sacrificed.
- If invited by two of more locals: Anything except for your morning writing session may be sacrificed.

11. One day off may be permitted per week; though if you plan to consume alcohol on your day off, your ten-page minimum must be met.

12. No more than the following may be spent per meal, as well as regulations on meal to assure comfort and regular digestion, thus promoting productive writing:

- Breakfast: not to exceed $4.00, not including coffee. Breakfast should be plain and light. Toast is a good choice; a moderate amount of peanut is permissible.
- Lunch: not to exceed $7.00, though a $5.00 lunch would be preferred as long as it is not consisting of the sort of food that will weight you down and cause you to become sluggish in the evening, thus reducing your productivity and tempting you to sleep through valuable writing hours. A typical lunch should be something like the following: uncooked sandwich (half of sandwich can be replaced with soup or salad), a fruit, and a glass of water.
- Dinner: not to exceed $10 in food purchases. Dinner should, when possible, be made in hostel kitchen. By buying groceries and using them throughout the week, much money can be saved. Each dinner should include two vegetables (one vegetable can be replaced with a fruit and/or salad), one protein, and a source of whole grain (brown rice, bread, pasta, etc.).
- Before 6pm, coffee may be consumed without limit or financial concern.
- Other than coffee, water is to be the only other beverage consumed, with exception of alcohol, as per aforementioned regulations.

13. Daily exercise is mandatory, and though it will mostly be in the form of walking, should occasionally include jogging, and when possible, weight lifting. This will promote a better self-image, thus allowing my writing to be more productive.

14. Train expenses should be limited to coffee when needed, and groceries to be purchased before departure. Meals should follow aforementioned guidelines as closely as possible. In place of toast, bread and butter will suffice. IN place of a cooked dinner, fruit, bread, and peanut butter will suffice.

15. Since time will not feel the same on a train as it does in the city, it will be essential to develop a prudent schedule. Priorities are to include sleep (since a sleeper car is out of the budget, getting sleep when possible is essential), writing, and reading. During train trips, socializing should be kept to a minimum since there are no locals on a train, and people will only be concerned with what your novel is about.

16. When people ask what your novel is about, possible answers include:
   a) love
   b) travel
c) trains

d) the economy

e) shared experience, though be careful about being too vague, which will undoubtedly solicit explanation

f) writing (only to be used if asked when time prevents explanation (e.g. asked while stepping onto a bus by one stepping off a bus) as it would not be prudent to get into a conversation about the value of writing about a writer writing

g) if pushed, any of the following single-word answers may be used to get the interrogator off your back (though particular awareness of interrogator’s demographics must be acutely considered, as per the following):*

i) person younger than 15: politics

ii) person between 15 and 18: education

iii) person between 18 and 31: abstinence

iv) person between 31 and 39: stability

v) person between 39 and 45: passion

vi) person between 45 and 52: posterity

vii) person between 52 and 61: healthcare

viii) person between 61 and 65: economy

ix) person between 65 and 72: sex

x) person older than 72: death

*If inquiries persist and solutions fail to satisfy inquirers, a separate list based on gender shall be established as an addendum to this sub-sub-list.

17. Relationships with the opposite sex may be explored on a surface level only in the effort of researching female characters, though invitations to homes/apartments/townhouses/hotels/hostels must be declined. (Exceptions: Anna)

18. Headphones are not to be worn during morning writing session, though music without vocals is permissible during evening writing sessions

19. Part of 8am-10am time slot should be used to read and respond to emails. Email account should not be accessed again until just before bed, though no replies should be written if up to $15 worth of alcohol has been consumed.

20. Internet is only to be used to conduct relevant research on location, specific places and events, and to find directions.

21. Internet is to be disabled on your laptop during writing sessions. No exceptions. If a particular name or reference must be looked up, you will take note of it and research during the first 15 minutes of your allotted reading time, and revise it the following morning. It has been said by a writer better than most others (his opinion), that any writing done on a computer with internet access mustn’t be important writing.

22. Always carry a notebook and full pen on your person—not in bag, not in coat, etc. Write down everything. You may organize and review these notes during your reading time and during meals.

List to be continued…

List #2

Items that were Taken along with my Suitcase that I would Need to Replace, Including Items I did not bring but have Realized that I Would Need:

1. Suitcase or capable alternative (e.g. duffel bag, large backpack, etc)
2. One pair blue jeans, size 32-34s
3. One pair cargo pants, size 32-34s
4. One pair dress slacks, size 32-34s
5. One pair running shoes, size 9 ½
8. A knife, larger than a pocket knife, but small enough to conceal in the front pocket of my computer bag. Something with a blade that flips open and locks, can be used to spread peanut-butter, whittle, and defend myself from further thefts.
9. Five plain, black t-shirts, large
10. 2 plain, white t-shirts, large
11. 2 sweaters, grey or black, solid, large
12. 1 dress shirt—button-down, not polo, large
13. An assortment of 1-2 shirt purchases per city at a local thrift store (e.g. goodwill, salvation army), in an attempt to assimilate to a style representative of the region’s local color, thus assuring trustability from locals and drastically reducing my chances of being pinned an “outsider”
14. 10 pairs large boxer briefs, grey or black (no exceptions)—unsure how often I will have access to laundry facilities, size 32-34
15. 10 pairs white socks
16. Replace phone charger
17. A book of Ezra Pounds collected poems, for train reading.
18. 3 leather-bound mini-notebooks, 1 leather bound journal-sized notebook
19. 8 black ink, Pilot G-2 pens, .07 tip
20. 2 blue ink, Pilot G-2 pens, .07 tip
21. 1 pair thin cotton gloves
22. 1 stocking cap

List 3
Things to Accomplish Concerning the Novel and Related Activities:

1. Buy a battery-operated alarm clock and batteries
2. Translate recent notes into written pages.
3. 30 written pages by meeting with B. Hart on March 2 at 7am
   a. Within these pages, each character must be represented in a section that ends with him of her boarding a train.
4. Plot outline
   a. To be designed in outline form during duration of bus trip and during writing breaks.
   Must be finished by March 2, at 7am.
   b. Do not get bogged down in minor details. Plot main events.
5. To complete the following tasks, previously allocated coffee/light breakfast (8am-10am), research/exploration (2pm-6pm), and reading (10pm-12am) time will be forfeited until 30 pages have been completed.
   a. After all, I’m here to write.
      i. I must be thankful for the opportunity B. Hart and Bunsen Publishing has given me.
         1. Abby was right, right?
            a. Finding Anna was a pipedream.
            b. If it’s meant to be it will happen.
2. Focus on the writing. Impress B. Hart with your studiousness.
   a. Get an extension.
3. Keep an eye open and an ear to the ground for Anna,
   a. but get these 30 pages written.
4. I mean, don’t be afraid to look, but don’t waste an entire city on her
   a. if you have no reason to believe
      i. she is there.
6. Get a haircut.
I had fallen asleep while looking at the outline I’d previously sent B. Hart. Before falling asleep, however, I managed to compress the prospective novel by what I figured to be at least 60 pages by striking through several subheadings. Even though I did not get much writing done on the bus, did not, in fact, get any writing done, I was pleased with my progress on the outline and my list. Mostly, though, I was satisfied with this new outlook. The regime would keep me focused. If I did not ever find Anna, I would still have something worth having. I’d have a completed novel, something she had always wanted from me, anyway. As the bus coursed through the one-way streets on Manhattan, tracking and backtracking in order to gain access to a twice-passed underground bus lot, we passed an old, stone clock tower that read 8:45 AM. I had the entire day ahead of me. I had all of New York in front of me. I had a slew of clichés about new starts and the new world spinning through my head, and I refused to write them down.
“Karin,” she said over my shoulder as I turned around the Port Authority Bus Terminal, looking for a place to buy a subway pass and a map.

The first time I caught up to Anna, after she left, that is, she seemed to have been expecting me, as though tipped off. She knew exactly where I would be on the map, and it was up to her whether or not our lines would intersect; I had no words in the matter.

I turned to toward the voice, and scanned the tired travelers until my eyes met up with an unweary face, a face that had effortlessly sought out a friend, found him, and casually called out to him. “You’re traveling light,” she said.

We embraced.

I explained to her that my belongings had been lightened in Boston.

“Boston,” she said. “Abby is not pleased with you, Karin, leaving as you did. Did you know she was planning on telling you where to find me the next morning?”

I thought about me and Abby’s recorded conversation, the suspected hints and coincidences. I said, “I couldn’t stay any longer. I had to leave Boston. I have this meeting coming up, and I didn’t thing I was getting anything done there.” I reached out for Anna’s shoulders. She had met me here. It was 9 AM and Anna had woken up, somewhere in this city, and traveled to find me. I pulled her toward me again and hugged her once more. She casually wrapped an arm around me and held a coffee and a piece of paper with the other. It was a bus ticket, the piece of paper. “How did you know I’d be here?”

“Abby called me this morning to tell me.”

“Really? I thought you were phone-less. Off the grid.”
“Karin, come on. Don’t be so naïve. How can one travel without a phone?” Anna fondled with a bag, hoisting it higher on her shoulder. She looked healthy. That is, “healthy” is the word that kept running in white letters through the black space in my mind as I kept sneaking glances at her, looking for changes, hints of sadness, weariness, incompleteness. “Let’s go,” she said. “You’re going to need a subway pass, right? I’ll help you out. Do you have a place to stay? That is, do you at least know which borough you’ll be staying in? I can help you get there.” She wasn’t wearing a ring.

“Before I forget,” I mentioned to Anna as I followed her to who knew where, “maybe I should get your phone number.”

“Oh, um, I’ll have to get it for you later. It’s a new phone. To be honest, I don’t even know the number yet. I have it written down somewhere, though.” Anna led me to the MetroPass kiosk and I put in a twenty and a ten; in return, the machine hummed, ticked, and spit out a piece of paper worth seven days of subway travel and a dollar in change.

“Thank you,” flashed across the screen.

“So, Karin, where are you staying?” Anna repeated.

“Brooklyn,” I said, off the top of my head. “Hey, I wanted to ask you something. Did you use to stay with somebody named Brooklyn? In Boston?”

“What are you talking about?” Anna walked quickly out of the doorway and I followed her into the busy New York foot traffic. It was early yet. The air was thick with the scent of diesel exhaust and spicy food. The chunks of ice that had been kicked up onto the sidewalk’s edge was sooty grey and created a short barricade between the sidewalk and the road.
A storeowner with a shovel stepped in between Anna and me as I followed her, and I had to step over the ice barricade and jog a few steps on the road before I could step back in line before her. “Nothing,” I said. “I was just thinking about something Abby had said.”

“I don’t recall anybody named Brooklyn. I think I would if I had lived with her.”

“Yeah. I may have misheard her.”

Anna ducked down some stairs just before the intersection and I had to work hard to follow her down. “Where in Brooklyn are you staying?” she asked. “I’m here in Manhattan, and I have somewhere I need to be, someone to meet. But I can point you in the right direction.”

“Wait, you’re not going with me?”

“No. I’m due in SoHo in twenty-five minutes. I just wanted to see you.”

I grabbed Anna’s shoulder and spun her around, perhaps more forcefully than I meant to. “Anna, wait. What is this? You pick me up at a bus station after disappearing for over three months, and then you gotta go?”

“Karin,” Anna said, grabbing my hand, “I didn’t disappear. Besides, I’m not leaving town, I’m just leaving uptown. Listen, honey, why don’t we make a date. Are you familiar at all with the city?”

I turned and looked up the stairs leading to the street, and then I looked past the turnstiles down a long, narrow flight of stairs that sunk further below the surface of the city.

“No, I’m sorry. Of course you’re not.” Anna pulled a piece of paper out of her bag. She held it against the subway wall and in her beautiful handwriting wrote a note. “Meet me here,” she said, handing me the note. “Tomorrow at 6 PM. I don’t have anything going on in the evenings. We can talk then, but now I have to go.” Anna swiped her ticket and slipped
through the turnstile. As she descended down the narrow staircase, she turned back and said, “I’ve missed you, Karin. You look well.”

I turned, pretending not to hear her, folded the piece of paper, and put it in my front pocket. I headed back up the staircase. I wondered if having said I was staying in Brooklyn, I would be held to it somehow by Anna’s knowledge.

When I emerged onto the street level, I finally looked up. During school, when I had visited Los Angeles, I remember being awed at the feeling of being surrounded by tall buildings. I didn’t feel that awe here. In LA, no matter where you stood in the city, you could always see past the tall buildings to the mountains. There was a constant reminder of a landscape before skyscrapers. Being able to see that in the periphery of the tall buildings, I decided, created the awe, the constant awareness of contrast. New York gave the feeling that the buildings had always been there, rising above intricate subway tunnels. The lack of contrast sucked the awe out of the view. I was standing at the corner of 7th Avenue and 42nd street, and it was 9:30 AM; I decided that I would give myself an hour and a half to explore the immediate area, pushing back my writing time by one hour.

I walked south down 7th avenue for about forty minutes and stopped at a café near 20th street for a cup of coffee. The barista was a man I figured to be about my age. I wasn’t sure what it was about his dark-rimmed glasses, but I had a hunch they were not prescription lenses. His tight, black, buttoned-shirt stretched across his barrel chest. He gave me my coffee in a paper cup, and I asked him if he could tell me how far I was from Brooklyn, and if he knew of a place there I could stay. In a voice that surprised me in its softness, he told me I could get to Brooklyn in about a half hour via the subway, but if I wanted to stay somewhere cheap, I should just go next door. The Shell-Sea Hostel, he said. Stay a night there, use their internet, find something in Brooklyn later if I didn’t like it. I thanked him and
went next door. Without hassle, the clerk gave me a room with two beds for thirty-eight dollars a night. I paid her in cash for three nights; I had taken the money out of the machine in the lobby. The room’s empty now, she said, but if somebody new comes, we’ll have to give them the other bed. I wouldn’t worry though, she said. It’s a slow time of year and our website is currently down. Most people who come to New York already have reservations made online. You just lucked out.

I lucked out. When I got to my room I collapsed on the bed, setting my untouched coffee on the table next to it.

Note from Anna—02.28.10

Karin,

Meet me near the coffee vendor in the Northeast corner of Bryant Park 6 PM. 42nd Street and 6th Avenue.

Yours,
Anna Bertreb
I’d slept for three hours without stirring. I took a long drink from my coffee, now cooled to room temperature. I checked my phone, hoping that Claire had called. She hadn’t, so I called her. This time she answered. It was only an hour earlier in Prentice, but she sounded as though I had woken her.

“Karin,” she started, “you need to get back here. Things are not good. Something is definitely up.”

Trying to ride on my luck that the hostel clerk had noticed—I mean, what are the chances that I’d run into Anna during my first stop?—I said, “nothing is up. It is a misunderstanding, and as soon as they figure out who set the library on fire, they will be apologizing to us.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“I do.” My throat felt suddenly dry. I took another drink from my coffee.

“You got my last message?”

“Yes.”

“Things have changed since then, even.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t left my house in three days, except to go down to the police station. They drive by. Slowly, in a black car with tinted-windows. Sometimes they drive by three times in a single hour.”

“Claire, clearly you’re being paranoid. Everybody these days has a black car with tinted-windows. You’re reading into it.”
“With government plates. And the strange things is that I’ve noticed a pattern about their drive-bys.”

“Of course you have.” I stood up, and with the phone pressed against my shoulder, I emptied out the contents of my bag onto the bed. I would have to do my shopping as soon as possible. Even in the clothes that Abby gave me, I could smell the scent of sitting on a bus too long. I’d need new clothes before I met Anna.

“Karin, I’m serious. Tell me, when you were here, what would you say was the most frequent time that you would come by?”

I thought about it. “At night, mostly. Probably between 11:00 PM and 3:00 AM. Sometimes during the early afternoon. 10:00 AM for a couple hours.”

“That’s exactly what I’ve written down.”

“Written down?”

“Two days ago I thought I noticed a pattern, and I decided to chart it. First, from memory, I charted in red the day and times you came over, using some notes I’d taken in my journal for reference. I shaded your visits in purple.”

“Why purple?”

“You really think that’s important?”

“It might be.”

“Okay. Damnit, Karin. I shaded it in purple to emasculate you.”

“It didn’t work. Guess who I ran into today?”

There was a long pause on the other line. I didn’t speak. I thought Claire was being paranoid, and perhaps jealous. After a couple seconds, I heard a hitch in her breath, and then I heard her take a couple drinks of something. In the silence, I felt a distance from myself and me in the conversation. I was being an asshole.
“So, you found Anna? Does that mean you’re coming home? Mission accomplished.”

“Claire, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No, that’s great.”

“It wasn’t. Honestly, it wasn’t that great. In fact, maybe your purple shading worked, if I hadn’t always felt a little emasculated around Anna.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Nothing. I followed her around a little, and then she left. Tell me the rest of what you discovered with your charts. I was being an asshole to disregard them. Claire, you, of anybody, are reliable.”

“No. You’re probably right. I’m paranoid. I am. I see it.”

“Tell me.”

The deep breath Claire exhaled into the phone receiver sounded like the beginnings of a strong wind, building up over the lake, loud before I felt it. She continued, “I also charted their drive-bys, overtop of your visits chart. I watched them from my living room window, sitting on the floor. I shaded them in black, to match their car. The charts line up exactly. They only drive by in the early afternoon or late at night.”

I thought about the possibility of such a coincidence. Not exactly beyond the realm.

“So you think they might be looking for me.”

“Worse. I mean, yeah, I’m certain they’re looking for you, or rather, they think they’re watching you. But how do you think they know when you had visited unless they were watching while you were here?”

“Maybe it’s just a coincidence.”
“I’ve already talked my way out of that. Yesterday, after the mailman brought my mail to the front door in the morning, I saw one of the officers get out of the car to check out his tracks in the snow. He followed them a half block until he realized it couldn’t have been you.”

“Claire, what did you mean when you said they think they’re watching me? I haven’t been to your house in over a week. Longer, even.”

“That’s the other thing. I walked by your house a few days ago. There was someone there. I wanted to knock at the door, but I was afraid I’d be seen. Then, when I was taken to the police station for questioning, I was concentrating hard, making a point to not mention that you had left, but then the officer mentioned that he’d been keeping a close eye on you, too. I first, I worried that maybe they’d followed you on the road, but then he said that you’d been staying shut-in your apartment, except for to take walks late at night. He also said you’d been visiting the Prentice University Library. He had a stack of books with him, ones that you had checked out. Who is at your house?”

Now it was my turn to hang silent on the other end. I took a couple gulps from my cold coffee. “I got an email the yesterday, or early this morning,” I said. “It was from the Prentice Library. It said that I had recently returned damaged books. It’s fucking insane, something like seven-hundred dollars in fines.”

“Who returned them for you?”

“Returned them for me? I never checked these books out.”

“How could somebody check them out without your card?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have your library card with you?”
I opened my wallet to check for it, and then remembered that the night before I left I had cleaned it out. I’d put all the things I wouldn’t need into my desk drawer. I told this to Claire.

“Whoever’s living there, then, must’ve taken it.”

“There’s something else,” I said. The first day I was in Boston I spent some time at the public library. It’s a tremendously beautiful building, though each room is full of unused, turret-like balconies. It always gives you the feeling that somebody is watching you. Anyway, I went there the next day and had to scan my ID to get in. I was denied. A security guard escorted me out.” I left out the part about meeting Abby.

“So how’s it possible that your library card was used to check out books.”

“I don’t know. Either he checked them out before I was banned, or the university libraries just operate on a different system than the public libraries.”

“Shit. I gotta go. They’ve just stopped in front of my house.”

I looked at my watch. It was 2 PM.

“Karin, you should really think about coming back until this is all cleared up.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Also, try something for me. Before you leave, probably the day you leave so they won’t find you in New York, try getting into the public library, and then try at one of the university libraries.”

“I can do that. But you need to see if you can find out who is at my house. I’m certain, now, that it isn’t Anna.”

“Yeah. It’s probably not Anna. I gotta go.”

“Wait. Claire. Your last message. I just wanted to say that, to thank you for it. It came at a good time.”
“Sure,” Claire said, and she hung up. I lay back down on the bed, but I wasn’t tired. I finished my coffee and decided to go get some more. I went back to the front desk and bought a padlock. While I was there, I asked about where I could get some shopping done, and where I could get a haircut. Janelle, as the clerk introduced herself—as far as I could tell, we were the only people in the building—gave me a map of Manhattan and drew some directions on it. I thanked her and headed out.

I spent the rest of the afternoon shopping, avoiding the subway by walking. One by one, I checked things off my list, spending, of course, way more money than I had originally figured. My first stop had been a thrift store. I purchased two shirts: the first, a thin, yellow t-shirt that advertised a folk festival at Shea Stadium in 1994, and the second a hooded sweatshirt with a logo from the New York Dolls™ rock’n’roll band. There were holes along the cuffs of the sleeves, but only because I had been wearing it so often, and for so long, during my residence in New York City, that is. I also found a duffel bag that was in decent shape. I wore the New York Dolls™ sweatshirt out of the shop and left my Boston sweatshirt in the donation box. After the thrift store, I found a department store on Houston and bought the rest of the clothes I needed. Across the street, I purchased enough groceries to last me for three days. I found the rest of the things I needed, except for the knife and the running shoes, at a used bookstore on the way back from Houston Street. As I checked items off from my list, I was surprised to feel the sort of calm that I did, the type of calmness that comes from accomplishment. And though I hadn’t really accomplished anything, considering what I had intended to accomplish at the beginning of the trip, in terms of the novel, I comforted myself in knowing that I had, in fact, found Anna—unconcerned with who actually found who—and that I was back at the beginning, with a full suitcase full of things that I would need to complete my trip, my research on the novel. And
now that I had found Anna, I could focus on the novel. I would make an addendum to my list, a time slot of availability for Anna; she must understand that I’m out here, I’m traveling to write. She would appreciate that. The news I’d received from Claire was certainly worrisome, but it all seemed so far away, relevant only in the moment in which I spoke with her. I would try what she had suggested, the libraries.

The only thing that really troubled me was how much I had spent trying to recoup the things that had been stolen from me. In two days, when I met with B. Hart, I would mention my suitcase getting stolen in the hopes that we would offer to compensate me for it. Depending on how the meeting went, I might even ask him outright for compensation.

Lugging the duffel bag through the crowded south Manhattan streets slowed me down a bit. I had some time, then, to look around. I was surprised at how dark it seemed. It was approaching evening, and the days were naturally short now, but the buildings, the people, seemed to block out most of the light. In Boston, at this time, I imagined fighting the glare off the snow. I pictured Abby, then, walking her children through Boston Commons, looking over my scrambling tracks on the frog pond and deciding not to tell them, but laughing to herself, nonetheless. Then, I pictured Anna, not in Boston, but here, nearby. She had told me her business was somewhere in SoHo, which I had learned from the hostel clerk, meant south of Houston. (Houston, pronounced How-ston, like Cow or bow—bow, as in to bend at one’s back, not the implement used to project arrows—and not Hue-ston, like the Southwestern American city.) I thought about the chances of running into her now, twice in the same day. A girl with brown hair passed me, a brown coat and tall boots. Two men brushed aside me on the other side; they wore Carhartt® jackets and a cigarette angled down from the taller one’s mouth. Their hands were stained with soot. Across the street, I could see, from between the eclipsing gaps created by the people walking on my side
of the street, an Asian woman pushing a double stroller. An old man tipped backwards in a chair near the entranceway of a bodega storefront; he spit into a baked beans can. Three adolescent boys in hats-too-big stood across the street from a storefront with tinted-over windows, concentrating to the point of almost breaking a sweat in this February-almost-March air on the storefront door as it swung open and a pale, low-hatted, sunglassed patron stepped out, as the door closed and then was pulled open by a young, tattooed couple, giggling as they entered, as the door closed and it was pushed open by a long legged, sickly looking girl, her face painted heavily, stepping outside to smoke a cigarette, and then going back in. The boys knew nothing about angles, that they would remain unsatisfied from their glances because of the angles of the doorways, entrances; that they would have to be satisfied with only with the thought of glimpsing an exposed back, a white belly, a bicep flexed, sliding down a pole. I would not run into Anna a second time. Mathematically, I figured, stabbing at rough estimates of population, cities, and time, it was as close to impossible as it could be without being possible.

Each city block, the city changed; at the borders they attempted a blend. Men and women in multi-layers of grey and brown held out empty Styrofoam© cups to women in down coats—green, red dress hems peeking out from below—who rushed down stairs to meet their subway train. In the middle of the street, a young boy, no older, I figured, than thirteen, deftly maneuvered a unicycle down the center of the road, 7th Avenue. Then it occurred to me, Benjamin Prestik was from this city. I mean, not this borough, but he had walked these streets, looking for a job, trying to impress Carol, the girl he loved, the one girl out there for him. He had kicked an empty McDonald’s™ bag into a gutter in this street late at night, when the traffic had thinned out, wondering whether to travel west or not, loving Carol but seriously, reasonably wondering if she was really the only girl out there for him.
Ben lived in Brooklyn, and he spent a lot of time on the subway, traveling to his shitty temp jobs and looking for real jobs to apply to. At the next intersection, I descended a staircase and, at the bottom, swiped my MetroPass, hoisted my duffel bag over the turnstile, and boarded the first train that arrived. It was approaching 5 PM and the subway was full of businessmen and woman traveling north from the financial district—consulting my map. I stood, holding to the above railing and holding my duffel bag tight against my body with my free hand. This felt like research. I looked around. I could feel the muscles in my shoulder flex and strain as the train started and stopped. As we accelerated, my biceps contracted and my triceps retracted; as we slowed, my triceps contracted and my biceps retracted. When a seat opened up, as we passed through upper Manhattan, past the tall buildings and along Central Park into the Bronx, I took it. I took one of my new notebooks from my duffel bag, ripped the cardboard open on a package of Pilot pens, and I wrote furiously; I noted the difference in dress of the people that boarded and the people that exited; I noted the vibrations of the car, the shift of light and we went from underground to above ground, the demolished landscape to the right and the patient, hulking Coliseum-like structure of Yankee stadium to the right; in a handwriting I wasn’t sure I’d be able to decipher later, I recorded the ratio of men to women in my car—which had, at this point, considerably thinned out in population—of whom I thought to be homeless, poor, middle-class, and wealthy; I transcribed a conversation I overheard between an shaky old man with a newsies hat and his granddaughter; I tried, in three different paragraphs of exposition, to describe in metaphor the harsh Sopranos™-like accent of the girl next to me—I noted the cliché of her attire: large, gold hoop earrings, a puffy NBA Hornets jacket bought when the Hornets played in Charlotte before moving to New Orleans, a short denim skirt—even in such weather as this—and legs as thin as tent poles in dark, webbed nylons. When my hand cramped up, I
recorded the sound of the train on my Dictaphone and massaged the muscle between my thumb and index finger. Then, I wrote some more. Finally, when there were only three people left in the car—and one of them walked up and down the car trying to sell bootleg DVDs (of which I recorded)—I exited the bus. I didn’t go outside, though. I climbed the first level of stairs, crossed over the tracks, and descended down some stairs and re-boarded on the other side, heading south back toward Manhattan. When I sat, I started all over again, writing it all down. I stopped, briefly, to examine the map on the car wall. When I found my exit, I resumed, but progress was much slower, being so anxious about missing my stop. I didn’t miss it, though. I exited the car again, climbed the stairs, and walked to the Shell-Sea Hostel.

Janelle was still working the front desk. She greeted me by name. She leaned far over the counter to view the television, which was, as though some master plot was being exposed, showing *NYC-Vívor®*. I went to the kitchen and properly placed my things into the almost-empty refrigerator, properly labeled with the Sharpie® that hung from a white string on the refrigerator door. When I got up to my room, it was 6:30 PM. I set my duffel bag at the foot of my bed and opened my computer to Benjamin’s section of *This Monster Land*. I wrote, adding a completely new section about his night before leaving Carol, imagining a final game at Yankee stadium with an old friend—the tickets, a gift from said friend. I wrote until the moment Benjamin stepped onto the Amtrak® train and left New York and Carol behind.

When I was finished, I went downstairs and made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Janelle had left the desk and was sitting on the couch in the living room. I sat next to her. We talked, briefly, and she offered me some wine which, she explained, she was not supposed to be drink while working the front desk, but considering the practically-closed
state of the hostel, she did not mind drinking. I obliged—after all, it could not exceed my ten
dollar alcohol limit. She brought out the gallon bottle of cheap wine, and we passed it back
and forth, talking sometimes, but mostly watching the television. Once again, the reality
show had been playing as a marathon, showing episode after episode. I wasn’t sure if each
city was getting its individual chance to view the terrible show, in its entirety—Boston gets it
on February 27, New York on the 28th, etc—or if there was a station that actually played the
show so frequently, as though it had already reached the status of Roseanne® or Seinfeld®.
When an episode ended and a new one began, my question was answered as the
commentator said over the opening credits, “Now, brought to you by Moogal© search
gengines and PajamaJeans® lounge wear, we present to you the most popular and widely-
viewed reality show ever in America, NYC-Vivor®. Remember, if any of you insomniacs
have missed an episode tonight, BSC networks will be replaying the season in its entirety
each night throughout February and March, starting at 10 PM.”

I asked Janelle, “What’s the strategy, here? Do that many people really watch this
shit? I don’t see how BSC could be making any money on this.”

“Are you kidding?” She answered. “This is the most popular reality show since Ala-
Cannibal-Ama®.”

“Ala-Cannibal-Ama®? Wasn’t that one cancelled after just a few episodes?”

“Yeah. They had to cancel when the voice-over guy went missing after wandering
into the swamps alone to take a leak. They later found that he’d been eaten. It’s revealed in
the final episode, in which they also revealed that the tribe, who they thought were
undiscovered indigenous cannibals in the Alabama swamps, were just laid-off highway
workers who were following some crackpot religious nut.”

“You mean, they continued filming after the third episode?”
“Of course. The entire thing had been filmed before it ever went to cable. Once it was cancelled, bootlegged copies of the remaining nine episodes were leaked into the public. It became a cult hit. The company, afraid they were losing profits from the merciless cancellation of on-air cannibalism, brought it to court and won; they were able to release the season on DVD, under the stipulation that they give it an NC-17 rating.”

“If it was already a cult hit, and the bootlegged DVD’s were readily available, why did anybody buy the company’s DVDs?”

“Bonus features, unreleased materials. Stuff like that. They’re already planning on shooting a second season for a premium network; that is, they’ve shot the second season and they’re trying to find a network to air it. Rumor is,” Janelle continued, “that the cannibals take over the film crew, and a small town, and then coordinate a competition-based form of reality television of their own. It’s supposed to win some huge rewards, if it is ever released.”

“So, BSC thinks that by playing a full season of this bullshit NYC-Vivor® every night that it can compete with Ala-cana—whats-its-name?”

“What they’re trying to do, according to the internet,” Janelle explained, “is to grab the attention of every American who has ever had a sleepless night. Statistics show that one out of every three Americans over the age of eighteen, particularly during this economic crisis, spends at least one sleepless night a week in front of the television. So, they’ve designed a two part strategy: first, they incorporate a series of ‘hooks’ at crucial moments in the television show, coordinated in-sync with when most Americans return from bathroom breaks and flip back to the channel after surfing other channels during commercial breaks. The first two ‘hooks’ are aimed to draw the viewer into the particular episode with enough fervor to hold them until the end; the third ‘hook,’ which always occurs exactly at the twenty-three minutes and thirty-two second mark, functions as a cliffhanger and motivates
the viewer to stay tuned for the remaining eleven episodes, which of course, also function on
the same ‘three-hook’ strategy. Second, each evening the marathon starts at a different
episodes and plays through all twelve. You know, it starts on episode one and plays through
till the end on the first night, and then on the second night it starts on episode two and plays
through the season, plus episode one. The third night, episode three. This way, if their third
hook doesn’t compel the viewer to watch through to the end, which usually isn’t the case—
rather, the viewer is called away by some terrific accident, strong feeling of guilt, or petition
for sex—the viewer can tune in the next night and catch right up with what they missed out
on.”

I thought about the inanity of Janelle’s explanation clear through to the first
commercial break, somehow missing the first ‘hook.’ Finally, I said, “It sounds like an awful
lot of scripting and strategizing for a show that is supposed to be based on reality, doesn’t
it?”

“Come on, Karin. Don’t be so naïve,” Janelle said, and passed me the bottle of wine.
I wasn’t sure what she meant, so I quit talking. We sat there together, and during the second
commercial break, in which the sponsor exaggerated about the tailgating and girl-attracting
possibilities of PajamaJeans®, I noticed Janelle was examining my PajamaJeans®, which I was
only wearing because it saved me the expense of purchasing additional pajama pants, and I
hadn’t expected to be down here watching television with the hostel clerk after midnight.
For a moment, I considered explaining to Janelle how I’d come to own the pants, but then
decided I’d rather not get into all of it again.

In the episode that we watched, a man in a business suit was suspended upside down
in Central Park; his legs were bound by rope to two thin, opposing trees which had been
bent down and held in place by two other ropes, tied to stakes. Another man, whom I
recognized as the winner, the man with the neck tie fastened around his forehead like
Rambo™, held a torch dangerously close to one of the ropes that held the trees down.
Apparently, they were trying to get him to confess something, threatening to split him in half
via the two trees if he didn’t oblige.

“You know what?” Janelle interrupted my mental analysis of the program, “you’re
the only other man I’ve ever heard of named Karen.”

I took a drink of the wine. I was beginning to feel a little drunk. “What do you
mean?” I asked. “Who else do you know named Karin?”

“Him.” Janelle pointed at the screen. “The guy with the thing around his forehead.
He’s also named Karen. Though, he spells it with a ‘Y,’” she said. “K-A-R-Y-N,” she spelled
out. Janelle was dangerously thin, and I could tell that the wine was affecting her too.

“You’re kidding.”

“No. Wait. Just listen.” Pretty soon, the narrator described Karyn’s skills, addressing
him by name. “See?”

“There are others,” I said. Armenians and chess players, mostly.”

Janelle didn’t answer.

The man in the business suit who was tied to the trees was a mess of snot and sweat,
and he fumbled through his wallet. Finally, he pulled out a picture, which I’m sure everybody
imagined—hoped, maybe—was a picture of his wife; it turned out that it was, but not the
sort of picture viewers across the country had supposedly imagined. (Enter: “Hook #3). The
picture was of his wife having sex with of his coworkers; she wore an elf costume and was
bent over a sleigh. The deep-voiced narrator explained that after having been sent the
photograph anonymously, the tortured business-man-now-contestant-on-the-most-popular-
reality-television-show-in-America had attempted to leave the show, and his team, to
confront her. The team, then, whose chances of winning would be dramatically decreased by
the man’s absence, threatened to split him in half to regain their chances, for the sake of the
team. The total team’s good, that is. Eventually the man agreed not to leave, confessed to
have acted on impulse. The team hugged him, and forgave him, and untied him. Then, a
commercial. I stood up to leave.

You know something else is going to happen.” She passed me the bottle of wine again and
slapped the cushion next to her. I sat.

When the show resumed, each of the contestants returned to their camps—
makeshift tents constructed with torn tarps and pieces of cardboard—to find an envelope on
their bunks—boughs of pine branches and discarded plastic sheets. One-by-one, as the
envelopes were opened, they all found a similar picture as the man had who had just been
tortured: a loved one, that is, photographed in a sexual position. The final credits rolled.

Janelle and I continued to pass the bottle back and forth, long past the marathon’s
ending. We didn’t talk much; a documentary about the fall of Detroit, America’s once-great
city of industry, flashed grainy stills of violence and decay and abandoned buildings on
abandoned streets across the screen. Morgan Freeman narrated, and before long, Janelle fell
asleep. I went back to my room. I checked my email before falling asleep. Besides a couple
advertisements—one to increase my manhood, and the other to increase my romantic
stamina—there was an email from Sleightor. I responded and shut down my computer.

Tomorrow morning, I’d write, and then I walk the streets of Brooklyn.

**Trip Expenses**
**Day 1 in New York**
*February 28—From Arrival until Night*
3,600.79
(29.00)—MetroPass
(4.50)—2 cups of coffee from Café Lumpy
(127.68)—3 nights at Shell-Sea Hostel
(8.50)—Padlock from Shell-Sea Hostel
(3.75)—Thrift Store Purchases*
(2.50)—Large Slice of Cheese Pizza
(177.17)—clothes/alarm/winter wear purchases*
(19.95)—Phone Charger*
(8.05)—Used copy of Ezra Pound’s Selected Poems*
(36.17)—pens, notebooks*
(29.82)—Groceries (bread, peanut butter, jelly, 2 instant pasta meals, butter, 1 block sharp cheddar, instant oatmeal, 3 apples, Ibuprofen, ¼ lb sliced pastrami, 1 jar Sauerkraut)
3,153.70—Remaining Balance

*245.09 of total expenses used to recoup items stolen in Boston; intend to recoup 245.09 from B. Hart, if agreeable
^8.05 of expenses used to buy book which was not stolen, but purchased to replace other, more difficult to find—and most likely cheaper—book: will still seek compensation from B. Hart.

Email from Sleightor

Subject: NO and ALB
From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
February 14, 2009, 9:10PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: Low

Karin,

Hello, friend. I hope you’re enjoying your travels as much as I used. That is, back when Bunsen thought my emerging was an important enough of an event to be funded. Really, you should cherish these times. Anyway, I recently sent Hart an email asking about your trip, about whether or not I could assist you in some way, and he mentioned a couple things that we should look into.

First, he said you will be spending some time in New Orleans. If so, let me know. I live near the French Quarter and I could show you around a bit.

Second, it appears that you’ll be stopping in Albuquerque, it says here, to do some research on local farming as well. I have a former student who currently adjuncts at the University of Mexico, and works fulltime at The La Granja Farm. You should look her up. Last I knew, she was still in Albuquerque, though she has a tendency to pick up and leave on a whim. A fucking beautiful town, Albuquerque is. Rough and beautiful people, too. Anyway, I’ve kept up with her over the years, and she is really something to experience, though a bit off the handle at times. You’ll see. If I remember right, The La Granja Farm is about five to six miles north of the Amtrak station. Look her up. Her name is Tabby Noebale.

Let me know if there is any other way I can help you out.
Take it easy,
Laurence.

Email to Sleightor
Subject: RE: NO and ALB
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
February 14, 2009, 9:10PM
To: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
Priority: Low

Laurence,

Thank you. I will be sure to contact you in New Orleans. If I make it to Albuquerque, I’ll look up your former student, too.

Actually, I do have a question for you that may or may not have to do with the novel. It’s just something I’ve been curious about. When Bunsen somehow found my first manuscript, they seemed incredibly disappointed to find out that it was non-fiction. Offended, even. I guess I was just wondering what their aversion to non-fiction was, as well as how far their disdain extends. I mean, if parts of my novel seem too real, will they toss it? It is difficult to experience these places, and then make up what happens in fictional versions of them. I’m sure this is simply an amateur’s problem, but I would definitely appreciate any help you could give me on the subject.

Also, I have a favor/question for you. How familiar are you with 1) Finn Fien, 2) Bunsen’s Author-Sit program? I only ask because before I left I signed a waiver that allowed Hart to let my apartment for a struggling author, in my absence. It seems that Fien is now living in my apartment. I don’t care so much about letting somebody stay, it’s just that he’s taking some liberties with my possessions. It appears that he found my library card, and is now assuming my identity to check out books, destroy them, and then return them. I am racking up some serious fines as a result. Also, and I am not sure if this is related or not, but I have noticed an obnoxious amount of spam mail in my account recently—like, adult-content spam—which I’d never before received. I wonder if it has something to do with Fien using my internet. Does he, that you know of, indulge in any such habits that may increase the amount of mail I receive advertising an increase to my manhood?

Finally, I had my suitcase stolen out of my room in Boston. Unfortunately the Prentice University Library’s copy of Two was in there. The library wants to charge me something like ten cents a day until it is returned. Is there any way that I could purchase a copy from you when in New Orleans to send to them so I don’t go bankrupt out here?

Thanks a lot for your help,
Karin.
Chapter 32: My Youth, Jacob’s Past, March 1

According to schedule, I woke at 8 AM to the sound of voices on a local radio station exclaiming that the harsh winter weather was about to let up. Today, said the voices over my new alarm clock, the temperature should hit the low forties. Expect the streets to be wet. My head ached lightly from the distant memory of cheap wine. Janelle had mentioned last night that I should look her up if I ended up in Brooklyn. She had the day off and was more than willing to meet me for a cheap lunch in Park Slope. I called, and we made arrangements to meet her under the stone archway at the entrance of Prospect Park.

I hung up the phone and walked next door to the Café Lumpy to get an early start on my writing. The writing started with much difficulty. I felt that the night before I had recorded what I could write from my brief New York experience. Anyway, Benjamin was on the train. I considered postponing the writing for the time being, until I could gain the experience to inform the writing, but worried about my meeting with B. Hart in the morning. In order to meet my goals, I would have to complete at least ten pages this morning, and then another ten after I parted ways with Anna this evening, assuming that I would part ways with her, which I did.

After starting and restarting several different accounts of Ben’s first moments on the train, I was annoyed when a Café employee interrupted to tell me that if I wanted to stay I’d have to order some food. I could not, in his words, rent the table all morning for fifty-cent coffee refills. I irritably ordered a bowl of oatmeal and resumed my starting. Finally, around 9:30 AM I hit my stride on a section about Jacob, the ornery retiree who had decided to visit his brother in San Diego.
I wrote about Jacob’s evening at a Detroit Tigers’ game in Detroit and his walk home. Though I’d never been to Detroit, I saw the streets as I remembered them during the grainy documentary I’d recently watched last night. I could see them as though they were right outside the café window. I wrote, not only with the ferocity of being in the moment, but with the fear of not meeting my deadlines, the fear of losing steam for good. During Jacob’s walk home, I wrote, he was asked for spare change by a shaking woman with a deathly cough. Jacob, though frugal, and certainly hard-up himself, couldn’t ignore her cough and decided to give her not just some change, but a five dollar bill that he had left over in his wallet—he’d been planning on using it for a newspaper and a 40 oz bottle of beer when he got home. As he pulled out his wallet, his face was met with a hard fist from a man who had spun around the corner. They took his wallet and ran. Jacob, who had been punched in the face before, was not injured from the knuckles that glanced off his cheekbone and caused him to lose balance; when he fell, however, he inexplicably panicked: shortness of breath, the shakes, the sick feeling of being punished for trying to help. He wretched in the alley, aging and curled in a fetal position. After several minutes, or perhaps they were hours, Jacob stood and recognized nothing. He wandered through the streets, past grainy stills of violence and decay and abandoned buildings on abandoned streets as a deep, soothing voice—a voice not unlike Morgan Freeman’s, in fact—echoed in his pounding head. “This is no longer the city he knew,” said the rich, quivering voice of the Freeman stand-in. “Jacob, unable to find his way home.” Trying to cross an expressway, Jacob was pulled over by a State Trooper and brought to the hospital. Though he was not hurt badly by the punch, Jacob had been taking a lot of aspirin lately, and his blood was thin, causing a small cut to bleed as though it were a large one, thus scaring the officers and giving them a course on which to act upon finding this seemingly deranged old man.
Finally back at his house the next morning, Jacob, without sleep still heard a Morgan Freeman-ish voice in his head. It was singing now, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, “This is your hometown.” He packed a small suitcase and took a cab to the train station where he bought a ticket to San Diego. Perhaps his hatred for his brother’s success would allow him to forget about his hatred for this new Detroit.

The three chapters that I wrote, including an action packed account of the baseball game, a nail-biter that ended in a Tigers’ victory with a walk-off homerun in the bottom of the eleventh inning, which explained why Jacob was out so late; a flashback to when Jacob was a young boy and his father had taken him and Caleb—his San Diego brother—to an interleague play game in which the Tigers had been beat by the St. Louis Cardinals, though the blow of defeat had been softened when Jacob caught a homerun by Al Kaline and Caleb did not; and an episode in which Jacob got into a sharp argument with a vendor who refused to pass back the fifty cents worth of change from a glass of beer, taking it instead as a tip, totaled at thirteen pages. I felt good that the pages were there, though I still had plenty of work to do this evening in getting Katrina and Olivia onto their respective trains. This, according to B. Hart’s email, would be vital at our meeting tomorrow morning, especially if I hoped to recoup the expenses from the items I had to replace.

I gave myself an hour to meet up with Janelle, unsure if I’d be able to find the arches or not. It turns out I was, and I ended up sitting there for twenty minutes before she arrived. It was 2 PM. I had three hours to wander Brooklyn before I caught up with Anna at yet another famous New York park. Janelle insisted on running some errands before we ate, which she assured me would be part of her Brooklyn tour. She lived in Park Slope and the tour consisted of a Brooklyn post office, her marijuana dealer’s apartment—I had to wait outside—a Laundromat to throw something quickly in the wash, a grocery store that sold
organic produce, the Laundromat again to quickly throw what was in the washer into the dryer, a pharmacy where I was able to tour the aisles as Janelle picked up her inhaler, the Laundromat again to pick up what was in the dryer, and then finally to the bank and then back to the entranceway at Prospect Park. In total, my tour spanned no more than three city blocks of Brooklyn, and I was so caught up in keeping up with Janelle that I had time to write down only one observation, which I did as she made a deposit at the bank (I had to set down her bag of clean laundry to write it). The observation, actually, was more of an addendum to my list of rules than an observation. In short, I should conduct my tours on my own, or if that isn’t possible, I will always have a way out, a reason to set down a laundry bag, a back-up excuse to leave hurriedly.

When we finally returned, the oatmeal had worn off and I was ready for the cheap Brooklyn lunch Janelle had promised. I had expected something exotically Brooklyn, a strangely fashioned sandwich or burger, or perhaps a chili that the locals referred to with pride as “Brooklyn Chili.” Instead, Janelle led me to a hot dog vendor that hawked his sausages on the boulevard between Prospect Park and the Brooklyn museum. We walked into the park a short ways to eat, through the woods and past a modestly dressed black man who had recently, it appeared, come across difficult times and practiced his golf swing on pine cones along the trail as though advancing in a PGA tour. Janelle greeted him by name and asked if we could play through. We removed his cap and bowed, smiling large. Janelle and I found a bench on a wooden deck that was built along the edge of a pond. It was secluded from trail-walkers, and the park looked beautiful from this vantage: everything occurred at distances, the kids playing softball just beyond the pond’s edge, the paddle-boaters paddling just past the fountain, the aviary’s remarkable columns just on the other side, the sirens always in the distance. Janelle told me, as we ate our now-cold hotdogs,
smothered in Sauerkraut and mustard, that her father had taken her to that very spot every Sunday after their church service. Her mother and brothers would stay home, but Janelle had been privileged. Once, she told me, they even rented a paddle boat and went across the pond, but they’d always kept it a secret from the rest of the family. Before her siblings were old enough to spend such afternoons with their father, however, he passed away. While walking home from work, he’d been struck by a news van that was racing to Williamsburg to cover a warehouse fire.

After telling her story, Janelle asked me about my family. What does your father do, she asked. Her question sort of alarmed me, in that I hadn’t thought about my family in a long time. I swallowed the last bit of my hot dog. I told her about my own father’s tragic accident. He was a retired auto worker from Detroit. An avid baseball fan, he went to games every week. It was the only expense he allowed for his own pleasure. One night on the way home, he was mugged. He wasn’t injured, per say, just spooked. Afterward, everything changed. He reevaluated his life in Detroit, etc, and ended up moving to San Diego where he had other family.

“What about your mother?” Janelle asked.

I stalled, looking down at my watch. It was 5:30 PM! I apologized to Janelle and asked her if she’d point me in the direction of Bryant Park. I explained to her that I had an incredibly important meeting there in thirty minutes, and she obliged.

Once on the subway, en route to meet Anna, I tried to reason out why I had lied to Janelle about my father. I couldn’t. I felt both slighted by her “tour” and anonymous. I felt that I could tell her anything, regardless of where it came from. A guilty feeling dropped into the pit of my stomach, but I distracted myself with thoughts of seeing Anna. Besides, I
reasoned, I felt as though I had satisfied Janelle: she wanted a story, not a truth. That is what she had traded me when she told me about her father. A story for a story.
Chapter 33: A Hidden Subway Station, March 1

When I arrived at the park, I immediately recognized it, and not from the other day when I walked by it with Anna. I recognized it from a story, actually, that a friend had told me. He had described the park to the most minor detail: the wine bar (finely carved swinging benches hanging from chains, well-dressed bartenders, bottles twirled and spun behind the bar), the courtyard (covered in snow now, but I could see it in the summer, a vast expanse of green lawn, sometimes a stage upfront, sometimes music, sometimes a movie screen), the path (an aggregate-paved walkway around the courtyard, complete with iron chairs and tables that sat unevenly on the ground, scattered with readers, writers, watchers), stone tables for chess (yes, even in the winter: old men wearing wool suits playing young boys in shabby coats and getting beat, beat, beat), a place for a ping pong table, a place for a bocce ball court, and so many people. In winter, the same as he had described it in summer. His story, which had actually happened on the grounds I currently walked, looking for Anna, was simple. It was like this, crowded. He sat in a corner and read a book, which I had loaned him and he still hasn’t returned. No I.O.U. A lady in a red dress with a tight waist and flared skirt, like a dancer from the twenties—indeed, dark curly hair in a bob—sat cross-legged behind him. He, my friend, had noticed her, had watched her, had thought about talking to her. Instead, he drank from the coffee he’d purchased from the kiosk located at the entrance I was to meet Anna (his coffee, though, was mixed with cheap, Canadian whiskey purchased several block away from Times Square). After a while, after he’d long since given up on talking to her, a man approached wearing a plaid vest and suspenders and a newsies hat. He held out his hand for the lady—the stranger, not my friend—and she stood. According to him, my friend, they started making out, not passionately, but movie scripted-like. It went on
for at least twenty minutes, the two of them standing, kissing, and nothing else. Walkers walked by, watchers watched. Invested gazers stubbed their knees against the stone wall that separated the paved pathway from the lawn.

I remembered it exactly as my friend had described it in his story, and as I replaced the gentleman and the lady with myself and Anna, Anna surprised me from behind. I told you to meet me at the Northeast corner, she said. What are you doing wandering around here?

Anna’s words came looser from her mouth than I had remembered. As the evening went on, I noticed several changes that I hadn’t noticed yesterday. This was the first.

1. Anna is more comfortable, relaxed when she talks. She has what I can only label a Northern drawl, like her tongue has lost its roughness, eliminated friction, is well lubricated.

When she addressed me, she stood with her weight shifted to one side, as Marlon Brando or Ingrid Bergman would stand, in front of a camera, filming a movie in Bryant Park. Anna’s hair was the same as it had been: shoulder length and blonde, with wisps curling at the bottom in separated strands. Her blue jeans flared at the bottom over a pair of hiking boots and she wore a green, army-style jacket with a grey hooded sweatshirt underneath. I told her I was making my way to the Northeast corner, and then I hugged her, I mean, I really grabbed a hold of her, carefully. Another thing I noticed new about Anna.

2. Anna is slightly heavier than before. Not in an unhealthy way, but exactly the opposite. Her body has developed a new firmness—though she had always been in great shape—and she felt warm, confident. All the walking, I thought, that goes with travel.
She held my hand. Our fingers were not laced together because she wore mittens, but they were cupped together, the way you would hold a child's hand. We walked slowly around the park. I carefully chose my steps, planned ahead with precision for fear that choosing a space too narrow would mean I’d have to let go of her hand, and I was not willing to risk it.

Finally, she asked, “How are you on food? That is to say, have you eaten recently?”

“I have,” I told her. “A nasty hot dog in Park Slope. But I could use a drink.” We walked to the wine bar.

“Park Slope? I’m impressed. Your first time to New York and you’re already seeing beyond the boroughs. Describing locations based on neighborhoods is one of the better ways to fit in around here. That, along with not looking up. Nothing good can come from looking up. New Yorkers know that.”

“How long have you been here?”

“This time, just a few days. But I knew the city well during college. I grew up in Boston, remember.”

When we reached the wine bar I started to turn in, and Anna stopped me. “No, no,” she said. “We’re travelers. If we’re going to drink, we must drink like travelers. Follow me.” Another thing.

3. Two things really, that both have to do with Anna’s speech, as referenced in the first thing. In all the years I’ve known Anna, I’ve never known her to a) say things so dramatically, using repetition such as “no, no, no,” while shaking her head, and b) I’ve never heard her refer to us with such unity, particularly when giving imperative instructions (e.g. “we’re travelers,” “we must drink like travelers”).
So, I followed Anna out of the park and towards a crowded bodega on 6th Avenue, the Avenue of the Americas. She told me to wait outside and a few moments later she returned with two Styrofoam™ cups. “Try it,” she said.

I took a sip, expecting hot and instead, feeling bubbles on my tongue.

“I got this round, you can get the next.” Anna looked at her watch. She said, “I want to take you somewhere, but we have to wait a bit, at least until the subway crows thins out. It’s Monday, so I don’t think it will be long. We sat down at a bench across the street from the New York Public Library. I pulled the collar of my coat up and sunk my chin into it; I turned so that I could face Anna, while also being able to keep an eye on the library.

We talked about the city for a while. Anna was curious about everything that I had to say, about my interactions.

“It sounds like you’re really making some progress on the novel.”

“A little. I have deadlines, which help.”

“What about the travel? Is that helping?”

Across the street a police car parallel parked in front of the library. I turned inward, toward Anna and tried not to look back. “I think it just helps to be away from Prentice. I’m seeing the places that I’ve been writing about. I mean, they are practically writing themselves, the places, that are.”

Anna seemed enraptured in what I was saying. I wasn’t used to it. As much as I had wanted this moment, to see Anna again, to convince her to come home with me, for some reason I couldn’t. It felt too premature. It felt impossible. I had imagined finding her at the end, when I returned to Prentice, exasperated, having searched for her in all the major cities on my list. She had caught me off guard by not making me look for her. Like in a board game, it was as though on her first roll, she landed on a magical square that had brought her
to the highest square; me, I never hit a magic square, I just kept rolling, moving forward and growing older.

I had trouble even paying attention to Anna. There is little room for attention span in this city, unless one has lost his physical senses. As hard as I focused, I could only make it through the first few sentences of anything Anna had to say, and then a man would walk by wearing an officer’s uniform, which would turn out only to be a dark-blue shirt with a stitched insignia on the pocket and a large cell phone attached to the belt, or somebody would call out my name, and I’d look around, only to find a Karen, or Aaron, running to meet the yeller. The police car across the street—I had looked several times, each time weakening my resolve not to—pulled out. The driver, through dark sunglasses, watched me as he rolled up his window. I was sure.

Finally, Anna said something brief that I could understand. “Karin, you’re off.”

“Excuse me?”

“Something is wrong. You can’t even focus on me. You look, I don’t know, anxious or something. Do you need another beer?”

“Maybe. Yes. This plays kills your focus.”

I finished the rest of my beer and watched the police cruiser circle Bryant Park and stop again at the library. Through the window, I watched the officer peering around. His eyes stopped by where Anna and I were talking, and he picked up his radio. “I’m just not comfortable here, I guess. So many people.

“Let’s walk. Come on.” Anna put her arm in mine and we walked down The Avenue of the Americas, Anna and me, and when we reached the next bodega we stopped for a refill.
I scanned the street. I couldn’t see the cruiser. I approached the bodega and noticed a security eye over the door; with a high-pitched buzz, it panned from the left to the right, back to the left. Holding the Styrofoam® cups, I asked Anna, “aren’t you ever afraid of getting caught doing this? I mean, what is the penalty for drinking on the street in New York.”

Anna hesitated. “I haven’t thought about it. Money, I’m sure. Some amount of money.”

And then, another thing struck me.

4. Anna, for the first time since I’ve known her, had not prefigured the consequences. This, I believe freed her to move ahead.

She continued: “Just buy the beer, tall ones, and pour them in the doorway. Papi won’t care.”

“Papi?”

“Yeah, the clerk. He loves it when you call him Papi.”

“You’re kidding, right? You know him?”

“I’ve been here before. I’m staying just up the road.”

“Where? Where are you staying?” I stepped out of the view of the eye as it panned toward me.

Anna stepped into the street and pulled me toward her. She extended her arm and pointed down 36th street. “Two block down that way. You can see the fire escape coming down from the white, brick building. I’m there.”

“So, this guy’s name is Papi?”
“No, it’s not his name. It’s just what he likes to be called. It’s like a Dominican thing, or something. Trust me, the beer will be cheaper if you call him Papi.”

I headed into the bodega. Passing the counter, Papi looked down at me from his elevated lookout. Before I made it to the cooler, Anna rushed in.

“Karin, how are you on pockets? Grab a few extra for the walk. It’s a long one.”

When she left, she said “Oye, papi. Este es mi amigo, Karin.” She pointed at me, grinning.

“Él me está comprando cerveza. ¡Amor, Papi!”

He winked at her and flashed a stained, toothy grin, and then turned to watch me; while I selected six beers based on what I suspected of Anna’s beer tastes, he did not take his eyes off me. I set them on the counter, trying to avoid his stare. His sharp cheek bones bordered a face that seemed to always be burning with intensity: sharp, dark eyes, eyebrows lifted, teeth clenched. Without verbal exchange, I paid for the beers and went out. In the doorway, I put my back to the street, standing directly under the eye, and pulled my coat to the side. I tried to transfer the beers from the can to the cup, without being seen by the inside or the outside; not an easy task in such a busy city. Anna stood on other side of the street, grinning. Nodding her head, even, as if to say, Come on, Karin. Do it. By the time I pried the lid off the cup and twisted off the beer cap, another cruiser, maybe the same one as before, passed. The window slowly rolled down. I wrapped my coat around my other arm, holding the beer and the cups against my body; I looked away and eventually they passed. I tried to pour the beer again, but couldn’t. The cruiser double-parked a block down the road, and though it was too far to say for sure, I thought I could see a face in the side mirror, watching me. I forced the twisted-off cap back on the beer, put it in my pocket, and defeatedly went back to face Anna. I handed her her cup.
“It’s empty.” A pressure rose in my chest as her expression shifted from anticipatory to disappointed.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t. That cop, I think he’s watching me.” I turned to nod in the direction of the car, but it was gone.

“There’s nobody there. Why would they be watching you anyway?”

“It’s a long story.”

“You need to loosen up. You’re being paranoid. I mean, come on! No offense, but you’re a writer. Who could be after you?” Anna pulled the bottles from my pocket and took a seat at a nearby bench. The sidewalks had thinned out as the sun began to set, and the temperature dropped. She removed her hat and allowed her hair to fall in front of her face, hiding it from me, from the street. Hunched over, Anna filled the cups and handed mine back to. “Come on,” she said. We have a ways to walk.”

As we continued down 6th Avenue, Anna described the layout of the streets. “As long as you’re in the middle of the island,” she said, “the Avenues are up and down, and the Streets are left and right.” She hummed a song, then sang:

I love the New York beat:
shady on the Aves,
and seedy on the streets.

I didn’t know if she was making it up, or if I’d heard it before. I asked her, “What about the edges?”

“Edges of what?” Anna walked across a long grate as a subway car rushed loudly beneath us. After a day of sun and warmer temperatures, the melting snow formed a pool of water that seemed to flow south from the Bronx, all pouring endlessly into this 6th avenue grate. I wondered where all the water went. Downward, always down, past the streets, the layers of subway tunnels, dripping down rails into drainage and tunnels further down.
Endlessly down. I walked to the side of the gate. At the edge, Anna took my arm again. We walked for about thirty minutes, silently for the most part, sometimes poking about the future—where are you headed next? I don’t know. West, maybe. North. When do you think you’ll be done? At the end of my trip. What then? Start another one—each question and answer followed by a silence longer than the last. We left the past untouched.

There was a dip in layout as we reached the village. The skyscrapers in Upper Manhattan gave way to smaller building—I snuck glances upwards as Anna sipped her beer—and then rose again near the Financial District. The building faces of Upper Manhattan and, from what I could see of the Financial District, were new, shiny, and reflective. They made the streets look twice as crowded as they were. The village, revamped and commercialized I’ve been told since its revolutionary existence in lore, still felt quaint, regardless of the amped cover charges, high priced brownstones and well-dressed streetwalkers—the revisions, as a travel, didn’t affect me. The small, old-world feeling emanated from the brick buildings, the lack of mirrors, the inability to see one’s reflection and recognize their status: work in a mirrored-building, use to work in a mirrored-building, will never work in a mirrored building, just traveling. The fire escapes piled up brick facades like afterthoughts; they creaked as the wind crept through the gaps of Manhattan, but they seemed seldom used. Anna pulled the collar up of her army-like jacket, and I stepped in and out of the current narrative: for a moment I had never even started the novel, hadn’t thought about it, and Anna and I had just made a stop for the evening before heading up to Boston to visit her family for a late-Christmas; it was growing dark quickly, and we didn’t know the city that well; we were hungry after two days of driving and eating from gas stations; the vendors have all closed up shop and we would have to spend more money than we had for a warm meal. But I couldn’t stay in that narrative for long. As soon as one of us spoke, I
bounced back. I was looking for her, right here, her arm in mine, and I wouldn’t find her until the end, somehow, through a grand elevation of plot. Glimpses, just bait really, to keep moving forward, emerged, but I’d have to wait until that last stop. That was my narrative.

We made a turn on 13\textsuperscript{th} street and headed West, toward the North River. Eventually the street lost its numerical status—the edges—and turned into Horatio. Anna stopped a little ways down, and welcomed me to the West Village. The wind tore through the side streets along the far end of the Hudson River and spilled past us, into the middle. Anna stopped and faced a building across the street. A row of brownstones, older and rougher looking than those I’d seen in Brooklyn, splayed out before us. Directly in front of us, though, was one that had been long ago painted white. “It’s my favorite house in the village,” she said. “Look how it stands out. Like somebody really important lived here, somebody with ideas, a creator.”

“A reserved politician,” I added, “somebody who knows his status, but doesn’t want other to.”

“Or an eccentric artist whose landlord only gave them two options: brown or white.”

Snow crept up the front of the white house. Splotches of white stuck against the chipped, brick façade. From the snow a rough tangle of ivy emerged, unkempt long before winter had touched. The first level was halfway below the ground, and it rose to five stories, at least one level above its neighbors. A clay pot sat on a banister next to the doorway, filled with snow and the grey, neglected vines of ivy. A bicycle leaned, covered in thin piles of snow, frozen to a sparse, narrow tree in front.

“Once, while I was in college, I sat in front of this house for several hours, hoping to see who would come out, but nobody arrived. Not even a visit.”

“Didn’t that creep the neighbors out?”
“Nah. This is New York. No one even attempts recognition. It is too difficult. People acting peculiar is pretty normal here, if you hadn’t noticed. This is New York,” she repeated, and I thought she would start singing again, but she didn’t. “Everybody is wandering down some hidden hallway of their own frolic. Spying on somebody, eavesdropping, recording voices in a crowded room. Buying, selling. Every speaker, every story is faceless and remarkable except to the teller.”

Anna’s words dropped into the snow and blended in, like everything else, unnoticed and unremarkable. We stood there for a few minutes and I put my arm around her; she huddled in. When our cups were empty we refilled them, only to empty them again. Flakes of snow dropped slowly and Anna took my hand in her mitten hand and led me back up Horatio to 4th street, which we took south back to The Avenue of the Americas. There was something else.

5. Anna, maybe for just this moment, seemed not to simply wanderer. I was certain of that. She was looking for something. For content, perhaps. Instead of combing the surface for inconsistencies, as I had always known her to do, I realized that she was attempting to build something new. I was sad for what I knew would remain my loss, but a little part of me—no, more than a little part of me; the part of me that loved Anna—was anxious to flip pages, to follow her to the end, where I would no longer be a character.

When we were almost to The Avenue of the Americas, something caught my eye: a short, block-long side street heading West. I stopped and looked down it for a moment, trying to place it. Besides several cars parked along the curb—an blue VW© bus, a furniture truck, a white taxi—the street was empty except for the ridges of driven-through snow; I’d never
been in New York before, but I was certain that I had stood on this street, walking down the middle of it after a light snowfall. Anna asked me what I saw, and I told her I was just having a déjà vu moment. We kept walking. We walked until Anna led me down a staircase. I followed her onto a train on the 6-line heading south.

Boarded, we emptied our last two bottles of beer into our cups—I did it this time—and leaned back against shaking walls of the train. Anna was quiet for the first bit of the trip. Lost, somehow, in this city she inexplicably knew so well. My guide, quiet, and inexplicably trustworthy. I watched the subway map across the aisle bounce over the head of young boy; he couldn’t have been any older than seven. He wasn’t old enough, I thought, to be riding the subway alone, but how could I know what he was old enough to do. When I heard the metal voice above announce the final stop on the 6-line, Brooklyn Bridge, I stood up and stretched my legs. Anna grabbed my arm. She said hadn’t yet arrived, and she pulled me back into my seat. I watched as the rest of the bus emptied. It was only Anna and I. She told me we could get more comfortable now, as we’d have the car to ourselves for the next forty minutes. I didn’t know exactly what she meant, what we were doing, but gradually I figured it out as the subway car picked up speed; we reclined on the filthy benches, ducking beneath the window levels. The lights dimmed, and I started to understand something Anna had earlier, about being faceless and unremarkable. We were traveling not only unacknowledged, but unnoticed. The walls shook harder and the turns were taken sharper. Reclined, we held onto the upright bars and each other. When the beer was gone, Anna produced a flask and we drank from it until the New York underworld began to blur with our perceptions of the city above: endless tunnels, lights on the subway walls flashing as the car passed by. An illuminated advertisement plastered against the tunnel walls strobed, creating the illusion of animation. Finally, foreshadowed by the screech of metal on metal through the subway
tunnel, the train slowed and drifted into a wide turn. Anna said, “We’re here. Look out your window. Be ready to take everything in at once because it goes by quick.”

I watched her and mimicked her movements; in the window, inches before the black tunnel walls, my reflection followed the movements of hers. A small light ahead grew larger and became brighter until a vast and ornate hall appeared. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling, casting shadows upon the clean tiled floors. Green and white ceramic patterns wove around the walls like sturdy, glass ropes. Above, which we could just see from the edges of our window peering up, a massive glass dome let in the dusky and building-lit light from the Southern Manhattan. Archways led to smaller blue-tinted stained glass skylights in empty, cavernous rooms. A rich shade of shining forest green lined all the movement of the cavernous architecture. Tiles placed within tiles spelled out “City Hall” before staircases that led up to closed-off streets.

“It’s fucking beautiful,” I said to Anna. She was lying on the bench looking up through the car windows, her head in my lap.

“It’s an abandoned station. The City Hall Station. They started to restore it, but after the September 11th attack, they quit. Something about the curvature of the rails.”

“It’s a shame.”

“Sort of. But, you know, it’s still here, though the content is gone.”

“The content?”

“Yeah, the people, the security, the subway musicians, the spinning turnstiles. The contents is gone but the structure is still here. That’s the important thing.”

“Yeah, but who cares about a structure if you can’t use it?”
“Form is everything, Karin. Look around the city. Every structure is there to remind people of their place, regardless of whether they use it or not. And when the structure no longer serves a purpose, it evolves, is placed in a museum or underneath the ground.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

Anna looked at me, surprised. She asked, “have you ever seen a bank with vinyl siding?”

“Yeah, I’m sure I have.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know, but they must be out there.”

“No, you haven’t. They aren’t. Banks are made of bricks. The smaller ones may have a bit of siding around the edges to match the landscape, but the bulk is stone and brick, with a brick pathway and way-too-big illuminated sign out front that not only tells you the temperature at all hours, but also sheds light over their grounds while reminding you, ‘we’re more informed that you are.’”

“So.”

“So, the form is there to let you know it is impenetrable.”

“But they’re not. Banks are robbed all the time. Otherwise, they wouldn’t make so many movies about banks.”

“First of all, they are not robbed all the time, which is precisely why there are so many movies about them being robbed. If they were robbed as often as, say, a person walks their dog, than they would not be movie-worthy. Second of all, the reason they aren’t robbed as frequently as dogs are walked isn’t because of the security. I worked at a bank after high school and they had some unreliable private security service and broken surveillance cameras. They aren’t robbed because their structure, the brick and stone and sign, create the
illusion of impenetrability. Look at the skyscrapers in the city. The old ones, the famous one like the Empire State Building and the Rockefeller Center are stone, but they don’t make them like that anymore because it is simply not enough to show impenetrability anymore. What are they made of now?”

“I don’t know. Glass?”

“Not just glass, but mirrored glass. Not only does It is crucial for the companies that the people outside not only know they do not belong inside, but every second a person spends walking by the building, they are reminded of their place. They watch themselves existing outside of the building. They are reminded of their own stupid offices, covered in vinyl siding and faux-brick fronts, constantly reminded that their work is lesser, and thus they are lesser than those inside. Therefore, the walkerbys, having accepted their lesser position, begin to understand themselves as needing those inside, those bigger and more privileged minds.”

“I don’t know about that, Anna. I think you might be reading into it too much.” But the truth is, I did sort of believe her. As she was talking, I attempted to imagine every bank I had been in or driven by, and they all matched her description.

“Form is everything. It is what teaches us. The content is just there to provide a reason for the form. It must evolve or it ends up thirty feet below the ground, like this place.”

We continued on, quiet as the long chain of cars slowed its way through the abandoned station. Full minutes passed, and Anna shifted her head in my lap. During this quiet, a couple things happened and, whether it was muscle memory or reflex, I don’t know, but I didn’t realize it until I pulled my eyes from the empty station and found my hand smoothing her hair, and her hand slide beneath my thigh and the hard, plastic seat.
Nonetheless, I knew the movements were involuntary because by looking down I seemed to have triggered recognition, and our hands slid back. Anna sat up, sober, and I looked back out the window. The train had made its turn and the front cars had already disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel ahead. “It’s really fucking beautiful,” I said. “Thank you.” Trying to peer ahead into the darkness, I said, “What’s next?”

“You already know, don’t you?” Anna said, somberly. “It’s beautiful because it’s the end. It’s the end of the line, and it’s seldom visited.”

“We can’t stay.”

“The station has been closed for a lot of years. Decades. We can’t get off.”

“So we just go back to the middle.”

“Yeah, something like that. We pass the stops we neglected in our anticipation for the end. We examine them closely, having seen the end, and then we get off and try to find our own ways.”

“Right.” And we did, quietly, but our silence didn’t matter. As we backtracked uptown through Manhattan, our silence was overcome by the noise of the new riders, making their way. At the Brooklyn Bridge stop, a Metro Policewoman boarded and sat across the aisle from us. I smiled at her, but she just watched me, carefully, so I looked down. A one-sided game of tag ensued: I looked up to see if she was still watching me—she was—and then I looked down, and when I was certain she had looked away, I looked up again—I was wrong again—ad infinitum, or at least close to that.

Over her shoulder, I watched an animated advertisement for a new reality series flash through the car’s walls like a strobe light. She was still watching me. This time, without looking away, she picked up her radio and made a call. I couldn’t understand her official language, rearrangements of numbers with half-words like a future dialect. Once the call was
made, she fell asleep. Past Bleecker Street, past Union Square, 23rd, 28th, and 33rd, and we stopped at Grand Central Station. Anna tugged my arm and we walked off the train together, exhausted, hungry, and both bearing that sad weight at having glimpsed at something perfect and just out of reach.

Upon reaching the surface, Anna looked at her watch and looked around at the street signs, though I knew she knew where we were. “I’m gonna walk from here. If you’re heading back to Brooklyn, you’re going to need to hop on the Q train to Brooklyn.”

“Is this it? When are you leaving New York?”

“Soon. But this doesn’t have to be it. I want to see you again,” she said, and I wondered if I had just imagined the distance between us that the end had edged in.

“Do you remember the building I pointed out to you, the one I’m staying in?”

“36th Street, two block East of The Avenue of the Americas. White brick, rickety fire escape.”

“That’s it. Why don’t you pick me up there tomorrow? 5:00?”

I hugged Anna and tested some unwritten rule by holding her too long. She pulled away and then walked away.

I wasn’t sure why I hadn’t told Anna that I was also staying in Manhattan. I guess I didn’t want her to think my trip had been so hastily planned. Anyway, I felt jipped from my Brooklyn tour earlier that day, so I decided to take the Q to Brooklyn, then I’d take it back and walk home. I purchased two beers at a nearby bodega, and found the Q. I wish I hadn’t.

I tried to take notes on the train, but couldn’t focus. I recorded things, then, and had an idea about transcribing them later, as a way to become more familiar with the dialect. The view from the bridge would’ve been remarkable if the windows had not been recently tagged with hieroglyphical markings from a spray paint can. That, and nobody on my train seemed
to talk, except for a wiry thin man wearing a plastic trash bag over a pile of sweatshirts and
sweaters who went from car to car selling copies of Toy Story 6™ and Saw 3™. I suppose
in his market, one would have to be prepared for every demographic. I bounced, one with
the bus, until we reached the Grand Army Station, and I exited. I was tired and didn’t know
why I decided to come this way. I needed to write, yet tonight; tomorrow I had to meet with
B. Hart.

When I took the stairway up and crossed the tracks, the opposite stairway was
closed. I found the security booth just below the street’s surface and asked the attendant.
Through the thick-planed glass, a staticky voice said, I think, “Manhattan-bound train’s
closed.”

“How do I get back to Manhattan?”

The speaker sputtered, and I heard some numbers and letters. After hearing a B and
a 10, and I think an F, the attendant behind the booth picked up a book and commenced his
reading. I could make out the name of the book, N’an Lure, but could make no sense of
what the attendant had said. I asked again and he repeated it, this time pointing up the
staircase to the street’s surface before resuming his reading. On my third attempt to get him
to speak slower, or to press the speaker button all the way down, he didn’t even look up
from his page. I turned and walked up the stairs.

At the surface, I was fortunate enough to run into a cop, though I felt as though I
had been running into them all day. With my beers carefully concealed in my inner pockets, I
explained my problem and he told me the line was closed; that I’d have to take a bus to the
F train—get off at 7th Avenue—and then take the F Manhattan bound. He pointed me to
the station. I thanked him and he walked away.
I rode stood in the aisle for at least thirty minutes until I recognized the Grand Army Station again. I went to the front and asked the driver where 7th Avenue was and he told me we’d passed it once; it’d be coming up again in four stops. The system he used to announce the stops seemed to have been made by the same company that provided the subway attendant stations with speakers. I couldn’t make out any of the stops. Crouched, I peered through the windows looking for a street sign. Finally, when I noticed the bus had been stopped for longer than usual, I looked up and found the burly driver staring at me. “It’s 7th. You getting off or what?” I struggled to make my way through the aisle, and tried to avoid contact with the woman who was pushing my shoulder and shouting for the goddamn bus to keep moving, asking which asshole was holding this fucking bus up.

I endured the long wait along the F train tracks by watching an endless line of rats balance along the third rail. I imagined a slip of a paw and a zap, but it didn’t happen. I boarded the car and thought I had it to myself before someone slipped through the doors as they were closing. Without looking directly at the person, I couldn’t make out whether it was a man or a woman. They were dressed in several puffy layers, and I could make out the pungent stench of stale alcohol. It sat across from and spread its legs wide. Sweatpants stretched tightly across seat, and left a damp residue on the seats as the legs shook rapidly. The person never took its eyes off from me, and when we finally started across the East River, it stood directly in front of me. It pulled something from its pocket. A long, retractable pocketknife, I saw, when I looked up.

For the third time that night, I couldn’t decipher what the person mumbled to me in a high-pitched, shaky voice, filled with an anxious edge of desperation and sleep deprivation. But it sounded like, “empty them, bitch.”
I froze. Before leaving for this trip, I had imagined this happening. I’d played through several scenarios: handing it all over, hoping that I’d backed up my files and that I didn’t carry my jump drive with me; standing quickly and delivering a quick blow to the stomach and running; getting stabbed/shot because of a non-reaction. In this situation, though at the time I wasn’t thinking anything, the third was the most likely since I was simply, no, complicatedly, frozen. We remained in the same position for at least thirty seconds, the mugger swaying in front of me, holding a knife, and me sitting, staring at the knife. Before I really had a chance to feel anything except for suspension, floating, the person in front of me doubled over and landed almost in my lap, dropped the knife and grabbed its stomach, and then threw up on my legs. I remained still, certain I had just been infected with some incurable disease. When the train stopped at the next station, the person crawled of on its hands and knees. Nobody else boarded, and I watched the person curl up next to the rails as the train slipped through the tunnel. I didn’t move for awhile until, as we neared my stop, several passengers boarded and I stepped on the knife and slid it along the floor towards me. When I reached my stop, I nonchalantly picked up it, closed it, slid it into my pocket, and left.

When I emerged from the tunnel, my phone beeped and I had a two new voicemails. It was Claire. She was breathing heavy, as though she’d been running, and she spoke quickly trying to beat the time limit of my voicemail. She told me how she had waited in her house until early morning and when the officers finally left their post across from her house, she snuck out, dressed in black, wearing a blonde wig and winter boots with platformed soles. “I quickly made my way to your apartment,” she continued, “and waited across the street and down a ways, sitting on a cold, metal bench. I kept my head buried in a book as the officers passed my apartment several times, and I recorded the times that your lights turned on and
off in your living room. Around 10 AM,—about the time I had started writing this
morning—“a man stepped out of your apartment, and I followed him at a distance, through
heavy drifts of plow-pushed snow, to the Prentice University Library. Karin,” Claire
suddenly said slowly over the phone message, “I thought it was you. Honest to God, I did.
His hair, his height, his frame, everything was you. I mean, I was a ways behind him, but this
man could’ve been you. I’m worried, though, that my misrecognition may have caused me to
make a mistake. I followed him into the library, and when I heard the clerk behind the desk
address him as Karin, I thought sure it was you. I followed him upstairs and lost him in the
shelves. When I found him again, seated at a desk in front of a stack of books and a pair of
scissors, I came up from behind him and sat right behind him. Really, Karin, I thought you
had returned to surprise me, and I wanted to surprise you. I’m so sorry. But, I think I
recovered well. Naturally, when he turned, and I saw his face I realized my mistake. His
facial features matched yours almost exactly: your slightly bent nose, thin eyebrows, narrow
jaw; but it was covered in, I don’t know, years. Age. Your features on his face had been
obfuscated with pockmarks and unflattering wrinkles like the face of someone who’d
smoked for too many years. It was unreservedly ubiquitous. There was a grey tint to his hair
that I could only make out when I was up close. I froze, and then recovered, I think. He
turned to look at me, and I said, ‘excuse me sir, but you have to help me. I know I’ve seen
you before, but I just can’t place you. I remember you though. I remember your face, and I
can’t help but to associate it with something pleasurable.’ Indeed, Karin, when you think
about it, I wasn’t lying.” Claire’s wispy laugh ricocheted across the line, and she continued:
“he laughed a low, guttural laugh and then placed his hand on mine.” The message ended. I
pressed seven to save it, and listened to the next.

It was Claire.
She apologized, and then continued: “the man said he gets that all the time. He knocked over his stack of books, spilling a box of matches across the table, and he grabbed the book that was on the bottom. He said, in a whisper, ‘you know, until the recent tragedy at the Baelb Library, the University library didn’t carry any of these.’ He laughed his creepy, guttural laugh again, and then turned the book over to reveal the cover: *What Happens When the Ink Runs Out?*, by Finn Fien. On the bottom of the inside flap of the dust cover was his face. I took the book and flipped it over. His name was Finn Fine, or something like that. A pseudonym, I’m sure. Anyway,” Claire said, in a crescendoing voice, “that’s who’s staying at your place. He really creeped me out, too, because when I set the book down he massaged my hand in his and said, ‘I, too, know who you are, dear.’ He said he recognized my pictures hanging on the wall of the apartment he was letting in Prentice. ‘You must be Anna,’ he said to me. I turned beat red as I remembered my blonde wig. Honestly, blonde or not, I don’t see the similarity. But I nodded and said I was. To make it seem real, I faked embarrassment as I asked for his autograph. He agreed, though he said he rarely did. But for me—seriously Karin: he ran his stubby fingers along my cheek—he said he would. Once I got the autograph, I made an excuse and left, though he made me promise to stop by. And no, Karin, I will not do it. I had to shower twice when I got home to get his stubby finger stench off of my face. Anyway, I thought you would want to know that. Call me. Sorry about the long message.

For the remainder of my walk, uncomfortable with the sticky bile of homeless vomit now freezing against my legs, which I naturally equated with the stench Fien’s greasy fingers had left on Claire’s face, I felt the knife with my thumb and forefinger, opening and closing it in my pocket.

I tested its blade against my skin.
After showering and starting a load of laundry, I was thankful for the first time for my PajamaJeans®. I sat the knife out on the small end table in front of me, and left it there as I wrote. I had a sick feeling in my gut that I had nothing new to write about, but I needed the pages; I had to have them to give to Hart in the morning. When I paused, frozen on the issue of how to get Olivia onto the train to Chicago, I picked up the knife and I felt a shift of power, like I had just gained some dominance over something, though I couldn’t say exactly what. Occasionally I tested the blade against my palm—I had scoured it with soap and hot water in the bathroom—its chipped and rough edge peeled back a thin layer of callous I’d developed from all the shoveling at work before I left. When I set the knife down, I wrote quickly and without hesitation. I wrote aggressively. No, I wrote maniacally.

I wrote through the night. I was beyond tired. I was stupid with exhaustion, but each time I stopped and picked up the knife to slip it into my bag, I’d touch it and get the urge to write again. When I reached 4 AM, sleep, even a few hours of it, did not seem worth it. I remembered the beers in my bag, and started in on them. Olivia not only made it onto the train headed East from the less-than-subtle pushing of her domesticated Chicagoan sister—Olivia would have to travel East before arriving West—but Olivia was running, too, she thought. She hadn’t stuck around Portland long enough, however, to determine what she was running from. It happened pretty late the night before she left. She was drunk, of course, on cheap wine, which she had justified upon Duane’s leaving would allow her to continue drinking without becoming an alcoholic. Sean had taken her out; she was rude to him most of the night but still invited him in, and when they went into the bedroom, after they had undressed and awkwardly knelt before each other on the bed, he touched her bare ribcage, below her right breast and she snapped. She reached for the bedside drawer and before Sean knew how to respond, he found a gun—unloaded and probably never used—in
his face. She violently threw him out. After another bottle and a half of Sauvignon Blanc, she packed a week’s worth of clothes a bottle of gin she’d found in the cupboard, and bought a 3 AM ticket to Chicago. She departed at 3:15 AM.

Paranoid, she had wiped down the grip of the empty handgun and threw it into the Willamette River on her way West to the Amtrak station.

When Olivia was safely boarded, I moved to Katrina, the last of my lazy, loafing, and stagnant characters. I knew as I was creating her circumstances, I flaked out a bit. I was driven by the edge of a knife I felt in my thumb and, well, I was tired as hell and had a deadline to meet. Here’s what happens: Katrina was determined to finish the garden for the Baptist church, despite the rudeness of the pastor and the unfair wages and conditions of the head contractor. When the job was near-complete, Eric pulled her from it. He sat her down on a milk crate in his Albuquerque office and explained to her that he was done. That there was not enough to continue on. He placed an envelope into the calloused and scarred palms of the troubled, angry woman, and told her she shouldn’t stick in Albuquerque. She needed to move on, to see the rest of the desert. In the envelope, Katrina found between hard sobs and outbursts of anger, alone in her truck, was a train ticket to Pennsylvania and five-hundred dollars in sooty, wrinkled twenties. It took her a week before she finally accepted she’d have to leave, and then traded the tickets in for tickets up the West Coast as far as Eugene, OR, and then back down to Los Angeles.

I saved the novel to my hard-drive, saved it to my jump drive, and then emailed it to myself at three different email addresses. At 5:30 AM, with almost thirty new pages written, I went to the desk and asked the clerk if he knew of a barber shop that would be open this early. He pointed me toward Washington Square and I left, with the knife in my pocket. The barber had a single chair in his empty shop, with a table, a pair of scissors, and a trimmer. I
asked for just a short trim, and with the clippers he took the sides close to the skin, fading it to the top, which curled wildly. As soon as I heard the buzzing I knew it was wrong, but is was also too late.

“How’s that, pal?” he asked. I examined it in the mirror. I looked like a Q-Tip®. In fact, looking at the barber, I looked just like him. I looked like the men in the pictures behind him, with tattoos and mustaches and army fatigues.

“That’ll be fine.”

“Sure?”

I paid him and left. I still had forty-five minutes, so I walked to the offices of Bunsen Publishing.

In the early hours, the moon reflected off the banks of snow and sent light back up the purple and fluorescently-lit sky. The rest of the people on the street were either stumbling home or hurriedly stepping toward their place of work. I felt that this New York I was now walking through was one people rarely saw with a clear mind. When I passed 36th street, I found Anna’s building and felt a brief sting of anticipation.

When I finally made it to the tall phallic structure that concealed Hart’s offices, I walked inside and stepped into the elevator. As far as I could recall, it was the first time I’d seen a number 13 button in an elevator. What was more amazing, I felt, was that the 13 button was at the top of the bottom fourth quadrant of the elevator’s button panel. The numbers went up to 52, leading me to believe there had to be close to sixty stories in the building, assuming that several executive suites were off limits to simple elevator travels. I imagined other passageways to get to those upper floors, secret hallways with larger elevators, entire floors, perhaps, on grand pulley systems that floated between those eight spaces, each presenting a different altitude, providing particular moods for particular
occasions. In addition to the assumed executive suites, several numbers had been blacked out. I wasn’t sure if the bulb behind them had died, or if they were also off limits. On my way down, I thought, I’d try one of the blacked-out buttons. They included 12, 14, 15, 16, 33, 34, 35, and 47. Numbers, my sleep deprivation informed me, that had to be brimming with codified significance.

Impulsively, I leapt out of the elevator, and exited the building. I looked up. It was tall, no doubt. I’d never been afraid of heights, or at least I’d never been high enough to cause the chemicals in my brain enough urgency to trigger the fear button, but standing there on 42nd street looking up, it felt as though I’d swallowed an immensely dense stone that slowly, very slowly, sunk all the way down to my testicles. I imagined that this must be the same sensation as acrophobia, or perhaps it was anablephobia. Regardless, it didn’t seem possible that there were more than thirty stories to the building, and I couldn’t make sense of how a small publishing company like Bunsen ran their business in such an affluent area. I ran back into the elevator which was strangely still open, and I pressed 13. When the elevator started moving, I held my breath, just as a game, just to see if I could make it to thirteen.

I did, barely, and if I would’ve known that the elevator doors opened right into Bunsen’s waiting room, right in front of, in fact, the receptionist’s desk, I wouldn’t have played the game.

“Hart. To see B. Hart” I gasped, red-faced. The receptionist looked to be about twenty years old; she smacked her gum and refused to look up from her phone. I said again, once I caught my breath, “I am here for a 7:00 AM appointment with B. Hart. My name is Karin Pankreez. Several seconds passed, and only after she finished responding to her text
message did she respond—really, it probably would’ve been quicker to send her a message in her own language: ♥, 2 c B ♥.

“He told me to tell you he isn’t here. You can wait.”

“He told you to tell me he isn’t here? What do you mean? He told you person-to-person to tell visitors he wasn’t here or he told you to specifically to tell me he wasn’t here?”

Her phone chimed and she started typing and smacking her gum. A stereotype, sure, but this girl was the cause for such stereotypes. I took a seat until Hart returned. As I sat there, in a hard plastic chair—the kind one would find attached to a desk in an elementary classroom—I felt the heavy weight of sleep coming over my eyes. I decided to update my budget.

**Day 2 in New York**
*March 1 until morning of March 2*

3,153.70
(6.00)—Coffee and refills at Café Lumpy
(5.25)—Oatmeal at Café Lumpy
(6.00)—2 hotdogs (w/ works) from vendor @ prospect park
(12.00)—6 tall beers from Papi’s Bodega
(4.00)—2 more beers from another Bodega
(13.00)—butchered haircut near Washington Square
3,107.45—Remaining Balance
Chapter 34: In my sleep, I was sure that I’d heard somebody laughing, and then they said, “Are you ready? Okay. Do it,” March 2:

In my sleep, I was sure that I’d heard somebody laughing, and then they said, “Are you ready? Okay. Do it.”
I felt an arm on my shoulder and heard the smacking of gum. I pulled my sleeve across my mouth and checked my watch. It was half past 7 AM. It took me a while to regain my bearings, but when I looked out the giant window behind the receptionist’s desk and looked face to face with the flashing bulbs of a Times Square advertisement, I remembered. The receptionist stood over me; she had seemed much shorter when behind the desk than she did now, jutting out her hip impatiently and typing one-handed on her phone.

“You can go in.”

“He’s here?”

“I said you could go in, didn’t I?” she said, smiling, though I think it was a reaction to the other person she was simultaneously having a conversation with.

“What is that? Email? Texting? I mean, seriously. Who are you talking to?”

For the first time since I’d been there, she looked down at me. And not just down at me, but she looked seriously hurt. Than I had somehow infringed upon a place inside her that I had no right infringing upon. She slipped her phone back into her pocket and returned to her desk. I watched her and she really looked lost. She opened a drawer, closed it. She sharpened a pencil in the electronic sharpener, which seemed to bring a small amount of joy to her. She removed another pencil from a coffee cup and sharpened it also. Her hands, then, gathered her thick, brown locks and tied them deftly into some sort of knot—or something like a not, with the result being that the locks no longer floated over her shoulders—and she removed a clipboard from atop a filing cabinet. After reviewing it, she slammed a thick stack of papers from her bottom desk drawer and onto the space in front of her, and she started marking shit up. I mean, she scribbled like hell, stopping every few lines
to put a new edge on her pencil. She even spit out her gum. For a moment, she looked at her computer, and attempted to type a few words, punching numbers on the numerical pad with two thumbs, but she promptly returned to marking the hell out of those pages.

“Go ahead,” she said to me, facing me and smiling, “You can go in.”

It occurred to me that the pages she was scribbling on furiously, though perhaps not fastidiously, was somebody’s manuscript. My manuscript would also be on her desk, I reasoned, probably as soon as this afternoon. I crept by her desk and eked open the Hart’s office door.

The hinged doors closed behind me and Hart’s office was lit by the morning Manhattan sun, spilling in from the floor-to-ceiling window facing East. I wondered how the lighting changed from floor to floor at this time of morning. The sun must be different here, than it was to those on the streets below, and equally different to those on the floors above. Hart’s chair faced the window, its high back before me.

“Sir?”

Nothing. I approached the desk and stood before it. From my vantage I could see the streets below and inside me, I felt the memory of the strange sensation of acrophobia.

“Mr. Hart?”

Nothing.

I stepped nervously to the chair and found it empty. Taped to its back was a note. In perfectly scribed handwriting, it read:

Karin,

Thanks for coming. Please follow these instructions closely until I get the chance to meet with you in person.

1) If you would like to continue on to get your photograph taken please head down to floor 7 and speak to the receptionist. Tell her your name. She will expect the chance of your visit. Or,
2) If you would like to momentarily forgo the preliminary author photograph, and move on to submitting the first one hundred pages of your manuscript to Bunsen Publishing, please advance to floor 43 and speak to the receptionist there. She will give you further directions and will also be expecting the chance of your arrival.

B.H.

Before leaving the office, I browsed through Hart’s large mahogany bookshelf. There were many titles from the company, and a few from larger, more familiar companies. I recognized some of them from the rejection letters I’d received concerning *The SauerKraut Circus*. At the edge of the shelf, in what appeared to be a section set aside for reference books, there were several books about the ins and outs of publishing, including *Publishing for Dummies*, *Publishing 101*, *Start Your Own Publishing Company in Three Days!*, and *How to Publish Thirty Books in Thirty Weeks*. I imagined them to be an annual sort of gag gift. Hart, I imagined, was a man with a sense of humor to display these novelty texts so proudly on his shelf. I took the note with me and left his office.

The receptionist didn’t seem to even notice me as I left. She was halfway through the stack of pages on her desk, and now had a substantial pile of finely sharpened pencils arranged in a pyramid next to her work. The elevator, however, had a sign on it written in thick black marker—its fumes still wafting through the waiting room—that read, “Elevator Closed for Repairs.”

“What happened to the elevator? I just used it.”

“I don’t know,” the receptionist answered. “As you can see, I’m busy with other things.”

“But I just used it. How could it have broken in the short amount I’d been in Hart’s office?”

“I suppose if it was going to break, it had to have happened at a specific time, regardless of your location,” she replied snidely.
“Yeah. I suppose so. Where are the stairs?” She pointed to a doorway opposite the row of hard, plastic chairs, and I headed down to floor 7. I mean, I spent the money on this haircut, anyway.

After descending six flights of stairs down a chilly, concrete shaft, I reached floor 7. The receptionist smiled as I entered. I introduced myself, and she told me she’d been expecting me. I know it was probably because I was very tired, but she looked almost identical to Hart’s receptionist, though maybe slightly younger. She led me into a room off the left of the waiting area and asked me nonchalantly to remove my shirt and pants.

I laughed.

She waited.

“Seriously?”

“Yes,” she replied. You can leave your undergarments on. I just need you to place this vest on before taking the photo. She handed me the beige vest, which felt like the led vests given to patients before x-rays. On the front, someone had drawn in Sharpie® the outline of a tuxedo coat, its lapels shaded in red.

“What kind of photo is this? I was told it was a preliminary author photograph.”

“It’s a thorough photo. It is important to the staff upstairs at Bunsen Publishing that they receive not only a quality photo—I like your haircut, by the way; not many people wear that fifties style brush cut anymore. It’s quite flattering on you—but also get a preliminary health record to ensure that you are physically capable of the travel your research requires.” She smiled, mimetically.

“So this is an x-ray.”

“Sort of. Go ahead and undress. I’ll face away.”
It was my first time meeting with Hart’s office, and furthermore, it was my first time meeting with any publisher. Of course this whole thing sounded strange, but I possessed no frame of reference. Perhaps it was normal. I undressed, carefully setting my clothes on a chair beside me, and donned the tuxedo-drawn vest. The receptionist, whom I now gathered to be more than a receptionist, led me to a chair, commanded me to sit up straight, and positioned a large, metal contraption in front of me. The contraption looked like the kind of cart that slide projectors are set on in classrooms, only its shelves were filled with large black boxes and lenses and buttons.

She said, “I’ll be back in just a minute. Please try not to move.”

She disappeared behind a wooden partition. I could still see the top of her thick brown hair over the top of it. Gears grinded in the box in front of me, and I could see lenses zooming in and out. There were a few metallic clunks as levers were lifted and buttons pressed. After several minutes she returned with a small, disposable camera. She asked me to remove the vest and stand, away from the floor. Act naturally, she said. These are your preliminary author photos.

“But I’m shirtless.”

“Yes, and really, Karin, you appear to have been starving. When is the last time you ate?”

It was a good question.

“Go ahead,” she prompted. Look despondently off in the distance, or intensely, directly at me. Maybe both. Walk around, if you’d like. Hart likes action shots.”

The room was hot and I could feel perspiration dampening the inner legs of my boxer briefs. I moved stiffly, at first, frustrated, and she told me so. Told me to loosen up.
What the hell? I thought. And I began walking freely around the room. As I did, she clicked her camera faster. I pushed up on my tip toes a couple times, and then leaped in the air. She clicked faster. I started doing some lunges, feeling uniquely free, and tired, and since she’d mentioned it, hungry. Finally, I fell flat to the ground in a push-up position and started pushing. The camera quit clicking and her smile left.

“I’m out of film,” she said. “These ought to do. You can get dressed and meet me in the waiting area.

When I did, she handed me a note. In Hart’s handwriting, it read:

Karin,

Great. Thank you for completing these photos. I hope the procedure wasn’t too unsettling. Trust me, this is normal in most modern publishing circuits. You will now:

1. Proceed to floor 43, where you will begin the process of submitting your novel-in-progress.
2. Proceed to floor 3, where you will get something to eat in the cafeteria, expenses paid.
3. Proceed to floor 36, where blood will be drawn.

B.H.

The elevator was still broken, and though I was still hungry, I was eager to get the worst out of the way, hoping that the food-option would still be available later. I thanked the receptionist and thought about asking if she had a sister that worked upstairs, but didn’t.

I’d intended to go to floor 43 to submit my novel, but by the time I reached the 20th floor, I was exhausted. I sat on the steps for a few moments, and then started again. When I reached the 33rd floor, I remembered it as one of the unlit buttons on the elevator. I tried the door, but it was locked. I proceeded to the 36th floor, resigned to get my blood drawn.

When I opened the door I wiped the sweat from my brow. I remembered my goal to start running again while traveling and decided to start tomorrow. First, though, as soon as this meeting-turned-scavenger-hunt was complete, I would head back to the Shell-Sea Hostel.
and get some sleep. The receptionist, at least I think it was the receptionist—she wore a white lab coat, but sat behind a computer at the desk—looked like the two before her: thick, dark hair straight down to the middle of her back, hauntingly pale skin, and a pointed nose. This one, however, wore dark-rimmed glasses and looked slightly older than the others. It wasn’t possible, I reasoned, that she could be a third sister, was it?

I introduced myself. She said she’d been expecting me led me into yet another room. The room was chilly and her shoes clicked against the linoleum. She sat me on a wax paper-covered mechanical chair, like you’d see at a doctor’s office, and asked me to roll up my sleeve.

“I just need a sample,” she said.

“To measure my health, right? To see if I can physically handle the stress involved with such intense research.”

“Sure,” she answered. She seemed bored and methodically went through her procedures: wipe iodine, watch second hand on clock, tie tourniquet around bicep, walk fingers along inner-elbow, comment on how wonderful my veins are, poke needle into my wonderful vein, stop flow, replace detachable hose with small vial, fill vial, remove needle, swab with cotton, and then bandage with stretchy tape. She instructed me to lie there for five minutes and brought me a small plastic cup of water and a piece of bread, untoasted and unbuttered.

“Don’t you usually get a cookie after blood is drawn?”

“That’s only if you give more than eight ounces,” she said, seriously.

After I ate the bread I met her back into the waiting room and she handed me a note. It read:

Karin,
Blood has been drawn. Our relationship is getting serious, right? Right? You must think I’m crazy. Trust me: this is normal. I’ve been in this business for some time. You will now:

1. Proceed to floor 43, where you will begin the process of submitting your novel-in-progress.
2. Proceed to floor 52, where you can register complaints/make additional funding requests.

B.H.

I was now desperately hungry. The slice of bread seemed to have triggered a reaction of chemicals in my body, teasing it with a little when it craved a lot. I was devastated to find that the cafeteria option was no longer on the list. Fuck it. I still had the previous note and I descended the thirty-three flights of stairs to the cafeteria. I was sweating profusely now, despite the chilly stairwell. When I pushed the door open, however, the room was dark. I felt the walls for a light-switch, but couldn’t find one. I pushed on, hoping to at least find a basket of fruit somewhere, maybe a jar of candy on a receptionist’s desk. As I walked in the dark my eyes began to adjust. I could see the dim outlines of tables and chairs. A television hung from the corner and a red light blinked in the corner. I could hear voices from somewhere, and then laughter. When I walked hard into a metal grate, it rattled back at me and it seemed as though the voices laughed harder. I was so tired, and I was so hungry. Beyond the grate I saw giant spreads of deli meats and a salad bar. The smell of slow-roasted beef exhumed from beyond the cafeteria. I pulled at the gate, but it wouldn’t budge. The voices, beyond a partition, or perhaps on the floor above, softened to a muffled hum. I returned to the stairwell and started toward floor 43. I arrived there forty-five minutes later, shivering and sweating and clutching my ribs.

I introduced myself and the receptionist—yes, like the others, but much older, an exquisite streak of silver running through her hair, the mother of the others, perhaps—smiled and handed me a piece of paper. It read:
Options for submitting partial manuscript to Bunsen Publishing:

1. Email manuscript to print@bpub.com, and go to computer lab on floor 42. Locate your document in “Retrieved Documents” Folder on Computer Seven’s main screen. Open it and print to Printer 1—Bpub. Then, bring it to floor 44 and place, in an envelope—the receptionist will provide it—in the drop-box labeled submissions.

2. If document is printed but needs to be copied, bring to copy room on floor 37, and introduce yourself to the receptionist. Ask her to copy manuscript. Ask nicely if it is a Monday or Tuesday. Then, bring it to floor 44 and place, in an envelope—the receptionist will provide it—in the drop-box labeled submissions.

3. If document is already printed, bring it to floor 44 and place, in an envelope—the receptionist will provide it—in the drop-box labeled submissions.

Sincerely,
Bunsen Publishing

I went through the motions of option one. Before leaving floor 43, I asked the lady behind the desk if the entire building was owned by Bunsen Publishing.

“Who?” she asked.

“Bunsen Publishing. The company listed on the instruction sheet you just handed me.”

She looked over the sheet and shook her head. I’ve never heard of them. Somebody came in here this morning, around 7:15 and told me to give this to Karin, if he should show up.

I opened my computer in the waiting area and emailed a copy of my manuscript to the email address.

I went downstairs.

I found computer seven in the lab.

I found my document in the Retrieved Files folder.

I printed it to Printer 1—Bpub.

I went up two flights of stairs and got an envelope from the receptionist. You know who she looked like, slightly older.
I placed the manuscript in the envelope, pondered over whether I should lick the seal or not, decided not to, placed it into the Submissions Drop-box, almost let go, but then decided I should probably seal the envelope, licked it, and then dropped it into the Submissions drop-box.

The receptionist handed me a note. It read:

*Karin,*

*I look forward to reading your manuscript. I trust our characters are underway? You will now:*

1. *Proceed to floor 3, where you will get something to eat, expenses paid.*
2. *Proceed to floor 52, where you can register complaints/make additional funding requests.*

*B.H.*

When I entered the stairwell I pressed my palm hard against the sign that read 43. I pressed as hard as my weak muscles could. When I pulled it away, I felt at the imprints of the Braille “43,” now sunk into the fatty tissue of my palm, about three inches below my pinky finger. For a meal, I had to descend forty floors. I imagined an infant with pale skin and a pointed nose with thick brown hair held up in a net and covered with a chef’s hat serving me a open-faced prime rib sandwich with a note directing me to head to floor 52 to make complaints or requests or to proceed to floor god-knows-what to have a fucking stepford twin cup my bag and instruct me to turn my head and cough. But then, if I attempted to skip the meal once more to avoid descending and re-ascending 40+ flights, I had no guarantee that the food option would still exist. I tried to think about it mathematically, calculating the estimated calories I’d burn through all this goddamn climbing and countering it against the calories I could possibly consume while at the cafeteria without becoming too sluggish to ascend back up to floor 52. The truth is, I didn’t know a thing about what I was thinking about. Limbs and appendages began breaking off from the
numbers in my head, shifting into other numbers, and sometimes letters. I remembered in grade school during a math class when I was reprimanded for spelling “boobless,” on a calculator by typing in the numbers 55378008 and turning it upside down. I started down the stairs and then collapsed halfway between floors 44 and 43. I started crying. Sobbing, seriously. Plumes, no, billows of snot poured from my nostrils. I cried like no protagonist should.

I didn’t think I’d ever stop until I heard a door open below me. It was one of the sisters/mothers. She gave me a box of Kleenex® facial tissues and softly rubbed my back. She said, “Now, now. Now, now, there.” From her pocket, she produced a lozenge and said “it isn’t much, but it should give you enough energy to keep moving on until you find the next thing. Go on,” she said. “Keep going. Rest will come soon enough, and when it does, you’ll wonder what you were blathering about in a stairwell between floors 43 and 44.” She smiled and disappeared behind her door. I waited for a moment, at least until I could evacuate my sinuses and dry my shameful eyes, and I started up to floor 52.

On floor 52 I handwrote a complaint/compensation request for the theft of my suitcase. I presented in detail the events: how I showed up and my suitcase was gone, how the clerk had had it out for me since my arrival, when they botched my reservations. I listed what had been stolen and attached receipts for the modest replacements I had to purchase in New York. I even mentioned the attempted mugging in the subway, though I didn’t mention the knife. I had hoped that even though nothing had been stolen during the experience, the fact that it happened would compel Hart to refund the earlier theft. It occurred to me, as I filled out the form, that I had the knife with me, in my pocket. I’d been too tired to think of it, and now I reached into my pocket and held it in my fist, just to feel it. When I finished the form, I returned it to the elderly receptionist, and she handed me back a note. A meal
was still an option, but I knew I had to devise a strategy that would both lead to eating as well as lessen the amount of expended calories. I was indefinitely tired, and I didn’t think I had much more than a couple hours left in my tank before I completely lost my shit. Leaving, for example, was a strategy, but I was not willing to reschedule, not knowing my current schedule. I took the note from the receptionist and weighed my options.

On 51, I filed a form requesting my literary influences and education background.

On 48, I took an eye-test.

On 39, I was questioned by a receptionist about the stresses and strategies of my research.

On 32, I reluctantly submitted my fingerprints. The receptionist had a jar of chocolates.

On 28, I filed my tax forms.

On 23, I was awoken by a receptionist after a fifteen-minute orientation video on Bunsen.

On 19, I was given a physical stress test: treadmill, ECG, pharmacological stimulation.

On 13, the door was locked.

On 8, I examined the proofs of the pictures I’d posed for on 7.

On 3, the cafeteria was closed.

There were no more notes.

A janitor, the only other person I’d seen in the building besides the receptionists, snuck me an apple, two packages of crackers, and a cup of stale, cold coffee in exchange for ten dollars. With a bit of food in my stomach, I gathered the strength to make one last attempt at Hart’s office. The door was open again and I walked past the protesting
receptionist, straight into Hart’s office. I heard laughing from behind a curtained-off room to the side.

“Hello?”

“Hold on, hold on,” said the voice, suppressing the laughter. “Please proceed to floor 2, to,” there was a pause, and then a whisper, and then, “floor 2 for your Rorschach Test.”

I gripped the knife in my hand. “No. I’m done for the day.”

“These are just preliminary procedures to make sure all your information is in our system. We must also ensure that you are in the proper physical and mental state required for your research. Please proceed to floor 2. Or if you’d prefer, you can head up to floor 18 to get an imprint of your teeth.

I turned around, defeated and desperate, and opened the door that led back to the waiting room. I felt the knife in my pocket, retracted its blade and thumbed the edge. I closed the door loudly, still inside the office. I stood very still and made sure my breathing was quiet. I listened to the voice, which I had gathered was speaking to someone on a telephone.

“Okay, okay, just wait. This one decides it. We’re dead even, now.”

A pause.

“Bull shit! You don’t get to count that twice. He shows up once, it’s a point; if he shows up a second time it’s just a waste of time.”

A pause.

“Alright, that’s only fair. I’ll relinquish one of my points since he didn’t proceed directly.”

A pause. I slipped off my shoes, quietly, and stepped lightly toward the curtain.
“Wait, I should get the call soon. You said, 2?”

A pause, as I passed the mahogany bookshelf.

“I see your strategy, following patterns. But, I disagree. I think he’s headed back up.”

I stood directly in front of the curtain. I could hear a voice yelling maniacally on the other end, now.

“Fine, fine, fine, fine,” shouted the voice behind the curtain.

The last “fine,” sounded extraneous, accented. I grabbed the edge of the curtain and ripped it open, sending wooden curtain rings sailing through the air, landing at random and rolling around the floor before resting in their new spaces. Behind the curtain, before a panel of screens and lights and buttons, Hart stood, a phone pressed against his ear.

“I gotta go,” he said. “There’s been an improvisation that may change the outcome.”

He flipped shut the phone and extended his arms to me. “Karin! I was wondering when you were going to stop by. I’ve been waiting around all day.”

“Bull shit,” I said. “I haven’t slept in over thirty hours, and haven’t eaten in almost that long. I’ve been running up and down the stairs because the fucking elevator suddenly went down, and I’m through with this game.”

“Karin, I know it’s a lot of running around, but you have to trust me. These are standard procedures. You got to count for a day of busy work.” He extended his arms and grabbed my shoulders.

“You said our meeting would commence at 7:00 AM and go for 45 minutes.” I looked at my watch. It was 3:00 P.M.

“You do look exhausted,” Hart said. “Come on, why don’t you have a seat?”

Hart led me to the chair in front of his desk and he stood behind it. He didn’t look much like I’d remembered him from our Skype encounter. He was taller than I thought, and
almost completely bald except for a strip of grey hair that started at his temples and wrapped around the base of his skull. He had a thin frame, with a paunchy gut that tested the buttons on his vest. He looked out his window for a brief moment before moving to the corner of the office in front of a small bar. I recognized the crystal bottle of brandy as he poured us each a glass. He handed it to me.

“Okay, so, we can forgo the dental and Rorschach tests. You seem stable enough.”

I tightened my grip around the knife, estimating the distance across the desk from me to him.

“What were you talking about on the phone?”

“So,” he continued, “we have the manuscript and the photos.” He opened a manila folder and scanned a list. “The research has been going well, I take it?”

“I’ve registered a complaint upstairs. I had my suitcase stolen, and was mugged. Two separate events. I had to spend a significant chunk of my stipend on clothes and writing material. I don’t think I can finish on the current budget.”

“Hm.” Hart took a drink of his brandy. His brow furrowed and he held the glass to his forehead, rubbing it from side to side.

“Also, I want to talk about this Author-Sit program. Who is in my apartment? I want them out. I just received an email from the Prentice University Library about a bunch of returned books that were damaged. They want to charge me over six hundred dollars. I had a friend check it out and they saw somebody leave my apartment, use my name at the library, and check out more books.

“There must be a mistake. I'll make sure to check on it this evening.”
“My friend talked to him. Said his name was Finn Fien. I remember the name from talking with Sleightor. And I think he was interviewed about the Baelb Library explosion. It was a bizarre interview.”

Hart finished his brandy and stood up to pour another, stopping for another long gaze out over Times Square. When he sat back down, he said, “I think we’ll be able to expedite your expenses for your replaced stolen items.” He picked up the phone and pressed two numbers. “Yes,” he said into the receiver, “please approve the request for additional funds made by Mr. Pankreez on floor 52. That was for how much? Really?” Hart took a deep breath and looked across the desk at me. “Yes, approve it. I’ll have my receptionist print off the check.” He hung up the phone and pressed a button on the intercom, repeating his instructions to his receptionist.

“Thank you,” I said, taking my first sip from the brandy. “What about the situation in Prentice? My friend was going to try to look into it some more.”

“No need,” Hart snapped. “I’ll take care of it before I leave.” Hart picked the checklist back up and said, “okay, I believe we have everything we need for now. How long are you going to be in New York?”

“A couple more days.”

“Great. I'll look through the manuscript this evening. I'll need you to come back tomorrow evening, let’s say, 4:30 P.M. to go over it and your test results. We can proceed from there. Sound good?”

I loosened the grip on the knife blade. I was exhausted, and I could see the end of this meeting approaching. “Fine,” I said. “I’ll be here. Get your elevators fixed, though.”

“Of course. They should be fixed promptly.” Hart stood up and shook my hand, and I turned to leave. I retrieved the check from the receptionist, who handed it to me without
looking up. I was almost through the door to the stairwell when I noticed the absence of a sign on the elevator.

“Are the elevators fixed?” I asked the receptionist.

“It appears so.”
Chapter 36: A Different Labyrinth and another Hostel Debacle, March 2

Outside, I walked down 7th Avenue toward the white, brick building where Anna was staying. The first vendor I came to was selling hotdogs. I bought two and ate them on the way. When I reached Anna’s building, I looked at my watch. I still had about forty-five minutes before 5:00; I didn’t want to seem too eager by waiting in the lobby, nor did I want to interrupt her in case she was preparing somehow for our evening. I found a bench outside and sat. Before long, I fell asleep. When I woke, it was twenty minutes after 5:00.

Shit. I hustled inside the building. Its interior belied its decrepit exterior. Long golden curtains hung in the windows, held by ornate, silver rods. The couches were red and velvet and unoccupied. The employees wore finely cut green vests and grey suit pants; the men were cleanly shaven and their hair was gelled tightly in place, the women had exquisite cheek bones, their hair shined and bounced lightly when they walked. Everybody smiled. I asked a woman at the front desk if she could look in the registry for Anna Bertreb. She flipped the pages carefully, slowly scanning the names.

“T’m sorry. There is not an Anna staying here.”

“She is staying here. I was with her last night.” I described Anna to the woman.

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to picture her. “Kind of a Northern accent?” she asked. “Down from, Boston, was it?”

“Yeah, that’s her.”

“Gorgeous handwriting?” she continued.

“Yes. That’s definitely her.”

She went back to the registry, flipping the pages backward. “I’m afraid she’s checked out. I’m sorry, my shift just started. Let me look at something.” The woman punched some
information into the computer keypad, tapped her long, painted fingernail on the Formica® countertop, and finally said, “it appears you just missed her. She checked out about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Did she happen to mention where she was headed?”

“I’m sorry, sir, I wasn’t here. Anyway, we’re not permitted to divulge that information.”

“But if anybody happened to know. Who checked her out? It’s, I’m not a stalker or anything. I’m her, I’m her brother. I’ve been all over looking for her, and two days ago I finally found her, or she found me. She was waiting for me.” She was waiting for me. She waited until after five to leave. She was waiting to say goodbye. “But I was late. I was held up. Please, is there anybody?”

“I’m sorry, the afternoon shift has left, and we’re not even supposed to ask about people’s traveling plans. I doubt anybody would even know, regardless of who you are.”

My legs collapsed from under me, and I rested my forehead against the counter. I could feel my sinuses loosening again. I felt the woman touch my shoulder. “I’m very sorry, sir. I do believe you, but I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do. If you want, you can leave a message in case she attempts to contact us. Sometimes, if our guests have planes or trains to catch and they are planning to meet someone, they do that.”

I gave her my information and turned to walk away. I took another look at the hotel; it was really a beautiful place. Outside, dusk was just beginning to settle over the rooftops; the sky was a wild swirl of unnatural purple and fiery orange. The setting sun fired back at me in the windows of the mirrored buildings over head, reminding me that I was on the sidewalk, and not inside. At the bottom of the stairs I turned to head back to my hostel. I just about turned the corner when I heard from a doorway a man’s voice.
“So, you know Anna?” He stepped out of a shadow, wearing a green vest and grey slacks and a vest. “Man, that girl is a trip.”

“A trip? What do you mean?”

“She’s wild, lot of fun.” He puffed on a cigarette. A gelled strand of long hair fell from its place and he brushed it out of his face.

“How do you know her?”

“She was staying here. I mean, I was practically her tour guide. I work the front desk during the night shift. She was hanging around in the lobby one night, carrying a heavy book and a couple bottles of beer. We don’t allow drinking in the lobby, but she did anyway. Kept talking about names, about how we should be able to pick our own. I remember her saying the she believed our parents type-casted us by choosing our names before we could develop into something else. Yeah, we got to know each other pretty well.” He looked up at the skyline and chuckled softly, replaying some memory in his head.

“Yeah? How well did you get to know each other?” I tried to remember back, all those pages ago, to how soon I’d slept with Anna after I’d met her in the hotel lobby. It wasn’t there, that lone detail. Left out, or edited.

The man puffed on his cigarette and smiled. He repeated, “pretty, pretty well.”

“Well enough to know where she was headed?”

He rubbed his cigarette out against the white brick and started walking to the front door.

“Yeah, I know where she’s headed.”

“And?”

“Company policy. Anyway, I don’t believe you’re her brother. You don’t ask about her the way a brother asks for a sister.” He looked toward the front door where a crowd of
people waited. “You’re asking with a different type of urgency, like a fire in your gut, or somewhere else.” He began climbing the steps to the walkway.

“Wait. Hold on. Please.” He ignored me, and I reached out and grabbed his shoulder. I held his stupid, green vest in my fist and pulled his face next to mine. I thumbed the retracted knife blade in my pocket. He pushed back, but I held on tight. The crowd began to draw their attention to us. I pressed the knife blade back into its slot. “Okay, fifty bucks. I’ll give you fifty bucks if you tell me.”

“Dude, let go of me.” He pushed harder, but I held on. “I’ll make that in tips in the next hour.”

“Seventy-five.”

“Fuck off, asshole.”

“Alright. A hundred, but that’s it. And it’s only a courtesy that I’m offering. You really should accept it.”

He stared hard at me, and I knew from seeing the proofs of the photos at Hart’s office that my eyes were outlined in red and my face pale. I shook him sharply, for emphasis. Finally, he relented. “Okay. Let me see the money.”

I pulled out my wallet with my free hand and opened it. There was less than thirty dollars in there. I folded it with the lone twenty on the outside, and several ones inside. I held it in front of him. He reached for it and I let go of his vest and swung for broke at

He hesitated, glaring at the money in a way that nobody who made fifty dollars an hour in tips glanced at money. Finally, he said, “Albuquerque. Fucking Albuquerque, asshole. But I wouldn’t bother if I were you, dude. She’s over you, Carrie, or Karen, or whatever the fuck your name is. He reached for the money and I let go of his vest and swung for broke at
his jaw. My punch landed somewhere in the shoulder, though hard enough to send him stumbling into the gazing crowd. A man grabbed my arm and I pulled out the knife with my other hand and flung open the blade with a single finger, like I had been practicing in my pocket all day. I whipped my arm free and took off running. I ran for several blocks as hard as I could, the cold wintry air cutting holes into my lungs.

I was all the way to Union Square before I realized that I had been swinging a brandished knife blade in one hand, and twenty-seven dollars in the other. I stuffed them in my pocket and looked behind me. There were a ton of people on the streets, all trained not to notice each other. I sat down for a moment in Union Square Park to catch my breath, and then I walked the rest of the way to the Shell-Sea hostel.

Janelle was working. I could tell she was drinking wine again from her slow enunciation. That, and she kept leaning over the counter: first, to scan the other room and second, to check out the NYC-Vivor® marathon. I said hello and passed by the television with little energy for curiosity. All the steps, the confrontation, the run had taken about everything out of me. I would make something simple to eat, sleep, and then get up tomorrow and start anew.

The stale grease and recent microwave popcorn scent that loomed in the kitchen made my stomach turn. I remembered seeing a scented candle in the bathroom and went upstairs to fetch it. The wick had been buried in the wax, so I tried digging at it a bit with my knife, but my tired hands kept cutting it shorter when I tried to pry it. I thought about skipping it, but when I returned to the kitchen I knew I wouldn't be able to prepare a meal in the stench. I turned a burner on low and set the glass-cased candle on it, hoping to heat it up enough to free the wick. As it was heating, I looked over my groceries in the cupboards—it was an easy scan since I was still the only guest. I found a pan on a shelf
above the stove and started boiling some water for pasta. I joined Janelle on the couch and accepted some wine as the water grew to a boil. We passed the bottle back and forth a couple times, and Janelle soon fell asleep. I knew she’d be in trouble if she was caught sleeping, but I figured I’d wake her up before I left. Though, I felt my eyelids growing, too.

I don’t know if it was the bright flash or the sound of glass shattering, or the smell that woke me, but when I ran into the kitchen the entire wall above the stove, up to the ceiling, was engulfed in flames. I froze. The glass around the candle had shattered and the wallpaper above the stove caught fire from the burst of flames. My mind was screaming for my body to look for a fire extinguisher—under the sink, behind the front desk, mounted on the wall in the hallway—but my eyes were enraptured by the translucent yellow of the flames, their shapelessness and enormous heat. I am not sure how long I watched, but when I finally felt my feet moving they were running toward Janelle. I lifted her small frame before she knew what was happening, and carried her outside, explaining that the hostel was on fire. I lied to her and said I was going to check for other guests, though she knew better than I that we had been alone in there. She said nothing as I rushed back in, through the burning kitchen, and up to my room. I stuffed my things into my suitcase and even checked under the bed for loose socks. Finally, sure that I had everything, I rushed back downstairs and outside. Janelle was on the phone with the fire department. I told her that I had hid her wine underneath the couch so she wouldn’t get blamed for negligence, and then I told her I had to leave. In my hastiness, I turned right down 7th Ave and headed south instead of north. I was too busy listening for sirens. I walked several blocks before I heard them and felt a little better knowing they were there. With my head low, I mean being as close to sleep without actually sleeping, I kept walking past unfamiliar rows of brownstones and bodegas and parks until I noticed that the buildings were starting to get taller again. I looked for the lights of
Times Square but couldn’t find a clear path of sight in any direction. I kept making rights and then lefts and by the time I’d realized what I’d done, I was thoroughly lost.

I wandered into a shaded courtyard that seemed to exist in an earlier century, and onto the steps of a small, brick church with a towering steeple. In front of the steeple was an uncharacteristic space, void of mirrored glass and random-lit windows hundreds up feet high. Instead, there was a ten-foot high fence wrapped in a tarp that chattered back at the wind through the cave-like streets. I knew this place. That is, I recognized it from the pictures. Recognized what it used to be. It struck me as remarkable that this space now meant more to more people than it ever had before the devastation. Americans who had no previous clue what went on in the trade towers, now referenced it on a weekly basis, ten years later, with a subtle, vague ache followed perhaps by a sharper ache of pride. I brushed a thin layer of snow from the church steps and sat down. I could see the sky from this place, surrounded by the giants around it, and it was opaque and bland. Contrast, again. Lights from surrounding buildings reflected off a bell in the small courtyard. When I walked to it, the haunting shapes of crooked tombstones took form from the darkness. I crouched before one and ran my fingertips over the letters. It was dark, but I could still make out the name and dates. The stone was rough and primitive. The final date was two hundred years past. The end date. But the stone was still here and nothing else. Just the structure, the symbol that something more had been here, and now it is not. I touched several of the stones; the dates seemed to move further and further back as I moved forward.

I took 5th Ave north to avoid seeing the fire I had started. It took me almost two hours to reach Penn Station, where I booked a train to Albuquerque. It wasn’t leaving for a few hours, so after using the Penn Station’s internet to check my email, and setting my battery-operated alarm, I found an iron table in the upstairs food court and sat at it. I’ve
heard people say that the Penn Station used to be a really remarkable place, but looking around, it felt a lot like a shopping mall. The well-lit sandwich shops and pizza vendors, shoe shiners and newsstands projected a less grimy, miniaturized version of the city outside.

**Day 3 in New York**
_March 2 until morning of March 3_

3,107.45

(10.00)—to pay off janitor for an apple, two packets of crackers, and stale coffee

(6.00)—two vendor hotdogs

245.09—Credit Received for stolen items from Bunsen Publishing

3,336.54—Remaining Balance

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**Email from Laurence Sleightor**

Subject: RE: NO and ALB

From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)

February 14, 2009, 9:10PM

To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)

Priority: Low

Karin,

Glad to hear the traveling is going well. I understand that it is rarely easy, and Hart can certainly be a strange guy to work for. I’ll try to answer your last questions first, starting with Bunsen’s author-sit program. It is a bit shady, and Bunsen prefers to keep it under the radar, hidden, even, from landlords and tenants. They request that the sitting-authors make no splash in the community, that is, so that the program may continue on. The reason why is simply that it is a remarkably effective program. After your first book is published, you will also have the option to participate in the program by writing in another author’s home. In this regard, I suppose it is like a sort of Time Share. I wrote Two in D.J. Glinear’s reclusive home on the East Coast. When the program fails is when somebody like Fien is lodged into the home of a naïve, young writer, or when Bunsen uses the program for purposes other than writing—for example, when Zafren found himself in the non-readerly public eye after his third novel, and acted awkwardly and self-consciously, Bunsen placed him in Montana until the talk shows and tabloids lost interest.

In short, Fien is a bizarre man, and when he stayed here, I didn’t even let him have a room to himself. Have you seen his novels? (Essentially, they are several hundred paged anagrams of classics like Lolita and Moby-Dick.) Well, he really believes in these things. I mean, he believes that the original authors had the letters write, but just put them in the wrong order. I swear to you. He believes that there is a perfect order of letters, a near-infinite code, if you will, and that with each book he writes he is getting closer to replicating it. This is why he chooses to rewrite classics, because he believes the presence of the letters, even if in the wrong order, trigger some chemical reaction in the reader, which propels the book to the canon. He is crazy. Possibly legally so.

And another thing, if he has internet access in your apartment, he’s definitely taking advantage of it. After he stayed here I ended up spending hundreds of dollars trying to get my computers back in order. Pay
close attention to your credit card statements, because if he has access to them, he'll have you signed up for
internet sites you wouldn't think could legally exist. Trust me: it can be very embarrassing when you're trying
to show your nephew a funny video and one of these sites pop up.

As far as the copy of Two goes, don't worry about it. I'll give you a copy when you get to New
Orleans. There are plenty lying around here. Now, about non-fiction. I'm going to pass on something to you
that took me many years to learn, and has helped me in areas further-reaching than my writing:

Non-fiction, Karin, is a woman. Fiction is a man. Trust me: this is not a misogynistic classification,
though such interpretations can be made. Short-sighted interpretations, that is, as there are specific values to
both genres, as there are to both genders. What is central to this paradigm, you must understand, is creation.
Men create, but they don't experience creation. They can only imagine it. Short of a DNA test, or the chance
that eye-color and such characteristics are passed from father to child, there is little data to back him up as
creator. Women, on the other hand, create, but more importantly, they experience creation, physically and
emotionally. They are universally accepted as the grower of human life, and the data can be checked, is
exhibited in their skin, their glow, their growth, and the lasting effects of pregnancy. They can imagine little
beyond what is there, the physical implications of a small foot in their ribs, or a picture from a book of what
their child must look like at this stage. Observations and records are based upon fact. They don't have to
imagine the details of a growing life in their womb, nor are they able to forget about it. Men must imagine it
all. Must try to understand the process through observation and hearsay. Woman experience it.

Writing is very similar. Fiction is a collection of data observed, of hearsay and experiences shared,
crafted into a unified story; its existence is an attempt to understand something. Non-fiction, on the other
hand, is a recording of data experienced, if not by the author, than by a person who has access to the entire
processes of the events: motivations, shifts in loyalty and desires. Fiction, then, cannot be approached as a
recording of events. It must not be experienced as a woman experiences pregnancy.

Pregnancy, or so I've observed, is experienced two ways: a woman reads many things that explain
what happens to their body and the child's body, then waits and is satisfied when the changes take place,
confirming that developments are proceeding normally, or taking precautions when actual events do not match
up to ideal events. The process looks like this: conception, awareness of details through observation,
confirmation of details through experience, birth, and therein, the recognition of the final object: a child. At
this final stage, the most important progression takes place: the ideal object, which has been developed in the
mother's mind, is set against and compared with the actual object: the child. Discrepancies in perception are
noted, and then are forgotten as the perceived image eventually becomes the actual image.

Fiction, on the other hand—or rather, the man's perception of creation—occurs in quite a different
progression, starting with perception; man is a visual being. After the correct amount of observation stimulates
the man to action, conception occurs. At that point, the ideal image remains at its most basic stage. Particular
features and functions are not perceived on the same level as the person who is carrying the object: arm and leg
movements are not felt, books are sometimes read, but let's face it, no man has out-read their partner in such
matters. Consequently, in order for the man to experience these things, he must imagine them through the
experience of others and a small handful of actual data (e.g. a birthing book read in the bathroom). Since he
cannot create an ideal image based on experience, he must work with an acute understanding and observation
of others' experiences, using his own understandings of Human Experience to draw a conclusion. Therefore,
the progression of man/fiction looks as follows:

The email ended, just as seen above. I opened next one, which was also from Sleightor:

Subject: RE: NO and ALB
From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
February 14, 2009, 9:10PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: Low

Sorry about that, Karin. I hit the “Send” button when trying to clean gin from my keyboard. I’m okay now, I’ve poured myself a fresh Scotch and am ready to go. The progression for man/fiction looks like this: observation, conception, imagination, and finally amazement. For the man, there is little fact-checking and comparison; final observation immediately replaces any notion of an ideal image with an actual image. This is possible simply because, well, he was only guessing at it to begin with.

So, I think that the following is what pertains to you: you’ve already observed and conceived—congratulations, future father!—now just sit back and imagine. Wait for that ideal image to appear, to “click” as some say, and record it, but don’t hold too tightly to it. When the final object does appear, it will be much different than you imagined. That will be okay, though, since you were just imagining anyway, and who can say whether your imagination is right or wrong? Anyway, you’ve already put so much effort into the imagining that you will be too exhausted to attempt re-imagination. The important thing is to carefully attend to the project during the imagination-process. Do not neglect it, not even for a single day. Get it water when it wants, fast food when it craves it, and if the project wants a cigarette halfway through its growth, don’t argue with it. Don’t let it get out of control, but let it breathe.

Okay. Shit. I’m tired. I hope some of this makes sense.

Best,
Laurence.
The train rumbled out of New York and into the suburbs early on Wednesday morning. I wouldn’t be in Albuquerque until Friday afternoon. I realized later that this is because the train seemed to stop every thirty minutes. Time, however, doesn’t exist on a train in the same way as it does off a train. Perhaps this is different in a sleeper car, but sitting with the people on the train, time becomes fluid. There are a couple ways—outside of a watch or clock—to monitor the approximate time: the dimming of the lights in the coach cars, the closing of the snack bar, and the sun rising and falling outside your windows. It is, of course, misleading since time zones are being crossed and darkness during the winter in New York means evening in New Mexico. By the second day, you can see the travelers loosing from the burden of time. Old couples play card games late into the night in the lounge, while teenagers make a ruckus early in the morning and are asleep by evening. People begin fixing their day around three points: breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The points, however, rarely occur at breakfast time, lunch time, or dinner time; it is only important that they occur, that there is something fixed. Meals help travelers to recognize that time has passed: my stomach was full but now it is empty. There are fewer segments of time, now, between myself and my destination than there was at breakfast.

For me, I had trouble even following these simple rules. I lost all track of time. I often ate long after I began to grow hungry, having thought to grab my food from the Shell-Sea Hostel refrigerator. Other times, I ate sandwich after sandwich, for what seemed like forever. Much of the trip blurred by, but it wasn’t a fast blur; rather the entire experience seemed to be slowed slower than standstill. If somebody stood up to use the bathroom, by the time they returned it was as though I could still see them in every point of movement.
from their seat to the bathroom and back. A solid line of person, blurred from A to B to A. I think this had a lot to do with my final day in New York, though such displacements rarely hinge upon a moment or a few moments. Everything is progression. By so clearly setting my plan as I traveled to New York, I had set myself up to hit road blacks along the way. With such a stable and sensibly plan put forth, such road blocks caused more destruction than those in the path of a hastily-hashd out plan. On the train, then, I set out to detach myself from people, and I detached from myself as well. I wore headphones that kept people from talking to me while also refusing myself admittance into my thoughts. I simply watched actions from a near-omniscient vantage point, and thought little about them. But mostly, I slept.

One night, I wandered into the near-empty lounge car, and sat several tables down from the large Amish family that sat near the entrance. Their clean-pressed canvas clothes hung off their bodies in a way that would’ve looked sloppy on anyone else, but on them it made sense. This was the connection I made to the other travelers, the only one, and I wrote several times in my journal that night: “simplify, simplify, simply.” I wrote: “can you chase two things.” With a period. I made sure to end it with a period. I watched them from several booths down, a family of seven. One hulking man, bearded, and his three skinny sons who have yet to grow into their father’s presence. A mother, thin and bright. This trip stimulated her, and she responded by watching everything, recording everything inside. Her two daughters, in long blue dresses, wore bonnets that casted shadows over their oily skin, and occasionally, I felt like I was in the presence of extraordinary, though prohibited beauty. The daughters played the harmonicas. The family sung, all draped in clothes that looked designed for a family of paper dolls.
It was after dark, and they played back and forth. After some time, as people stood up to walk through the lounge car, they stopped and sat and listened. Before long, quite a crowd gathered, and the daughters met their requests for Hank Williams Sr. songs, folk songs, and hymns. Many people, then, in many types of clothes, sat and listened and merged and talked. I went back to my seat and slept.

When I woke, I began wandered the aisle aimlessly, walking as far as I could in one direction, going downstairs, back upstairs, and then wandering back. I found a magazine left on a table with a cover story titled, “Above Average is now just Average.” I brought it back to my seat. During the next two days, I drifted between states of sleeping, waking, walking, and reading. At some point, I had a cup of coffee in my hand, and I finished the article, which was about the rise of the average height of American citizens. A college on the east coast had conducted a study as to why people are taller than they used to be. A surprise discovery to their research revealed clues as to why so many youths were highly addicted to video games containing either violent or sports themes.

The argument went something like the following: Thirty to forty years ago, during the golden age of the National Basketball Association’s short shorts and the uprising of the National Football League—a time that also coincided with televised games, an increasing number of homes with television sets, media-exploitation of corrupt politicians, and the death of rock-n-roll—athletes, argued the author, officially became more popular than the rest: actors, singers, presidents, and astronauts. As a result, there was an increasing emphasis placed on high school-level athletics. Since the majority of successful athletes were on average three and three quarter inches taller than the average person—particularly in the top five American televised sports: basketball, football, baseball, hockey, and tennis—junior high students were often scouted on an incremental scale of qualifications. At the base level of
this scale, was build and height. Higher qualifications included agility, temperament—fiery temperaments being an advantage in competition based sports—shoe/hand size, circumference of head—measured around the ears—presence of facial hair, and, occasionally, academic grade. Remember, the article reminded me, this was the seventies. Furthermore, though the aforementioned qualifications seem unable to accurately qualify anything, this took place before highly regulated systems of recruiting were in place; thus, tests and training camps were only proceeded with after a base lever of prescreened athletes had been acquired.

The article proceeded to recount how high school programs, consisting of 15-year-old tall, large headed and footed athletes with the ability to grow lumberjack beards and occasionally pass a math test, grew in popularity. The growth was not simply an issue of a certain teams rising within their division, but also the growth in popularity of high school athletes among their schoolmates, particularly females. It is important to note, the article noted, that this increase in popularity occurred at a time when the drinking restrictions were less restricting, and the drinking age was three years lower, allowing high school-aged kids to buy alcohol for themselves, which they also shared with their friends. Furthermore, it was almost a decade before the widespread AIDS scare, so contraceptives, though in existence, were more funny than they were useful. As the athletes grew in popularity, the also began attending more social gatherings, where the high school girls sought them out based on very similar qualifications as the scouts sought them earlier. The total effect: during the late seventies, hundreds of thousands of, at the time, abnormally-tall children were born out of high school relationships, with large feet and large heads. Oftentimes, during such times, the parents stayed together, limiting slightly the amount of such children being born.
After fifteen to twenty years, the athletic scouting process evolved a little, but those who still qualified were often the children of those who had made the first cut, and thus shared the same characteristics. The social gathering scouting process changed very little. The primary shift was that male students who had not grown up with parents and grandparents accustomed to old-world familial values, including such valued traits as monogamy and penny-pinching, no longer felt obligated to remain with the girls they impregnated. Therefore, the amount of large-headed, large footed, not-quite-so-abnormally tall babies increased exponentially, as a former high school athlete often had two or three tall babies out there, often unbeknownst to him, before he married and raised his own tall children. This repetition of processes brings us up to our current time, when we see the competition for sports ever-increasing, and the particularly leagues expanding in order to accommodate such growths. It also explains why people are so much taller now than they were thirty to forty years ago.

The surprise discovery occurred when a distracted researcher asked the question: what happens to all the tall, testosterone-saturated teenagers who cannot make an athletic team due to the increasing difficulty of scouting qualifications—now developed to include such events as timed running, vertical jumps, weight-lifting, and liberal arts? These students were often eliminated in the first or second rounds of cut-offs. Those who were not offered the vague, ancillary titles of team manager, or equipment overseer, were forced to find other outlets. The ramifications coincided with, and perhaps caused, the transition of electronic gaming from fraternal Italian plumbers saving princesses, to racing, to beheading prostitutes in alleys, killing over-stimulated dragons, and participating in the off-season training schedules of actual athletes. The unplanned breeding of testosterone-oversaturated children
created an excess of capable ball-throwers, and those ball-throwers needed an outlet. If it wasn’t to be on a field, than it would occur on a screen.

The shift from simple sports-based electronic gaming to violent street-fighting and dragon-slaying electronic gaming was easy to figure out, once the basics were acknowledged. Since the hands of the aforementioned bred athletes were once-abnormally large, they lacked the dexterity and grace to press particular buttons in the sequenced and controlled order needed to succeed at their simulated games, and thus satisfy their bred desire to win all competitions. Alternatively, there were far too many hit batters, interceptions thrown, and half-court shots taken, when the player had only meant to press the throw/pass button (the article acknowledges that several of the hit batters may have been intentional). These bearded, fat-fingered vidiots, then, turned to games where a competitor who pressed several buttons simultaneously at any random order, often defeated their more calculating and patient counterpart. Many genealogists and psychoanalysts fear that the natural evolution of this gene will promote a further increase in violent gaming that may extend into virtually-realistic violence, and not, unfortunately, more competitive athletes. Though, only time will tell.

I set the magazine down, unsure of whether minutes, hours, or days had passed during my reading of it—indeed, I had dozed off several times during—and I looked out the window and saw desert and bright pink mountains in the distance. The voice over the intercom announced that we would arrive in Albuquerque in approximately twenty-five minutes. I grabbed my suitcase and computer from above my seat, and went downstairs. My phone chimed as I did, and I listened to two voicemails: the first, an urgent message from Claire asking me to call her this evening—that it was imperative that I called her this evening—and the second from the Prentice Police Department informing me that I must
report to the courthouse no later than March 7, to answer some questions about the Library burning, as well as a recent complaint they received, concerning me, from the Prentice University Library. The message stated that officers had stopped at my apartment several times and were unable to find me. Then, the train door slid open and I prepared to step back into time.

**Train from NYC to ALB**

*March 3 to March 5*

3,336.54

(22.50)—nine train coffees

3,314.04—Remaining Balance
Penn station in New York, where all the important business seems to be conducted underground, was a distance memory when I stepped off the train at the Albuquerque station. Where Penn had been dingy and grey on the outside, flashy and carnival-esque on the inside, the Albuquerque station was a red-brick composite of parallel lines and right angles on the outside, and dusty and worn on the inside. Everything indoors had been constructed for heavy-traffic: the floors were linoleum and uncluttered to be cleaned easily; the banks of simple wooden pew-like benches were grouped together in narrow, straight lines; there were no rugs, or restaurants, or kiosks. Just open space and seemingly colorless décor. The walls smelled strongly of disinfectant, as though pumped in through the vents.

Outdoors, the building was beautiful. Distinguished grey stone rose to a fiery orange roof; a diminishing tower rose into the sky, capped in metallic blue. “Albuquerque” was written at its widest part in a modern font, and narrow, arched windows let the relentless sunlight in. The shape of the windows made one feel that at any time, the building could be stormed upon by a band of outlaw vigilantes or horse thieves. Even in March, the heat was intense, its fingers finding their way underneath my clothes, and against my skin. I stuffed my sweater into my bag and started walking West on route 66 in short sleeves, carrying my bags. It was mid afternoon on a Friday, and the streets were packed. Work, I figured, must have let the citizens out early, and sent them toward their weekend. I was hypnotized, I was certain, by the whirling color and movement of the town. They grayness of New York, the endless mirrors, set on a grid along the East coast, had been replaced by a straight line of road—the infamous Route 66—lined by circus-like, tasteless and wonderful neon lights and paint jobs, and an endless snake of shiny, fluorescent-colored vehicles, from Humvees® to
Hundais®. Brownish brick buildings had been painted over with a thin coat of day-glo green and pink paint. The spray-painted tags were indistinguishable from the storefronts sides. Everywhere, brick bled through and the disarray of color seemed to bring me to a trance-like forward movement, step by step, down the clean, dry sidewalk. On the road, traffic not only moved forward and backward, but up and down as well. At least every other car on the road, from the frequent low rider to the rusty small-sized pickup truck, had hydraulics and paused to bounce in the air, tires leaving the pavement, leaped into the air while driving, settled into the ground while turning; drivers hunched low into their seats gripping iron chain-molded steering wheels with a single hand and adjusting the hydraulics with the other. The polka-like thumping of their local radio blasted and everyone seemed to celebrate Friday afternoon. I walked ahead without meaning to, without a destination; my eyes spun spirals; sweat danced off my forehead and dropped onto the pavement and I swear I heard it sizzle.

I only made it a couple blocks before I found a small microbrewery that advertised, in fluorescent red, internet access and canine accommodations. I went in and ordered an India Pale Ale. The barroom was small and dogs outnumbered people 3:1. A lazy, golden retriever lied curled before a barstool, its grey muzzle nestled into its paws. I sat at a table where I could watch her. She acknowledged me with a yawn and closed her eyes. I opened my computer and weeded through at least thirty obscene spam emails to find an email from Hart. I read it. In addition to Hart’s email, though, there were a series of orders from small bookstores around the country confirming recent orders. As I read through them, I stored them away into a folder somewhere on some database that survived and thrived by trusting people to trust that the database was, indeed, accessed by the user alone. As I placed them into the folder, I expected to see the number of unread emails drop. It didn’t. I scrolled down to find the more emails had been delivered since moving the others. More notes from
bookstores. Then, a note from my brother in Maine. A college English professor. Anna, even, and then Abby, Claire, B. Hart, Dennison Whitmore. I clicked on my “Deleted Emails” link and several more emails appeared that had been deleted, though I hadn’t even seen them. I tried to click on one from Anna with exclamation points in the subject line, but was booted off the page. I attempted to sign back in but an error message appeared, stating, “log-in error, you are already signed in.” I tried again, and again, but no longer had access to the page. It was the first time I’d had a problem with Vmail, and the issue immediately erased the pleasant mood I’d entered into from viewing the strange things outside. I felt a pressure building in my chest, like a balloon slowly inflated behind my ribcage. My beer no longer tasted sweet and hoppy, but acidic and heavy. The balloon in my chest kept expanding until I had trouble taking a full breath. It wasn’t just the emails, either. Seeing Anna’s name brought me back to New York, Abby to Boston, Dennison to The SauerKraut Circus, Hart to the staircase, my English professor to the year I spent as a city park worker, my brother’s name to the trip I never made to Maine upon graduation, the detour to Prentice. Claire to, to a late night of strange-tasting bourbon, the knocking of ice against rocks, of creating stories, of burned pages pasted to our backs with sweat and the dusty smell of charcoal on our skin.

I ordered another beer and stepped around the retriever to retrieve it. There was a local newsletter on the table next to mine. I flipped it open, peeling apart its pages that had been sealed together from the moisture of too many pint glasses. The publication was called The Alby Post, and was printed in colored ink that rubbed off onto my fingers. Inside the back cover, there was a listing of lodging options along Central Avenue, phone numbers, and prices. I held it up to the bartender and he nodded.

“Take it,” she said. “We’ve got more.”
“Thank you.” I looked past him to the wall behind the bar. Instead of a mirror, the wall had been pasted with Polaroids®, all taken, it appeared, in the small room. Patrons with beards, some shirtless, mustached men smiling with large jugs of beer, women with their arms wrapped around dogs, a man standing on his head on a table, a woman, right-side up with her arms around his torso, a barroom full of drinkers in Isotope jerseys, a row of women in Laker’s jerseys. The sense of community in the pictures, though I was not a part of them, seemed to pull air out of the balloon in my chest. In several of the pictures, large glass jugs were held in the air like trophies. The same jugs, I noticed, hung on hooks above the pictures. The bartender, a pencil thin woman with a bee’s nest of thick graying hair, explained to me that the jugs were called growlers. For fifteen bucks, she’d fill one up with a beer of my choice, seal and tape it, and I could bring it home. Refills, then, would only be nine bucks. I gave her seventeen and left, feeling just a little better.

After two weeks of Chicago, Boston, New York, buses, and trains, I relished the heat of the city, the closeness to the sun and the closeness to the mountains. I watched the cars dance in the street, hopping on one wheel like a toy car in an animated movie. A small pick-up truck stopped at an intersection in front of me, blocking my path across. Three men, piled in the front seat leaned forward progressively, like a hand fanning out cards, and they stared at me through black sunglasses that hugged their faces like a mask. Their brown skin was wet with sweat that soaked the edges of their white tank-tops. Still staring at me, the furthest one away—the driver—reached forward and pressed a switch. The entire front, driver side shot up in the air. The men bounced up with the car and fell to the passenger side, toward me, and continued staring. I stood there and watched them. Their light turned green; he pressed another switch and the rear, driver side shot up, sending them leaning even further. Then it was the front, passenger side, and the rear, driver side sank. The box of the
pick up, then, lifted several feet into the air on giant hydraulics and mimicked the movement of the truck’s frame. This went on until the light went from green to red to green again, the men never taking their eyes off me. It was like watching a huge game of labyrinth in progress, tilting, rising and sinking to avoid the pitfalls, a small iron ball moving forward through the maze to find at the end, just another hole. When the show ended, I saw the mustache of the man closest to me rise in what I figured was something of a smile. I nodded back and walked behind the truck, West down Central Ave.

As I continued down Central Ave, the streets became less colorful and less maintained. The traffic was less. Even the heat felt slightly tamed. I arrived at a small three-story hostel across the street from a Laundromat, halfway between the downtown district and old-town Albuquerque. The rates were unbelievably cheap compared to New York and Boston, so I booked a private room for four nights and went upstairs to settle in.

I brought a plastic cup from the downstairs kitchen to my room and poured some beer into it. I sat on the bed, testing its springs by bouncing slightly, and then smashed a spider against the wallpapered wall. Fucking Finn Fien. I should’ve known it right away. In the right drawer of my computer desk in my apartment, at the very back underneath a rubberbanded collection of my correspondence with Dennison Whitmore, I kept a list of all the usernames and passwords of every website I used on a regular basis. Online bookstores, email accounts, Shit!, my bank statements. Fien must’ve used it to access my email account. Was he fucking writing notes to my brother? To Anna? I picked up the phone and dialed Claire’s number.

She answered.

“Claire. You gotta help me.”

“I help you? Karin, you need to help me. This Fien fella—”
“Claire, there is not time to talk about some fine fella, and it really seems insensitive,
given our history. I don’t wanna—”

“Fien! This fellow named Finn Fien. Karin, he showed up to my house this 
morning.”

“What? How did he know where you live?”

“It’s sort of a long story.”

“Is there any other kind? I mean, people like to tell you there story is short, or their 
telling will be brief, but you know—”

“Shut up! I’m seriously worried about this creep.”

“I’m sorry. Tell me what happened.”

“Remember when you asked me, several days back, to try to get to know him. To go 
out with him?”

“Well, I just wanted to—”

“I did. I thought it would help you. I stopped by his place a couple nights ago, and 
we went out to O’Briens, you know, on 7th. He wanted to sing Karaoke.”

“You’re making this up,” I said.

“I’m not. Karin, believe me.”

“I do. I’m sorry.”

“So, it was all like a game to him. To see how far he could go?”

“What do you mean?” I could feel my face heating up with anger, shame, thinking 
that I’d led Claire into a situation where Fien may have tried to take advantage of her. “Did 
he try anything? I mean, did he, he didn’t, like, touch you or anything, did he? Claire?”

There was a long pause on the other line. “No, Karin, not that type of game. I mean, 
the Karaoke. As soon as we arrived, he didn’t even speak to me for twenty minutes as he
filled out song requests and stuffed them into the D.J.’s box. I swear, he must’ve sang about every other song, until the D.J. finally caught on.”

“I don’t get it. I mean, it’s weird, but old people just dig karaoke. That’s all.”

“No. It gets worse. It was like he knew the words to every song. Whenever he was up, he’d sing the words to the song sung before him, to the tune of the song he requested.”

“Okay, that’s definitely weird. What else?”

“Well, eventually the D.J. caught on. He refused to let him sing. When the D.J. went on break, Fien went up to the request match and dropped an entire book of matches into it, with one match lit.”

“What the fuck?”

“I know, right?”

“I mean,” I said, “what is up with this guy and fire? Everything is lit matches with him. It seems a bit heavy-handed for such a supposedly, brilliant novelist.”

“I said about as much to him. He went into a long rant about how the artificial must be cleansed. Must be burned away to reveal the authentic.”

I thought about the deleted emails in my inbox. The bastard!

Claire said, “I challenged him on his argument, that his action is artificial because he can’t be the one to determine truth from fiction for everyone. I shouldn’t have, but I even mentioned my book. That I compiled pages that had been selected by chance, that I’d only taken the pages the fire didn’t destroy. That I didn’t actually destroy anything.”

“I don’t know if you should’ve mentioned your book to him. He doesn’t seem reasonable.”

“No shit.”

“So, what happened?”
“I lied to him. I was scared. After I explained my book to him, he became very quiet. And then, a few moments later, smoke started floating up from the request box. Soon, the entire box was on fire and the bartender and D.J. were stomping it to put it out. He watched, enthused, and I told him I had to use the bathroom. I left out the back and went home, locked my doors and shut the lights off. But this morning, he was at my doorstep. I hid because I thought it was the cops, but his high-pitched, graved voice gave him away. I was just sitting there, crouched against the door as he hit it with a closed fist, mere inches away from me.”

I refilled my cup. “You might want to think about leaving,” I said.

“But to where? I’m supposed to stay put.”

“Let me think about it. I can call you later.”

“At the risk of sounding like a distressed damsel from a paperback novel, Karin, if it isn’t yet clear, I’m scared.”

I lied down on the bed and cupped the phone with both hands. Outside my window, a motorcycle engine revved and motored down Central Ave. I said, “I know you are, Claire. The cops, are they still monitoring your place?”

“Yes,” she said softly. I heard her swallow something on the other end of the line.

“How often?”

“At least once an hour. They wait outside for longer in the early evening and late at night.”

“Okay. That’s good. Fien can’t do anything with them stopping by so frequently. You need to just stay put for a couple days. I’m going to talk to this guy, Laurence Sleightor. He’s an author with Bunsen Publishing, and he knows Fien. He lives in New Orleans and I
think I’m heading there soon. Let me talk to him, see if I can find out what Fien is up to, and I’ll get a hold of you.”

“Should I say anything to the police?”

“Not yet, I wouldn’t. He hasn’t really done anything except get pissed about some karaoke thing and knock on your door. Don’t worry, Claire,” I lied into the mouthpiece, “he’s just an eccentric writer in too small a town. You’ll be fine. Just stay put.”

“Okay. But don’t forget about me. I mean, I know you have other things to do: the novel, find Anna, but please, don’t forget about me.”

“Claire. Come on. You know I won’t. We’re in this together.”

“What were you going to tell me?” she asked. “You said I had to help you.”

I decided not to tell her that my accounts had been accessed, presumably by Fien, so I lied. “It’s nothing. I was just thinking about something at my apartment that needed tending to, but its not a big deal. I don’t want you going there anyway. It was just a couple plants I wanted to make sure got watered.” I knew, it was a terribly transparent lie. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Are you sure? I don’t think I could go over there, anyway.”


I hung up the phone and called my bank. I explained to them that someone had accessed my account and was using it to make online purchases. I don’t think the person had my card number, but the information was stored on my computer so they only needed my password, which they did have. The woman on the other line said my only option was to put a hold on the account, which wouldn’t work since I needed access to it for my travels. Unsure of what Fien would purchase next, I decided to take out funds I’d received from Bunsen, and finish the trip using only cash. I asked if she could wait until tomorrow morning
before placing a hold on my account and she agreed. Any transaction that went through before tomorrow, she said, would still be debited from my balance. I hung up.

I poured another glass of beer and opened my computer. After several tries, I was able to get into my email account. I wrote an email to Sleightor, and checked the emails I’d missed. When I was finished, I fell asleep reading an article from “The Alby Post” about a man who apparently had perfect memory. It was titled: “Albuquerque Man Remembers Birth, is now Most Sought After Albuquerquean.”

**Budget**

_March 5_

3,314.04

(27.00)—Chama River Brewing Company

(115.00)—4 nights at Hostel

3,172.04—Remaining Balance

**Email from B. Hart**

*Subject: No-Show*

*From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)*

*March 5, 2009, 10:07 AM*

*To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)*

*Priority: High*

Karin,

After waiting several hours, I am very upset to discover that you have either A) chosen not to show up to our meeting this morning, or B) have been put into a predicament that has made it impossible for you to either show up or, at the least, call. If the second option is the case, please disregard my disappointed tone, and know that Bunsen is sympathetic to whatever tragedy has befallen you and is willing to offer you their full support. If the former is the case, then you should know that this is not how business is conducted at Bunsen. Regardless of how chaotic your previous visit to my office may have been—though truthfully, if I may be truthful, I believe that your displeasure in our meeting was more of a result of you being tired than Bunsen being unaccommodating—your presence and obedience to Bunsen Publishing is part of your contractual agreement with us. Please call me immediately so we can set the record straight and continue to move forward.

Now, with that nasty business out of the way, I would like to offer you a few notes on the first 100 pages of your manuscript. First off, I like the progression the novel has taken; the back-stories of the characters are satisfying to me as a reader, and I feel you have set me up nicely to proceed.
Second, you use several unpublishable words throughout your manuscript, at least for a publishing company of our modest income. I imagine that this may be a rookie error, though you must be careful to omit/replace several words, lest we invite a copyright suit upon publication. Below is a list of words that cannot be used without purchasing copyrights. Only in special cases will Bunsen be willing to purchase such rights, though in the current context in which the words are used, we feel it is better for you and the novel to replace said words with better words. Here is the list of words to be replaced:

- "Amtrak"
- "Sauvignon Blanc"
- "The ‘F’ train” (though the “Q” train and the “1” train are fine)
- "Brooklyn” cannot be used if the words “hotdog,” “vendor,” or “Jay-Z” appears in the same sentence
- "Katrina” can be used, as long as it does not appear in the same sentence as “storm,” “flood,” “hurricane,” “tropical,” “Superdome,” “New Orleans,” or “N’awlins.”
- "Detroit Tigers” cannot be used unless a fee of seventeen dollars per usage is paid to MLB.com. Bunsen will allow you no more than five usages of “Detroit Tigers.”
- Finally—and this is of the utmost importance— the name “N’an Lure” may never be used. We are not willing to negotiate this usage, Karin.

In addition, as an editor, I’m going to ask you to restrain yourself from spending describing, in excruciating detail, the reality television shows that Benjamin and Olivia watch during the evenings. I don’t know what you are trying to do here, but it isn’t working and is taking up too much space.

In regards to Katrina, I feel like you are in love with her in the way you write about her. This will not do. You can’t idealize your characters. Provide her with flaws; give her some bitterness to balance out her unfathomable integrity and sense of duty. Perhaps a little road rage or a drunken rant. Maybe she could sucker punch the pastor. Just a thought.

Furthermore, the scene where Sean crawled out on the ice to impress Olivia wasn’t very believable, nor was it an impressive stunt. At the least, please make it more dangerous, though I’d suggest getting rid of it.

Alright, beyond that, I don’t really have anything for you. Please call me immediately to resolve your absence today, and please keep writing.

B. Hart.

Email to Laurence Sleightor

Subject: RE: NO and ALB
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
February 14, 2009, 9:10PM
To: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
Priority: High

Laurence,
I am sorry to pester you with so many questions, but I feel I’m in a bit of a bind now. I’m curious about this Fien character. As I’ve told you, he is now staying in my apartment in Prentice. There are a couple things I am concerned with. First, he’s gained access to several of my online accounts: eBray, vMail, Mamazon, etc. Needless to say, he’s been buying a shit-ton of books through my name. Furthermore, he’s accessed my email account and is now corresponding to my friends and family. He’s taken my identity. Second, he has come into contact with a close friend of mine in Prentice, and has done some things—almost set a barroom on fire, shown up at her apartment—that has made her feel quite uncomfortable.

I guess what I’m asking is, do you have any advice for me? Should I contact Hart about this? I think it is more than speculation at this stage. Also, how much should I worry about his action with my friend? Is he dangerous? Please. Any help you can give me would be greatly appreciated.

By the way, I plan to be in New Orleans around the 12th or 13th of March, depending on what happens here in Albuquerque. I hope to look up your friend tomorrow. I’d like to spend a day, if she lets me, working on her farm. I think this would be a great way to re-jumpstart the writing.

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Karin

Deleted email response from B. Hart

Karin,

You need to calm down. Your apology is accepted. I understand the pressure you must feel from trying to finish this novel. I’m flattered by your praise of our company, but you must not compare yourself to our other authors. Don’t worry. What Fien writes is, indeed brilliant, but with a clear mind and strong work ethic, you’ll get there. We do have a high standard of literary excellence, and that is why we’ve funded you to help with your novel. Just keep writing, son. Follow the muse, and you will do fine.

p.s. You shouldn’t be so harsh on Sleightor’s novels. I strongly believe he is building up to something truly great. There really is something wonderful in them, and soon it will all come together. Trust me; he really isn’t, as you say, “regurgitating every used-up, supposedly postmodern writing convention in order to attract those lame fucking critics that are just looking for something different.” Sleightor is a splendid author with his own struggles. He will help you.

Sincerely,

B. Hart

Deleted email response from brother, Carol Pankreez

k-
you need to let up on this guilt trip shit. believe you me, i’d love to visit your small-ass town someday. i’d love to see you. i miss you. trust me, i really do. i’m sure we would have a blast. we will have a blast, soon. but you know my situation. besides it was you that never made it out to maine that summer. don’t blame me for not ever visiting. i miss you bro, i do. we’ll get together soon.

check ya later

c

Deleted email response from Anna Bertreb

Karin,
I have to say, I am quite shocked by your email. Selfishly, I’m slightly, pleasantly shocked. I thought you’d be pissed that I left NYC without seeing you again, but really, I did wait. You just didn’t show up in time and I had a plane to catch.

Karin, if I can be honest, I was a bit—I’m blushing now—turned on by your email. Why have you never written to me like that before? It’s possible that things could’ve been different. I’m sorry. I know, that’s not fair. It was the passion, though. You really had me. I hope, by chance, we run into each other soon.

Love, Anna.

Deleted email from Dennison Whitmore

Karin,

I’m shocked to hear from you like this. It is true that The SauerKraut Circus was beautifully written, but I contend your attack on me that I did not do enough to sell it. I agree that the world needs more of these true stories, about bravery, about human dignity, but what can I do besides placing it on the desk of every publisher I have access to? I tried, Karin. I gave it everything I had. In truth, as a reader, I admired this book far more than anything I’d read in ages, and I pushed it harder than anything I’ve pushed in the last decade. But in the end, I hope you understand, it is not my decision to publish it. I can only make it available.

I hope that you don’t write me off, Karin. You’re a promising writer. Sincerely, I value our relationship on a personal level as well as a business level. Trust me when I tell you that. You are one of those rare, down-to earth writers that an agent rarely stumbles upon. Perhaps we can work together on your next project. Besides, I’ve seen this situation several times: a couple books get published, and then the publishers are begging for the earlier manuscripts. The SauerKraut Circus is by no means dead. It is merely dormant.

Best regards,

D.W.

Deleted Email from Abby Bertreb

Karin,
You’re an asshole! How could you suggest such a thing! She’s my sister! My Sister!!!!!!!!
Do not ever contact me again. Asshole.

Abby.

Deleted Email from Prentice University of Library

Mr. Pankreez,

Given the obscene and threatening nature of your recent email, as well as your blatant refusal to pay your fines, we want to inform you that we’ve forwarded your account information—emails included—to the campus security and the Prentice Police Department. Trust that they will be in contact with you shortly.

Sincerely,
Authorities at the Prentice University Library
I spent most of the morning responding to emails which were responses to emails I hadn’t written, and trying to reverse Fien’s purchases, with no success. Though, I didn’t respond to Anna’s. I wasn’t sure what Fien had written to her, and I was willing to let it ride. My response to the Prentice University Library took the longest, as I attempted to explain that not only had I not written the previous email, but that I hadn’t checked out any of the books they had listed to me, with the exception of the Sleightor novel. I begged them to contact Jessica Blairry, who was a friend of mine at the library. She would be able to describe my appearance, as well as testify to my character. Please believe me, I wrote, when I tell you that I value books tremendously.

Afterward, I looked up Sleightor’s former student from the farm. She agreed to meet with me the following morning, and gave me directions to the farm as well as instructions on what to wear. Downstairs, I finished the last of my bread and peanut butter, and set out to do my banking. I was worried about carrying so much cash around, but not as worried as I was knowing Fien had access to my account. Fien, with his frivolous spending spree, had made a massive dent on my stipend. After putting a hold on my account, I exchange most of the cash for traveler’s checks, and then split them up into five different bundles, stored in five different places. After purchasing groceries for the week, as well as hot-weather clothes from a second-hand store near my hostel, I placed three hundred dollars in cash in my wallet, and then went about dispersing five bundles of traveler’s checks, each totaling 416 dollars. I hid the stacks in 1) the back folder of my moleskin journal, 2) in a sock at the bottom of my suitcase, 3) in my collection of Ezra Pound poems in my bag, 4) within the pages of “The Alby Post” and in the top shelf of my closet, and 5) inside a near-empty
package of cigarettes—the same package that I had purchased in Prentice—which I kept in my front pocket.

While doing laundry that afternoon, I brought “The Alby Post” with me, and continued reading the article about the Albuequerqean man who remembered his birth. Apparently, he had become quite a popular figure, worldwide. Concerned parents of newborns from all over the world paid thousands of dollars for his advice on any number of parenting concerns: “Why does she wake up screaming in the middle of the night, and fall right back asleep?” “Is it possible for an infant, less than a week old, to have dreams?” “What do newborns dream about?” “Why does he give me that look when I change his diaper?” “Is it possible that my newborn hates me?” “Is it possible that my toddler loves me? I mean, understands love enough to love me?” “When my wife and I have intercourse and the newborn is in the room—she sleeps in our room until we are able to afford a larger place—will it shape her future views on sex?” “When he starts urinating after I’ve removed his diaper, is it intentional?” Abe Filmnopryz, the man with the amazing memory, answers all the questions. Yes, we dream at that age, though our dreams often consist of staring out of a dark, fishbowl-like container; we innately recognize the humility involved in diaper changes, but also understand we cannot do it ourselves: our somber look was one of shame and jealousy for your overdeveloped, dexterous hands; we are capable of understanding love and hate as soon as you are capable of showing it selflessly and genuinely; if you have intercourse with your infant in the room, you should hope he or she does not have my memory—I’ve yet to engage in any sexual activity since seeing what I saw when I was only four days old; we do not urinate intentionally at first, but eventually do, particularly if you have slow reflexes and frazzle easily.
A research team from the University of Mexico has been studying Mr. Filmnopryz via tests and controlled interviews with the subject and his elderly parents for several weeks now, with so far no reason to believe he is fictionalizing any of his accounts. Though there are many theories as to why his memory is so developed—was always dressed in baggy clothes, ate only breast milk and blended, organic, New Mexican squash until third birthday, had never been placed too roughly into car seat, never slipped out of parent’s grip resulting in a sharp whipping of the neck or bumping of soft skull—the leading theorist, Dr. Rushur, contends that his memory is directly related to his parents’ debilitating case of Chronomentrophobia, which Mr. Filmnopryz has inherited.

The subject has been invited as a guest lecturer at UNM for the entire month of March, speaking and answering questions from 1pm to 3pm on weekdays.

I wrote most of the afternoon in my room at the hostel, struggling to give my characters something to do on their train journeys, to provide action, impetus, and plot without delving too far into the sentimental. When I broke for a sandwich and sauerkraut, I shared a kitchen with a girl who, though she looked nothing like Anna, shared her mannerisms to an unsettling degree. I didn’t stay for long, just watching her briefly as I waited for my water to boil for coffee. I didn’t even say hello. But when I returned upstairs, I found I couldn’t focus. I kept seeing her pressing buttons on the microwave panel, hitting clear and then pressing the identical buttons again, touching her lips lightly with her fingertips, occasionally tasting the edge of her fingernail, double-tapping each individual floor tile with her socked toes as she walked through the kitchen. Finally, I shut down my computer, and left the hostel. I mean, Anna’s why I’m here, right? Why I came to Albuquerque, now, that is. For a moment I wondered if there was any chance that I could actually find her in the city, but I knew better.
It felt good to walk on the sidewalk unbundled and uncrowded. A light breeze reached through my t shirt and touched the sides of my ribcage. My jeans felt loose on my hips. When I returned to Prentice, I would attempt to gain back some of the weight I’d lost so far, living on a couple hot dogs a day and coffee and bourbon. Music poured off from the streets and onto the sidewalks from cars that screamed past, leaving in their absence the rich smells of combusted fuel and marijuana. The action intensified as I neared the center of town, the epicenter of flashy pizza eateries and chain restaurants and loud clubs with walls that vibrated with thumping bass notes; when the doors occasionally opened the flashing lights escaped into a laser show on the sidewalk and into the road. I entertained a thought about how I would be the one to find Anna this time. That I could use the list of hostels and hotels I found in The Alby Post as a checklist and visit each one. I could explain to the clerk that I was meeting my sister here, Anna Bertreb. That they could call her and verify if they didn’t believe me. Giving away, in the process, confirmation of her staying there. I even played out a scene in my mind about how I would trick a clerk into stepping out from behind their desk to answer a call or settle a dispute and I would search the registry for Anna’s name, or whip the screen of the computer toward me and search her name. But I knew that I wouldn’t do these things. There was something pleasant about being alone in Albuquerque on this particular night. Something liberating and tough and slightly bitter about the air and the pink mountains ahead of me, still casting off the light of the sun that had since set.

I pulled open the heavy door of a moderately lit barroom with live jazz playing from a low stage near the end of the bar. There was four of them on stage, an upright bassist with dark sunglasses, a trumpeter who’d occasionally scat or blow a harmonica, a pianist, and a drummer with a very minimal drum kit. I ordered bourbon with a splash of spring water and
sat at the bar to watch them play. I felt a detachment, watching them. That the music I heard
was somehow not contingent on, or not a product of their pounding and plucking, tapping
and blowing on stage. It felt as though if they were to pack up their instruments, collect their
money and leave, the music would continue uninterrupted. Or if the music were to stop,
people would continue to pack the bar in order to watch them silently gesture on stage. I
stayed at the bar most of the evening, and I drank my drinks carefully, slowly. In the
morning I would meet up with Sleightor’s friend, and I’d need to be prepared to spend the
day working at the farm. Before eleven, I paid my tab in cash and walked back to my room
alone. I set my alarm before falling asleep.

3,172.04
(713.50)—Spent on Online purchases from Finn Fien
(49.87)—Groceries (bread, peanut butter, 1 bottle hot sauce, jelly, 3 pkgs Ramen Noodles, 1
block swiss cheese, instant oatmeal, 5 oranges, potato chips, ½ lb sliced turkey, 1 jar
Applesauce, 1 jar jalapenos, 1 jar Sauerkraut, 2 bottles local Cabernet Sauvignon, coffee
grounds, 2 rolls of antacids)
(9.50)—Laundry
(17.54)—two t-shirts (one red with faded yellow sunset on front, New Mexico flag on back,
the other blue with the Albuquerque Isotopes logo on the front), 1 pair of cargo shorts, 1
pair of worn blue jeans, 1 pair of leather work gloves.
(23.00)—drinks at Jazz bar on Central Ave
2,358.63—Remaining Balance
Chapter 40: “I Can Help You to Fuck Off,” March 7

I woke with the slight lightness of head brought on by the strong drinks from the bar last night. The low pressure from the hostel shower still felt great on my neck and shoulders, and even when the hot water began to cool, I lingered, taking my waking slow. I wasn’t sure exactly what I needed for the day, or when the day would end—Tabby had been vague in her instructions. I put on a pair of jeans, and then took them off for a pair of shorts. I put the jeans back on, put the shorts in my computer bag, with my computer removed, hidden in the closet with a bundle of traveler’s checks and a bottle of cabernet. I packed my gloves, an extra shirt, deodorant, and a bandanna for my sweat; I carried my knife in my pocket. Glancing in the long mirror hung on the back of my door, I convinced myself that, with the exception of the computer bag, I looked more like a farmer than a writer trying to look like a farmer. Even my shoes were touched by the dust of the desert, though I had hardly stepped off a sidewalk since my arrival.

At the front desk, the girl, the woman whom I mistook for Anna, taught me how to read the bus manuals and how to ride the Albuquerque buses. The drivers’ accents can be thick at times, she said, so you must know the sound of your stop beforehand; leading up to it, you must imagine how it may sound being spoken in a foreign tongue. If only I had been given that advice in New York. I stepped outside in the pinkly-lit morning. It was only quarter to seven, though by the time I reached my stop, I could feel my t-shirt beginning to stick to my back with drops of sweat.

The bus shook on the uneven roads as we veered away from the downtown district. The landscape was brownish green and the shadows of the Sandia Mountains carved monolithic shapes into the dry fields. I wondered how water was stored and dispersed to
sustain a farm in such a climate. I pulled out my notebook and, standing in the aisle with my arm hooked around a pole, I sketched the layout of the fields as they passed by my window; I jotted down some questions for Tabby: the question of water, about any pressure her small farm may garner from larger farms, about what the city did to support her farm, about contracting, supply, and demand. Anything that could help me to authenticate Katrina and her plotline, I would ask Tabby. As the bus stopped at the sparsely populated, residential intersections I listened to the driver’s voice and imagined his accent announcing my stop. When we got to my stop, I knew right away. From there, I had to walk about a mile down a dirt road, lined with large oak trees that cast their shadows over the road and blocked some of the heat of the morning. A road runner—which, yes, I was able to identify from the cartoon—darted across the road ahead of me and ran along a narrow gulley in the ditch. When I got closer I realized that the gulley may be the answer to the water question. Water flowed through ditch, lined with large wooden boards and what looked like a pool lining. Where driveways met the road, there was a reservoir constructed with tunnels underneath the driveways and a wheel and sets of channels. I stopped and sketched the mechanism in my journal. Finally, when the road dead ended a sign made from wooden planks and blue paint marked the entranceway to The La Granja Farm. I walked toward a hoop house covered in white plastic. In the field to the left, several smaller, rectangular sections had been carved out of the earth and were bordered by raised earthen boundaries. I wondered if they were meant to hold in what precious water may fall. In each section, metal posts were positioned in long rows; connecting the posts was a mesh fence and barely-visible tentacle-like vines had attached themselves to the fences. Past the hoop house, in the largest of the rectangular sections was a group of five or six young people prying shovels into the dry earth and breaking up the soil with their boots. I headed toward them and before long, a short,
muscular woman in a cut-off jean shorts and a ball cap headed toward me. Her hair was either cut short to her scalp or tucked underneath her hat, and her skin was dark and shiny with sweat. On the left side of her face, dirt had been streaked from above her eye, across her temple and along her cheek bone, where a bead of sweat cut the smudge in half and carried it south. In my pocket I felt my phone vibrate, and on the back of my neck I felt the New Mexican bare down.

The woman, before we were in a reasonable distance to begin speaking, hollered at me to go back to the entrance and read the goddamn sign posted under the bigger goddamn sign that stated, as clearly as possible, that solicitors and organizers were not welcome on this goddamn property. Behind her, the group of young farmers—seasonal help, I supposed—leaned lazily on their shovels in her absence, mindlessly crushing lumps of dry soil with their boot heels and waiting for me to react.

“Can you help me to find Tabitha Noebale?” I asked. The woman stopped and looked me over, spitting on the ground.

“I can help you to fuck off.”

“I’m sorry.” I started to step backward. “I must be at the wrong place. I meant to be at The La Granja Farms. To work for the day.”

“Wait. Are you Kristin?”

“Karin.”

“Karin! That’s right. Shit, I’m sorry. I forgot you were coming. Come here.” I cautiously stepped toward her and she took my hand in her hand and shook it heartily. “A friend of that fucker, Sleightor, huh?”
“Well, I’ve never actually met him. We’ve just talked, or rather, we’ve been writing to each other. Yes, that is, Sleightor told me to contact you.” I pried the toe of my shoe into the soil, trying to look knowledgably down a row of trellises. So, this is the right farm?”

“Yes of course.” She spit again, and I watched her work a chaw of tobacco from one edge of her lip to the other. She spit again. “Sorry about that.”

“Do you really get lots of solicitors out here?”

“We used to. Now we just get organizers. Trying to push us into joining some farming collective with the other local farms, to give us better bargaining leverage. Never mind that. Let me show you around.”

Tabby lead me along the borders of the rectangular sections, explaining what was planted in each. Beans and tomatoes along the trellises, lettuce over there, eggplant right here, and flowers in the hoop houses. Plenty more on the other side, and back beyond that fence is the community farms.

“How many employees do you have here?”

“Just two, now. Me and Jim, the owner.”

I asked about the group of workers I’d seen and she explained that they were on work study from the University. Lazy, cocky assholes, she explained, hardly worth a shit. Which was fine, cause we don’t have to pay them. They get some sort of agricultural credit from UNM for coming out here and busting up our soil up and installing the trellises. Free labor.

After showing me around, Tabby—who did have long hair, dark brown in a single, tight braid down her back—brought me to where the others stood and handed me a shovel. She pointed out the rows to me and explained that they were currently digging trenches. She taught me that I would only half to dig the hole half as deep if I stacked the dirt alongside
the plants. It’s good, she explained, for the plants to be close to the surface where the water can reach them quicker. She pointed out the irrigation system: a four inch PVC pipe that stretched the short length of the rectangle with a valve installed at the start of each row of plants. As long as the holes were dug on a gradual slope, and enough water had gathered in the irrigation ditches along the road, when she turned the valve on, the collected rain water would filter down the roads and aptly irrigate the entire field. We’ll test it when we’re done, she explained, to make sure the grade is right.

I picked up a shovel and was thankful that my hands still bore the calluses from the work I’d done with Prentice’s Parks department last year. For the next few hours, the group worked mostly in silence. Occasionally a pocket of conversation sparked, but then died. The students worked like people worked when they knew they weren’t getting paid, but they knew what they were doing. Tabby moved quickly and confidently, adjusting valves on the ditch irrigation system, occasionally picking up a shovel to revise our trench digging, spitting tobacco into the ditches, and then going back over the ditch irrigation system.

I enjoyed the work, my mind able to wander or think of nothing at all. I made a conscious attempt to avoid seeing things as I would record them later in my journal, but to actually see them through my interaction with them: It isn’t enough to state that the sun is hot, and to modify the statement with a metaphor; rather, I attempted to trace the unification of my experiences, their linkages: the sun is hot, so my skin is sweating, so my shirt is wet, so my back is sticky, so I must peel my shirt away from my skin, which causes the sin along my collar line to sting, because it has been exposed too long to the sun, which is hot. I recited these cycles, like mantras, as I repeatedly pushed the shovel into the ground and pried up earth: first with the sun, then with the earth, my feet, my hands. Each time I tried to enlarge the loop, to connect all experience, to include it all.
I sat in the shade of an oak tree with Tabby at lunchtime. The students packed into a car and left for the day. A slight breeze rustled the leaves overhead and was cooling against my back. Tabby pulled a tomato from a paper bag and used a knife to split it. She gave me half; I hadn't even thought to pack a lunch this morning. I used my knife to cut the tomato into smaller pieces before plopping them into my mouth. They were soft, and I could squish them with my tongue against the roof of my mouth. She shared some pita bread with me, and gave me an apple, too.

We ate in silence, watching the stillness of the landscape, and the subtle movement of small things that cannot anchor against even a light breeze. When we finished, Tabby asked me if I felt like hanging around for the rest of the afternoon.

“Sure, if possible. Is there a lot more to be done?”

“Oh, plenty. Way more than we can ever get to, even with the kids from the university.”

“I can come back tomorrow, too.”

“You know you’re not getting paid, right?”

“Of course.”

“But I can probably scrounge up another tomato for you, if you do.”

“Deal.” Tabby drank from an old milk jug full of water. She took a ceramic cup from her bag and wiped out the inside of it with her sleeve before filling it with water and handing it to me. The water was warm from sitting in the heat all morning, but it was refreshing and no matter how full my stomach grew, I felt that I couldn't drink enough, fast enough, until I reached the bottom of the cup. Tabby as she dug out slivers of dirt from beneath her fingernails with her knife. I remember Sleightor writing that she could really fly off the handle at times, sporadically, but sitting there, legs stretched out in front of her, cleaning and
then biting her nails to keep them short, I couldn’t see it. Then I remembered the ferocity of her greeting this morning. Like it was from an entirely different person altogether.

Tabby looked up and caught me watching her. She bit into a fingernail, and after moving it around with her tongue, she spit it out. “So, you’re a writer?” she asked.

“Well, yeah. I mean, I write.”

“And you’re writing a book about farms?”

“Not really. There’s a character who works on a farm. That’s all.”

“And is that, like, me?”

“Is it you?”

“Yeah. Are you here to, like, base her on me?”

“No. I’m just, I wanted to get a better sense, albeit brief, of some of the things that happen on a small farm. What you do and what it feels like.”

Tabby went back to cleaning her fingernails. She appeared disappointed.

“Where’s the other guy? What’s his name? John?”

“Jim. He’s probably at home. Lives just down there a ways,” she said, pointing her knife down the road I’d taken in. “He only comes out to the grounds a few times a week, or else to watch over things if I’m not around. Sometimes I take trips for a few days in the area. Jim takes care of the business part of the farm, then comes by to get into my shit about planting too much or overwatering. He’s itching to retire. Just to close the farm and spend the rest of his time drinking and looking out his windows. Come on,” she said, “Let’s get back at it for a bit more so we can end a little early and get a drink. You can ask me all your questions then, even though you say you’re not writing about me.”

After Tabby showed me how to build the trellises, she left me on my own for the rest of the afternoon. She dropped of a loader-bucketful of steel pieces of rebar, and then
showed me how to drive them into the ground a couple feet deep, and then run plastic
ingfencing around them to give the plants something to climb. The rebar was heavy and I could
feel the dull ache growing in my shoulders as the afternoon went on. I’d left my bag by the
tree, and had to work without gloves. Though I couldn’t see Tabby, and I wasn’t getting
paid, I had a strong urge to impress her, to surpass her expectations. I could feel the skin on
my hands peeling away, but I kept driving the rebar into the ground; the sun burned against
my back, and I let it. Once the first row of trellises were finished, I was amazed to find that
some of the smallest vines had already attached themselves several feet up. They had
somehow woven their appendages into the fence.

I finished with four rows before Tabby finally returned. She threw me a bottle of
water and examined my now shirtless back with squinty eyes. “If you’re not up for working
tomorrow,” she said, “you don’t have to come. By the looks of it, you’re going to be hurting
with that sunburn.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, looking past her toward the mountains, trying my hardest to
appear tougher than I knew I was. She was right. I would be hurting, though.

Tabby walked along the edge of the section I’d been working in, eyeing the
straightness of the rows and occasionally pulling at the pieces of rebar. She spit some
tobacco into the dirt, seemingly unimpressed by my work, and perhaps unamazed at the
quick work of the vines to cling to the fences. Or, I sensed, just bored. “Why don’t we put
this shit away and call it a day. We’ve got enough done.”

I savored what I took to be a compliment.

“How’d you get here?”

“Train,” I said. “Came in from New York two days ago.”

“Not to New Mexico. How’d you get to the farm?”
I explained my commute and she told me that if I didn’t mind waiting for a bit, she could drive us back into town and we could get that drink. I agreed.

On the way to the apartment she rented from Jim, she gave me a brief tour of the farm. She explained some of their processes, what they grew, and showed me around the community garden where a few ladies with small children knelt in front of miniature sections of plants, touching the soil and pulling at weeds.

Tabby’s apartment was nearly bare, with the exception of an old recliner and a bookshelf filled with books of fiction and poetry, mainly from the beat writers of the fifties and sixties. The shadows of the dim room exiled the corner of the bookshelf, where, had I been less interested in peoples’ bookshelves, I wouldn’t have noticed the small stack of agricultural books and a sloppy pile of Farmer’s Almanacs. On a milk crate next to the chair several dishes were stacked, crusted with sauces and crumbs of earlier meals. Hanging from the lone window in the living room was a curtain made from wine corks, threaded together by string. Given the purple-stained Mason® jar on the counter, I had a feeling the corks had been self-procured.

Tabby opened a door off the main room that I hadn’t noticed, and entered the adjoining room. She left the door open, and didn’t speak to me as she changed. Before I knew she was changing, I nearly followed her into the room. I caught her half-dressed, her muscled thighs youth-white and her calves hardened and darkened by the desert day. Her grey sports bra was faded and stretched as she stretched her back, hunching her shoulders forward and arching like an alley cat. Without her back to me, she tugged out the rubber bands from her pony-tail and began untangling them. There’s beer in the refrigerator, she said. Grab us a couple, huh?
The refrigerator was as bare as her apartment, apart from some vegetables, a bottle of Dijon® mustard, a Tupperware® of something that looked like tuna fish, and five forty-ounce bottles of malt liquor. I grabbed two of them, and before closing the door, for a reason I couldn’t describe—the need for order or to leave things undisturbed, I pulled the other three bottles into the empty spaces. When I brought her the beer, she had a foot up on the bed and was picking at a toenail, wearing only her undergarments, as though we’d been rooming together for years.

“This is my favorite part of the day,” she said. She took the beer from me and twisted off the top, flicking it onto the unmade bed, and tilted it back as she guzzled nearly a quarter of the bottle down. As she took the bottle with her into the bathroom and then into the shower, it occurred to me, above the noisy shower spray and the knocking of the glass bottle on the shower wall, that I should’ve uncapped her beer for her. In the living room, I took a book of poetry by Laurence Ferlinghetti from her shelf, amongst several volumes of work by Jack Kerouac. I sat in her recliner, sinking further into the loose springs than I’d imagined. I read and I drank from the malty beer.

When Tabby emerged from her room, clean and dressed pretty much the same as before, she said, “your turn.”

I hadn’t planned on showering here, but I had clothes with me so I did. The water was not very warm, but it felt incredible in the heat. Tabby came into the bathroom, as I was turning a thin bar of soap in my hand, thinking I should’ve asked for a wash cloth, and fumbled around the sink.

“Where are you from? Originally?”

“I live in Northern Wisconsin,” I said, digging my fingernail into the soap to free a dark hair, “but I grew up a few hours Northeast of Los Angeles.”
“How’d you end up in Wisconsin?”

“A long story. A girl, I guess, and a place to live. I was flying to Maine to visit my brother and got stuck at O’Hare. I rent a car, took several wrong turns, and ended up in Prentice. I met a girl in the hotel lobby, decided to stay an extra few days, and then weeks. I’m still there.”

“So you never made it to see your brother?”

I scrubbed the bar of soap across my face and my freshly shaved scalp. I could feel a burn when the water hit the areas where I’d gotten too much sun. I felt vulnerable for a moment, with my eyes closed and Tabby just beyond the shower door. “No, I didn’t.”

“And the girl? She still there?”

I heard tablets shaking inside a plastic bottle and then the empty sound of an empty bottle clink against the porcelain sink. “She’s gone. Headed East, actually, where I had started.

Tabby laughed. I was insulted at first, but as I rinsed the soap from my face, from the rest of the bottle, I too laughed. “So you’re living in snowy-fuckin-Wisconsin, probably freezing your ass off nine months of the year, and the girl, the only reason you lived there has left?”

I couldn’t control it. I laughed harder. I took a long swig from my bottle and choked hard on its carbonation. “I did,” I said. “I mean, I am.” I took another drink and emptied it. When I got out of the shower Tabby was sitting on the toilet. I didn’t realize, at first, that she was using the toilet. She looked me over as though evaluating a row of tomato plants—though probably without as much care—and pushed her hair out of her face. She reached to the door and grabbed a towel, tossing it to me. “You’re insane. I use to live in Indiana. It’s fuckin cold up there. And square. Fucking square as hell. Come on, get dressed. Let’s go.”
She swiped a piece of toilet paper between her legs, stood up and left without flushing. I dressed and followed her.

She handed me another beer and we drank them in her truck, on the way into town. It was the first time I'd ever drank alcohol in a car, but I had a feeling that if I stayed around Tabby, it wouldn’t be the last.

It occurred to me, walking across the near-empty parking lot of the Gondola Bar, located off a dusty intersection illuminated by a lone, intermittently shining street lamp, that this was not an bar that tourists frequented, and I was wearing my Albuquerque Isotopes t-shirt. There were less than a dozen people inside, including the bar staff: an old man, probably in his seventies with skin that draped, thin and wrinkled as used saran wrap, from the sharp bones of his face. The barroom walls were covered in red velvet that was darker from wear near the tables. The actual bar, a giant gondola complete with masthead and two massive oars hanging overhead. At its best, the bar was a tacky theme joint that’d failed to catch on, and the patrons were regulars who could identify with this. The only noises in the bar were the seamless satellite radio feed of anonymous jazz, and the sporadic cracking of pool balls from a table in the corner. We weren’t asked for our orders at the bar, but were given tall cans of beer. Tabby greeted barman familiarly and he attempted a smile. We sat on the starboard side of the bar.

It was difficult to tell how much time had passed; I looked around the bar and couldn’t find a clock. Even the weather channel, which played seamlessly and muted on the small television screen above the bar was formatted so that the picture did not fully fit into the screen, cutting out the clock that counted down the minutes to the local weather. At best, when the Albuquerque weather appeared, I knew it ten minutes had passed. I asked
Tabby some questions about Sleightor, and she explained that he used to teach at a small university in Indiana before his first novel. After the novel’s meager acceptance, he quit teaching and began writing instructional pamphlets for commercial airlines and Amtrak®. Next time you’re traveling on the train, she told me, check out the small print at the back. He uses a pseudonym, though you should be able to figure it out. She’d met Sleightor during her first semester—a required World Lit course—almost fifteen years ago. She was vague about their relationship, though she spoke about him with an unsettling familiarity, calling him Larry and talking at length about his love for good gin and breakfast meats. She said she’d shown up at his place in New Orleans on a couple occasions, impulsively driving across the country, but then trailed off in thought. She looked toward dark corner of the bar, longingly, and then said something about always having to get back to the farm. She practically ran it herself.

During one of these passing moments, between the first word of her statement and the period at the end, I watched her watch the door, ostensibly willing someone to walk through, or perhaps just expecting someone to. And then the door snuck open, meekly, and only wide enough to allow a shadow of a man pass through. As he walked to the bar he didn’t look up, but sat near the wall on the port side. The bartender mixed him a drink and served him without conversation. The man slid out of his beige windbreaker, and his bespectacled face was gaunt as though he hadn’t slept in days or maybe weeks.

Tabby leaned close to me, looking ahead. “Do you know who that is?” she asked.

I ran through the images of potential celebrities in mind: Steve Buscemi? Willem Defoe? Gary Oldman? I couldn’t place him, but I knew I’d seen him before.

“Abe Filmnop-something-or-other. He’s been lecturing, and being researched, at the university. Supposedly, he can remember every moment from his birth to the present.”
“Yeah. I read about him. People come from all over asking for parenting advice, right?”

“He’s in here every night.”

We stared at him, though he didn’t notice, or perhaps he was simply used to it, not from his celebrity status, but from his bizarre appearance. His prominent, wispy eyebrows extended to far past his eyes and curled upward toward his temples, causing him to appear constantly astounded. The edges of his mouth, too, seemed to stretch slightly farther across his face than normal, and he had virtually no chin. As soon as his coat was removed, he pulled a small electronic device from his pocket, attached a pair of headphones, and began staring, stoically, at the screen.

Tabby continued, “I’ve heard that because of his perfect memory, he is incapable of being fascinated, or even engaged in anything that takes place in the actual world, and that since the actual world is so entirely engrained into his consciousness, that he lacks all power of creativity.”

“Bullshit.”

“Maybe, but think about it. He does not possess the ability to forget anything. Nothing is new to him. I watched part of a presentation on him last week at UNM, after I gave a lecture about our farm. The presenters had the audience come up with the five most awe-inspiring things they’d seen, and Abe then recounted his experience of them. They went through the Grand Canyon, the northern lights, Machu Picchu, the Iguazu waterfalls, the Cliffs of Mohr. Everything, he explained, he’d already seen.”

“Bullshit. He couldn’t have seen all those things.”

“Not in person. He’d seen photographs of them, and remembered them perfectly. Photographs that were taken precisely, when every element of season, light, and foliage had
been at its most awe-inspiring, and then enhanced through computers and photo programs to become better than perfect. These photos have caused any actual viewing to pale in comparison.”

“It makes no sense. The thing about awe is the appeal to the senses, right? The senses working synergistically. That we not only see something, as we do in with a photo, but we also feel the mist from a waterfall and the cool evening air as the northern lights move about the sky. We taste things, hear things, and experience things beyond what a photo can provide.”

He was asked about that. He said he’s felt better breezes, smelled better smells. He said we can manufacture all these things through mechanics; we can creating more pleasing breezes and use them only when a breeze is desired, can manufacture scents, play back sounds. He explained that by sitting in a temperature controlled room, with a miniature fan blowing on his bare legs, an apple-pie scented candle burning, a pre-recorded brook rustling through speakers, the fat from a rib-eye steak melting in his mouth, he could watch a digitally enhanced, panoramic video of the Himalayan mountains captured during the perfect season and time of day, and lose all capacity of future awe.”

“That’s bullshit. What about contrast? Isn’t that what makes things beautiful? The sweet with the bitter? That a fan can’t be appreciated unless it’s either unavailable or, at least, used in sweltering heat?”

“He was asked that too. He said it was a bullshit theory. That genuine ecstasy requires not substandard qualities.”

“Genuine ecstasy requires not substandard qualities?”

“His phrasing. It stuck with me.”
“Alright, so what about emotional awe? I read that he is abstinent, but what about awe that derives from kinship, camaraderie, or love?”

“I don’t know. They started in on that, but I left.”

We finished our drinks and the bartender brought us more. I wondered what time it was. When the local weather came on, I knew ten minutes had passed.

“We should go talk to him,” I said to Tabby. I looked for a napkin to sop up the beer that had spilled from my mug when the bartender set it down. It was remarkable, I thought, the lack of head on the beer.

“No, we can’t do that?”

“What do you mean we can’t? Look at him. He’s practically begging to be approached. I don’t think I’ve ever seen somebody so isolated, so lonely-looking.” Abe reached across the bar without looking up from his screen and felt around for his drink. When he found it, he brought it to his lips, carefully, took a drink and set it back down, all without looking away.

“You’re just projecting your own feelings of isolation onto him. He’s simply watching a video, alone in a bar. Because that action strikes you as a lonely one doesn’t make it a lonely action.”

“I think we should talk to him. I’m going over there.” I stood up, picked up my beer, and started over. Tabby aggressively grabbed my shirt and pulled me toward her. Pale beer sloshed out of my mug and onto the leg of my jeans.

“Quit being a douche, Karin.”

“A douche? Now there’s the Tabitha I met this morning.”

“Yes, a douche.” Her whisper was strained, was right on the cusp of normal talking volume. “He’s been at the university for several days, and will be there for several more
weeks, being probed repeatedly by researchers, shitty parents, and journalists. You think he comes to the bar to be further probed? Leave him alone.”

I sat back down. It was peculiar, I thought, how strongly Tabby felt about this.

“And my name isn’t Tabitha. It’s Tabby. Tabby Noebale. That’s what I was named.”

“Sorry. I didn’t realize you felt so strongly about it.”

“Just drink up.”

Sitting in silence, then, for several moments, the urge to know the time was painful. I looked around for somebody with a wristwatch, some way to find the time. There was nothing. I asked Tabby and she just pointed to a sign above the entryway: “No Wristwatches or Other Time-Telling Devices Allowed in the Bar, Including Cell Phones.”

“What’s that all about?”

“Part of the original theme of the place. To replicate the feeling of being on the open water in some past age, where time would only be known by the position of the sun.”

“Seems like if that’s what they were going for, they’d at least put a window in this place.”

We finished our drinks and Tabby pulled a man’s wallet out of her blue jeans. I told her to put it away, that I’d pay. A small consolation, I figured, for being an outsider in her regulars-only bar. Only when we stood up and left, did Abe look up at us. I froze for a minute, feeling as though a trick was being played. In his shadowy, gaunt features, I saw a thin and sickly version of myself. What Tabby had said about me projecting my portrait of loneliness onto him came back to me. I tried to push back at it. Tabby packed rapped her index finger against a tin of chewing tobacco and pulled a thick pinch of snuff from the can, dropping it between her lips and gums.
On the way back to my hostel, we passed a church with several men and woman standing in front, around a barrel with a fire blazing from it; they held signs and sang songs. We both watched and Tabby slowed down the truck. When we reached them she stopped the truck and ordered me to roll down my window. From the gravel in her voice, I knew she was not there to wish them well, and I felt afraid for the recipient of her forthcoming rant. Her face had turned bright red, and she spit a wad of chaw out her window. When it hit the street outside, it sounded like two fingers snapping together; somehow, it had gotten their attention.

A woman approached with a handful of purple pieces of paper. She handed us each one. Tabby balled hers up and whipped it back at the lady, bouncing it off her forehead. I folded mine and stuffed it into my pocket before she could do the same with it. Tabby began screaming. Rigid veins exploded from the soft, dark skin of her neck and brown spittle collected at the corners of her mouth, occasionally flying across the seat, onto my lap, against the door, or out the window. “Hey you lousy fuckers,” she yelled. “Is that no-good, lazy fuck, Brad with y’all tonight?”

“Shit,” the woman replied. She relaxed the muscles in her face, her enthusiastic smile sliding to the concrete before. It seemed as though she had met Tabby before. “Brad ain’t here.”

“Why don’t you sons-a-bitches just leave us real fucking workers alone, huh?” Tabby asked. “I’ve been kicked off three jobs in the last month because of you. You think you’re fighting for the people, but you’re killing us. And when I lose my goddamn farm because I can no longer afford to lease the land, you can be damn sure I’ll know who to thank.”

“Listen, we’re just trying to help our friends who are losing their jobs to these cheap bastards who refuse to pay appropriate wages.”
I felt invisible, evaporated into the thick mist of tension that had accumulated between Tabby and the woman. I looked from one to the other. The woman looked to be in her thirties and carried on her shoulders the excitement of what I imagined to be her first protest. It was clear this was also her first confrontation, and I felt bad for her. I tried to imagine what her house looked like, if there was anybody else in it, if she would go to bed hungry, which I doubted. But, I still was a little bit scared for her.

“Who are you to determine what is appropriate? All you’re doing is preventing honestfuckers from getting a paycheck, just because you’ve lost some benefit we’ve never even had the opportunity to have.”

Tabby spit out her window again. I wondered if she was referring to dental benefits. She continued, “it’s one thing to protect your wages, but quite another to fuck with other people’s livelihood.”

The woman placed her hands on the edge of the truck, and Tabby slammed her foot against the accelerator. I could hear the crack as the woman’s knuckles rapped against the window’s edge. I looked into the side mirror and saw her still standing at the curb, stunned and holding her hand.

Tabby didn’t speak until I pulled out the flier and began reading it. There was an poorly-photocopied image in the center of it picturing a rat inside a church, chewing up an American Flag. Above the image, bolded and in all-caps, the title read: “SHAME ON YOU 2ND BAPTIST CHURCH FOR DESECRATION OF THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE.” Throughout the body of the flier, certain words were bolded: “rat,” “area standard wages,” “Smith Drywall,” and “crime and other social ills.” I only made it through the first paragraph—a definition of the word “rat,” and a general description of the problem (local
organizations are hiring non-union contractors to avoid paying standard wages and
benefits)—before Tabby ordered me to get that piece of shit propaganda out of her truck.

“I’d like to keep it,” I said, “to use for possible research.”

Without saying another word, Tabby grabbed it out of my hand and threw it out of
the window.

We drove in silence the rest of the way. I didn’t have to ask why Tabby had been so
pissed. From the way she treated the woman, and the way she’d greeted me earlier that
morning, I could piece the rest together.

When we reached my hostel, Tabby parked her truck on the road, and left it running.
I said goodbye, thanked her, and was about to shut the door when she told me that
tomorrow she’d be teaching a community farming seminar at the university at noon. You
can come if you want, she said, and we can visit Abe afterward, if you’d still like to. We can
leave right from the farm.

I agreed and told her I’d see her in the morning, and then shut the door and went up
to my room to change. While I was out during the day, I had received several voicemails.
The first three were from the Prentice Police Department. They, respectively, informed me
that 1) my failure to show up at court meant that officers had been sent to apprehend me,
and that if I attempted to avoid them I would be formally charged with evasion of justice, 2)
if I was in Prentice, I should step outside and meet with the officers, and 3) in the event that
I was no longer in Prentice, a national warrant for transplantation back to Prentice has been
administered. The fourth voicemail was from Claire. She sounded intoxicated and paranoid.
After Fien spent the night knocking on her door and reading lines of King Lear to her
through the mail slot in her door, she had sprayed him in the mouth with (home-made)
mace and snuck out her back door. She’d been staying, for the last thirty hours, at The
Clock, a local 24-hour greasy spoon diner. She was so jittery, she claimed, that she could no longer lift the cups of shitty coffee to her mouth without spilling. She was afraid to go to the cops, however, lest they find out that the man stalking her was staying at my place and that I was out of Prentice.

As I was coming back from the kitchen with a sandwich and a plate of sauerkraut, I noticed something on the wall above where I’d thrown my clothes. On closer inspection, I realized it was a tic, and I found several more. The fuckers were impossible to kill, too, short off cutting them in half with my knife. I spent a considerable amount of time searching my clothes, the bed sheets, and the rest of the room for them. When I was sure I’d got them all, I opened the other bottle of cabernet and checked my email, and wrote a few responses. I spent a little time taking notes about my first farm experience, though I was mostly distracted by searching around the internet for information about the man from the bar. Then I went to bed.

Subject: Immediate Attention Required
From: PPD@WI.gov
March 7, 2009, 8:37AM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Mr. Pankreez,

After your refusal to show up to the courthouse for questioning yesterday, officers were sent to your home to take you into custody. The man we took into custody, it turns out, was not you, though he did have several forms of your identification on him. After some further exploration into the situation, the man was identified as Mr. Finn Fien, a writer under contract with Bunsen Publishing. Despite posing as you when taking into custody—he explained he had been intimidated and was merely trying to cooperate with the officers who were calling him by your name—Mr. Fien explained your situation as well as your relationship with him. You should be very grateful for Mr. Fien, who insisted on your contractual obligations with Bunsen Publishing as the excuse for why you have left Prentice.
As a result of your leaving Prentice after being warned not to, however, the Prentice Police Department has imposed a formal warrant for your immediate transplantation back to Prentice for questioning in regards to the ongoing arson investigation of the Baell Library. Upon reception of this official notice, if you do not return to Prentice within five days, the warrant will be advanced from “immediate transplantation” to “immediate arrest.”

Bunsen Publishing has been notified of this warrant as well, and has issued a formal statement of its unawareness of your situation, regarding the aforementioned situation.

We have also left numerous messages on your cell phone. Please respond to this notification directly.

Sincerely,

The Offices of the Chief of Police,
Prentice Police Department

Subject: Plan A
From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
March 7, 2009, 9:10AM
To: “Karin” (kpunk@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

You should certainly be concerned with all of the actions you’ve mentioned concerning Fien. In short, he’s a fucking creep. Tell your friend to avoid him. Tell her to move, if necessary. At the least, she should get out of town. Fien has an incredible talent for manipulation, for taking an ordinary situation and translating it into an insane, fucking carnival of drama. His intentions are rarely clear, and more than likely he does it simply for his own amusement.

In regards to your financial situation, it is probably best for you to close your account. Also, you should notify your bank, and try to contact the sellers he’s purchased these books from, under a false name. That is, you should tell them Fien purchased them under a false name; do not contact them under a false name. I could see that spiraling out of even the craftiest artisan’s control.

Now, for a more personal response, I have an idea, actually, of a way to perhaps fight back at Fien, as well as to recoup some of your expenses. It may be difficult to pull off, but I have a few friends in Los Angeles who owe me favors. They should be able to help set it up. What I am suggesting, and be warned that it could be somewhat dangerous, is that you go to Los Angeles and impersonate Fien. He has a large readership in L.A, due to, what I attribute to be, the soaring abundance of likeminded creepy hipsters there who will do anything to be able to impress their friends at stuffy, hipster, social gatherings by claiming to have read the most obscure and difficult novels, and by pretending that they’ve not only read them, but have understood them. Here’s the plan: you will go to LA and perform a reading at the Los Angeles Public Library. You will be reading as Finn Fien, and you will be paid as Finn Fien. Because of Fien’s relative anonymity, it should be a breeze to pull off. He has never included an author photo on his books, nor has he ever embarked on a reading circuit to promote his novels. His face is entirely untraceable to his writing. Nobody will know that you’re not actually Fien (and I can insist through my contacts, primarily the public relations director at the LAPL, that you must be paid in cash). That he has never performed a public reading will only help to increase the
popularity of the event. I will come up with a reasonable reason for the sudden willingness to conduct said reading. We will insist on no press to prevent from gathering any sort of national coverage (i.e. so B. Hart will not find out), and we’ll encourage them to promote the reading organically—word-of-mouth—in order to further decrease non-local attention. What we have working for us is the fact that modern media does not give a shit about writers unless they’re writing conspiracy/crime dramas or sentimental non-fiction dreck.

Now, here is the best part: you will be reading from “the yet unfinished, forthcoming novel.” What this means is that you can read whatever horse-shit you’d like to read. I’d suggest reading off the back of a cereal box, or from the instructions of a sewing machine. Regardless of what you will read, you have the opportunity to get back at Fien in this way. Furthermore, during the question and answer segment that will follow the reading, you are able to recreate Fien to his fans in whatever way you’d like. Now, don’t get too excited about the chance to ruin his career—as you probably know, regardless of what you read, the attendees will find something in it to latch onto—some truth—and exaggerate the hell out of it, filling it with ontological meaning. You can, however, take pleasure in experiencing firsthand the real nature of criticism.

I’m not going to try to downplay the danger in going through with this, Karin. If something goes wrong, there could be consequences for both of us. Though, I trust that my contacts—who, indeed, share our hatred of this guy—will act with discretion and that we will be able to pull off this stunt.

Please let me know immediately if you’re willing to give it a shot, and I will set things into place. I believe we should schedule it within the week, so as to limit the amount of non-local publicity it is given. Oh, and tell your friend to be on her guard. I’ll repeat, Fien is a fucking creep.

Best,
Laurence Sleightor

Subject: RE: Plan A
From: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
March 7, 2009, 10:10PM
To: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
Priority: High

Laurence,

I’m in. Let me know when to get to LA by.

One more thing: Though I am hugely indebted to you for your help, I have one more favor to ask. I hesitate, but I am afraid I do not know where else to go. My friend, Claire, whom I mentioned in a previous email, has maced Fien and is currently scared to death of him. Would it be possible if I invited her to New Orleans, and take shelter with you, just until I arrive?

Karin

Subject: A Troubling Phone Call
From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
March 7, 2009, 2:32PM
Karin,  

I received a phone call from the Prentice Police Department today concerning some unfinished business you were a part of. Now, it is not my place to involve myself in the personal matters of my writers, though I would like to strongly urge you to take care of this matter. If this means postponing your travels for a while, I would advise you to do so. Please resolve these issues before you upset the muse. I do believe this means you should return to Prentice.

B. Hart
Chapter 41: Arpoh Frey-Win and the Trithemian Language, March 8

I arrived at The La Granja Farm a bit earlier than yesterday, my back aching with sunburn. Tabby was working alone in the far fields, the sun already beating down from the East, and reflecting brilliantly off the Sandia Mountains. She worked furiously at a ditch, shoveling and piling dirt as if her life depended on it. In the time it took me to reach the field, she had dug out several trenches the length of the section. The interns that were present yesterday were not today. As I neared the edge of her row, she stopped shoveling and propped her elbow onto it, leaning into it at the hip with a bend in her right knee. She pulled a bandanna out of her back pocket and wiped her forehead, Tom Joad style. She looked toward the mountains and when I thought she was about to pick up the shovel again, she surprised me by dropping to a knee, holding the shovel upright in front of her. I stopped, sure that she hadn’t noticed me yet, and waited. She began repeating a mantra or a prayer, mostly whispers and humming noises, the words of which I couldn’t distinguish from the sounds of the breeze against the dry foliage and the occasional truck kicking up dirt along the road. I felt intrusive, that my timing and space were a violation, but I was unable to retreat back across the field to a safe distance without looking foolish should she turn around. It was too late, and it seemed funny to me, then, how time and space had been re-ordered by mankind, limited and sectioned off into neat arrangements, and how even in their order, they feel so unboundable and unmanageable. The order we’ve placed on them places a new order onto us; it controls us, with an entirely new system of violations.

So, I coughed, and Tabby turned toward me. Her hair was not in braids, and beyond that, she appeared different, as though she had just stepped out of a storm shelter to find that her house was still intact. The rigid veins in her neck that I’d seen the night before were
covered with hair soft and pushed by the breeze. Sweat and dirt appeared like shadows on
her forehead, cheeks, and across the bridge of her nose. She wasn’t wearing shoes.

“Karin,” she said, smiling in a way I couldn’t trust, “you’re early.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Disturb me? No. I’m glad you’re here.”

“Where are the interns?”

“I called them this morning and told them to take the day off. Midterms are coming
soon and they should be studying.” She flashed that smile again. It wasn’t as though the
expression seemed false; rather, it made all her other expressions seem false. “Here, why
don’t you put some of this on, and I’ll go over what needs to be done before we leave for
the university?” She tossed me a bottle of aloe and I took off my shirt and rubbed it onto my
shoulders and back as she explained that we had to build several rows of trellises in the field
we were standing in, and plant the rest of the globe onions and parsnips.

We worked silently for nearly an hour, pounding rebar into the ground along the
rows Tabby had already dug that morning, before I finally commented on her mood.

“You seem awfully happy this morning. Did something happen last night after you
dropped me off?”

“Just went home, read a bit, and went to bed.”

“I figured after that confrontation you’d still be, I don’t know, sour this morning.”

“That was foolish of me Karin. I realized that, as I was reading. That so much of
everything I’ve done lately has been foolish.”

I took off a glove and rubbed my hands on my shorts. “What were you reading?”

“Kerouac. I always go back to Kerouac. He seems to unground me. Are you a fan?”

“Exactly. He’s just so spot-on when it comes to the drudgery of daily struggles. I mean, I’ve been working on this farm for nearly a decade, and it is no better off than it was when I started. It’s worse. Jim’s trying to get his shit in order to retire. He’s done with it all. Just keeping me on to help me more than the farm. And, I don’t know, I just wonder what I’m doing it for? Just to earn a paycheck?”

Tabby’s confession stirred an eerie feeling of déjà vu within me. I felt certain I’d heard it before. I tried to console her. “It seems like good work, though. I mean, better than pushing a pencil, right?”

“Maybe.” Tabby moved down the row, unrolling the mesh fence. I met her at the far end and helped her secure it to the first post. Tabby walked slowly to the other end and held it taut while I connected it to several posts to hold it in place. We moved down the row together, then, tightening and tying. Without looking up at me, Tabby asked, “Have you ever heard of Arpoh Frey-win?”

“What is it, a band?”

“No, it’s a group of people. A community. They live in the desert west of here.”

“Oh, so it’s a commune.”

“Well, yeah. Sort of like a commune. They grow their own food, live communally, worship together.”

Tabby put in a pinch of tobacco and offered me some. I accepted, having never done it before, and imitated her actions. “Wow, I didn’t expect this to taste quite like it does.”

“Just make sure you keep it tight against your gums and cheeks. You don’t want that shreds floating around. And don’t swallow any.”
I sucked my cheek into my gums. A slight burn edged into my gums. “So, this group. What is it called again?”

“Arpoh Frey-win.”

“Yeah, Arpoh Frey-win. Is it like a Christian group?”

“Not really. Not at all, actually.” Tabby tugged too hard on the fence and tore a piece where it was supposed to connect to the post. She started tying it farther down the post. “They believe that there is a god, but that she’s been drowned out by empty languages.”

“Sounds weird.” I wanted to expand. In fact, as a big fan of language, I felt compelled to respond. My mouth, however, had filled so quickly with saliva—and shreds of tobacco—that the quid was drifting to the back of my throat and making me lightheaded. I spat and attempted to reign it back in. Finally, I managed to slur, “empty languages?”

“Words without references. Like, signs without signifiers.”

We secured the fence to the final post, and I cut the excess with my knife. I thought, briefly, how strange the narrative of this knife, and was curious of its story before me. I followed Tabby to the next row where we continued tying the fence. 

Tabby continued, “they believe the human race rapidly grew so fond of talking, that they ceased to worry whether they were actually saying anything. As the distance between the word and the image grew further apart, so did god—the word—from man—the flesh. The only real Christian connection is a passage their prophet quotes from the book of John. ‘The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.’ The Arpoh’s believe that we’ve removed the flesh from the word by allowing words to become ambiguous. In doing so, god has become ambiguous.”

I spit again, embarrassed at how terrible of a tobacco chewer I was. “How do you know so much about it?”
Tabby moved ahead to the next post, pretending not to hear me.

“You brought it up. I’m just asking.”

She admitted to being a member for a brief time. An intern, during her first year at the farm, introduced her to it. After an intensely physical relationship with him during the summer months, they’d fled together to the western desert and found the Arpohs. You can identify them by their trademark umbrellas and cloche hats—comprised of mostly linguists and etymologists, the members of the cult have yet to develop a tolerance for the sun’s UV rays. The desert, Tabby eventually explained, was the ideal choice for their location, however, because it was the region with the least amount of cell phone towers, radio waves, and satellite signals. The primary practice of the Arpoh Frey-wins was complete abstinence from all forms of electronic media, as this was, they felt, the modern-day equivalent to empty chatter.

When we finished the last of the fences, we had to hurry downtown for the seminar. I helped Tabby load the truck with crates of veggies she hoped to sell afterward. Once we were in the truck, I finally gathered the nerve to ask her why she left the cult.

“I didn’t leave,” she said. “I was removed.”

“Removed?”

“Asked to leave. They refuse to use the phrases ‘kicked out,’ or ‘fired’ because there was no actual kicking or flames. Just a removal of a person.”

“So, why were you removed?”

“Three offenses: I was caught listening to a book on tape during my daily chores, I used ‘fuck’ as a non-referential modifier, and I failed the second level of Trithemian.”

“I don’t know where to fucking start.”
“I'll start with your use of the modifier, ‘fucking.’ Your usage of it refers to nothing, therefore the distance between it and the image is infinite and unattainable. A sin that pushes god further away. Next, books on tape are a violation because the reader's inflections imply unintentional meaning. Finally, Trithemian is a perfect language, given to the prophet in a vision, which all members are required to learn. There are twelve levels, one for each full moon in a single year. It is comprised mostly of non-intrusive whispers and humming noises.”

As Tabby explained this, I pulled out my notebook and wrote down a few things. She said, “don’t bother searching for it on the internet. Since electronic media is a sin, very little about the practice is known because members are not allowed to communicate without other members.” And then, driving past the protestors from the day before, Tabby hammered on her horn and waved her middle finger at the crowd. A few moments later, we arrived at the university.

I asked her, while setting a crate of lettuces onto a wooden table, what the Arpoh Frey-win had to do with the good mood she had been in this morning.

“It was the Kerouac,” she said. “When I read him I get the urge to go west. Whenever I feel like going west I think about my time with the Arpoh Frey-win.”

Tabby’s seminar was brief. A dozen or so students and locals sat scattered about the small classroom, most of them playing with their phones or drawing cartoons in their notebooks. I watched Tabby as she spoke, interested less in the content as I was in the seemingly magnificent transition that had overtaken her over night. Though I hardly knew her, it was difficult to imagine that the bitter farmer I’d dug ditches and drank with yesterday was the same energetic public speaker that instructed an uninterested crowd about the
mechanics of ditch irrigation. She bounced on the balls of her feet, still barefoot and dirt-dark. With one exception—referring to her produce as “shit to sell”—she even managed to avoid cursing. Even when she had flicked off the protestors earlier, she did so with a slight, upturned grin. When she was done, she sold most of the produce we’d brought, and I helped carry the crates back to the truck as she chatted with a couple lingerers.

Afterward, we grabbed some coffee from the cafeteria and found the lecture hall where Abe Filmnopryz would be presenting. The stadium seats were full packed with mothers holding squirming infants; the floors were littered with diaper bags, dropped toys, and loose pacifiers. High-pitched screams and even louder shushing sounds ricocheted off the walls. Tabby and I sat on the steps near the back. Abe didn’t appear on stage until about 45 minutes after the lecture was to start. He looked exactly as he did the previous night: disheveled and pale, as though he were about to collapse under the weight of too many mothers’ expectations. He sunk into a chair as a professor from the psychology department delivered a lofty introduction and explained the research that had been going on with Abe in the recent weeks. Between the chatter of the mothers and the ornery children, it was difficult to hear.

When Abe finally stood up to the podium, the entire room seemed to tilt as the mothers shifted forward in unison. Abe seemed entirely unaware of them and spoke with eyes closed, as though reciting a memorized passage. Though it was difficult to hear, he spoke about the impact a perfect memory has on relationships. The lecture seemed less like a lecture than a recitation of an epic poem that had been studied too long, past the point creating awe. The mothers, seemingly uninterested in his academic babble, still clung to each word as though he were a prophet. As though he delivered promises of quiet households, regular nap times, and swift potty training. Abe, however, spoke of the inability to engage in
any sort of relationship with his, as he called it, condition. At times he referred to it by its abbreviated moniker, PM, or perfect memory.

He could not have a romantic relationship, he said, because love requires the ability to forget or, at least, to be able to dilute memories, shape them by telling and retelling them over and over until minor exaggerations and miniscule adjustments take root and become reality. He is unable to change his memories this way. He provided an illustration about an experience that’d happened to him when he was six.

The story, as his father tell it, goes as follows: The small Filmnopryz family were dining at a small café in Santa Fe, and as they were about to pay their check, actor Danny DeVito walked by their table with his wife, Rhea Perlman. Abe’s father looked up just in time to make eye contact with the Hollywood couple. As it happened, they were both wearing the exact same shirt: a green t-shirt with a yellow palm tree printed on the back. The father and the actor shared a polite laugh. Then, on an impulse, Abe’s father invited them to sit and have a drink. They did, and for the next three hours, Abe’s father pitched him a film idea, the plot of which was eerily similar to the as-of-yet unmade film, One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest. DeVito loved the idea, took copious amounts of notes, paid their meal tab, and then, four years later, starred next to Jack Nicholson in One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest. Abe’s father always ends the story by insisting he is not upset that he didn’t receive his due credit for coming up with the idea for the film. He believes DeVito indirectly credited him by insisting that Nicholson’s main character be named McMurphy—Abe’s father’s name was, in fact, Murphy—and by naming his own character Martini, the drink they drank so much of in the Sante Fe café that afternoon.

The actual events, as Abe perfectly remembers it, goes as follows: the Filmnopryz family eats turkey sandwiches at a café in Sante Fe, and Danny DeVito does, in fact, walk by.
Rhea Perlman is not with him. Danny DeVito wears a suit, much like the beige suit from his movie, *Twins*. Murphy Filnopryz awkwardly shouts at DeVito, “I have that same suit at home.” DeVito nods and smiles, and then attempts to leave the restaurant. Murphy shouts after him, “I’ve an idea for a movie, Danny, about this guy. He wears a stocking cap and teaches some nuts how to play poker! Danny!” And then Danny DeVito leaves. The Filnopryz family is kicked out of the restaurant before they finish their sandwiches for disturbing the customers. Abe explained that he believed his father believed in the version he tells of the story, based on the evolution of the story, which he perfectly remembers. He recounts the way it had been shaped and crafted through multiple telling; as one exaggeration begins to be remembered as a truth, a new exaggeration is added. The process is continued until the story ceases to be told.

An angry mother yelled, “what the hell’s this got to do with our children’s sleep habits?”

He was losing them.

Abe continued by explaining that memory is infectious to relationships because every argument, every vindictive moment, every act that rises out of jealousy, impatience, or spite, permanently exists in the mind as though it were actually happening in the present moment, causing the participant to become reluctant to invest in the other. Additionally, every great memory, every beautiful moment of lovemaking, every gut-busting laugh shared, every nervous quiver of the belly during the early stages of the relationship, are also ever-present, constantly reminding the participant that no moment will ever be as good as it once was.

Another mother yelled, “I drove 300 miles to hear this nonsense from some pale-faced creep? How do I convince Tyler, here, not to cry during my shows?”
Abe, without even opening his eyes, continued his explanation by drawing a diagram on a chalkboard. In the center, he drew a horizontal line. This line, he explained, represents the duration of your relationship. He drew a dot at the end of the line, explaining that this is where each of the audience members currently exists. “At times,” he said as he randomly placed several dots adjacent to the line, though slightly above or below it, “you exist in poorly-remembered versions of these moments.” He tapped on the dots. “The existence is rarely on the line, because your memory has deviated from the actual events. Your ability to traverse back and forth along the line, made possible by the random nature of your imperfect memories, allow your relationship to work by propelling you away from bad experiences and toward the great experiences you erroneously believe will recur.

Subconsciously, and sometimes consciously, you create the relationship you would like to have by revising, contributing, and erasing the existing memories that make up the whole of the relationship. I, on the other hand,” Abe continued as he retraced the line several time, “am the line. Exactly. With my PM, I experience it all simultaneously and constantly.

“Your fuckin’ line sucks!” a mother yelled, covering the ears of the young boy she had on her lap. She hoisted the now-screaming child and left. Other mothers followed. Abe’s hand that held the piece of chalk continued to retrace the line.

Through the shuffle of the lecture hall, several seats opened up and Tabby and I took our place in two of them. It didn’t matter though. The once noisy room quickly became an image of chaos; mothers fussed about, laboriously gathering countless bags—for diapers, for toys, for personal belongings, for knitting materials, for notebooks and recorders—and hung them over their shoulders until, like an army of angry coat racks, they picked up their children and left prematurely. I wasn’t sure if Abe was even aware that they were all leaving.
Now, completely inaudible, Abe stood at the front of the room with his eyes closed and his lips still forming words but making no sounds.

He continued his lecture until the room was empty except for Tabby and I, and the psychology professor who sat on stage with his legs stretched out before him, holding a Dictaphone to his mouth and speaking into it. As the door creaked shut on dry hinges after the last person had exited, Abe said, “Thank you for your attention. I’ll take some questions, now.”

Then, he opened his eyes.

He looked around the room, uninterested, until his eyes fell on Tabby and I, in the back row. Tabby began applauding his lecture, and I followed. It was hard to tell from the back of the room, but it appeared as though a smile began to appear across his face. It was so small and so quick, however, that it may have just been a tic.

Abe leaned toward the microphone and asked us if we had any questions.

Tabby asked the first one: Have you ever had a girlfriend?

Yes, though not in a very long time. I may try again, someday.

I asked the second: Will you come for drinks with us tonight?

A pause, and then: Yes, but before I have some business to take care of first.

He invited us to come to the front of the room, as he could not hear us very well. When we reached him, he began to study me peculiarly. He looked back at Tabby. “I’m filming a commercial this afternoon,” he said, quietly. “I’d be open to meeting you for a drink later.”

“What kind of commercial?” I asked.

“It’s for Storage-Tec® External Hard drives. I’m their new spokesman.”

“Do you do that sort of thing a lot?” Tabby asked.
“Yeah, I guess.” Abe glanced down at the palm of his hand, as though trying to peek at something he’d written there earlier, and then he looked back at the psychology professor. “Do you need anything else?” He asked the man, he leaned forward in his chair, trying to listen to our conversation.

“No. That’ll be all for today. Same time tomorrow?”

Abe’s expression returned to the sickly, uninterested face we’d seen at the bar last night. “Yes,” he said. “I’ll be here.”

“Maybe you could try to cater to the audience a bit more tomorrow?”

“Maybe,” Abe said.

The man walked to Abe, who still stood behind the podium, and he slapped him on the back. “You’re a celebrity, now, Abe. You’re a miracle. The people need you.” And then he jumped off the stage and ascended the staircase. The door creaked as he left.

“What other commercials have you done?” I asked him.

Abe stepped forward and sat at the edge of the stage. We sat in the chairs at the front row. He said, “I did a lot back in my twenties. After I’d graduated from college and my PM started to garner more interest, a lot of computer companies and child products contacted me. I quit, though, after I made a little money.”

“Why are you starting up again?”

“I’m thinking about going a way for a bit. It gets awfully tiring,” he said, recognizing and being recognized by everyone. I’d like to see something new. But, I’ll have to make a little more money first. I have something big coming up, though, that should help.”

I looked at Tabby, wondering if she was going to press him any further, but she kept quiet. It didn’t appear as though she had been listening at all. She had her legs stretched out
in front of her and was crossing her big toe over her second toe. She seemed miles away. I touched her arm and she came back.

“How about we meet you tonight at the Gondola Bar. Does seven sound alright?”

Abe cringed.

I knew my mistake as soon as I said the words. I looked around the room and noticed that the clocks had all been removed. I continued, “I mean, you just do what you have to do, and we'll go get some things done, and we'll meet you sometime later at the Gondola Bar.”

“Okay,” Abe said, his face bearing a painful expression. “Sometime later.”

I had to stir Tabby, again, to wake her out of another trance. Again, she was grinning. We went back to her place. There was something I wanted to talk to her about, seeing as she seemed to know Sleightor a little better than I did.

Dust swirled in the sun-lit room as Tabby sat heavily into her recliner. The wine-cork curtains casted stringy shadows across her face and body; their dance across the floor created the illusion of waves. Kerouac’s *On the Road* lay open on the floor. I sat in front of her on the milk crate, and we opened two beers. They were cold and it felt good to drink them like this, after a morning of working in the desert heat and after making a friend; there was a feeling of anticipation growing from our scheduled meeting with Abe, and from what I was determined to discuss with Tabby.

“When’s the last time you’ve seen Sleightor?” I asked her.

She drank from her beer and chewed a handful of almonds. “It’s been a year, at least. Yes, last year around this time, I stayed with him in New Orleans for a while.”

“Have you spoken with him recently?”
“Just once. He called me shortly before you arrived to let me know you were coming. But other than that, no.”

I wasn’t sure where to start, and I remembered some advice Anna had once given me about where to start with the novel. A pang of guilt flashed through my body when I considered how sorely I’d neglected the novel over the last few days. Anna, too. Hadn’t she told me she was going to be in Albuquerque? Finally, I said, “I’m in trouble.”

Tabby reached for some more almonds and came up short. “What kind of trouble?”

“Well, it’s complicated. And I’m not sure how it got to this point. It’s like, well, it’s coming at me from all angles. To start, I’m working on this novel, right? And this company is paying for me to travel while I work on it. But they want constant updates, and I haven’t been able to keep up. And then, there was this explosion back at home, in Prentice. The public library burned to the ground and they’re certain it was arson. For some reason, which I can’t figure out, the authorities want to question me about it, but this all happened just as I was leaving, and I was anxious about it, and I guess I just ignored it. Now, if I don’t return to Prentice in five days, they’re going to issue a warrant for my arrest for evasion of justice.”

“So why don’t you just go back? Answer their questions, and then get back on the road.”

“I don’t know. I mean, I know that’s what I should do, what I should’ve done a while ago, but I’m afraid that once I get to that point, I’ll never return to this point again. I’ll never get back to my research. That the book will just end up on a shelf somewhere. And that something will go wrong with the questioning, that they’ll find some reason to accuse me of something.”

“Is there any reason?”
“No. I remember the night the library burned. I was walking home from an evening of writing. I could see it all from on top of this hill. Anna had forgotten to pick me up.”

“Anna?”

“That’s the other thing. That night, Anna left.”

“So, she didn’t actually forget.”

“It’s a long story. She didn’t leave until I returned. She’s been traveling ever since, exploring the country, and I’ve sorta been trying to find her, too.”

“So that’s the real reason you’re traveling?”

I picked the Kerouac book up from the floor. A page was creased and I folded it back, ran my fingers along the crease. “There’s another thing.”

“Shit, Karin. You’re more interesting than I’ve given you credit for.” Tabby laughed.

“There is somebody staying in my apartment, back at home. A writer. I agreed to let him stay while I traveled, and now he’s going nuts. Or he’s always been nuts. He found some of my personal information, and he’s sabotaging me. He’s checking out books, putting matches out in their pages, and then returning them to the library. He’s bought a bunch of shit online in my name, books about arson, library architecture, and homemade explosives.

“Fuck, so he’s setting you up?”

“Right. I mean, that’s what it seems like. So, here’s the thing. You want to travel, right?”

“I’m in.” Tabby tipped her beer bottle up and emptied it. She stood up and stretched her shoulder like a bull-pen pitcher loosening up, and then walked into the kitchen.

“Tabby, I haven’t told you what we’re going to do.”

“I don’t give a fuck. Let’s just do it.”

“It might be kinda dangerous.”
“Karin,” Tabby said, leaning against the open refrigerator door, “lately I just feel like somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life is a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I’m halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that is why this is happening right here and now, this strange red afternoon.”

I looked out the window above the sink across the sun-scorched fields and saw the Sandia Mountains, bright red and casting a shadow over the city, like they had been placed there as a backdrop, like they weren’t real at all. I said to Tabby, “shit, you’re more eloquent than I’d originally given you credit for.”

“Fuck you,” she said and handed me a beer. “It’s from Kerouac.”

I followed Tabby into her room and she lifted a suitcase from a shelf in her closet. Immediately, she began filling it with clothes from her drawers. “We can’t leave right now,” I told her. “Remember, Abe?”

“Right. Tomorrow, then. I just want to get ready.”

“What about the farm?”

“Jim’s problem.”

“But you don’t even know the plan.”

“So, tell me about it.”

And I did. I explained it all to her, what little there was that I knew, that is. That I’d be impersonating Fien, and Sleightor was going to set the whole thing up. Afterward, we both lay down on the bed, and Tabby insisted on reading Kerouac aloud. I don’t know if it was the alcohol, or just excitement, but as she read she kept stumbling over the words, shuffling their order, or skipping them altogether. I begged her to slow down, to be more careful, but she always sped it back up and lost control, like she was choosing random words
on each page to say out loud, unconcerned whether it made any sense at all. I listened nonetheless, and just before I fell asleep, I realized what I was going to read in LA.

I woke when I heard the front door slam shut. In the kitchen, the crack of a can opening and the knocking of cabinet doors echoed throughout the barren apartment. Tabby brought me a glass of water and a plate of strawberries and a sliced apple. She grabbed a piece of the apple before handing me the plate and bit it in half. I must’ve been asleep for a while. Tabby had showered and was dressed to go out for the evening. She wore a long, billowy skirt that was comprised of multiple patches of different colored fabrics. Her hair was tucked behind her ears and it curled slightly at the ends, where it rested on the shoulders and back of a plain, grey t-shirt. It was the first time that I’d seen her in something other than cut-off jean shorts or a dirt- and sweat-stained undershirt. We stood in the kitchen, leaning against the counter and finished the apples and strawberries. Outside, as the sun sunk behind the mountains, we could hear a single bird calling across the fields, repeatedly. It was fucking beautiful.

Abe wasn’t at the Gondola bar when we arrived. We took the same seats as we had the night before and were brought the same drinks by the same expressionless bartender. After three cycles of the local weather, the door finally cracked open and Abe slipped inconspicuously appeared in the atrium. He wore a dark pair of sunglasses, thick-framed and glossy like Bob Dylan during interviews in the sixties. You could tell they threw off his bearings as he stood at the doorway several seconds until the shapes of the room began to grow definite. He stepped slowly toward the bar, and I wasn’t sure whether he saw us or not, because he walked to his usual spot, slid out of his beige jacket, and sat down.
We called his name from the starboard side of the bar, and then convinced him to grab a table with us on the portside. I asked how the commercial shooting had gone, and he just nodded.

“What’s with the sunglasses?” Tabby asked.

Abe took a deep breath and exhaled. It was clear that he’d been drinking for some time. He looked nervously about the room. “There is nothing new, ever, is there?”

“Your sunglasses look new,” she answered.

“But the experience isn’t. I’ve worn them before. Sunglasses, that is,” he said, setting them on the table. Despite their apparent newness, they had peculiar scratches along their temples. Abe finished his drink in two large gulps and raised his hand for another. He peered at the television above the bar, and then jerked his head back toward us, taking another deep breath. “So, what are your questions?”

Tabby looked at me, back at Abe. “Questions?”

“I mean what are your questions? Here, let me guess. You’re thinking about having a child together, or perhaps you just found out you were pregnant—”

“Do I fucking look pregnant?”

“No, you don’t. But if you just found out you were pregnant, you wouldn’t look like it, would you? Okay, so pregnancy is out. I got it.” As Abe spoke, he scratched his thumbnail at the temples of the sunglasses, despite his thumbnail having been chewed to the delicate flesh underneath. The ticking of the remaining nail against the plastic was becoming steadily louder, faster. “You have a problem that you think you can trace back to your childhood. You want to use my memory to help you deal with your shit. Is that it?” His sinewy hand clenched around the glasses. “Which of you have the problem. Let’s get this over with.”

“I think you got us wrong, Abe,” I said. “We don’t have any lingering problem—”
Tabby laughed. She stood up and took Abe’s fresh drink from the bar and brought it to him.

“Well, of course we have problems,” I said, “but that’s not why we wanted to see you tonight.”

Tabby asked, “Why are you doing all this shit at the University?”

“Science. It’s important, right?”

“But you seem miserable?”

“I’m gonna be miserable wherever. Might as well get paid for it.” Abe snapped the end of the temple off the sunglasses. A thin line of blood collected along the edge of his fingernail and dripped onto the table. I handed him a napkin. He wrapped his thumb in it, and then took another long drink. “I’m losing it,” he said.

“No shit,” Tabby said. I nudged her with my knee under the table.

Abe looked up at her. For the second time, a smile started to appear, but it was short-lived. “When they take me in their offices and ask me all the questions, pinching and prodding me in the laboratories, there is always a moment I look forward to. That makes it, well, tolerable. Worth it, almost.”

“What moment is that?” I asked.

“When they give me the nitrous oxide.”

“Come on. You do it for nitrous oxide? There has to be a simpler way to get that shit.”

“No, I hate the gas. It gives me terrible headaches. It’s the unconsciousness, that hour or two where I’m completely out. That brief moment where I can fantasize about taking too much, damaging my brain cells and waking up an memory-less.”
Tabby picked up the broken sunglasses. “What do these have to do with it?” she asked.

Abe didn’t answer. He looked toward the bar where his coat hung from a chair.

“It’s the chronomentrophobia, isn’t it?” I asked. “That’s why you come here.”

Abe nodded. “It’s getting worse.”

“Chronomen—”

“Chronomentrophobia,” Abe repeated. “Fear of clocks. It used to be just clocks, but it’s other things now.”

“What do you mean, fear of clocks?”

“The reminder of the ordered system of time. That feeling people get from heights, I get it from clocks, like an anxious fist thumping in my gut. I start to get lightheaded when I consider that I’m doomed to sit through the same movie over and over again for another thirty or forty years. But like I said, it’s not just chronomentrophobia anymore. It’s evolved, branched out into chronophobia, heliophobia, selenophobia, thalassophobia, uranophobia, and siderophobia. The sunglasses help a little bit. But it doesn’t matter. You can’t avoid all these things. It’s a curse. I mean, people lose their memories all the time by getting hit too hard on the head or growing old or drinking too much. But I can’t seem to forget the smallest thing.”

“Have you ever tried?” Tabby asked.

“Tried?”

“Getting hit on the head.”

“I don’t think I could. Not yet, at least.”

“Why are you so intent on forgetting things?”
“I want to do something or see something without any recollection of it, or without preconceived expectations. I want to experience something for the first time.”

“How long has it been?” I asked. “I mean, since you’ve done something for the first time. Do you remember?” I turned my glass in my hand. “I’m sorry. Of course you remember.”

“I was twenty-three. It had been several years since I’d experienced anything new, but then one day while I was meeting with woman, who was at least twice my age, about the sleeping habits of her toddler, I started making up an explanation. I don’t know why I did it. But I made up this entire story about why I refused to sleep through the night during most of my third year. And it was such an exciting feeling. She just nodded along, wrote notes in her notebook. That happened on November 12, 1992.”

“I think I’m missing something,” Tabby said. “Have you ever been bungee jumping? Sky-diving? Have you ever, I don’t know, been bit by a snake or shot an elephant?”

“I’ve been bit by a snake, but I haven’t done any of those other things. But that’s not the point. You don’t have to actually experience something to have an experience of it.”

We waited.

“Our experiences are often composites of every other experience we’ve had, combined with information we’ve been exposed to about that experience. In order to experience shooting an elephant, I don’t actually have to pull any trigger. I just have to create the experience by grouping together several other related experiences: squirrel hunting with my father, watching a documentary on elephants, witnessing my grandfather chop down a tree, opening up a Tupperware® of spoiled chicken, cutting my arm on a barbwire fence, getting caught looking at a dirty magazine by my mother.”

“What does the dirty magazine have to do with it?” Tabby asked.
“Shame,” I answered.

Tabby went to the bar and brought us another round of drinks. She looked at me for several seconds. I knew what she wanted to ask.

“Abe, we’re headed to L.A. Tomorrow morning, I think. I don’t know if you’ll experience anything new, but perhaps it will be at least rare. Maybe not good, but rare, nonetheless. Wanna join us?”

Abe looked from Tabby to me.

Tabby asked, “What happens if you ditch the UNM gig?”

He thought for a moment. “I’ll lose out on some money, but that won’t be a problem since I registered my name this afternoon.”

“Registered your name?”

“Yeah. Have you ever heard of a company named CompuTech?”

I shook my head.

“They bought my name. Check this out.” Abe took out his wallet and slid out a temporary license. “Look at my name,” he said as he handed it to me.

It read Abe Filmnopryz®.

“Wait, they bought the rights to your name?”

“Yup. They are now the sole owner of Abe Filmnopryz®. From now on, whoever writes the name, or uses it in an attempt to sell a product, has to pay CompuTech hundreds of dollars for the rights, excluding, of course, government documents.”

“That’s insane. What about when you have to sign something?”

“We worked it out. They gave me a discounted rate. I only have to pay seventeen cents per usage, which is a small fraction of what they purchased it for.”

I handed the ID back to Abe. “So? Are you up for a road trip?”
Abe sucked on the tip of his thumb. “How long are you going for?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “There’s not much of a plan, yet. I’m still waiting to hear from someone about it.”

“What the hell?” Abe said. “I’ll go.”

We finished our drinks and, trying to avoid the direct use of time, Abe made arrangements to stay with Tabby for the night, and I would call them as soon as I heard from Sleightor. Then, we would leave directly. Tabby agreed to stop at the university apartment where Abe was staying to grab his things.

Abe offered to cover the tab, and Tabby excused herself to use the restroom. After paying, he turned to me and said, “It’ll be nice to travel.”

“Sure,” I said, doubting the chances Sleightor’s proposed plan had even the remotest chance of working out.

Abe put some bills back into his wallet, slid it into his back pocket. When he looked up at me, he was grinning. “It’s been several years since I’ve traveled, just for the sake of traveling, that is. You?”

“No, not as long.”

Abe was still grinning, foolishly. It was the longest time I’d seen him carry a smile, and it was starting to annoy me, the way someone who had just told a joke stares at you grinning until you get it. Or fake it. “You don’t remember, do you?”

“Remember what?”

“No, I guess I couldn’t expect you to. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg? Fall of 2005.”

“What about it?”
“We’ve met before. I was hiking and became lost. You were there gathering research for your first book. We met on the trail and you led me back to the parking lot. Come on, Karin, I don’t expect your memory to be as good as mine, but you should at least remember that evening. We had drinks late into the night; you vented about the book, an account of your grandfather. You were struggling with how you could you ever say something new about World War II without fictionalizing it. I remembered it the moment I saw you here last night, with Tabby, as you were leaving. You don’t remember?”

“That’s,” I searched for Tabby. “Do you remember the title?”

“You were pretty drunk by the time I’d asked, so my recollection is an effect of your slurred speech more than it is my memory. In any event, the title was something like The Secret Circus. Though, later that night, you’d joked about fictionalizing the whole thing and calling it When the Ink Runs Out.”

Tabby returned from the bathroom. “Come on, let’s get out of here. Some creep in the bathroom shut off the lights on me. Let’s go get your shit, Abe. I want another beer.”

I followed them out to the car, baffled. I’d never been to Luxembourg.

Waiting for Abe to gather his things, I mentioned the exchange to Tabby. I was annoyed at how calmly she processed the revelation.

“But he has a perfect memory! And it wasn’t like he happened to see me in a crowd, he claims we talked and drank together.”

“I’m sure there’s another explanation.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe he’s confusing you with somebody else.”

“Maybe he only thinks he has a perfect memory.”
It struck me, then, that perhaps there was another explanation. That maybe there is somebody out there, wandering the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, and who knows where the hell else, that looks and acts exactly like me. My doppelganger. But what are the chances that I have a doppelganger who not only writes, but was writing a book, their first book, about their grandfather’s experience in World War Two, and was contemplating crossing over to fiction?

When Abe returned, he carried only a single bag with him. I have no need for sentimental affects when I travel. They are all up here, he said, tapping his temple. Plus, there are always pens and pencils to be found around the university. He chatted uncharacteristically the rest of the drive, and I already began to regret inviting him. The prospect of breaking away from the research seemed to have lightened his spirits. They dropped me off at the hostel, and I promised to call Tabby as soon as I heard from Sleightor.

After changing my clothes and checking my email, I went downstairs to fix something to eat. There was a girl in the lobby, the girl, I learned, who I’d previously confused with Anna. I made a late dinner of noodles and bread and sat beside her on the catch.

“Did you know there are credited screenwriters for this show? They actual list them on the final credits,” she said. I recognized the show, as I had seen it in Prentice, Boston, and New York, like cable had been reduced to a single, hypnotizing broadcast of senseless faux-reality.

“How can they?”

“They call them ‘story producers’ or ‘story editors.’ Check it out next time. The whole venture is terribly phony.”
“And yet here you are, watching.”

“I’m watching it ironically. There’s a difference. I’m watching it the way I’d watch *Freaks and Geeks* or read short stories. It’s not so bad that way, once you realize it’s fiction.”

She held out her hand to me. “I’m Karen,” she said.

“You’re fucking with me, right?”

“How do you mean?”

“You name is Karen? I mean, I saw you working at the front desk earlier, and you saw my name, didn’t you. I get it. Funny.”

“I work the front desk, but guests are listed by last names. You’re Pankreez, right?”

“Yes, I am. Karin Pankreez.”

“No shit. Just like the guy on the show.”

“Yeah. Different spelling, I’ve been told. I’m with an ‘i, he’s with a ‘y.’”

“Right on. I’m an ‘e.’”

On the screen, Karyn and several members of his tribe approached a drinking fountain that had been draped in shreds of fabric and personal paraphernalia. Kneeling, they shouted toward the fountain. Some beat their fists into their chests. Then, a commercial.

“You mind catching me up to speed?” I asked.

“Sure,” Karen said as she reached into her purse. “But I’m gonna go outside and smoke this, first. Care to burn it with me?”

I agreed, thinking it was a cigarette, but on the walk outside, noticing that Karen had a pack of American Spirit cigarettes jutting out from her purse, I realized that she probably was planning on smoking something else. It’d been several years since I’ve gotten high—I had a roommate my senior year that smoked daily—and I never cared much for it. Typically,
it made me either sleepy or paranoid. I was leaving tomorrow morning, however, and there was something about ending things that made me want to start things, too. So I mentioned none of this to Karen, and when she handed me the tightly rolled joint, I took it between my lips and sucked it in, holding the dank smoke into my lungs as long as I could before releasing it with a barrage of coughs.

“Not a rec user?”

“Not really.”

“This is shit anyway. I’m finishing what I have left, and then I’m done.”

“The lovely end of things.”

“Right.” Karen took another hit and passed it to me. I did the same.

I asked Karen where she was from—I’d since learned that no hostel employee was from the city where they worked—and as she told me her story, which I have no recollection of, I leaned against the rough stucco walls of the back entrance and felt the wind wrap its warm hands around my neck and along my arms. The mountains, which had casted shadows all day, were now shadows, made only visible by the light of the city. And it was quiet, now, just a few miles from downtown. Karen’s voice hung in the air, soft and pulsating like the single low-watt bulb overhead, that flickered and buzzed and called to the hostel the insects from several lots over. I was mildly drunk, and perhaps a little high, though I couldn’t draw the line between the two. I was vaguely horny. I wanted to sit back on the couch and feel its wear on my shoulders and thighs. I wanted a glass of water and an extra set of hands. I wanted to hit it off somehow magically with Karen and live here with her in Albuquerque for a hundred years and to tell our children that yes we do have the same name and that it was funny to us too. And if she left me I still wanted to live here and watch the cars bounce and burn in the desert sun and eat the vegetables that Tabby’s hands had nurtured. I wanted
not to follow Sleightor or Anna or Hart or Tabby to LA or New York or Prentice but I wanted to burn quickly and furiously in a single place and then to cool for years and years and to grow, somehow, grow.

But Karen had finished talking and the joint had grown cold in my hands. Karen put it back in her purse and I followed her indoors. On our way, she told me what I’d missed in the episode of *NYC-vivor®*: each morning, apparently, the individual tribes gathered at their altar to prepare for the tasks of the day ahead of them. They chose their alters, created them from objects important to them, and gave them further importance with the adornment of treasures: photos of loved ones and eliminated contestants, the scrapped clothing their rivals, relics, they’d found, that had given them strength. They were told at the beginning of the show, Karen told me, that the vigor and volume with which they addressed their altar would affect several aspects of their competition, from prizes of immunity to determining order.

We sunk back in the couch with our legs underneath us and touching, and the quickness in which we’d grown so comfortable with each other did not seem to me false; rather it reminded me much of the night I’d spent with Anna, that first night in the hotel, when I could’ve talked to her forever, and though I would. I don’t know if it was the pot or the alcohol from earlier, but as I watched I found the show and the commercials seemed to blend together. Several times, I’d catch myself watching a mother hustling her children off to school only to stop to give them each a sandwich made with Oscar Meyer® bologna before shuffling them out the van door, or a man in a flannel suit looking directly at me, telling me that if I had encountered liver problems after taking this-or-that prescription drug, that I should call him and he would get me the settlement I deserved. Each time I struggled to fit the mother, the man in the suit, within the context of the show.
Karen had her head on my shoulder and I was drawing circles on the knees of her jeans when the front door opened, not slowly, not quickly, but moderately and coolly, as though Humphrey Bogart was about to enter the room. A man with a boyish face and a touch of grey in his hair stepped through the lobby and into the TV lounge. His tinted eyeglasses shaded his eyes as he smiled at me, or at Karen. I couldn’t tell.

“Kar’n!” he said, pronouncing the word as a single syllable and clapped his hands together. “I'm so glad you’re here. To be honest, I didn’t expect you. I kinda figured you’d either be home or in jail by now. But, I see you're taking your time. That’s good, perhaps. Could be problematic, as a lot of people out there want to see you get through this rough patch swiftly. But, like a said, it could be okay, you taking your time and all. Sometimes time is everything. Regardless, I’m glad you’re here. You look well.”

I withdrew my hand from Karen’s knee. I’d never seen the man before, so I assumed he was a friend of Karen’s. At least, he spoke to her with some familiarity. I wondered, listening to him talk, what it was that Karen was rushing toward or from. This rough patch. Who were these people who wanted to see her get through it all?

Karen withdrew her head from my shoulder and looked at me sympathetically, wrinkling her forehead.

“Hey,” we both said, more or less together.

“Who’s your friend?” he asked. “Why don’t you introduce me?” He said as he stepped back in the lobby, facing away from us. He bent to sign the registry at the front desk.

I looked down, waiting to see how Karen would introduce me, having known me for only an hour.
“Excuse my friend’s manners,” the man finally said. “I’m Jason.” He turned and walked into the TV lounge. We stood. He held his hand out to me and I shook it.

“I’m Karin/en,” we said simultaneously.

I started to ask how he knew Karen, but he interrupted me by reaching out for Karen’s hand. Simultaneously, we said, “good to meet you.”

“So, how long have you known Karen?” I asked.

“Here’s the thing,” he said, ignoring my question. He took a seat on the couch and pulled out his cell phone. He typed on it as he spoke, looking down at it. “And trust me, I hate feeling like I’m telling you what to do. Really, it’s the last thing I want. I never imagined myself being some controlling figure in your life. I’d rather you think of me as, I don’t know, a father or a guide, I guess. Someone with whom you can counsel with. Someone who has your best interest in mind. And believe me Kar’n, I really do. I want the best for you. I want you to finish your project, and I want you to do a great job on it. I want you to find love along the way. And sure, I want you to take some time to relax, meet friends and drink with them, have adventures and see the countryside. These things are important. But you have to understand that there are certain rules I must adhere to, as well. That’s life, right? Like, once things are set in motion, it is sometimes impossible to turn back, right? Do you understand?”

He looked up at Karen, smiled, and then looked at me.

Neither of us answered.

“Let me give you an analogy,” he continued. Let’s say you get a tattoo in Atlanta. If you proceed to San Francisco, you’re going to have that tattoo in San Francisco, right?”

We nodded.
“If you chase after somebody for miles and miles, and by chance, you meet up with them in one place, you must understand that things have been set in motion. You can’t go to another city and completely forget about that person, right?”

“Right,” Karen said.

“Definitely,” I said.

“I’d like to give you what you want in each adventure you go on. But, like I said, there are rules. The things that were put in motion in the beginning are going to catch up with you. Now, I’m here just to say that things are serious back at home. You shouldn’t have left the way you did. People are looking for you Kar’n, and they aren’t happy. You made the choice not to stick around, and you’re going to have to deal with the consequences, right?”

We nodded.

“I don’t mean to be the hard-ass, here. Trust me when I say that I like you, Kar’n. I’ve really grown to admire you, your human-ness, your real-ness, if I can say that. I guess that’s simply why I wanted to stop by and give you this warning. It may be in your best interest to go home and take care of the loose ends before you continue.”

Karen and I both hung our heads, thinking, I supposed, about our individual loose ends. Thinking about the people we’d forgotten about, had ignored and attempted to cope with their absence by creating more and more distance. At least, I thought about mine.

“OK,” Jason continued. “That’s enough lecturing.” He clapped his hands together again. “I’m beat, and I could really use a drink. A bourbon, on the rocks, with a splash of water would just about complete this day for me.” He stood up. Looked from me to Karen, sliding his phone back into his pocket. “I’ll catch you on the flipside, right?”

“Right,” we said. “It was good to meet you.”
“Remember,” he said, from the threshold of the doorway, “I’m here for you. Remember that.”

Jason left and Karen appeared exhausted. I suppose being faced with such a truth must’ve really tuckered her out. She seemed burdened, and I suppose she needed some time alone to sort things out. Before heading upstairs, though I wasn’t sure if it was my place, I took a chance and asked her where she was from.

“Atlanta.”

“Really? So, what was the tattoo, then?”

“Tattoo? I’m pretty sure that was just an analogy.”

“So who was that guy, then?” I asked. “A boyfriend? A relative?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“He was talking to you, wasn’t he?” she asked.

“I’ve never seen that guy in my life.”

We walked to the front desk and looked at the registry: Jason Shrontz.

“Me neither. Have never heard of him.”

“But he knew your name.”

“I’m pretty sure he was using your name.”

“You think?”

“Shit. I don’t know. You wanna go outside and finish this thing?” Karen asked me, holding out the joint.

“I don’t know. I think I better just head back to my room. I have to do a few things before my night is over.”
I said goodbye to Karen, and we both walked in opposite directions, her outside and me upstairs, both a little confused, I imagined.

When I reached my room, I wished I had a glass bourbon to sip on. I thought about Anna who was no longer in Albuquerque. Sitting on the loose springs of my bed, I felt my old couch underneath me, the cold winter air seeping in from my drafty apartment. Anna was there for a moment, in the kitchen, pouring two glasses of bourbon and telling me she’d been looking forward to this night, after all the stress lately, the rejections and the shitty hours at work, to spend some time together, just us. I lay back on the bed and tried to keep the vision going. Me on the couch, Anna in the kitchen, a Graham Nash record spinning on the turntable—did we ever own a turntable? But as the details became more and more concrete, I could never quite coax Anna out of the kitchen. There were always more details to imagine: the floor, the light seeping through the curtains, the smells and the sounds of the ice dropping into the glasses, bits of tiny conversations pieced together from the best ones I could remember, our clothes, the wear of our faces. Was the bedroom door open? Would I have to flip the record soon? Was this a real memory or was it all made up? How should I presume? But I couldn’t coax Anna out of the kitchen.

I pulled out my laptop and checked my email. Sleightor had responded, and there was an email from Anna and Hart, too. I’d be leaving for LA tomorrow. I had the feeling of being pulled forcefully to the West. It was a feeling different than the urge I’d had to chase Anna or write the novel. It was as though my hands and feet, my consciousness, somehow, had been attached to strings and were controlled by unseen hands behind a curtain. Perhaps it was an insecurity that had always been there, or perhaps it was exhaustion, but it felt easier this way, to be pulled. I called Tabby and told her tomorrow’s a go. I’d be ready at 9 AM, if
she was up for picking me up. We’d have a couple days to make the trip, though we shouldn’t waste too much time.

Before going to bed, I had one more call to make.

I knew I had waked her up. Her voice had the crust of sleep in it, and it took no effort to recreate the details of the room where she slept. It took little effort to crawl into bed with her, to feel the warmth of her body against my legs; the smell of burned pages and sweat and the cold coastline rose to my nostrils even here, in Albuquerque.

“I’ve talked with a friend about Fien. He thinks you should get out of Prentice.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“To New Orleans.”

“What?”

“New Orleans. He stays there and said you can stay in his guestroom.”

“But I don’t even know this guy. And anyway, how would I even get there?”

“He’s a friend, Claire. He’ll take care of you. He’s promised me that. Besides, you and he seem to share the same disdain for Fien. Apparently he has a not-so-pleasant history with Fien. He’d be happy to do anything that would piss off Fien. Also, I’m going to wire you enough money to buy a train ticket. I have enough, and I don’t think I’ll be traveling much longer anyway. I’ve been upgraded on the Prentice Police Department’s watch list from a suspect to an evader of justice. They’re actively looking for me now. I don’t know how it will end up, but I don’t think it will be long before I find out. I probably shouldn’t even be calling you now. If you were at Sleightor’s, we’d have a bit more freedom to talk. Plus, I just have one more place to go, and I’m going to be heading there myself.”

“You’re coming to New Orleans?”

“As long as I don’t get arrested first. Yes, I’ll be there in about five or six days.”
“Okay. I'll go.”

“I'm going to wire the money to you tomorrow morning, before I leave Albuquerque. You should leave soon after.”

“I will.”

“I'm looking forward to seeing you, Claire.”

“Yes.”

“Goodnight.”

“Karin, thank you. Goodnight, and be safe.”

I hung up the phone and lay in bed wondering the chances of ever making it to New Orleans.

Subject: RE: RE: Plan A
From: “Laurence” (sleightofhand@awol.net)
March 9, 2009, 12:10 AM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

Great. Here's the deal. You need to be at the Los Angeles Public Library by March 11, at 4:30 PM. You will be looking for a woman named Cory O'Grafer. She is in on the whole deal, and has worked hard to set it all up, using only organic promotion methods, and subtle fliers. She promises a large crowd of locals, and has taken extensive measure to ensure there will be no press. Now, here is the kicker in this whole deal. When you meet with her at 4:30, she will be taking you out to lunch with a group of grad students from the UCLA’s English Department. Have fun with them. Have fun being Fien. The students, trust me, will only be there for the free meal and drinks. By the end of the night, they’ll be too drunk to identify the proper train line to get home, let alone your/Fien’s work.

Pay attention, because this next bit is important: you should make arrangements to leave LA almost immediately after the reading. It will be tempting to stick around and drink with the graduate students—it always is—but in the event that someone catches on, it will be imperative for you to collect your cash ($10/head) and get the hell out of L.A. As per our previous arrangements, I suggest you head to New Orleans. You have a place to stay with me until you figure out your next step.

In regards to your friend, send her here as well. I will take care of her. Have her call me before she arrives, and I'll pick her up at the airport/train station/etc.

Good luck. Take extensive notes. This is the stuff of great stories, Karin. Don't forget a thing.

Yours,

Laurence
Subject: RE: A Troubling Phone Call
From: “B. Hart” (bshart@bunsenp.org)
March 8, 2009, 10:32PM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

As a follow-up to my previous email, I’d like to know if you have settled on your forthcoming plans. Again, I urge you to go home and take care of any unfinished business before moving forward with this project.

In addition, I will need you to send me your recent progress on the novel. The research grant review committee has recently taken an interest in your file—no doubt because of the recent reimbursement—and insist on no less than an additional hundred and fifty pages by Friday, March 19. I know this is a lot to ask, but it is imperative that you oblige them. Find that muse and chain her to a chair if you have to. Get those pages finished, or the project could be put in jeopardy.

One last thing, Karin: do you have some sort of tic or something that you haven’t mentioned? In every preliminary author photo we took, you are either blinking an eye or licking your lips. We’re going to have to redo it. All of it.

Please keep me posted. I’m a bit wary that you have not responded to my emails. Please, stay in touch.

Best,
B. Hart.

Subject: keep ‘em coming
From: “Anna Bertreb” Abba88@vmail.net
March 8, 2009 10:47 AM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: Normal

Karin,

Darling. This is just to say, keep those emails coming. I never knew you were capable of such passionately charged lyrics! How’s a girl supposed to get out and see the world with such lovely propositions awaiting her on her computer? Really, you never cease to surprise me. I can’t wait to meet up with you soon. Where are you headed next?

And to answer your question: no, I haven’t ever heard of Fien. I didn’t realize you were such a fan. I will keep my eye out for him.
Love,
Anna.

Budget—March 8

2,332.13
(4.25)—Two cups of coffee at University of New Mexico
2,327.88—Remaining Balance
Chapter 42: “burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars,” March 9

The laidback hustle of Albuquerque faded in the rearview as the loaded truck bounced into the stretch of desert between La Granja and the ocean. The Sandia Mountains seemed forever in the distance, though Tabby assured me we were heading toward them. The sun beat mercilessly against the truck’s cab, where Abe sat sandwiched between Tabby and I.

Tabby’s copy of “On the Road” rested on my lap, unopened. I hoped to get to LA as soon as possible, in the event that I’d have some time to look for Anna, and I knew that I had to prepare for my reading. I’d started that morning as Abe fucked around endlessly with his suitcase, recalling as he did a memory of driving in a truck when his suitcase blew open and his socks and underwear had scattered across the highway:

I first ate meat long after my wife, Donnd ’n I split up. I’d just gotten over a bothering illness, serious, except I had some delish spam that she wouldn’t talk about, tho I fed on everything to the tilt with wheat pie, and my berry Atawatta Gaya.

I hated admitting it, but I had to respect Fien merely for the tedious effort involved in rearranging the letters of a sentence, and attempting to produce some semblance of meaning. I’d tried to start on the third sentence in the truck, but the heat was unbearable, as was Tabby’s singing, and Abe insisted on playing the alphabet game, in which he had an unfair advantage as he had once taken this route to LA as a child, had played the game with his mother, and could call out the difficult letters from signs miles before they came into view.

There was another thing. Tabby, in an attempt to turn this trip into a burning Kerouacian adventure, had scored some Benzedrine the night before from godknowswhere. She held out her hand, displaying the old fashioned guts of circa 1940’s inhalers: a strip of
paper soaked in Benzedrine and wadded into a ball. Though I resisted, she insisted that she
would not let me into the vehicle if I ended up being a square who needs to “worry and
betray time with urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny.” So, I took the
bennies and sat squished in the front seat, paranoid and neurotic and sweating, as Abe called
out letters that had yet to appear.

C, c, Crazy Burgers.

D. D is Diner.

E, easy, Exit 170.

F, finally, for Free Fliers at Rest Area, exit 173.

G is for God Loves You, a sun-stained billboard we would see several miles ahead,
the dLoves shadowed underneath a towering mesa.

H is for we Have yet to reach exit 165.

Most of the signs never appeared, and Abe cursed the rebuilding of the Southwest,
which had clearly eliminated many of the mom and pop billboards he’d relied on to win the
game. During a sign-less stretch, Abe insisted on taking a detour to see the Grand Canyon,
but I used his own argument—if he’s seen a picture of it, he’s already experienced it—to
dissuade him. To shut him up, I gave him the copy of On the Road, which he claimed to have
read cover to cover as I attempted to sleep. When I woke, I took the book back from him to
try to get some more work done. In protest, or perhaps because he turned out to be an
asshole, he continued pounding beers, and I couldn’t figure out where he’d been getting
them from. After a while, Tabby was pounding them too. I had trouble concentrating,
though was able to get small bits of anagrammatizing done during the frequent piss breaks.
In the desert, they showed little modesty, and on more than one occasion, I sat in the truck
as Tabby and Abe compared streams of piss racing down a dusty ravine.
Our second gas stop was a lone station sitting west of the Sandia Mountains, in the brown desert expanse. Abe had sweated through his shirt and dug through his suitcase for another. I went inside to find Tabby. She was standing in line whispering to a couple carrying umbrellas and wearing cloche hats. Abe finally arrived, dug around in the beer cooler for a while, and greeted us in line humming whatever song had just been on the radio. The whispering couple bolted out of the station and Tabby shot a dirty look at Abe.

Over the next few hours, Abe and Tabby had both began singing fucking Janis Joplin songs, and Abe, with his supposedly perfect memory, didn’t seem to know the words to any of them, as he pounced out of tune onto the tail ends of every note Tabby belted. Somehow, I managed another sentence as Abe quit singing and worked his fifth time through the alphabet, also working through, with Tabby, his fifth jumbo beer.

*With the coming of meat, my life, or the part of my diary you could call—“Hearty Life’n’Mondo”—began.*

I figured if I read it fast enough, nobody would not pick up on the made-up words.

Late into the night, Tabby, strung out and drunk, both shivering and sweaty, insisted on stopping for sleep. She looked to Abe and I, perhaps to offer to money for a hotel room. Abe slurried a list of hotels that would be available over the next twenty miles, at least those that had been thirty years ago.

“Do you have any of those bennies left?” I asked.

“Sure, plenty.”

“Give me a couple. I'll drive. You sleep.”

“I need to stretch out. I’m so, I’m fucked.”

“Lay in the back. It’s warm.”

Tabby’s face paled.
I said, “Listen. I gotta get to LA, and I’m chipping in for gas. Front or back, your call. But we have to keep moving forward.

I wasn’t sure how many bennies Tabby had taken, but from the sagging muscles in her face and the way she continued to gnaw at her bottom lip, they hadn’t mixed well with the alcohol. She was strung out bad. She wouldn’t sleep, but neither would she be able to drive. Abe looked out the back window, sizing up the space. He suggested we throw the luggage into the front, and him and Tabby could both rest back there. That way, if I got tired, one of them could take over. Tabby argued it, saying she couldn’t possibly rest in the back of a truck barreling down a highway at night.

In a fit of, perhaps embellished anger, I threw the book at her. The copy of On the Road, that is. It hit her in the chest and fell into her lap. “Are you just gonna stop in a hotel? Put the road trip on hold like all those squares out there? Itching to live for a brief moment, just so they can tell their friends about the time they lived? Or are you actually gonna live?” I even slammed the dash board, and then, quoting an early passage in the novel I had yet to anagrammatize, I said, “The great blazing stars are out, the far-receding sand hills are dim. I feel like an arrow that could shoot out all the way.” Taking the book back and nonchalantly thumbing through it while holding it out of her view, I read a sentence Tabby had once underlined: “I shambled after, as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me, because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”” I looked out my window, disgusted. “Fucking hotel, huh? Boy, did I have you wrong.”
Tabby pulled over to the side of the road and I watched them crawl into the back, size it up, argue briefly about space, and then finally settle. I found a talk radio station and jammed the old truck into gear, watching the bundles bouncing in the back.

First things first. I popped the bennies. I was convinced, and had argued this point with Tabby, that the Benzedrine strips were to be sucked on, but not ingested. She suggested otherwise, and seemed to have the experience to back it up. One of the crumpled strips got stuck in my throat, and I washed it down with the dregs of a beer. I slid open the back window and tossed it into the box, sliding it shut before they could protest.

After opening the map and gaining my bearings, I propped open the Kerouac on my lap and began working on my next sentence. The truth was, I was simply mad to get to LA. I felt like I had reached the middle of this adventure, and sure, it would’ve been nice to stay in Albuquerque longer, but I knew shit was headed my way, and eventually, it would find me regardless of where I was. I might as well do the reading, if only to piss on Fien’s name. And I was mad to see Anna, maybe in LA, Claire in New Orleans, an entirely new shit storm I’d have to straighten out sooner or later. I was mad to see the end, how everything would play out: me and Anna, Claire and me, the novel, the library burning down, and though I sure as hell did not burn down a library, I seemed to be one of the few to believe this. I was mad to get to the end.

Rumbling down the empty highway, I worked on the next sentence, reconfiguring the letters in my head and drawing them onto the dusty dashboard when I struggled. With the windows down, the dust seemed to accumulate faster than I could write, like an Etch-A-Sketch® that maxed out at sixty-five on the highway and got shitty gas-mileage.

I’d dreamed of’t before, often taking off countless layers, vaguely penning away, never going to end that thaw.
It was remarkable how the sentences wrote themselves, though not without considerable frustration. I was like a chef, creating a spread with somebody else’s ingredients. And it didn’t matter if the meal turned out well. You can only do so much with somebody else’s beginnings. I was excited to see where the story would go, the man who’d started eating meat once his wife had left him, and how the protein felt like a new beginning to his life, though did little for his writing or his sex life. I tried another.

The road has borne no perfect guy, denied cause for actual lyin’; on the way to sparse Los Angeles, through the jail, 16 or 29 stories hi, weepy, walker hannah past through a benign Salt City.

I’d have to figure out Hannah’s part in the story. Or I didn’t. I didn’t have to figure anything out about this story. I only had to act. Translate. Act. I continued writing like this through the night, heading west to the city I’d once visited regularly, with a schedule too tight to see anything. I was pressing on to the 10th of March, and the reading was little more than 30 hours away. In 5 days, I figured, I’d be in New Orleans with Claire.

Besides an armadillo running underneath my tires, I had no problems, in the stretched out, elastic desert.

Then, almost as soon as it had begun, the trip was over. The sun had just began to rise over one side of the Sierra Nevada’s as I drove up the other side, and into the valley below. Los Angeles.
Chapter 43: The Timely Return of Jason Shrontz and My First Celebrity Encounter, to be Followed by Many, March 10

I knew my way into Los Angeles, though I had a history of problems getting out. Since I attended a small university an hour and a half north of LA, my friends and I often came to LA looking to escape academia, which often resulted in waking up on the floor of a strange apartment, perhaps next to a strange girl (albeit rarely), in an unfamiliar corner of the city. We were hungover, broke, and had to feel our way out of the groping LA traffic.

I found my way downtown first and slid open the window to holler at Tabby as we passed the post office where Charles Bukowski had, several times, worked to support his writing. Nearby, I parked the truck in a narrow alley and we went into Phillipe's for breakfast. Tabby wasn’t interested in eating at first; the desert air had energized her, as well as the bennies she ate like Skittles® once awake, and she was ready to burn, burn, burn. And to drink. I told her we probably weren’t going to find any jazz at sunrise. I explained that Phillipes had also been a haunt of Bukowski’s and she was suddenly hungry.

The tables stretched horizontally across the wide open room that smelled of grease and burned coffee. As early as it was, the lines were notoriously long. Abe talked on and on about some shit he’d remembered, and I had the sudden urge to call him a liar, to throw something at him, to smack him across the face with a tray. Instead, I dragged my shoes across the floor, arranging the piles of sawdust—hamster bedding, really—into a bas relief arrow directing the flow of the line.

As we waited for the famously advertised nine cent cups of coffee and runny eggs, a commotion broke out in the main dining area; the restaurant was also known for its community dining, meaning everybody sat together at long cafeteria-style tables. I didn’t see
how the fight started, but a man with a shaved head was holding a tray in both hands as a
hippie lay unmoving on the floor before him. The hamster bedding soaked up the blood the
gushed out of the hippie’s nose. The man with the tray tossed it down and headed toward
the door. On the side of his shaved head, he had a tattoo of a couple embracing, about to
kiss. Natalie Wood and James Dean, I recognized, from *Rebel without a Cause*. I was tempted
to yell out that I dug the tattoo, that it was from one of my favorite movies, but he was out
the door too soon.

After breakfast, I led Tabby and Abe to a hostel I’d stayed at before, and we checked
into a dorm room. Tabby and Abe insisted on leaving for more alcohol, and Tabby kept
talking about scoring some blow. I told them to go without me, and I lay down to get some
much needed sleep.

When I woke, they hadn’t yet returned. I sent a quick email out to Anna. I resisted
telling her that I was in LA, though I did mention that Fien would be reading at the Los
Angeles Public Library tomorrow evening, if she felt like going. I knew it was risky, but
thought it could be a pleasant surprise for her to see me, since Fien had managed to
inadvertently rekindle her desire for me. After the email, I set out to get some work done.
There was a park nearby, and I knew I’d be able to find some peace there. I was surprised,
though, when I arrived, to find a film set taking up most of the park. Regardless, I took a
seat on an iron bench, and tried to see if I could identify anyone famous. There was one guy
at the center of the action, who I swore I recognized, but could not place his name. No
matter what angle I took, a camera relentlessly blocked my view of the story. Microphone
booms and carts on trolleys, men with clipboards and a group of writers punching screens of
digital writing pads moved as I did, always blocking my view. I waited it out, and as I did,
finished the first chapter of my reading material. Typically, I thought, it would be enough for a forty-minute reading, but since I’d have to read fast in order to cover up all the words I’d had to make up, I started in on the second.

After struggling through the first few sentences, I heard some crackling of wood burning, accompanied by the low hum of chanting, and it suddenly occurred to me who the guy was in front of the camera. Before I could react, a woman pushing a stroller parked nearby and sat next to me. Her long fingers dabbed at her forehead with a thin handkerchief. Craning her neck, she, too, attempted catch a glimpse of the star.

“Oh, we made it, we made it,” she whispered into the stroller. “We’re going to see him.” She looked at me. “Do you see him? We’re going to see him!”

She pushed the stroller toward me and locked the wheels, digging around her purse before pulling out a notebook and a pen. “Do you mind, sir?” she asked me, looking down at her stroller. “Just for a second,” and then she dashed toward the set, where it appeared they were wrapping up for the day, yelling, “Karyn! Karyn.”

I pecked into the stroller, pushing the top back. Two brown eyes peered back at me, large and unblinking. I remembered something Anna had once told me about a baby’s eyes. We had been sitting in a hospital room, and she was holding the newborn of a colleague. She told me that the eyeball is the only part of the human body that does not grow, that it is the same size at birth as it is at childbirth. I later found this to be untrue, though having been told it once, I’ve always considered an infant’s eyeballs to be abnormally large. The child in the stroller was bundled in a blanket and I could not tell if it was a boy or a girl. I said hi, foolishly, and it stared back at me without response. It had no use for words, I realized. Hi, or hello were only sounds, mere differences in pitch and timbre than any variety of flatulence. I started making different noises; I tested different words to gauge if a particular
sound would elicit reactions. The wind picked up slightly and the sun began to its downward fall from the top. I couldn’t believe how long this woman had trusted me with her child, having never met me. I thought for a moment, I feared that she wasn’t coming back. That this situation would evolve into a tragic/heroic/compassionate story that some lonely guy in a small Midwestern town would read about soon, from an online news page: “Woman Abandons Child, Leaving It with Failing Writer, Though at the Time, She did not Know He was a Writer.”

When I ran out of words, I began to read to it from Kerouac, and almost immediately it began screeching and squirming, tiny legs kicking at blankets until they fell to the grass. I looked into the crowd and saw the woman still there, stretching her notebook out to the man signing autographs. I picked up the baby—a boy, I was now relatively sure—and bounced him on my knee. I put my hand on his back and could feel the tiny bones and muscles slithering underneath skin. I wished his mother hadn’t left him with me. I mean, I wished that he hadn’t a mother who would leave him with a stranger to have a piece of paper signed by another stranger. I stood up and lifted the boy over my head. The screams immediately subsided and a large grin stretched across the face. I imagined doing the reading tomorrow with the boy, sitting on the podium in front of me, or strapped to my chest in a carrier, judging the efficacy of my words through grunts and shrills and screeches.

It seemed that a lot of time had passed when the mother returned. Karyn, the man signing the autographs, walked with her. She took the boy from me and handed him to Karyn, who smiled all Hollywood-like and distant at the boy, holding him like one holds a stray animal, unsure of whether to bring it in or not. I sat back on the bench and tried to continue writing, but the sentences seemed to no longer work. There was always an extra word, and extra letter that wouldn’t fit. As I was about to finish, Karyn kneeled down to face
me; he signed his name, upside-down in my notebook. When I looked up he grinned. You're
welcome, he said.

I nodded.

“Watchya working on?”

I looked at the almost blank page, our name written at the top. “Just taking notes,” I said. “I think I picked the wrong place to write, though.” A small group of fans began to
gather around us, politely waiting their turn.

“No shit,” he said. “I’m a bit of a writer, too. Poetry, mostly.”

Men in shorts and blue shirts with their names etched over the left breast pocket
deftly tore down the set in front of us. “What is all this, then?” I asked.

“Just something else I got caught up in. A way to pay the bills until my writing begins
to pay off.”

“So, you’re just starring in reality shows to pay the bills?”

He nodded. I couldn’t figure out why he was here at all, with me, when the fans
waited.

“I’ve seen your show. It seems like it’s always on. I don’t remember anything taking
place in LA. Is this NYC-Vivor’s® second season? LA-something or other?”

He looked toward the set, the fans waiting. “This is just where it’s all shot. Except
for last season’s finale, when we finally walked through Times Square. It’s easier, cheaper.
There’s more space.” Karyn checked his watch. “Shit. I gotta go. Shooting a commercial in
twenty minutes.”

“What’s the commercial for?”

I have no idea. Just got the address and the time. Something to do with computer
hard drives. I guess I’m shooting with some dude who claims to have a perfect memory.”
“No shit? I’ve heard of this guy.”

“Well?”

“In fact, I just read something about his watch collection. He’s fascinated with any sort of timepieces. You should talk to him about it.”

We shook hands and he signed a few more autographs before I watched him leave. I thought of Janelle, suddenly. I wondered if she still worked at the Shell-Sea Hostel. I wondered if the hostel was still in operation after the fire. I hoped she hadn’t gotten into too much trouble for it. I went through my bag, through the envelope where I had been saving all my receipts to record later. The Shell-Sea receipt had a phone number on it and I called.

After several rings—during which, I figured either it had burned down or Janelle was working and the NYC-Vixon® marathon was back on—somebody finally answered. I asked if Janelle still worked there and they said she did. That she had, in fact, been promoted to manager after she’d managed to save the hostel during a recent fire, as well as the life of the only guest. On the way back to my hostel, I stopped at a post office. I tore Karyn’s name from my notebook and mailed it to Janelle with a note.

Janelle,

Thanks for the pleasant evenings at the Shell-Sea Hostel, as well as the Brooklyn tour. I’ve made it to LA. You’ll never believe who I ran into today.

Karin.

When I made it back to the hostel, there was a note on my bed. The writing was barely legible, like the hand had been moving faster than the thoughts. It read:

K-
we've moved. we met some dude that's putting us up for a few weeks. also, we're taking care of abe's memory problem tonight. we've got the solution. you should join us. it will be a hell-all celebration, a moment we'll never forget, the moment he forgets, that is. catch up with us.

tabby and abe.

That they didn’t leave an address or a time, I assumed they found their booze, and probably their coke, too. I flipped the note over and was horrified at what I saw. It had been written on the back of an advertisement for an underground fight club. Newcomers welcome. The event was going to take place this evening, in the basement of a bar in LA’s fashion district. I set out immediately.

It was nearing evening, and the streets were crowded with Angelenos. The urgency, though, was missing from their step, as it had been everything in New York. They milled about, casually, coolly. It was as though everyone were on a mandatory cigarette break. I found myself moving slower, too, despite Abe’s forthcoming ass-kicking. It was difficult to be in the crowd and not become a part of them, adapt their manners, their style, their swagger. And I loved Los Angeles. I wanted to be a part of their crowd, in that moment. The sun ducked behind the buildings, and I nodded at some boys who leaned against a vendor’s table. They nodded back, and I could tell from their darting eyes and their silence that they were contemplating stealing one of the purses from the table, though they had no use for it. The temperature dropped. The sweat on my lower back chilled slightly and the sensation crept down the underside of my arms to my palms.

El Luchador Grasa was packed. The basement, usually used for small banquets and parties, had an entrance on the street, adjacent to the barroom entrance. I started downstairs, and from the cheering and grunting, it seemed the fights had already started. At the bottom of the stairs, a bouncer stopped me.
“No public access,” he said. “Fighters only.” His pecks were each about the size of my head; the veins that ran from underneath his stretched short sleeves were like ropes underneath his skin.

“I’m just here for support. A friend of mine is fighting tonight.”

“Name.”

“Of me or my friend.”

“Don’t give a fuck what your name is.”

“Abe Filmnopryz,” I said.

He scanned a list. “That’s the fighter or you?”

“I didn’t think you wanted my name.”

“Here it is. That’s right. I was here when he signed up.” He smirked.

“Does he have a chance?” I asked.

“Nope. Go in.”

The basement had been cleared of tables and chairs. The only set up was a makeshift ring in the middle, made from street barricades. The crowd stood behind the barricades yelling and cursing at the two men in the ring. The sour stench of sweated-through musk and open containers was thick in the air, and the floor was sticky with tobacco spit and blood. When the fighters came too close to the barricade, they were shoved back toward the center of the ring. I watched for a few minutes; it was difficult in the dim light to tell if Abe was one of the fighters. Their faces were already bloodied and bruised. The men didn’t look like fighters, either. They looked like at one time they had probably been strong, but were no longer. Their flesh moved loosely, lagging behind their almost-quick movements, and their attacks and parries lacked technique. They moved as I would probably move if in the ring. But I wouldn’t move in the ring. I lacked something more than technique, something that
propelled people to act, to fight. I knew this about myself, and had gradually resigned myself
to it, probably more so than Anna ever had. When my eyes acclimated to the dim light, I
started searching for Tabby and Abe. I worked my way through the crowd, men in business
suits, some shirtless, women in denim overalls drinking from forties, all supposedly waiting
to fight, sizing each other up, making up for shortcomings with alcohol and stone faces.
Tabby and Abe were not here. I headed for the exit, but this time the bouncer would not let
me leave.

“Where’s your friend,” he asked.

“Not sure. He’s not really my friend. To be honest, I can hardly stand him. He’s just
some guy I came to LA with.”

“You said he was your friend.”

“You’re right. I did. I’m sorry.”

“If he don’t show up, we’re a fighter short. Fucks everything up.”

“That’s rough.”

“You’ll fight. You’re here.”

“No, thanks.”

“Why not? Are you some kind of pansy?”

“Yes. Very much so.”

“No matter. You’ll fight anyway. People like watching pansies get their ass kicked.”

“I really can’t. I have asthma,” I lied. “I could die in there.”

“That’s why people come. They won’t admit it, but there is the chance they might
see someone die. You increase that chance. I’ll start spreading the word. The place’ll be
packed in seconds.”

“I thought only fighters could come in.”
“People will sign up to fight if it gives them a chance to see death. That’s life.”

I tried to push past him, but he didn’t budge. It was like he was part of the stairwell.

“Seriously,” I said. I can’t do it. “I’ll get sick. I get real nervous. I’ll get sick all over everything if I get put into that ring. Nobody wants to fight somebody who’s going to get sick.”

“Don’t give a fuck. Go stretch, get pissed off, or do whatever it is that you watch fighters do on television.”

I tried again to push past him with no success. I looked up the staircase; a crease of light from the door jamb cast an oblong shadow along the steps, splitting the staircase in half. I thought that if I could just get a couple of steps on him, I could make it to that light. How could he keep me here and force me to fight? Rather, what was going to stop him? I waited for something to happen, something that would change the current narrative. I offered the bouncer some money, but he said I didn’t have enough. If I wouldn’t have mentioned the asthma, he said, he would have considered taking the money, but the asthma increased my draw. I thought about the bennies still in my pocket. I offered those as well, in addition to the money. Uppers give him heartburn, he said.

“There’s a room, in the back there, a warm-up space for fighters. You’ll find some tape for your hands, and mouth guards. You should probably get ready. No shirts.”

I tried one more time to slip past him, faking hard to the right and then leaping to the left, but he simply reached out, in an unaggressive movement, and pushed me gently, deeper into the room. They won’t let you die in there, he said. He pointed to the back room. I slid through the crowd, my feet cumbersome and slow. There must be a way, I reasoned, to reason my way out of this mess. But how do I reason with logic so clear, so simple:
fighter missing, fighter replaced. That was his job, to fill spots. Illegal? Don’t care. I have a job to do. Don’t want to? Don’t care. I have a job to do.

The warm-up room was surprisingly well lit and carpeted. There were some lockers, a countertop and a large mirror, and a sink. I stood before the mirror and examined my face. I leaned over the counter and looked closer. It wasn’t as I had remembered it, though I couldn’t pinpoint what exactly had changed. I couldn’t remember when I had last looked in a mirror. I mean, had seen myself, carefully. It was as though things were missing that I had remembered being there. Lines at the edges of my eyes, color in my cheeks, freckles. The traveling had taken its toll, for sure, but there was something else. A look of indetermination, regardless how I stretched my lips, blew out my cheeks and crossed my eyes. A lot had changed in the past few weeks, and though I was moving forward, I wouldn’t figure out where I’d been until steps after I’d been there.

I slid out of my t-shirt and stuffed my bag into my locker. I paid the fifty cents for the use of a key. Returning to the mirror, I put my fists up, like I had seen people do before. Elbows in, I remembered hearing on some movie from my childhood. Protect the midsection. Chin down, tucked below your fists. Protect your jaw. Eyes low. Don’t give them anywhere to land. Keep your feet moving, I remembered from another movie. Don’t let them anticipate any movement: bounce and cut left, strike, cut right, then left. Bounce, strike. Soon, I was bouncing and striking before the mirror, throwing jabs at the image of myself, touching the fists of my image, ducking, touching fists. I hit my chest a couple times, to gauge the sensation. I flexed my abs. Remember to keep your abs tight, in the ring. Don’t let them knock the air out of you. Land a good punch or two. With any luck, they’ll knock you out early, and you’ll be on your way. I slapped my cheek, first open handed a couple times, then close-fisted. It hurt. But it should pave the way for harder blows to come. When
I felt that I could not prepare anymore, I found a roll of tape in a drawer underneath the counter. I wrapped my knuckles tightly like I had seen done before. On the corner of the counter, there was a bucket full of blue disinfectant, like you’d see at a barbershop. Instead of combs, however, it was full of used mouth guards. I reached for the one that seemed least chewed, rinsed it in the sink, and put it into place. I posed once more before the mirror, and ingested the two remaining bennies. I heard my name over the intercom.

The bouncer greeted me at the warm-up room door. “Karin,” he said, “you’re free to go. Someone took your spot. Get your shit and scram.”

I rushed back into the warm-up room, put my shirt back on, and gathered my things. Just before I reached the staircase, I glanced back at the fighters. I was curious, suddenly, to watch the fight. To see, I don’t know, how I would’ve matched up. I turned to the right and started around the ring once. I walked slowly to get a good view, though afraid that if I stuck around too long, I’d be back in the same predicament as before. The fighter who I imagined was meant to fight Abe, and then me, wore a dirty brown ponytail. His face was scarred from generations of bad skin. He didn’t warm up, bounce on the balls of his feet, or shout challenged to his opponent. Instead, he just stood in the corner, his elbows resting on the top of the barricades, and looked over at the other guy who had taken my place. He was smaller than the pony-tailed fighter, with a boyish face and grey hair. He looked eerily familiar, but the name just wasn’t there. I knew him, there was no doubt. And he knew me. I could tell this when he pointed at me with a taped hand, shot me a Humphrey Bogart sort of half smile and wink, and then showed off some mightily impressive footwork for my benefit.

I didn’t stick around long, though I wanted to watch. I felt compelled to, since he had saved me from fighting. But I felt he did it so I could leave. The last thing I wanted was to stick around long enough to get roped into another fight. I nodded back at the fighter and
bowed, slightly, trying to show my gratitude nonverbally. He nodded and thumped his chest.

The bell rang. He dashed toward the center of the ring, and I dashed toward the door. On my way out, I asked the bouncer what the fighter’s name was who took my place.

“Jacob, I think. Or maybe it was Jason,” he said. “I told him not to do it, that you’d pull a better crowd, but he insisted. Said he couldn’t let you get your ass kicked so close to the end, whatever that meant.” Then it hit me. I knew who it was. Karen’s friend from Albuquerque. What a coincidence.

When I finally pushed out onto the street, I resolved to leave Tabby and Abe be. They can handle their own shit while I handle mine. Besides, I knew I’d better lay low, and ought to even think of what I should wear to the reading the next day. I knew from my experience in Boston that Public libraries across the map had already blacklisted me. Even though I’d be attending as Fien, I wasn’t sure if there was a risk of being identified. I stood at the doorway and was just about to turn onto the street to head back to the hostel when a crowd of Angelenos swerved off the sidewalk and into the adjacent doorway, into the upper portion of El Luchador Grasa. I was swept inside with them, and stumbled up the stairs, finally spilling out of their group at the hostess station.

The interior of the bar was the epitome of fashion-district LA. The room was split in half and an elevated runway ran right through the middle of the room. Several miniature disco balls hung from the ceiling, still. The room had a bizarre smell, which I could only describe as being void of smell. No musk, no booze, no cigarette smoke clinging from a jacket or onions sizzling on a grill. Rather, it was like the air in Prentice. Clean. Unlike anything I’d smelled in weeks. Before I had time to turn and leave, the lights went out across the entire bar and subtle green lines appeared along the runway, not so much flashing as they were pulsing, giving the appearance of water propelling forward along the path. The disco
balls descended and began spinning. The thump of a bass note resonated with the pulse of the lights and all else was still, quiet. Soon, a girl stepped onto the runway at the far end of the bar and slowly, forcefully, stomped toward me. She wore red cowboy boots and a coat with decorative shoulder pads that flared out like the appendages of a jester’s hat. Her head down, she strutted, methodically, and when she almost reached me, she turned and stepped off the runway into a discreet doorway behind the bar. As soon as she left, a man entered from the other side, following her, modeling another outfit, the same rhythm, the same pulsing beat. One after another, the models stomped down the runway to the thumping bass note. There was no accompaniment. No synth, no voices, just a thumping bass note. Then, as the last model exited, the disco balls ascended and the lights came back on to a muted applause. When my eyes had readjusted to the light, Tabby was standing next to me.

“Where’ve you been, man?” she asked. “We left that note, like, days ago.”

“Days ago? We just got here this morning.”

She began laughing hysterically and grabbed my hand, pulling me to the far corner of the bar where I saw Abe standing on a table before several strangers, gesturing wildly and shouting. When we reached them, I heard him say:

“It is clear, then, that television commercials are the new, purest form of art. What is the purpose of art, you may ask.” Several yelled out: to express an idea, to praise, to entertain, to provide aesthetic pleasure. “Abe continued, sloshing a half-full mug of beer in the air, “Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes. This is the commercial! Since the very first work of art was created, all has become imitation, representation. The commercial, however, imitates ironically. It entertains, draws us in with its aesthetic appeal, gags, jokes, and glimpses of beauty. And it does so in thirty seconds. It teaches us how to desire, compels us to desire what we’ve haven’t desired. It stirs us, praises, always, always, always,” he repeated, as
though waiting for the next words to form, “points us toward a single, ideal object or form, without, however, limiting our desire. A commercial for allergy medicine causes us to desire clear sinuses, nice skin, and a wife and child who run through highly defined fields of daisies on perfectly cloudless days. A commercial for lingerie causes us to desire physical intimacy, a beautiful woman, and a garment of which only the advertiser can provide.” Abe stepped off the table and onto a chair, wobbled slightly, and took a drink. Softer, he continued, “yes, even a commercial for external hard-drives, can cause us to desire a great idea worth recording, to be productive, to star on a reality television show, and to have more memory. Indeed, to have perfect memory.” He stepped off the chair, saying, perhaps only to himself, “They are deceiving and convincing and often beautiful. A perfect art. They lead us to believe that Venus arrived fully-formed from the sea, that Thinkers were not only poets but chiseled with muscle, that Christ was white.”

Abe sat down at the table, and his audience, released now, through a mere shift in Abe’s posture, left to find more drinks.

I sat down at the table with them, Tabby and Abe. They had clearly been drinking most of the day, and seemed about to crash. Tabby’s face sagged with exhaustion and there was a curious green stain all along the front of her shirt. Abe, meanwhile, was in the process of flagging down the waitress when the lights went out, the disco balls dropped, and the scene broke for a modeling interruption. In the brief silence I heard a yelp and a crash and a muted rumbling of applause from somewhere deep within the building. I wondered how things were going downstairs.

When the lights came back on, I asked Abe about the fight.

“The fight! Yes!” He stood up quickly and his chair fell backward.

“Forget about it,” I said. “You’re too late. Your match has already started.”
“Impossible. I’m never late for anything. It’s one of the few benefits of a perfect memory. The memory of a second, a minute’s length is so engrained in my mind that I am constantly aware of the exact fixture in time in which every event takes place. I have,” he repeated, “never been late for anything.”

I looked at Tabby. She had been facing away from us, and whipped back, a guilty expression on her face. She swallowed hard. “Abe, I was there. I came to talk you out of fighting. They almost forced me to fight in your absence, until somebody stepped up and took my place.”

“Abe stumbled backward and fell into the table behind him. His beer crashed against the tabletop, producing a domino effect on the other beers. Several other chairs crashed to the floor. Clothing was spilled upon, women knocked down, glasses broke. It seemed to take a full minute for Abe to finally stand upright again. During this time, two men who had been sitting at the table had already helped their dates up and signaled to the waiters for towels. They waited for Abe to get up and begin his explanation. Instead, when Abe stood up, he examined the table, sought out the only beer that remained upright, and proceeded drinking from it. The beer hadn’t been his, of course. I half-heartedly tried to intervene when the men dragged Abe out into the street, out the entrance and into the adjacent door leading down a flight of stairs. I could see, from the street before the door slammed shut, the bouncer registering two more fighters to his list.

I convinced Tabby to wait on the curb with me. We leaned against the warm brick and she put her head between her legs. The fingernails of her left hand scratched agitatedly against the concrete until I reached for her hand and held it in my lap. After sitting in silence for a few minutes, her face began to pale in the dimming Los Angeles light. I crossed the
street to a vendor and bought a bottle of water and two hot dogs. I grabbed several napkins. I tore of pieces of the hot dog buns and fed them to her; I ate the hot dogs—how long has it been since I’d last ate? Tabby ate the buns slowly, like a bird, and she sipped at the water. Soon, she leaned into me, resting her head on my shoulder. Cheers could be heard from downstairs, the periodic thumping of a single bass note from upstairs. The streets were thinning of walkers, that magical time when everyone had found a place to be, for the time being. Tabby blanched further, upon finishing the buns probably too quickly, and I helped her up and led her down the narrow alley alongside the bar. I held her hair back as she became sick, and helped her wipe her face with the napkins. We returned to the empty curb and waited for Abe.

“Do you know where your truck is?” I finally asked her, when her color started to return.

She shook her head.

“Any idea? Can you point me in the right direction? Let me find it for you?”

She shook her head. Finally, she said, “Abe.”

Tabby had begun relying on Abe to remember things. It started, I believed, with the directions to L.A. Then, she’d relied on him to tell her when to stop for fuel. Directions back to the hostel, my telephone number, and the whereabouts of her truck. “But now,” she said slowly, staring at the sidewalk beneath her feet, “I don’t know what we’re going to do. I mean, if he loses his memory.”

“Damnit, Tabby. Abe doesn’t have a perfect memory.”

“Of course he does. You’ve heard him speak. You’ve seen the effects of his memory.”
“You were just in there with me, right? Can you think of a single time when Abe’s been on time during the short week we’ve known him? And that story about meeting me in Luxembourg? It’s all bullshit.”

“No. It isn’t. He’s really in pain, Karin. He’s afflicted with the curse of having to remember everything. I’ve seen it more closely than you have. I mean, I tried to talk him out of signing up for that fight, but even now, he’s down there getting the shit kicked out of him. I tried telling him that in his state, he could get killed, and he said it’d still be a relief.”

She stopped, dabbed at her eyes with the napkin. I couldn’t tell if she was crying or still reacting from getting sick. “Today’s been especially rough on him. He didn’t want to tell you, because he could tell you were starting to doubt him, but the real reason he came out here, aside from setting out to lose his memory, was to shoot that commercial for the external hard drive company. Apparently they lined up another celebrity to be in it. The fuckin guy, as soon as he meets Abe, gives him a watch as a gift. Said, ‘I’ve done my research. I know you’re going to love this.’ Abe opened it up and flew into a full-blown panic attack. The director, who’d insisted on shooting everything, thought the episode was so believable that he rewrote the script on the spot so they could use his footage. Something about how the craziest and most violent catastrophes could not threaten a memory as perfect as this one.”

I did feel a little bad. I took a swig of the water and handed it to Tabby. “I’m not saying he’s lying, Tabby. I think he believes he remembers everything. I just don’t think there’s any real substance to his memories. That they are merely projections he’s, I don’t know, fantasized enough about until they felt real to him. Or maybe he just can’t tell the difference between the real and fantastic things that pop into his mind. Between truth and fiction.”

“Bullshit.”
“Remember that story he told about his father. How they had vastly different memories about the same event, the meeting with Danny DeVito?”

She balled up a napkin and threw it into the street.

“That’s basically what has happened to him. He’s convinced himself his memory is perfect, and is now suffering from the belief that it is.”

“What about the memories we’ve experienced? His recognition of us at the bar? The signs along the highway?”

“He doesn’t have a better memory than you, Tabby. He simply has a higher alcohol tolerance.”

Just as Tabby began to argue back, the heavy metal door flew open and Abe stumbled out onto the street and fell face down before us. I stood quickly and helped him up, leaning him against the wall.

After wiping the blood from his face, most of which was spilling either from his mouth or the large cut above his left eye, we could see that he was smiling. His grin, missing both of his lower upper incisors, was like a child’s who had injured himself doing something too fun to regret. He stretched out his right leg, and then his left. Then, he did the same to his fingers, then his arms, and finally rolled his shoulders. Finally, he said, “How long was I in there?”

I flipped open my phone. “At least thirty minutes.”

He stood up slowly, stretched his back and then doubled over grabbing his gut. He began laughing hysterically. He looked possessed, standing there in the middle of LA’s fashion district, laughing uncontrollably and simultaneously wincing in pain. “I’d a said ten minutes,” he said. And then he yelled it. Tabby and I took a step backward into the street. He continued, “Do you see? I would’ve said ten minutes. I was knocked out immediately, the
first punch,” which was clearly a lie since a single punch couldn’t have knocked out his teeth, cut his forehead, and bruised his ribs, but I let it go. “I’m cured!” he yelled and jumped into the street, falling over a gimpy ankle. He stood up again. “My memory is gone!” He faked introductions with us, claiming not to know our names. He thanked us for helping a stranger.

We followed Abe down the street. He insisted on buying us drinks. When he came out from a convenience store with three opened beers, he claimed that he didn’t remember one couldn’t drink on the streets. We put them in bags and continued following him. At every unusual thing we saw, he shouted with his hands upraised, “I have so much to relearn!”

Tabby hung back for a moment, just long enough to whisper, “I told you so.” Her breath was still putrid and she was drinking her beer too quickly.

I knew I shouldn’t speak up, but it bothered me that Tabby was so convinced. “Abe,” I said. “We should be sure that your memory is, in fact gone, lest your trip be for naught.”

He turned to me, grinning. “Of course, Karol,” he said. “Or is it Karin? What do you have in mind?”

“How did you get out here?”

“Of course I remember some things. I mean, that was so recent, it’d be hard to forget, right?”

“Yeah. I suppose it would be. What do you remember about it?”

“I drove out here with you guys. We were crammed together in the front seat, right?”

We were drinking and taking bennies.”
My hope was to get him to admit something so outrageous that even Tabby couldn’t deny that he was making it up. But, he had me. I hadn’t thought the plan out.

Then, Abe continued. “But there was more of us, right? Some guys, dressed in suits and talking incessantly about music. They were on their way out West and hitched a ride with us. Remember? We stopped with them one evening in Denver. Oh shit! How could anybody forget that? The guy with us, what was his name? The real wild one. Remember? He stole that car and we were taking the mountain roads at ninety miles an hour? Stopping in the bars to find the best jazz? Oh, Mary Lou and Rita? Let’s go back!” Abe, now lost in his fantasy, continued walking, even faster now. We followed.

I looked at Tabby, who though she hung back, clearly did not want to talk to me. “That story sound familiar? I asked.

“He’s just been knocked out, Karin. You’re viscous.”

“Sure. But you see what he did, right? You see how his memory works? He believes it.”

She didn’t answer, but caught up with Abe. They laughed together. He stopped a couple times to reenact the fight with her. Positioning her just right, saying “okay, you be me, and then he came at me like this,” and then, “okay, I’ll be me, and you come at me like this, and I did this.” We followed Abe out of the fashion district and eventually along the Los Angeles River. Tabby didn’t seem to care where we were headed, but I had a hunch. And then, after only twenty minutes of walking, Abe led us directly to the truck.

I shook Abe’s hand and hugged Tabby. She was resistant at first, but forgiving. I told them I hoped to see them again and I meant it. Then, in Los Angeles, as the sun went down, I sat on an old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over Los Angeles and sensed all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievably huge bulge over to the West Coast, and
all that road going, all the people dreaming the immensity of it, and in Prentice I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don’t you know that God is... Out here, and back East, and wherever it is that I return to, I know I’ll think of Abe and Tabby, and of Janelle, Abby, and Morris. I’ll continue to think of even B. Hart, Finn Fien, Sleightor, who I’ve yet to meet, and Anna. I’ll think of Claire.
Chapter 44: A Fien Reading, March 11

The following morning I woke up early and alone. I spent most of the morning at Phillipes, drinking nine cent cups of coffee and finishing my work on the anagrammatization of *On the Road*. The story was coming along pretty smoothly, and I had to laugh at the unexpected turns my new protagonist was taking. There was a freedom, in writing like this. I had no control; I had no real decisions to make. For example, the first sentence of the second chapter reads:

> In the month of July 1947, having saved about fifty dollars from old veteran benefits, I was ready to go to the West Coast.

One option would be:

> Toast no longer filled our stomach; 147 jet hours from 9 vegan identity fits, veal was a bonify’d way to vest the fib: o death.

Another option:

> 1,749 dullards of God, tiny bat-ear swine, fart joy if a fun-loving vendetta costs I a sweet-tooth lobotomy of meat fever; shhh!

I can’t, however, write:

> Toast filled our dull stomachs for 47 hours; striving to keep away from meat, we drove the fun-loving highway of meat fever, a vendetta of sweet-tooth vendetta, for joy is in flesh.

The letters simply aren’t there. The freedom, then, comes in never having to decide what a character must do. An anagrammatizer can only decide the arrangement of existing letters. The letters form the story, the conflict. The letters provide resolve, taking the character through a pre-established, albeit omniscient-authorless, path. Writing, now, was like math, punching in numbers, solving riddles. It was, I thought then, a somehow better way.
When I finished the second chapter, a short one, thankfully, which only took a few hours, I headed back toward the fashion district for phase two of my Fien deconstruction: Wardrobe. Being mostly sober yesterday, I couldn’t help but notice plenty of outfits being sold by street vendors. After strolling around for an hour, I decided on a brooding author look. If only I had the ability to grow a goatee in the next few hours. I tried them on in the hostel and they were perfect: a tight, wool turtleneck sweater—very Hemingway-esque—with a pair of loose, black suit pants, and a black, felt fedora. For good measure, I also picked up a pair of black combat boots and a set of military dog tags to from an Army Surplus store. After a short nap and a read-through of my manuscript, went downstairs to the hostel desk for and wrote down two sets of directions: from here to the library, and from the library to the train station. There was a midnight train headed out of LA to New Orleans and I would be on it. I put the directions in my front pocket and dragged my suitcase and bag onto the 76 bus to downtown LA.

I started to grow a little nervous when the library came into view. I pulled my fedora down low to cover my face. I wished I had told Sleightor to have Ms. O’Graffer meet me outdoors to ensure that I could get in without a problem, especially since, unlike Fien’s possession of my library card, I did not possess any ID of his. I walked past the entrance once before going in. It seemed as though they were not scanning IDs, as they had in Boston. I walked past a second time, and noticed a security guard leaning against the library facade, smoking. He was too big for his uniform. His unbuttoned sleeves, unrolled, ended and stretched halfway down his forearms. When he perched his sunglasses atop his shaved head, I could barely make out a sprawling tattoo along the dark skin on the inside of his forearm. He eyed me peculiarly, at least I think he did. He could’ve been squinting in the sun, having just removed the shades. He could’ve been watching the street performer...
juggling behind me. He could’ve been inspecting my outrageous outfit. Regardless, I had to go in soon, lest I invite unwanted attention. As I approached, the security raised his walkie-talkie and spoke into it. He straightened up, and headed toward me. I picked up my pace. So did he. I looked behind me, to ensure I wasn’t walking into a trap. Nobody. That is, nobody that should cause suspicion, nobody in an official outfit. I instinctively reached into my pocket and felt my knife. Shit! Why did I bring this fucking thing? Now they’re certainly going to be suspicious. I took a couple more steps. I could feel sweat building underneath my armpits. My stomach itched from the sweater’s wool. The security guard waved his hand at me, yelled for me to hold up. I was fucked. I should be fucked, too. I look like an asshole. Sleightor set this whole thing up and I was about to go to jail because I chose to dress like an asshole. Fuck.

Feigning calmness, misdirection, a sudden change of plans or forgotten last stop, I turned and walked away from the library. I picked up my pace, but I heard the guard yell once more. When I reached the street, I started to jog.

“Karin!” he yelled. “Mr. Pankreez!”

I started running, my suitcase slowing me down, and I thought about ditching it altogether. I had no idea where to go. The hard leather boots dug into my feet severely; they ached with each step.

“Stop. Hold up!”

The Angelenos around me turned to watch, indecision in their eyes. Should I grab him? Should I trip him up? Should I trip the guard? Should I ignore it and just get to work, get home, get to my meeting? The footsteps behind me grow closer. I was done and I knew it. Chase scenes from the great Hollywood films flashed by. I could tell, from my memory of The Reservoir Dogs, that the guard probably had his gun already drawn, was taking aim.
From Point Break, I knew that I was Richard Nixon to his Keanu Reaves. Before I could make the next turn, a strong hand closed around my bicep. No gunshot. Yet. I should’ve ditched my suitcase. Dropping it now, I whipped my body around and swung for the fences, which unfortunately, were several inches over the guard’s head. He didn’t even have to duck. He let go of my arm, and there was this fleeting moment, a freeze frame, in which I debated whether to run again, knowing he would outrun me, and in which the guard attempted to piece the events together. To catch his breath, mentally.

Finally, he said, “What the fuck? Are you Karin Pankreez?”


He breathed deeply. “Do you look like a Karin? What the fuck?”

“Well, she doesn’t look like me.”

“She? Shit. I’m sorry. This job blows. He didn’t tell me I’d have to be chasing anybody down.” He pulled out a piece of paper. When I peered over the top of it, I was terrified to see myself looking back, my left eye in the photocopied photo half closed. “This photo sucks,” he said. I recognized the background of the photo from the photo shoot at Hart’s office. “Ain’t gonna help me identify shit.” He looked back at the library front.

I felt bad for him, for how easily he was willing to let me off. He was right, though. Even I was surprised how different I looked in the photo, whether from my exhaustion that day, the hunger, my desperation, or just the few weeks that had gone by since. I said, “Could be worse, right?”

“Could be better.”

“Yes. I guess it could be. So, what did this Karin do? I felt like any second you were about to brain me.”
“Shit. Forget Karin. What did you do?” He pulled out a cigarette and offered me one, and then held out a match for me. “You must’ve done some serious shit to just start running like that. I half-expected to turn that corner to find a whole bunch of men dressed in president’s masks with automatic guns.”

“Point Break?”

He laughed, blew out smoke that swirled in between us for a moment, then dissipated.

“I was picturing the same scene. Except I had the Richard Nixon mask on, and you were Keanu Reaves.”

“Nah, man. He chases down the guy with the Reagan mask. Nixon comes later.”

“You sure?”

“Fuck yeah I’m sure. I grew up on it. They filmed that shit right here, man. 1991. My parents took me to see the set.”

We finished our cigarettes and reminisced about our favorite scenes from the movie, which led to a conversation of our other favorite chase scenes, which eventually led to a confession that neither of us had ever actually been in a real chase before. Finally, the guard turned around, convinced I was not who I was, and said, “Well, I guess I better get back and look for this Karin dude.”

“You don’t answer my question,” I said. “About what this Karin did that made you chase me down.” I felt a twinge of regret in my chest, knowing I was pushing it.

“He didn’t do anything. Supposed to meet me here is all. For an event in the library.”

“A reading, by chance?”
He took another drag from his cigarette and let his arm fall to his side. He was turned toward the street and eyed me sideways. “Yeah, a reading. I can’t go into details. What do you know about it?”

“Did Cory O’Graffer send you?”

“Shit. I am Cory. Who the fuck are you?”

“I’m Karin.”

“No shit? What’s with the lies, man?”

“I, to be honest, I didn’t expect, I mean, Laurence said you were a woman. I’d pictured a large Irish woman, is all.”

“That cocksucker. Well, ‘til I saw the picture, you don’t want to know what I had expected.”

“You’re right. I don’t. So, what do we do now?”

“First thing I do is get out of this stupid outfit. Then I call Sleightor and bitch his ass out for telling me to meet someone who is clearly guilty of something, in a security outfit. I imagine it was one of his jokes, his attempt at Found Drama.”

“Found Drama?”

“Never mind. You can ask him about it. Something to do with reconstructing realism, without the tools of narrative. Just another sign of narrative exhaustion if you ask me.”

“You a writer, then?”

“No. I dig film. Run the library’s media department.” He took my suitcase from me and told me he’d take care of it, make sure it got where it had to.

I followed Cory through a side entrance of the library. He changed, and we caught a train to meet the students before the reading.
The temptation to use an accent was nearly unbearable. I strained while answering these students’ questions not to sink into some variation of a Slovakian dialect. Consistency was the problem, though. I didn’t think I’d be able to keep it up throughout the night, after several drinks, and the nerves that were supposed to kick in. Age was the big question. Since a good deal of them—there were seven or eight at our lunch—were close to my age, if not older, I told them my youthful look came from my mother’s side, who was Filipino. The Filipino women, I told them slowly and thoughtfully, hardly age at all until they near sixty, in which they age all at once, which, unfortunately, explains the large mail-order bride business of which my heritage is so devastatingly familiar with. Even the students near the end of the table who had been chatting incessantly through my introduction and slamming high-priced craft beers as quickly as possible stopped to listen. I continued, after a solemn pause, that besides the aging patterns, I’d gotten the majority of my genes from my German father. I am, in fact, nearing that age where any morning now, I expect to wake up and see a German man, twenty-five years my senior, staring back at me in the mirror. But I can’t complain. I’ve certainly had my fun, and I curse not the twilight of my youthful appearance.

The table grew pretty much silent after that.

Glasses chattered as the waiter, a tall, lanky boy with oily skin and dark hairs curling up from underneath his collar, replaced empties. Our table was parallel with the front window and covered in a dark green tablecloth that matched the trim of the nearly all wooden interior. It was a modern design, very angular with an uncomfortable bench that wrapped along its interior walls. I was sitting on the bench, my back to the window. Cory sat next to me, and the rest of the students filled in the rest of the seats.
Cory, who was now dressed in a pair of jeans and a dark, army-style sweater, crossed his legs and turned toward me. He asked how I knew Sleightor, and I confessed that I didn’t. I told him most of the story, quietly. The students were shoveling their mouths with enormous sandwiches and gulping down malty beers; they were too hungry to hear the truth. Cory said he’d met Sleightor first when they’d worked together in the kitchen at an Austin, Texas orphanage.

“Come on.”

“Serious as shit, man. I ran the grill. Larry covered sides. Fuckin Salisbury steak with powdered potatoes, tomato soup was salty as hell. Week-old rolls.”

“At an orphanage?”

“We’d do other shit, too. You know, stuff-we-know sort of shit. I’d show films, get the kids to talk about them. Larry’d read ‘em these monster, door-stop sort of books, a thousand plus pages, at ten pages a night, and usually right before bedtime.”

“I don’t mean to disrespect you, but I’m having a difficult time believing this.”

“We’d both started together on the same day. Eventually found out we were both there for the same reason. We were researching. Larry for a novel, me for a film. Once we found out what the other was doing, though, it sorta fucked everything up. Hard to research, you know, accurately, when the sources you’re researching knows what you’re up to.” Cory sipped at the dregs of a scotch. He chewed a piece of ice and ordered two more. “You gotta drink up, man. These kids aren’t gonna buy shit from you if you’re more sober than they are.”

I wasn’t sure which meaning of “buy shit” Cory meant. I didn’t have things to sell. Or maybe he meant they wouldn’t buy my writerly advice. I started to grow anxious, though, that they wouldn’t buy my shit, the whole act. I toasted Cory, to selling shit, and we drank
and ordered more. Nearby students tried to join the toast, and drank as well. When the plates began to empty—more than one student hid rolls, silverware, and even a saltshaker into pockets—they started in, suddenly very serious-like, with the questions.

1. (Female, ankle-length suede dress, glasses) What do you write on? Computer?
   Typewriter?
   a. Handwritten, of course. Yellow Sharpie® Marker.

2. (Male, salmon polo-shirt, buzz-cut) Do you, like, listen to music when you write?
   a. Only Gregorian chants.

3. (Male, incredibly small, young looking. How did he get in here?) What’s your favorite book?
   a. Moll Flanders. The most perfect, complex plot ever penned.

4. (Female, buzz cut, tattoo of Gertrude Stein’s face on left side of neck, low-hanging collar presents a reason to believe the rest of Gertrude Stein’s profile is hidden inside of shirt) I love your writing, particularly your early stuff, particularly, Tao III, particularly, when Burt “Rub Them” Hem finally pairs up with Carlyle Quit to break out of jail, particularly, like, the prose in that section. It’s just so, um, prosy, but like, intentional, ya know.
   a. Not a question.

5. (Polo shirt boy) Why do you, like, so rarely do public readings and shit?
   a. Crippling anxiety when questioned. Full-body hives I’ll be fighting for weeks to come.

6. (Male, long brown hair in ringlets, Che Guevara t-shirt, dark-rimmed glasses) What, in your opinion, is the penultimate postmodern collection or collections of English Letters, in particular regards to the topography of ignorance, and its earlier pairings
with sexuality slash gender issues in a self-referential mode, such as, say, I don’t
know, representations of media in literature? I’m thinking, of course, of the later
work of post-reconstructuralist psycho-Marxist, Flabert Butchem.

a. You mean what book, er collection of English Letters best represents his
assertions?

i. (Che Guevara shirted scholar) Indubitably.

1. I find it almost astounding that the question would even have
to be asked, when the answer is so clearly obvious. Anybody
else like to answer?

ii. (Incredibly small, young looking male from earlier) Where the Red Fern
Grows?

1. Exactly.

7. (Female, long fingers nonchalantly swirling a glass of red wine, dark red lips, dark red
nail polish, dark red hair) Do you drink when you write?

a. (me, pausing dramatically, taking a drink, and slowly returning my gaze) I
write when I drink.

Cory looked up from signing his name to the recently arrived meal tab, stifling a laugh. He
handed it and the Library’s expense card to our server, and then looked at his enormous,
leather banded wristwatch. He said, “It’s time for us to go.”

He made sure the students were not driving, repeated the directions to the library
several times. Walk Sunset Blvd to Santa Monica to the Vermont/Santa Monica Station, take
the Red Line to Pershing Square, get off there and walk West 5th street Northwest to the
library.

I didn’t believe I’d see any of the students there.
On the way, Cory reassured me that all publicity had been done via grassroots methods. Word of mouth, handmade fliers at niche indie nightclubs, show houses, and even a classified want ad in *The Los Angeles Independent*: Wanted: Fien Fans for a Finn Fest; 5.10, 7:30pm. Though they were charging ten bucks a head, ninety percent of which would go into my pocket, he assured me that we’d be lucky—or unlucky?—to find fifteen people waiting. The thing is, Cory said, These Angelenos always got shit cookin, and shit just don’t cook these days at the library.

When we got to the library, however, and we were very relieved that Cory had his own parking spot because the entire block was gridlocked with cars and bikes and skateboarders and pedestrians who were all pushing toward the library’s large basement room where I was to read, we saw that the grassroots publicity had unfortunately worked. We entered from the back entrance we’d gone in earlier, and Cory assured me that I didn’t have to worry about being recognized, as Fien had done so few public readings. Up until we reached a small, liquor-stocked room set off from the main reading room—Sleightor’s doing—we weren’t sure how so many people had heard about the reading. We sat down and poured some more scotch when a knock came at the door. Cory answered it and spoke briefly with somebody hidden behind the door. He returned, with a somber face, and threw a large envelope into my lap. For you, he said.

On the outside of the envelope were the initials FF. I dumped its contents onto the room’s small desk. Cory, first, reached out and spread the letters around, reluctantly. Then I did the same, picked one up and examined it. It was addressed to Fien, they all were. Most were from fans, though some seemed more official: a past due notice from the LAPL, an electric bill, even a couple letters from Bunsen, dated several weeks ago.
Cory spoke first. “She said she was an assistant of Fien’s personal assistant, and the head of the Finn Fien Fan Forum. Needed to make sure you got these.”

“Shit!” I said. “She’ll recognize me.”

“No, she won’t. Not a problem. At least, I don’t think it will be. There’s a good chance she’s never seen Fien before. She told me Fien’s assistant has been away for several weeks and she was trying to hold down the Fien fort, so to speak. She’d been commissioned a few years back, as an assistant of his assistant, to start the fan club. Since she had no address, or way of knowing where to find Fien, she said she fortuitously overheard two employees at a local bookstore talking about the reading, and came merely to drop off the mail.”

Somewhat hurt, I asked, “Was she even planning on staying for the reading?”

“Nah. Said she don’t give a shit about you, er, I mean Fien. She said her two-week notice, backdated two weeks, could be found in the envelope as well. We searched for it and found it, along with a letter which gave the reasons for her decision, citing the “incessant online forum-based come-ons by perverted internet creepers and overwritten assertions by failing English students who consider Fien to be the new Herman Melville.”

“What do we do with them?” I asked.

Cory finished off his scotch. “Shit, they’re yours now. You’re up in ten minutes. I gotta go introduce you. Any requests?”

I could feel my face paling, holding in my hands several loose envelopes addressed to the man I was about to be for the next several hours.

“Don’t flake out on me. You got an exit plan right?”

I fingered the piece of paper in my pocket which contained the directions the train station.
I did.

The Reading

& From the Previously-Not-Mentioned-By-Name Green Room:

Literally green, save the ceiling. Green green, too. Not the green of forests or of most crayons and some tractors, but the green of children’s flash cards. The door swung shut behind Cory and I stood motionless for several seconds staring down at my worn, black combat boots, the soles buried in thick, green shag carpet. There was a thick, white candle on the desk behind the splayed envelopes. I lifted it to my nose. Scentless. I lit it with a book of matches I found in the drawer. I carried my empty glass across the room, now thick with the rich smell of sulfur, and I refilled it. There was a mirror above the mini-bar, frameless against the green wall, and there I was, in it. Behind me, at the desk, was another smaller mirror, presumably for those who sat while applying makeup or plucking hairs. The mirrors bounced my image back and forth, and I was always standing just behind myself, slightly to the left, seemingly infinite. Though, in the green room mirrors, I couldn’t see myself go on forever, because no matter how I stood, my head was always in the way. Even if I had a glass periscope, the image of my eye would cover up the thing I really wanted to avoid seeing: my splotchy beard unshaven since Albuquerque, the beard of an adolescent trying to grow a beard—too much on the neck and not enough on the cheeks—or the beard of a homeless man. Shadows underneath my eyes, which appeared to have relaxed deeper into the sockets. Sunken, I’ve heard them described—not mine particularly, described, that is. Too many days of too little water and too many vendor’s hot dogs. Too many days of indirection. My
armpits itched the sweat had dried and triggered something in the wool, down my biceps, too, itching. I tucked the dog tags underneath my shirt, then pulled them back over top. I wanted not to wear the hat, but the arrival of the assistant of Fien’s assistant had my nerves poking out everywhere, like rubbing the rough edge of Velcro underneath the wrist. So, hat it was. I tilted it low, casting a deeper shadow over my eyes, and in the mirror I saw one of them too young boys, unliked and unpopular, whose independence of any one particularly clique allowed him to dress differently, as he pleased, and he often came to school dressed not like his peers but like those he admires on television, his other friends, a pseudo-tough-man-type without the tough. Apparently, there were speakers in the room, broadcasting a live feed from the adjoining conference room. I was startled when the speakers popped on. What I at first thought was static, it turned out, was the sound of a DeLillo-novel-like mass of people, though not quite mass-wedding-in-Yankee-Stadium mass.

& The Sound From The Previously-Unnoticed Intercom Speakers:

Aurally, I’d estimate between two and three hundred attendees snacked on snack-like foods, shuffled to their seats, took off coats and draped them over chairs, picked them up off the ground when other snackers mindlessly snuck down the aisle to late, knocking coats off from chairs. Murmurs, indecipherable chatter with an occasionally decipherable “Chet’s on his way,” auspiciously spoken by Chet’s hipster friends who arrived extra early and reserved seats near the front of the room, which is also near the podium microphone that is picking up these sounds. And many curse words, too, I could pick up above the murmur, curious that practically all curses, even those said by frequent I-don’t-give-a-fuck-if-cursing-offends-you-cause-you-know-like-its-just-a-word cursers, are emphasized above the other words,
which makes me think of the Arpoh Frey-Wins; the use of curses as non-referential modifiers displayed the distance of the signifier from the signified, and further signified the distance between man and God—the head signifier/word/Logos—and thus the emphatic cursing that I could make out in the shuffle of the slightly-smaller-than-a-DeLillo-novel-crowd were really nothing more than poorly chosen, though emphasized adjectives, when ultimately the emphasis should be on the active verb, or at the least, the direct object, and slightly (often) less important than the direct object, the subject (slightly less because in most cases with elitist crowds such as these the subject is practically invariably “I”), thus making the most recent audible phrase “I gotta fuckin piss” not a whole lot different than saying “I ran quietly to the bathroom” (emphasized word italicized). Which, well, just sounds stupid. A door slammed loudly and the crowd noise increased and whirred briefly, as I imagined a mad scamper to seats, a too-cool-to-play-games-that-make-already-awkward-limbs-look-even-more-awkward, version of musical chairs, except this time there is far more than one chair missing, and then silence spiked with a booming cough, a nose blow, a cell phone, though mostly silence. A woman’s voice: “okay, grab your seats please”—a pause—“I’m sorry, we didn’t expect such a large crowd this evening. We’ve brought in extra chairs for those who didn’t make the first cut,”—the sound of a hand covering the microphone, then laughter, as though coming through a gag—“additionally, chairs have been set up in two adjacent, satellite rooms, and the reading will be fed to those rooms via intercom. To the remainder of those who do not fit into the primary room, the chairs positioned along the edges and in the hallways, or in the adjacent rooms, we ask that you please find a place against the wall to stand, or if no wall space is available, to sit in a fashion that leaves ample room to maneuver the aisles, should there be a fire” (a very effective use of emphasis), “or some other catastrophe.” (In order to ward of the shaking of readerly heads, [I mean, enough with the
fires already, we get it, first the library, then the library again, then the hostel kitchen fire] you can rest assured there will not be another fire in this scene, and unless unforeseen shifts occur during the revision, there will be no more fires throughout the remainder of the novel. “If you will, please welcome our introducer this evening, head of the Los Angeles Public Libraries Media Department, and acclaimed film critic and sometime director/writer, Cory O’Graffer.” Uninterested, though very loud applause, given the mere number of hands present. A throat clearing, and then Cory speaking, his voice less rich through the tangle of wires and amplifiers and overall complicated system of channels it takes to get a vice from its original source to its electronic projector. “You motherfuckers showed up, huh? James, up there in front, didn’t expect to see you so soon. How’s that arm?”—Some laughter—

“Seriously, though, when we initially coaxed Mr. Fien to do this reading, it was under the promise that we would keep it low-key, advertising through only ineffective methods, local newspapers, fliers at nightclubs, word of mouth using only shy people, and all I can say is when Fien comes out here, which I hope he eventually does, he’s gonna be pissed.”—more laughter—“Most of you, I assume, know Fien only through his writing, which is how he prefers it. What you may not know, however, is that despite the content of his novels, Fien is a relatively simple man, interested more in writing about adventures than having them, interested more in writing about sex then having sex, interested more in writing about people than actually interacting with them. Through his fascination with language, his experiments with words, which started, he claims, from an addiction to highly complex crossword puzzles he acquired while going through NA in Boston following a brief career as a veterinarian, have garnered unremitting attention from disparate sources, whether through the unconditional love of his devotees, or the infallible critiques of scholars worldwide. Fien has always insisted he doesn’t give a shit whence, or on what occasion his name is uttered, as
long as it is uttered often, by attractive and unattractive people alike. His words. After Fien’s reading, there will be a brief period when questions can be answered. We will certainly not be able to get to all the questions, though we ask that you line up in an orderly fashion in front of the two microphones placed in each aisle, and wait your turn to ask your questions. With no further ado, Mr. Finn Fien.

& The Walk From The Green Room To The Podium

I took one last glance in the mirror, trying to straighten out my sweater, which had stretched from all the sweating, which had resumed. Pouring one last glass of scotch, I made my way out of the green room, and into the whitewashed, ill-lit hallway, the metaphorical and actual (metaphorically) bowels of the LAPL. It occurred to me that I didn’t have a fucking clue where the fucking reading room was. The hallway, much like those in a dorm or hotel, contained several doors, numbered, but unlabeled otherwise. I tried the first. Locked. The intercom piped through ceiling speakers announced my pseudo-name once more. I tried a couple more: a dark closet with a broom and a large yellow bucket, shelves lined with cleansers, an empty room filled with piles of books, another room, no larger than the green room, with a table and four men in grey coveralls playing cards. They threw a newspaper over the pile of coins in the middle of the table as I popped my head in. “Any clue where the reading room is?” I asked, but they only shouted back at me in what sounded like a Slovakian dialect. I turned and headed the other directions. Over the intercom: “Finn Fien, you’re up. Are you still back there?” I tried another door. At first, the room appeared black, empty, but as the door swung slowly open—I really had to push, as something seemed to block it from
opening completely—I saw that the room was backlit; a sliver of light emerged from another cracked-open door at the back of the room, and it was this light, it seemed, that slightly illuminated the shadowed room. The shadows appeared backward, cast toward me and lit from behind, though the light I let in seemed stronger than the light from the cracked door on the opposite wall. My eyes adjusted, distracted by the riddle of the light, and the cracked door emerged not as a cracked door, but as a seam between plywood wall panels. In front of the panels, dark to me but lit from the creeping backlight, an old man, looking eerily like my grandfather from *The SauerKrant Circus*, sat on a stool before a crude panel of toggle- and knife-switches, hung beside an open fuse box near his head; elsewhere in the odd room were wooden levers and ropes belayed to boat cleats. I wasn’t sure how long I stood there, but when a hand finally reached from behind me and softly touched my shoulder, I felt as though I had been sleeping. I rubbed my eyes and slowly turned. A beautiful woman, red-haired with an ambrosial scent emanating from somewhere deep, underneath, slid her hand from my shoulder down the length of my arm to my hand. She touched the back of my fingers, and then took it in hers, like a mother, or like a girlfriend I’d been fighting with, who now wanted to make up. “You’re fine,” she said, and I misunderstood her. “No, you…” I started, but pulled up short when her concerned expression turned puzzled. “Thank you, I’m fine,” I said, and her expression resumed. I followed slightly behind her, still led by her hand. Swept by sleepiness, I felt the chance at escape slip into my lap. Not just an escape from the reading, but from all of it, that I could return to whatever dream I was interrupted from, that she would guide me and show me how to remember it, to record it, to operate the toggle- and knife-switches. She turned to me and said, “I’m so glad I found you. This could’ve been a disaster. There are so many people out there, expecting so much. Just follow me, honey.” And I did. We passed several doors, all coldly shut, sealed off. The hallway seemed to dim as
we walked toward some exit. I heard Cory’s voice continuing over the intercom; I could hear an increasing chatter just beyond the walls. And when we reached the door, I knew I was only steps from the end. She opened it, smiled and pushed me through.

Standing on the other side, I was greeted by hundreds of impatient faces, forgiving, though, when they saw me appear. “Good luck,” she said, and then she left.

& My First Impressions Of The Reading Room From The Vantage Of The Podium

My first instinct, as I walked to the podium where Cory stood looking very pissed off, was to turn and bolt. My second was to look for Anna, and the urge surprised me, as I’d managed to forget altogether that Anna may be here. My third instinct, which wasn’t an instinct at all, rather it was a sudden realization that came too late, was a sudden and clear recognition of how this entire stolen identity narrative would fail, particularly if I was unable to get out of the room quick enough following the reading: I had invited Anna to the reading and she had been corresponding to the actual Fien, though she thought it was me. If she happened to mention the reading in a subsequent email—and perhaps she already had and I had missed it, Fien had access to my email and could have seen the note I’d sent Anna about the reading, perhaps Fien was here waiting to pounce on me, and I could only hope he’d let me read first—the entire thing would be blown. I pulled Cory aside, away from the microphone, and after whispering that I hadn’t tried to evade the reading, but I got lost in the hallway, I
also told him that I may have accidentally blown my cover, and that I would need to leave immediately after the reading. He nodded, and shoved me toward the podium. The crowd was overwhelming. I had trouble fitting them within a single demographic. The tweed-suited, dusty scholars sat in pockets amidst ripped jean youth with patches safety-pinned on their denim jackets; women in suits, as though just arriving from the office sat with notebooks open and men with dirty hands picked at their fingernails. A presumably religious man in a black robe and tall, triangular hat stood near the wall in the back, and next to him were three women adorned in black and white habits. They thumbed deftly through their rosaries. What was more startling than the sheer number of people, however, was that I recognized some of them. Not, of course, from a personal relationship—that would be too manipulative, narrative-wise—but that I had seen them before, either in magazines or movies. Sitting several rows back I saw the mother from some a sitcom Anna used to watch and I couldn’t remember her name; kneeling in a catcher’s stance, near the front of the room, scratching the inside of his left knee, was Ivan ‘Pudge’ Rodriguez. Near the back, leaning far into the aisle, Jack Nicholson in a Los Angeles Lakes jersey rested his elbows on his knees. He violently motioned with upraised arms and a snarl for me to get on with it already. Condoleezza Rice and ‘Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf sat next to each other; they passed a cup large coffee mug back and forth. I remembered reading somewhere that Norman Schwarzkopf’s father was the lead investigator on the Charles Lindbergh Jr. kidnapping case, but I could not remember where. Even Karyn “Karate” Collickson was present, sitting near the side door. I’d apparently walked right by him; even now, as I prepared to read, a look of bewilderment was spread across his face. Eddie Vedder, whose posters had once adorned my bedroom walls, sat in the front row, head tilted slightly to the left, as though already engaged in what I hadn’t yet read; he leaned over and whispered something to James Franco,
actor, director, producer, writer, and PhD. student. Mr. Franco flashed a warm, understanding smile and nobody seemed to object, to me being Fien, that is. James Franco held his smile, and I felt okay to begin.

& The Reading Minus The Actual Reading; Rather, Just A Summary Of How Things Went, Including The Very Brief Questions At The End

Again, I had to resist the urge to fake an accent. I gazed slowly across the crowd, determined to make eye-contact with several audience members before finally opening up my notebook and setting it on the podium. An envelope slid out of it as I did, and several traveler’s checks in Karin’s name scattered on the floor. I hustled to pick them up amidst several laughs and impatient sighs. I tapped the microphone once, my head spinning slowly, and I cleared my throat. I said, “before the pages fall onto the floor, they are in order. When they hit the floor, they land in order, though different than their previous order.” I paused, stretching the silence to a near-physical sensation. “And when I pick them up, there is a new order. Who is to say the final order is wrong and that original order is correct?” There were some nods. Jack Nicholson’s hand went to his forehead in astonishment, the sit-com mother’s hand to her mouth. “That is what I do with words,” I continued. The door to my right creaked open, and I saw Cory leave the room, presumably to get some more Scotch. Several feet to my left, I noticed the woman who had helped me find the reading room earlier. She had pulled her red hair back into a pony tail, and was now wearing white gloves. It took me a minute, as she adeptly signaled with her hands in front of her, to realize that she was signing every word I spoke. As I started my next sentence, I wished I knew sign language, curious as I was whether she was signing in the first- or second- person. “I take existing orders,” I continued,
watching the woman from my peripheral, “orders with all the right components, and I strive, I sweat them, beat them, and seduce them into a superior order. Perhaps the superior order.” Pudge Rodriguez, in his kneeling stance, seemed to signal for a breaking ball low and away. I shook him off. Eddie Vedder stroked the stubble on his chin, nodding. He elbowed Franco, who was too busy digging it all to respond. Franco grinned widely, and offered from his lap a discreet thumbs-up. I looked down at the notebook, opening it to where I had started anagrammatizing On the Road. “My name is Finn Fien,” I said, and to my—Karin’s—dismay, a raucous applause exploded within the room before I could continue. One of the nuns in the back had two fingers in her mouth, whistling over the roar. The other shouted, “It’s the truth.” Jack Nicholson stood on his chair. After the applause began settle down, I said, “I’m here to read from my newest novel, Torah Done. The room exploded once more. I looked for Cory, who hadn’t yet returned. ‘Stormin’ Norman stood up and saluted; Mrs. Rice tugged at his shirt sleeve. I began reading. I’d been to readings before. Several. During school, a group of us would typically travel to see eight to ten reading a year: Gwendolyn Brooks, William T. Vollman, William Gass, Robert Coover, and even Lawrence Ferlinghetti, once. I’d never, however, witnessed such rapt attention before. All cell phones were literally shut off. No accidental rings. No fidgeting, standing up to use a bathroom or snag one more piece of baklava. Nobody chewed on the outer lip of their Styrofoam® coffee cup. Nobody picked at an in-grown hair on the inside of their leg. Between the first and second chapters, just to see if I could, I took a break and asked everyone to stand. They did. I requested 25 jumping jacks. Pudge, weathered knees and all, performed his jacks with such precision and vigor that one would think he was trying to make it back onto the Yankees’ starting roster. When they’d finished the jumping jacks, I told them all to hold their breath for ten seconds, close their eyes, and exhale slowly, making a flatulence-like sound as they did. And they did. I
started in on the second chapter, breaking only once after the third sentence to tell them they could sit back down again. They took their seats as though one uniformed body of sitters, that is, except for one girl who stood in the doorway. She remained standing for several seconds longer than the rest, as though making sure I saw her. I did, too, and a pang of nervous excitement ran the length of my spine as I recognized Anna. It was clear, too, that she had recognized me, a look of bewilderment across her face. I continued reading, slowly at times, faster during the parts where I’d had to make up words. Almost at the end, there was a commotion at the edge of the room where I’d entered. Cory had stepped back into the room. Someone was with him, though they still stood out of view behind the door. The commotion, I soon learned, was because there were actually two people with him, and upon entering, the first person had stumbled over a chair, knocking both the chair and Karyn “Karate” Collickson to the ground. When the culprit finally stood, I recognized none other than Abe Filmnopryz. Tabby appeared from behind the door and stood in the threshold, grinning and winking at me. I was certain they’d left the night before; I’d watched them. Their faces were blotchy and dripping sweat, and from the way Abe struggled to regain his balance, I could tell they were still drunk. Though, I had advised Karyn to give Abe a watch, and I wondered if Abe had tipped over Karyn’s chair on purpose. An impatient murmur settled over the room, and I resumed reading. When I finished, complete silence. Jack Nicholson dabbed at his eye with the corner of his Lakers’ jersey. Cory wobbled to the microphone, nearly dropping his Styrofoam® cup, and said, “Let’s hear it for Mr. Fien!” The audience erupted, once again, maniacally, and I lifted my fedora from my head and waved it in the air as I bowed. The lines formed in front of the microphones. I watched Anna race to the front of the line, pushing and shoving her way through celebrities, priests, politicians and beatniks. Unfortunately, Anna was not very large, and though I believe she
had the gumption, I don’t think she had the physical strength and willingness to be violent-if-necessary, which kept her from making it even close to the front of the line. As long as I answered enough questions to get her close to the front of the room, I reasoned, I would be able to get to her and explain—how would I explain?—before the throng swept her away. I tried to count out the people in the line, but it was difficult to determine who was in line and who wasn’t. As Cory started to stumble away from the podium, he stopped, as though remembering something, and turned to put his hand on my shoulder. He held his other hand in front of his mouth so as not to give away any secrets. He said, “you gotta do it now, man. They ate up that reading. If you’re gonna kill Fien, do it with your answers. I didn’t fuckin design this entire event to make Fien a hero.” He patted me strongly on the back; his breath reeked of scotch, but he was right. This was where my work was to be done. Killing their author through impersonation had been more onerous than I’d imagined. So, I took some questions:

1. (elderly woman, mid-70s, I guessed, purple bow in hair) Your writing is so beautiful. Such a gift to children just coming into literature. I’m curious, do you have any children?
   a. Hard to tell, but the odds point to yes. Next question.

2. (male, mid-sixties, suede patches on elbows of tweed suit) Yes. A two part question, if you will. Can you, please, pontificate on the evolution your writing has endured from your earlier works to this one? And second, where do you feel your writing fits in the seemingly doomed state of literature, what, with all the self-referential malarkey, ego-obsession, and pressures from the technological arts?
   a. Imagine a wall, if you will, sir, some fifty steps away. That wall represents the perfect novel. While some novelists take massive leaps toward that wall with
their first novel, never to come close to it again, most novelists move toward that wall gradually. Each novel, as they say, is like cutting the distance between your novel and perfection in half. You won’t ever get there, but soon you’ll be so close your nicotine breath will leave a smudge on its surface.

i. And your novels?

1. My novels tend to hit the wall every time.

There was a quiet gasp in the room, though Jack Nicholson threw a fist into the air and shouted, “fuckin-A,” and laughed maniacally.

3. (A woman of an indeterminable age, nun’s habit) Your novels are so complex, so authentically structured. May I ask how long it takes you, on average, to complete one?

a. Yes, but you’ll have to get back in line. One question only, folks.

From the center of the room, somebody yelled, “come on, answer the question. You don’t have to be a dick about it,” but was soon hushed by his neighbors.

4. (Young male, nerdy glasses, short gelled hair combed close to his scalp) I’ve heard recently that Warner Brothers wanted to make a movie out of your last novel, but your turned down their offer. Can I ask, er, should I say, why did you turn them down?

a. My novels are always the final product. It cannot be built upon. If I wanted some film guy with no knowledge of literature to build upon my work, I would’ve written it in crayon on construction paper. You see, people are always trying to improve upon things, make them timely and relevant. This
can only happen when the original writer failed to write something timeless. The fact that you even question my decision is no different than you calling me a failure. Besides, if there were ever to be a movie rendition of one of my novels, it would always have to come before the novel, never after.

There were a few scoffs in the audience, some laughter, and a little bit of applause. Several people grabbed their belongings, perhaps poured a final cup of punch, and left. Though their absence was hardly noticeable in such a large crowd, I cringed to address these people in such a way. I had to keep reminding myself that Fien deserves such a reputation, that my rudeness was only a projection of Fien, and it would only ever be seen as such.

5. (Eddie Vedder, untucked, unbuttoned flannel, squinting) When I hit a sort of wall with my writing, not that I’m comparing my writing with yours, I often need to take a break and refresh my creative juices, if you will. In order to do this, I typically surf. I’m curious, like, what do you do?

   a. I typically put on some music, like, say, Creed—Now there’s some real grunge rockers!—and then I write something else.

Eddie Vedder looked hurt. Not reactionary nor pissed off, just like he was on to me fucking with him. He sat back down next to James Franco, who hadn’t stood to ask any questions. Franco’s winning smile had vanished from his face; he checked his watch and looked toward the exit at the back of the room. Eddie whispered something to him, and Franco shook his head. Though it was difficult to do, I kept up with the Q&A session. Anna was getting much closer to the front, and I was able to reduce the distance by claiming that I was done answering questions from anyone over thirty-five, as they only care about two things: my place in the cannon, and my writing process. I then handled a few more questions, rude and
arrogantly—Yes, I have read William Gaddis, and if he were still alive, I’d tell him to fire his editor; Even if I were staying in LA for a month, I would not go to a Lakers game with you—and then I shortened the line even more by refusing to take any questions by males. This seemed to really piss people off, as enough of the audience left to notice a sizeable dent in the room. They began moving more freely, spreading out. Groups soon formed, voices were raised, and gestures were aimed my way; it seemed my answers were working. Finally, Anna stepped up to the mic. She looked exhausted; her shoulders drooped and curled inwards. She held onto her elbows in front of her. It was difficult to read her expression. Once, I could penetrate her thoughts through her expression as though it had been composed of words. I could look at her and know to change the music, to get her a glass of wine, to quit talking about books. When she said she liked the passages I’d just shown her, I knew to revise them; once, I knew when to quit talking altogether. Now, the expression wasn’t written in a language I knew. Her eyes, too, seemed different. They were hazel, when I’d always known them as blue. Maybe it was only this that through me off, but it felt like something more. “This will be my last question,” I announced, and the lines began to fade, not waiting to hear the question or my response. “Your question, ma’am?”

6. (Anna) What is the purpose of all this storytelling?

I wasn’t sure how to answer. I had no idea if Anna had somehow intuited the deception and was playing along, or if she was trying to trap me. I didn’t know if she was addressing me as Fien or Karin, wanting a legitimate explanation as to why Fien writes, or to why I was pretending to be Fien. I couldn’t know if Anna wanted a real answer or not, because I wasn’t sure if her question had been real or not.
a. To entertain, I started saying, but I didn’t believe it. That is to say, to seek truth. To determine what is real and what is not.

Anna started to speak again into the microphone, and though I wanted her to go on, Cory pushed his way in front of me, obviously not knowing that I knew the woman asking the question, and announced the end of questions. “The room,” he said, “will remain open for another half hour, but Mr. Fien has a plane to catch.” I motioned to him that I would need a couple minutes, and that I’d meet him in the hallway promptly. He tapped on his watch, anxiously, but let me go. I almost reached Anna, was only steps away from her, though, when I was stopped by James Franco. I tried to wave him off, but he has this look about him, especially when up so close, that demands attention. Just past him, Anna still stood at the microphone, watching the men in front of her tear it down. “Hey man, what was all that?” Franco asked. “I mean, what gives?” I squared up to Franco, a puzzled expression on his face. I said, “I’m sorry. It was just an off night. So many questions. I really got to be going.” He blocked my attempt to get past him. “No, just hold on man. There’s something going on. I mean, how old are you, anyway?” Anna looked at me, and then at the clock behind her. A row of seats were emptying beside her, and Norman Schwarzkopf motioned for her go in front of him. She looked back at me, waiting, and then stepped in front of ‘Stormin’ Norman. The opportunity to catch her was disappearing. Desperately, I said to James Franco, “Listen, I can’t explain fully right now, but you’re right.” I explained to him, very briefly, my situation, I mean the whole truth. I pleaded with him not to say anything, all the time watching Anna move closer to the exit. “Please, just trust me that my answers responses were justified, and trust that I hated doing it. You see, Fien is a real dick, anyway. He’s stolen my identity, but I need to get out of here quick.” Franco’s puzzled expression was a lot like his skeptical expression. Just then, as I watched Anna disappear out of the exit,
I saw her get shoved back into the room, violently. This was my chance. I started toward her, but then saw what had pushed her back into the room. A small-framed woman, with a business suit and thick eyeglasses emerged into the room. On either side of her were two Library Security Guards. They scanned the room, dutifully, before the woman pointed at me. One of the guards yelled out, “Karin Pankreez!” They shoved their way through the crowd. I scanned the room for Cory and found him at the hallway door; he motioned for me to follow him, but my path was blocked by an angry mob of insulted audience members. Cory yelled, “Franco, give him a hand. Come on!” There was a commotion near the middle of the room. Condoleezza Rice was trying to clear a path for the guards, while Jack Nicholson was knocking chairs over in front of them. Nicholson yelled, “Fuck ‘em Fien! Get outta here. Hurry.” Just then, Franco grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the back exit; Eddie Vedder shoved drunken Abe out of the way, accidentally toppling Tabby in the process. I was glad to see that he’d forgiven my rudeness. I hollered apologies at Tabby and Abe as I was pushed out the door by Cory and Franco. In the now dim-lit hallway, I ran alongside Franco, following Cory. Cory tossed my bag back to me and explained over heavy breathing, that he had slipped the proceeds and Fien’s letters in. At the end of the hallway—it seemed like a mile or more—was a heavy metal door, lit by an Exit sign. Sometime during the chaos, Cory had changed back into his security guard outfit and attempted to button up his shirt as we ran after him. When we finally reached the door, he instructed Franco to get me out of here. Fast. He’d steer the security the wrong way down the library’s funhouse hallways. Cory slapped me on the back and winked at Franco. Outside, just a block from the library I jumped into James Franco’s vintage 1970 AMC Gremlin, and we sped through downtown Los Angeles.
I watched out of the large back window as the library shrunk out of sight. Franco reclined in his drivers’ seat, James Dean style, a cigarette hanging from between his lips and an unbuckled lap belt draped over the console. He coolly rested his elbow on the frame and punched the gas with a sideways grin. He wore a black “Felice Brothers” t-shirt that rippled across his chest as he wove through traffic on the 110. The exit signs blurred by as the evening’s desert heat rose from the intrusive asphalt, sending illusory waves up from the ground. The sun tipped downward, the day’s light waning. I tried to explain the entire library debacle, but whenever I reached a decisive moment in the narrative, I had to stop and start at an earlier scene. Everything’s contingent on the earlier narrative. I couldn’t explain the reading without explaining my history with Fien, which I couldn’t do without explaining my relationship with Bunsen, Sleightor and Hart, explaining the fire at Baelb library, explaining Anna, Claire, and *The SauerKraut Circus*. Even then, I felt as though I fell short of the beginning, which was beginning to feel as elusive as the ending. When I finished hashing out as much of the story as I understood, I realized that we had been driving for over an hour.

“Hey. Where are we going, James?”

Franco looked at me with a sideways grin; he threw his hands up in the air. “Just drivin, man. Goddamn I love this car!” The floorboards vibrated as he pressed on the accelerator. He swerved from lane to lane, passing the other cars only slightly slower than the lonesome palm trees that bordered the highway. “By the way,” he said, “call me Jimmy, will ya? James makes me sound like a spoiled brat at a boarding school.”

“Jimmy, yeah sure.” I checked the tension on my lap belt and planted my feet square on the floorboards. The wind’s hum popped and moaned as we ducked under a series of
overpasses; a train rumbled above of us and away from the coast. Shit. I had to be at the train station. I mentioned this to Jimmy.

“I don’t know, chief. You sure you want to leave tonight? That place could be swarming with cops.”

“Do you really think they’ll be looking for me? I mean, because of the reading?”

“It’s not just the reading, though, is it?” “I gotta a buddy who lives right on the Ventura County Line. You can take it to Union Station as soon as you wake up. Why don’t you just lay low tonight? Give the heat some time to settle down.”

“Shit. My suitcase! We gotta go back to the library. I left all my shit there.” I thought about the envelopes of traveler’s checks stuffed away in its pockets. Without it, I’d be finishing my travels on however much Cory had raked in at the reading.

Jimmy took his foot off the accelerator and steered the Gremlin over to the shoulder of the highway. As the vehicle rumbled to a halt, I noticed for the first time since I’d been in Los Angeles, the ocean, all bloody red and fiery orange; the sun, like a halved mandarin resting on its side at the far end, looked much hotter than it felt. Jimmy said, “Relax, man. We got the bag. Cory threw it in the trunk during the reading. Shit’s taken care of.”

“How did you get the bag during the reading? How’d you know, I mean, how’d Cory know that you—”

Jimmy opened up his door and stepped onto the road. I did the same. He rested his arms on the top of the car and looked at me, puzzled. His dark hair was tangled from the wind, falling back on his head. “You’re kidding, right?”

“—”

“It was all part of the plan.” He slapped the top of the door. His laughter was classic, the stuff out of movies. Man, he had a hell of a grin. “Fuckin Cory,” he said. “He didn’t tell
you the ending? The big chase, the shouting, the speeding getaway through downtown LA? The last moments driving up the coast into the sunset? Fuckin Cory,” he said again. “Him and some guy from New Orleans designed it all, the climax, I mean. I wouldn’t be surprised if he contacted the security, too.”

I tried to work it out in my head, but nothing seemed to make sense; I couldn’t distinguish between what had been scripted and what had actually happened. “So you were in on it the entire time?”

“Sure, more or less.” He faced the ocean. I followed him across the road and there was a narrow strip of empty beach, sandwiched between the water and several large boulders. The sun slowly melted into the water, tainting it with color; the waves exploded into jagged black rocks several feet from shore. We sat down on one of the boulders. The air coming off the ocean was chilly and damp.

“What about that whole story I told you in the car, how I got into all this mess. Did you know all that?”

“Most of it, sure.”

“You could’ve stopped me.”

“Nah,” he said, spilling a handful of sand back onto the beach. “It’s best just to let you tell it. To work it out. You’re not a bad storyteller, ya know. Just kinda windy, at times.”


“No, man. No,” Jimmy pleaded. “You’re close. Close to the end. I mean, look at the sun, it’s slipping.” He leaned back, supporting himself with his hands and staring out over the ocean. “Dig this, man. All those roads that split and branch and multiply, all those lines on the map that seem to offer infinite options, they end here. And this is the perfect place to
end. You’ve faced conflict, had your identity stolen, went through trials, and when you acted, the reading of course, your narrative climaxed. You’ve even experienced the foot-chase, the racing through downtown LA, and now you’re here, with a new friend, symbolically replacing your love interest, and you start at the ocean, the ending, a new frontier. It’s time to start new. Shelve that old narrative, end with a great sunset scene on the beach, here, with Jimmy Franco, and start that new one.”

“I gotta go back. There are too many loose ends, no resolution.” Only a sliver remained of the sun. It was amazing like this, how you could actually see the sun sinking, dropping into the ocean without a splash.

“You can’t tie up all the loose ends. Many writers have tried, and I don’t think any have succeeded.”

“But what about Anna? I mean, I was so close this time.”

“Perhaps, you’re right. That girl from the reading, the one that asked the last question, that’s your lady, right?”

Anna. “Sort of. She is, I mean, she was my lady.”

“Is that where this all ends, then? When you find her?”

The sun was down, now, but the light still emanated from the waves.

Jimmy continued, “Or is it the novel? Does it end with the novel?”

“I don’t know how to contain it all,” I said. “I mean, how can it just be one thing? Are things ever really that organized, can a narrative just be one thing and then another, and then another? Nothing new until the old has resolved?”

“That’s how we tend to represent it. But we both know it’s all things at once.”

“Anna’s still here right? I mean, how far could she have gotten? Shit, she’s probably out looking for you.”
“But the city is so goddamn big. I couldn’t just find her. It has to happen somehow
different.”

“I could find her for you, man.” Jimmy stretched out his back and then hugged his
arms.

“I don’t know.”

“Of course I could. I’m Jimmy Fucking Franco.”

“It just, it seems too contrived. It’s not supposed to end here.”

In silence, we looked out over the ocean. Finally, Jimmy put his arm around my
shoulders. “Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “I don’t think you could possibly tie up
everything, but you gotta end it when you feel it’s ended. It is, after all, your story.”

After a while, we got back into the car. Jimmy popped a cassette into the deck and
headed back toward the city, lit up like a carnival. I saw that Jimmy had pressed play on the
tape deck, but ten minutes into the drive, I couldn’t hear anything, at least I didn’t think I
could. But there was a moment where I had realized I’d been hearing something all along, at
first like an accidental whistle, one formed when pronouncing your S’s without completely
clamping your front teeth. Gradually it grew, to something like the noise made when a car’s
speeding down the highway and the window is set perfectly crooked, enough to screech
softly. As it grew louder, there were some words, at first a hush, then like a million voices or
more speaking in whispers together. I asked Jimmy about it, and he explained that it was a
sort of new vein, tributary, or dirt-road-stretch-type sound that branched from ambient
music. It was discovered, he said, at least people claim it was discovered, by some
conservative preacher or something who had embarked upon a hobby, albeit a sentimental
one, in which he recorded the sounds emitted from his baby monitor, when his child was
sleeping. One time, upon one such recording, he hadn’t realized that his wife had opened the
door, and the noise from the speaker was caught by the microphone end, creating what we all know as feedback. In his boredom, and through his highly technical, though amateurish recording equipment, he was able to slow down the recording and eliminate such piercing frequencies that, you know, sting your eardrums when you hear them, and came up with this real sort of ambient music which is really nothing more than the speaker relaying noise to the microphone going back to the speaker, relaying once more to the microphone, ad infinitum. It’s not bad. Listening closer, I could make out the whispers, speaking very slowly, “she’s almost asleep.” As the whispers grew, the darkening ocean shrunk behind us, like a movie.

By the time we arrived at Union Station, the lights of Los Angeles had replaced the sun. I grabbed my suitcase from the trunk. We still had a couple hours before I could board the train, so we walked down the road and had a few drinks and followed him. He asked me, over our second beer which path I was following when I left for New Orleans, Anna or the novel. Claire, I told him. She was going to be there.

After an hour or more, I stood up and so did Jimmy. He shook my hand, and then hugged me the way that men do in the midst of a handshake, and then he ridiculed my sweater. I told him it had only been a prop. Then, right there in the middle of the bar, he took off his black “Felice Brothers” t-shirt and gave it to me. I also took off my sweater and put on his shirt. He said, sheepishly, “hey, all that ‘I’m Jimmy Fuckin Franco’ bit I said earlier, I didn’t meant to sound like a dick. I just, you know, wanted to help. I told him I understood and thanked him for his help. When we left the bar, Jimmy wished me luck on the ending. That’s all it is after all, he said. Luck. Sometimes you get there, sometimes not. Just a matter of chance, really.
I parted ways with James Franco in a parking lot underneath the soft white clock-tower of Union Station, and then walked down a side street hoping to find somewhere I could buy some food. Los Angeles wasn’t like the other cities I’d been in. Even with the second largest population in the nation, the streets around Union Station were bare, the sidewalks empty. Down the road, the neon lights of a strip club flashed, and behind it a Denny’s® sign casted shadows onto a near-empty parking lot. I stopped into a convenience store in between the two. After grabbing several pre-made subs, three apples, a bag of chips, and a bottle of water, I dug through my suitcase to find my traveler’s checks. The clerk, a short, hairy man with a tremendous gut stretching the fabric of his thin white tank top, and an otherwise tiny frame, grumbled as I passed the checks to him. He claimed he could not accept them. His breath reeked of dental neglect. Something that looked like powdered sugar was smudged against the stubble on his cheek and below his nose. After much pleading, he finally relented. I figured, as a last resort, I could use the cash from the reading, but I did not feel good about handling all the cash out in the open, especially so late at night.

He rang up my items and turned to the back counter to process my check. His breathing grew heavier as his short, sloppy fingers punched in buttons on the small card machine. I wasn’t sure what he was doing, as I hadn’t yet had a problem with the checks. His cursing started under his breath, and at first sounded like wheezing, the panning of the mechanic cameras the only other sound in the store. Eventually, his cursing took on vowels and consonants, which he accented by slamming his hand several times against the side of the machine he was trying to get to work. Finally, he turned and gave me a hard stare, as though trying to store my features. I turned away and looked for a clock, trying to angle my profile in a way that couldn’t be wholly captured by him or the camera overhead.
“Identification,” he grumbled.

“Really?”

His thin chest heaved, hoisting up the enormous gut with each breath. Besides his whiskers, the skin on his face was sallow, almost jaundiced, it appeared. I handed fished my license out of my wallet and handed it to him, expecting him to punch something into the small black machine he’d been so frustrated with. Instead, he studied it, carefully. He stepped out of reach and pulled a pen that had been hung on the stretching neckline of his shirt. He jotted something down on a piece of paper.

Finally, he spoke: “Name’s been flagged. Can’t sell to you.”

“Give me my license back.” I stepped toward the counter, reaching toward him.

“Hold the fuck on,” he said. “I clear this check, and you’re caught.”

“It’s a mistake. Just give me back my card and I’ll go somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else, my ass.” He flashed two dead teeth in the front of his grin, and several more seemed to barely hold on. “You got cash?”

“No.”

“Then you’re fucked.” He picked up the phone.

“Wait. Maybe I have some. Just take it easy.”

“One hundred dollars to get your license back, another two hundred to keep me from turning you in.”

I opened the bag of cash from the reading and looked inside. “How do I know you won’t just call when I leave?”

He set down the phone, eyeballing the bag I held. “You’re right. Better make it an even five hundred.”

“Fuck you.”
He picked up the phone and started dialing.

“Wait, okay. Here.” I counted out five hundred dollars in ten dollar bills and held it in front of me. He grabbed it from my hand and threw my license across the counter.

“Another fifty for the sandwiches.”

This felt like the perfect time to tell him to fuck off, to pull my knife and threaten him, but I couldn’t help but to see ahead, me, hungry on the train, starving when I reached New Orleans. I handed him fifty dollars, and like that, had just spend nearly half of the money from the reading. I walked down the road and stood before Union Station, a slight reverberating headache and a crushed will. I took a little consolation, however, in the shadows around the grounds outside of the station. The large white tower was lit from below and the gardens, the cobblestone path, even at night, seemed to burst with a sort of West Coast energy from too many days without a winter, too many footsteps of travelers, happy to be anywhere warm. The warmth was good, too, especially at night. Fuck the clerk, there’s still some money left. Though, I’ll have to be careful about the traveler’s checks, from now on. I pushed open the heavy glass doors.

In the twilight, the breezy station was dim and desolate. Noises from outside crept in through the open doors and propped windows, and I mistook them for other noises. The main hall was cavernous; rows and rows of overstuffed lounge chairs with scratched-up wooden arm rests, slept in the shadowy hall. The deli was closing for the night, and my footsteps echoed across the tile floor, mixed with the surprisingly soft sounds of iron gates dropping, trains clunking along somewhere within the walls, pigeons cooing sadly in the rafters. A lonely vacuum cleaner hummed from a dining hall just beyond the walls.

The outlets were high up on the walls. At 5’ 11”, and on my toes, I could barely reach them to plug in my computer and charge my cell phone, the cord of which was only 4’
long, so my cell phone dangled disconcertingly along the hard tile wall. Only one of the three hulking chandeliers on either side was lit, but my eyes soon adjusted. As I sat there in the night, waiting on a train, thinking about how every stage of my trip seemed to repeat itself and end up at a train station, waiting, I checked my email and found that the emails, too, were the same as they had always been.

Claire, nervous, independent, reluctant to need anything, had arrived in New Orleans.

Hart, ever-designing, conscious of my well-being, though convinced (accurately) that I had been spending too little time on the novel, wrote to tell me the deadline had moved up to March 16, 150 additional pages, and that I should get my ass back to Prentice; he was beginning to feel, at least he said, that my failure to communicate openly with him suggests a flaw in his decision to fund my research; in short, he has lost his confidence in me. Also, he wrote to tell me that Mr. Fien would be leaving my apartment soon, so I would find it vacant.

Sleightor wished me luck at the reading. Told me he thought Claire was a surprisingly beautiful woman, that is, to end up with a writer, if in fact she ended up with me. With the exception of B.S. Johnson, writers typically didn’t do well in that area, which he would expand on when I arrived in New Orleans.

Anna, decisive and ambiguous, wrote to say it was nice to see me, though she was at first put off by whatever game I was playing, meaning of course the reading, though after a couple drinks afterward with some guy in a security guard’s outfit, became intrigued by it. Also, she thanked me for sending her Fien’s email address, and that she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to offer editing services to him, but she’d certainly try. She appreciated, she said, that after all that had happened, I was still looking out for her. She didn’t know I had been in
contact with him, and assumes that it had something to do with why I had done the reading in his stead. (I hadn’t sent her the email address, of course, but I would have to somehow convince her not to mention the reading to Fien.)

I wrote to tell Sleightor that I was on my way, and I’d tell him about the reading when I got there. I wrote Anna that although Fien was a pleasant individual, he suffers from severe paranoia and obsessive compulsive disorder, and that she probably shouldn’t mention anything about the reading to him, lest he believe someone was reading his email. I wrote B. Hart to tell him I’d have the pages by the sixteenth, and I was already making arrangements for a brief stop in Prentice to sort everything out. I told him I’d been in contact with the Prentice Police Department, that the entire debacle had been a terrible misunderstanding, and that it would be sorted out in no time.

Then, I walked down the hallways in search for a train.
Chapter 45: From LA to New Orleans, March 11-13,

Tabby had mentioned once, during one of our evenings at the bar, pre-Kerouacian trip, that is, that nobody heads East for long. West, she argued, was a natural tendency for humans, and she attributed this tendency to mankind’s once-close connection with the universe; it is an innate quality that leads us to follow the sun, always from East to West. I argued that some of our busiest cities are on the East Coast, and she pointed out that they were full of two types of people: those who had come from farther East, across the ocean, and young people in leather jackets who try to move against the universal current but will soon find themselves migrating in herd to the West. Like most things she’d said, I was certain she was creating the theory as she explained it, though I did think, as the dark and empty interior of the train rumbled out of a nearly unlit Los Angeles night, that it may have accounted for why the train was so empty.

Today had been a long chapter, and no matter how hard I tried to compartmentalize it into manageable chunks to dwell on and sort out, I couldn’t. I had told and written so many untrue things to so many people, that I was beginning to lose track of which lies to carry on with and which truths to snub out. I sat inside the corridor of the dark train, watching the desert snap by like the individual frames of a film, and I was too tired to sleep. I found the package with Fien’s personal letters, and opened it. Several of the letters had already been opened, and I assume they had been collected from Fien’s office, but had no idea who would’ve requested that the assistant bring them to the reading to give to me.
I.

17 February, 2010

mr. fien,

I've recently read your novel, tao ill. fucking mind-blowing. i think your novel is wonderful and have studied it under dr. steven brun at northern minnesota university. i finished my semester tonight with the completion of my final essay, considering the importance of characters in franzen's the corrections and gaddis's a frolic of his own. that is beside the point. i thought that your novel was, and is, hugely important regarding the fiction that is being published these days. among our reading list (delillo, barth, gaddis, powers, maso, you, franzen), it was your novel that encouraged me to keep up with postmodern fiction (if postmodern is what you call it, as i feel the entire "category" thing is ridiculous). i plan on reading your other novels over the christmas break.

anyways, thank you for your masterpiece. for me, it was "all quiet on the western front" that got me into literature, "the sun also rises" that determined whether i would study it the rest of my life, and "tao ill" that decided i want to write and teach everything LITERATURE has to offer, which, i believe, is everything.

you are equally responsible for converting this fella into the literature field as hemingway and fitzgerald, and kesey were. thank you.

james shortness
stoned63818@notmail.com

please, keep writing about it.

II.

December 21, 1997

Mr Fien,

As a woman, and a librarian, I must say I am outraged at your portrayal of Hazel Rodeos, in Tao Ill. You know, I guess I shouldn't expect any better from a goddamn writer. I spend eight hours a day cleaning up the messes you create, what with all your books lying around unfiled, so why the hell should I expect to have a little bit of peace during my off-time? Besides, if you think that every female librarian (you may be surprised to know that males can actually be librarians, too) is nothing more than a bespectacled sexpot under shape-hiding sweaters and knee-length skirts, you got it all wrong. I happen to never wear sweaters, for one, nor do I care for sex. And the thought of a middle aged librarian trying to seduce an underage, teenage boy, well, it's appalling, and unrealistic. Young teenage boys, for one, would never be interested in a woman like me, of Hazel, for that matter. And for another thing, I happen to think your book should be banned. Though my petition did not pass through the local court's approval, I have taken it on my own to make sure your book is not read by the ever-impressionable minds of our youth. You should know, for one, that I have personally ordered over 300 copies of Tao Ill to our library, and have personally set fire to them in my backyard. You should be so ashamed, for one thing. And for another thing, you are a disgusting man.
Here’s to the next 300.

With a sour taste in my mouth,
Ezra Wile,
Prentice Public Library
Prentice, IL

III.

31 January, 2010

Mr. Fine,
I would like to start by saying I’m a huge fan. I’ve read My Bi-Dock no less than seven times. Miles Ha is, without a doubt, one of the most intriguing characters in literature.

It just so happens that I, too, am a writer. I am sorry for the cliché, but I am writing to ask, ever so humbly, if you would be willing to read the manuscript of a sincere fan. I’ve just finished my first novel, and am hoping to find some help in getting it published. Though it is certainly not as good as your work, I think you’ll find it is very close. Truthfully, I just know you’ll love it.

Please respond to me soon, as I am certain somebody will pick up the novel soon.

Oh, and the novel is titled, A Writhing Gin Bout, With Love, and follows a young writer as he travels across the country attempting to write a novel about love. I know you’ll love it.

Hoping to hear from you soon,

Jared Shorts

IV.

25 January, 2010

Finn,

I suppose I should start with an apology. I had no right to respond to you with such rudeness. Believe me, we’ve been friends for a long time, and such belligerence is not my custom. I have many things on my plate right now, with Sleightor’s third novel, which I don’t believe will ever get finished, and not to mention the ongoing fraudulent investigation into our previous incident.
That being said, I am indeed frustrated, but I will not let it ruin our wonderful business (and hopefully personal) relationship. I have a plan, which should take care of our situation. Unfortunately, the plan requires a bit of dislodging on your part, but I am sure you will prefer that to sleeping in a jail cell.

So, here goes: I’ve recently commissioned a young writer who had submitted some phony, sentimental garbage about his grandfather’s misadventures in World War Two. His agent seems reluctant to deal with us, though I have reason to believe the writer will. Call it a hunch, but he’s been working on this manuscript for years, and has recently moved to the Northern Midwest, from the West Coast. The cover materials for his manuscript reek of insecurity and gloom, and all signs point toward giving up. I think with a little flattery (his writing is actually quite good), and some Fien storytelling, we could bring him into this situation.

So, here’s where you come in. The idea seems far-fetched, but I think with some restraint and precision, we could get it to work. I’m implementing a new program particularly for this plan, called our Author-Sit program, which allows struggling writers (you, in this case, though your struggle is hardly writing-related) an opportunity to lodge in the home of a traveling writer, who is also working for Bunsen. I’m going to design this in such a way that you will end up in the home of this young writer, should he accept our offer, which I am confident he will. Now, here’s the kicker. He lives in Prentice. Sure, it’d mean you’d have to return, and we run the risk of you running into that batty old librarian that started this entire mess, but it must be this way. Having access to his home, you can then go about providing and planting reasonable belief that this writer, (this desperate, young, at-the-end-of-his-rope, struggling writer) had a part in the Baalb Library fire.

Anyway, I should not go much more into detail, since we are still in our early stages, and I am not sure how secure our correspondence is. I will be in contact soon. Please, think it over. It may really pay off in the end, and who knows, maybe we’ll even get a couple good novels out of it.

Sincerely yours,
Benton Hart.

Holy shit. I read through the letter three times before it even began to sink in, the immensity of the plot, the entire fucking ordeal. I took some time to detail the implications of such a letter.

The Progressive Levels of Realizations in Finding B (enton!?) Hart’s Letter to Finn Fien, Exposing the Immensity of his Plotting, or More Accurately, His Manipulation of Myself, Karin, and My Narrative:
Level One:
I’m clear. My name is clear. I can finish this novel.

Level Two:

Shit, what novel?

Level Three:
Now, I can start really buckling down on the novel to give to…

Level Four:
Fuck. Nobody wants this novel. There was never any genuine interest in it.

Level Five:
Though Hart did say he hoped to get two novels out of the ordeal.

Level Six:
But who will publish it when Hart is in prison?

Level Seven:
Forget the novel. Everything, everything has been, er, is a lie. A set-up. Staged. Choreographed. Intelligently designed. Everything that had ever started with Hart’s words, since he first contacted me, no, since Dennison had first contacted me about Hart, everything that had started with his utterance, and had grown, had turned into something, the trip, the writing, the research, the deadlines, the tests in New York, the fire, the police, me on this train, Claire in New Orleans, perhaps even Sleightor’s friendship, all of it.

A lie.
Chapter 46: A Plan is Hatched, March 13

Claire picked me up at the train station. I saw her standing on the platform before the train stopped. She stood back away from the rails, partially hidden behind a drab, concrete pillar. Her face was shadowed by a droopy blue and white floral hat, her eyes hidden behind a large pair of Jackie Onassis sunglasses. She wore a tight green tank-top and a floor-length brown skirt. When the train came to a complete stop, I watched her for a few moments before gathering my things. As people began filing out and filling the platform, she snuck further behind the platform.

As I carried my two bags down the narrow train staircase the thick New Orleans air billowed into the car and I was immediately perspiring. I had folded the letter from Hart and stuffed it into the waistband of my pants, and I was worried my sweat would soak through it, so I removed it and stuffed it into my computer bag, next to my stash of travelers checks, which I wasn’t sure I could use any longer. Claire had momentarily disappeared behind the pillar, and though I had imagined, or hoped, that she would spot me and rush out to greet me with an embrace, instead she snuck her head around the post and motioned quickly for me to join her. When I did, she pulled a pair of dark sunglasses and handed them to me. I hugged her and she held me uninterestedly.

“We gotta go,” she said. “You should put on the sunglasses.”

“What’s going on?”

“Come on. There’s a lot of police around here. We should get back to Sleightor’s. He loaned me his car for the afternoon.”

“Wait. We’re okay.” I tried to calm her, to read her, but she was past that. I could see that the last few weeks had really weighed on her. Though her eyes were hidden, her cheeks
around the sunglasses’ frames were reddened; her lips were chapped. Sleightor was right: she was beautiful. “Let’s go get something to eat. I mean, since we have the car and all. I’m really hungry.”

“No way. Not it public. It’s not safe, even down here. We can eat at Sleightor’s
Follow me, I gotta show you something. But don’t walk beside me. We’re better off looking like we’re not together.”

I didn’t know what she meant by “together.”

She continued, “When I put my hand to the top of my hat to readjust it, look at the wall to your left. There will be a encased bulletin board. Now come on. We gotta hurry.”

I struggled to keep up with Claire, while also watching for her signal. The station was full of obstacles. Families posed for pictures in all my pathways. Scaffolding lining the walls like ancient ivy, and giant tarps were draped across the floor and trampled upon. When we reached the exit, I feared that I’d missed her signal, and just as I turned to look behind me, I saw her hand go to the top of her hat, as she pushed it back, and then forward again. I looked to my left. I scanned the bulletin board for something unusual, something unanticipated. Before I could complain that I didn’t know what I was looking for, I saw it: a photo scanned onto a white page. A heading, “WANTED FOR ARSON.” The man in the photo was me. Clearly, though digitalized and pixilated, photocopied in grainy grey and white, I looked back at me from my driver’s license photo. I stopped to read the sign. I only got halfway through the description, to the part that said the pictured subject is believed to have set a fatal fire to a library in Northern Wisconsin, and authorities have reason to believe he is traveling by train, and headed toward New Orleans. Claire grabbed my arm and whispered, loudly, to keep walking. I looked back briefly, and saw a list of cities and dates: Boston, New York, Los Angeles, but I was pulled away before I could continue. Claire told
me to wait around the station and she’d swing by to pick me up. We shouldn’t be seen
getting into a car together, she said.

I ducked around a corner and watched the road. I could feel the sweat gathering
under my arms and drip out of my shirt sleeves. James Franco’s shirt sleeves, that is.

A short distance from the train station, I watched a large, circa 1960’s pickup truck
creeping toward me, a line of cars behind it. It slowed long before reaching me, and the
gears grinded sharply before it lurched forward and stalled. The engine gunned once more,
and it pulled to the shoulder. A security guard approached it as I dashed toward. Claire had
opened the driver’s side door to signal to me, but panicked. I motioned assuredly to the
security guard, a large woman in too-tight black pants and a low-brimmed hat, and hopped
in the passenger side. Claire stalled the truck once more, gears grinding in a jaw-clenching
spasm, and we lurched out of the parking lot, the line of cars formed once more behind us
as we turned down a noisy road with the windows down.

“Claire, I think you may be drawing more suspicion by driving so slow.”

“I can’t get this damn thing out of first gear.”

“How about I try?”

Reluctantly, Claire obliged. When we passed each other at the front of the car, I
grabbed a hold of her shoulders and pulled her close to me. I lifted her sunglasses to her
forehead and revealed what I’d already known about her sunken, tired eyes. “It’s going to be
okay,” I told her. “You gotta trust me. I found something that is totally going to get us off
the hook, as long as we play our cards right.”

She looked at the pavement. “I don’t know. I just, I can’t believe that all this started
because I picked up a few pages that dropped into my yard. I mean, I didn’t do anything.”
“Claire, if there’s one thing I’ve learned in the past few weeks, it’s that nothing ever starts from one thing. It’s so much more than that. Always. Besides, you weren’t even on that poster.”

“Further down on the page, it mentioned me. At least, I think it was me. I’m sure it was. Said that you had an accomplice, a 5’10” female, with long Auburn-colored hair. Who else could that have been?”

When we got back into the car, Claire fed me directions. Once we were on the highway, I pulled the letter from my computer bag and handed it to her. She read it in silence. When it was clear she was done reading, I explained to her my story, trying to recall what I’d already told her, while attempting to fill in any gaps. I started from before I’d met her, and continued all the way up to finding the letter on the train.

“This is incredible,” she said. “But, if Sleightor works for Hart, and Hart obviously knows you’re in New Orleans, do you think he might be in on it?”

“I don’t know. I have a hard time believing it, but that could just be part of the narrative. It seems he doesn’t care much for Fien, and there’s that part where Hart gripes about how long it is taking Sleightor to finish his novel. Who can say? Though, we may find out soon enough. Don’t you think that if Sleightor is in on it, he would have notified the police that we’re staying at his place?”

“They may be waiting for us when we get there.”

“Right.”

“But we have this letter,” she said. “We’ll be okay as long as we have it.”

“I think so.”

As we pulled off the highway, we soon ended up on a dirt road. The branches from the trees grew in spirals, growing off of one another and into the ground; they had an
appearance of having grown backwards, from the sky downwards into the ground. Spanish moss draped from them like sad tinsel from a Christmas tree. Everything had grown dark, here on the outskirts of the city, in the woods, though it was only noon. Through the sparse cracks in the foliage, there was a hint of sunlight, but only a hint. When we finally reached Sleightor’s large, log home, set high off the ground on what looked like a set of stilts, there was no evidence that we would soon be busted. I parked the old truck in front of his garage, and we went in.

The house seemed so much larger on the inside than it did from the outside. The front door opened up to a dusty, though ultimately tidy living room. The walls were mostly bare, and though there were large oak shelves on either side of the fireplace, they were also bare. It looked as though Laurence was about to move, or hadn’t quite moved in. I couldn’t decide which. A strong smell of garlic and cooked simmering wine emanated from the kitchen; we followed the scent—Claire, still yet to show any sort of emotion, whether good or bad, about my arrival—and found Laurence, his back to us, bent over the stove sipping from a wooden spoon.

He was a small man, shorter than Claire, with narrow shoulders and an unusually long torso. Underneath a white, sauce splattered apron, he wore a pair of long, cargo shorts, a ragged plaid shirt, and a pair of fuzzy, green slippers. Claire cleared her throat and he turned to face us.

“Hey! Welcome,” Laurence said. He wiped his right hand on the side of his shorts, despite the apron, and held it out to me. “You must be Karin. It’s good to finally put a face with the anxiety.”

“The anxiety?”
“I’m sorry. It’s just, your emails. So worried all the time. Not that it’s a bad thing, necessarily. I’m sorry,” he repeated. “Just a bad joke.” He tapped the wooden spoon against his bare leg, and I shifted the weight of my bag to the other shoulder. He continued, “I thought you may be hungry when you arrived, so I whipped up some grub for us. You have any allergies?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out soon enough, eh?”

I looked from the pot on the stove to Claire.

“Karin, you gotta relax a bit. I’m just fooling with you. It’s just some spaghetti. I think you’ll be fine.”

“It’s just,” I started, and then came short, careful of what to reveal. “It’s just the trip. It was so long, and I’m exhausted. I’ve been in these clothes since the morning of the reading.”

“Right. Of course.” He leaned over, and to my surprise, kissed Claire on the cheek.

“Honey,” he said, “why don’t you show Karin up to your room so he can put his things away and get washed up. Take a nap if you need to. I’m assuming, that is, that you planned to share a room. Claire’s chosen the attic, and it’s plenty big, though you should make sure you keep the fan on. It can get fucking hot up there.” He set the spoon down on the stove top. “The meal can wait.”

I thanked him, and before we left, Laurence grabbed a hold of my shoulders and looked intensely into my face. “Karin, I know this entire shit-show with Hart and Fien is wearing you down, but I want you to just relax while you’re here. You’re safe. Besides, Hart thinks I’m San Francisco, now. Just take some time to wind down and plan your next move. We’ll talk more this evening. Now go get settled in.”
He didn’t grin after this, as a host usually would. He seemed sincere, but I still wasn’t sure if I could trust him. After all, he was still working for Hart, and there was that flyer at the train station. We turned to leave the room and were about halfway up the stairs when Laurence chased after us. He carried to short glasses, knocking with ice. Something to help you wind down, he said, and he handed them to us.

I followed Claire up the stairs. I had an urge to reach out and touch the smooth fabric of her skirt, to feel her calf muscle through the fabric, but I was set off a bit by the familiarity with which Laurence had kissed her cheek. I’m sure it was nothing. I mean, I’m not sure it was nothing, but I didn’t have reason to believe otherwise. Once we reached the top of the stairs, Claire turned down a hallway that ran parallel with the staircase. The floor was old and wooden; its moans when we walked upon it could have been coming from within my own skin. There were several doors along the hallway, all closed. I asked Claire about them, if she knew what was in them.

“Empty bedrooms, I guess.”

“Why don’t we sleep in one of them? It seems like the attic would get wicked hot during the days.”

“Wicked hot?”

“I mean, just really hot.”

“It’s not so bad.”

“Claire, what’s up? You’re not, I don’t know. You’re just not as I remember you.”

She stopped and turned around. For the first time since I’d seen her today, she removed her sunglasses and rubbed her temples. I sipped from one of the glasses Laurence had given me. “Maybe your memory is wrong,” she said.

“Let’s not get into memory-loss. I know where that conversation can lead.”
Claire wrinkled her brow, as though trying to remember something.

“Never mind,” I said.

“I chose the attic because it’s hidden. If somebody did come by, they would have a hard time finding us.”

“Nobody’s going to come by. Why would they?”

“Why wouldn’t they? They seem to know we’re in New Orleans. We have no idea if Laurence is legit or not. And now, we’re just fucking here, trying to hide out in a place that we probably shouldn’t even be in.”

I leaned into Claire and whispered, “I don’t think Laurence is in on it.”

“How do we know for sure?”

“Just give me some time. We’ll figure out something.”

Claire spun away from me, and I just barely pulled the drink out of the way before it was knocked out of my grip. She walked to the end of the hallway. She reached up and pulled on a cord that hung from the ceiling. A set of rickety stairs fell into place, and one by one, we climbed up them.

The attic was surprisingly cool, perhaps because of the shade around the house. Claire, still clearly disturbed, sat on the edge of the mattress, which lied on the floor in the center of the room. Blankets and sheets twisted across its surface in the aftermath of a less-than-sound night’s sleep. I set the glasses on a windowsill and leaned my bags against the wall. Then, I carried the drinks back to the mattress and handed one to Claire.

“I’m sorry, Claire. It’s just, I wanted to see you so bad. I guess I was thinking it’d be like before all this mess, like it was before I left.”

“But it’s not like that.” Claire took a drink of the bourbon, and coughed. “This is terrible.”
It wasn’t at all terrible.

I took another sip and could feel the tension slipping out of my shoulders and back. I said, “We need to find out if Laurence is legit, first. Once we find that out, I think he could help us expose Fien and Hart.”

“How are we supposed to do that?”

Falling back on the bed, I raised my hand and touched Claire’s back. She straightened up, as though surprised, and then went lax again. Soon, she fell back next to me. “Any ideas?” I asked her. “I mean, we’re going to have to come up with a really good lie.”

Her head rose as she took another sip of her drink, and then she rested it on her sternum. “What if we told the truth?” she asked.

“The truth?”

“I mean, yeah. Just tell him we found this letter that incriminates Fien and Hart, and then we could gauge his reaction. I mean, if he’s involved, he’s going to try to play it off as though he wasn’t, right?”

“And then he’ll try to get the letter from us,” I finished.

“Right. We could play, like, completely naïve, and maybe even leave the letter out for him.”

“But not the real one. And nowhere too obvious. We don’t want him to think it’s a trap.”

“Of course not.”

“But what about dealing with Hart?”

“What about him?” Claire pulled an ice cube from the glass and crushed it between her teeth.

“He expects more pages. Soon.”
“You gotta give them to him, then. You don’t want him to think anything funny is going on, otherwise, he may speed up his part of the plan. You need to do anything you can to buy a little more time, just enough to get back to Prentice, turn ourselves in, and reveal the letter.

Claire emptied her drink and swallowed hard. She set the glass precariously on the mattress and rolled over to face me. A shadow had left her face, and she acknowledged me. It was the look that I had expected getting off the train. She spoke quickly and softly, every once in awhile catching herself speaking too loudly, and then starting over, softly again, only to repeat it. We made our plans. She was going to take me into town to get some things I’d run out of in LA, and we’d find somewhere to make photocopies. Then, after showing Laurence the letter, we’d make sure that he saw me put the letter in bag. Claire told me Laurence always had a few drinks in the den before bed. We’d have a drink, and then check out early. If the letter was gone, then we’d bolt the following day with the original.

“Or better yet,” Claire said. You should rig something to your bag, like place a paperclip on its latch, or something so we’d know if he’d tampered with it.”

“You know,” I told Claire, “we run the risk of him seeing through our truth-telling, and leaving us be.”

Claire was silent for a moment, thinking. Finally, she said, “It’s okay. We’ve got a place to start. That’s the important thing. I mean, what do we have to lose?”

I finished up my drink and set it on the mattress next to hers, and pulled her toward me. I hesitated, gauging her interest, and then I kissed her and she kissed me back. I pulled her on top of me, her body feeling weightless, and I just held her. Her auburn hair tickled the side of my face and smelled like a mixture of sweat and shampoo. She rested face against the inside of my neck and for a brief moment, we just lay there, matching the rising of my
chest with the sinking of hers. Then, just as I was on the precipice of sleep, Claire jerked upwards. Her knee dug sharply into my thigh.

“I got something for you,” she said. “I can’t believe I forgot about this. I was so excited about it.” She leapt of the bed and began rummaging through one of her bags. From it, she removed a plastic shopping bag, much like the one I’d carried those ridiculous items around for Abby. She threw the bag onto the mattress in alongside of me, and from the damp smell of smoke, I knew what was inside.

I reached in and pulled out the first of the books she’d brought to me: MONEY!!!. Most of its cover had crumbled away in ash. I thumbed through its brittle pages and stopped toward the end. A name had caught my eye somewhere in the endnotes, and I flipped back to find it, careful not to tear the pages further. When I found the name, Jacob Viner, I wasn’t sure why it felt so familiar. I didn’t know any Jacob Viner. Underneath the name, was an entry for “Katrina, Tropical Storm.” Then it hit me. Whether fortuitous or coincidental, the names popped from the page. I continued to search the page, against odds, and then on the opposite page I found the next one, Ben Bernanke, and just at the end of the page, Olivia S. Mitchell.

“Shit.”

Claire leaned over to peer at the page. “What is it?”

“They’re all here. These are my characters. They’re all here!” I pointed them out to her. Jacob, Katrina, Ben, and Olivia. It had been a while since I’d even thought of them.

“What characters? Like, from your novel?”

“Yeah. I mean, what are the chances that they’d all be here, in the index of a single book, all on the same page.”

“What a strange coincidence.”
“It’s more than just a coincidence. I mean any other time, sure, I’d say it’s a coincidence. But right at this time? Right now, here, at the climax of my story? Three days before I’m supposed to get them to the climax?”

“You’re supposed to get them to climax?” She leaned back and plucked another ice cube out of one of the glasses and popped it seductively into her mouth.

“Right before I left LA, I received an email from Hart saying he needed an additional 150 pages by March 16. That’s three days.”

“Do you have the pages?”

“Of course not. But I could use these, you know, to give to him. I could use these books to fill in the, you know, gaps. You said we should keep everything going normal, in regards to Hart. This way, I could still get him the pages. I could tell him, I don’t know, that it’s experimental, the stats and research and all. I doubt he’ll read them all that closely, anyway.”

“You mean plagiarize,” she said.

“I’ll change some things.”

I looked through the other books and began pages that seemed usable. Some of the pages were torn and riddled with holes, smudged with soot, but I would use them. After all, it’s just fiction.

When Claire and I returned from town after making a photocopy of the letter—the only place we could make copies of the letter was at the nearby library, which Claire had to do, in her Jackie Onassis sunglasses, since we found a flyer with my photo on it there as well—Laurence had the table set. He poured us each another glass of bourbon, though Claire refused in preference of a glass of wine. Laurence seemed to have already had several,
and crooned Frank Sinatra songs as he plopped the spaghetti onto our plates. When he finished his bourbon, he drank from Claire’s glass. While we ate, I told him and Claire about the reading, and he shared stories about Cory. We ate steadily and indulgently, Laurence refilling our plates whenever they cleared. It was the first satisfying meal I’d had since leaving Prentice. Laurence didn’t ask about the novel, and I didn’t bring up the Baelb Library or Bunsen. Outside, as we ate, the light waned and there was a cool touch to the air as it tickled past the shades and into the kitchen. It carried with it a lush and damp smell vegetation; tangling with the garlic and bourbon in the kitchen. I could have sat at the table for a month, just taking in, one by one, the sensory impulses of a place that isn’t public: the sloppy noises of friends telling stories and laughing with spaghetti in their mouths, the feel of clean clothes against my legs and back, a full stomach, the condensation on the outside of my glass, and the light above the table, holding night at bay, like we were the center of something worth gathering around.

For a moment, I forgot completely about Claire and I’s plan, and I think she did too. Laurence stood up slowly, and suggested we have a smoke out on his back porch. We helped clear the dishes from the table. It felt great to be standing and moving after all that food. There was now only a distant echo of light in the sky, a faint memory. We each made new drinks, and followed Laurence toward the back of the creaking, sparsely decorated home. Everything in the house had a rough wood finish; it seemed as though the place belonged on a prairie, not in the woods outside of New Orleans. Out the back door, we entered a screened in porch. Two beat up couches lined the house-side of the walls, and a large ashtray was centered on the opposite wall. We stood around the ashtray and overlooked a river, which I had not to this point noticed. Invisible insects hummed and chirped in the night air, but we were protected. A light breeze carried some relief from the heat into the small room.
Laurence hand rolled us each a cigarette, and we smoked them in silence, due mostly to the fact, I believe, that our plan had once again filled Claire and I’s thoughts. Though, I’d like to think it was also because the sound of the unseen insects was enough for conversation, and that the tobacco was so rich and sweet, that it was better enjoyed with our mouths closed.

When we went back inside, we refilled our drinks once more, and sat in the den. My head was beginning to feel lighter from the bourbon, and I was thankful for that feeling. Laurence started the conversation.

“So, Karin, if you don’t mind me asking, how is the writing going?”

Claire looked up at me, wondering, I assumed, if I was about to broach the topic.

“It’s,” I started, and ran my palm over the top of my hair. It had grown out past the stubble that the barber had left in New York. Was that really only a couple weeks ago? It felt like forever. It was also, I realized, the last time I’d worked on the novel. “It’s not bad. I have a lot of work to do. Hart wants another 150 pages by the 16th.”

“ Fucking Hart and his deadlines.” Laurence had a slow way of speaking, like his dialect had assumed the Southern rhythm patterns without taking on the accent. His speech was slow, but not necessarily articulate, though that could have been the whiskey. Laurence stood and knelt in front of the fireplace. He pulled some newspapers out of a wooden crate and began balling them up and placing them on the fire grate. It seemed strange to be making a fire. Though the air had cooled a bit, it was plenty warm. Laurence said, as he propped some smaller sticks around the paper, “I wouldn’t worry much about Hart’s deadlines. He’s not going to drop you or anything. You want me to talk to him? We’ve been in contact lately.”

While Laurence struggled with trying to keep the kindling propped up, I stole a glance at Claire. She nodded.
“If you don’t mind me asking, what have you guys been in contact about?” The question must have caught him off guard, and he turned to look at me. I added, “Do you have a new project in the works?”

“You could say that.”

Neither Claire or I spoke.

Laurence continued, “Hart’s on my ass about a book I was supposed to finish months ago.” He finally got the kindling arranged, and held a lighter to the edges of the paper. It wasn’t long before it was engulfed in flames. Once the paper had burned out, the flames tamed to the edges of the sticks. They crackled in the silence, and Laurence turned on a blower to suck the smoke upwards. “It’s quaint,” he said, “despite the heat.”

“The thing is,” I said, “I think he might be serious about dropping me. He’s mentioned it a couple times, that he may have made poor judgment in funding my writing. I mean, I want to write, and I think I have something to write, but there is just so much else going on.”

Laurence sat at the edge of the fireplace and swirled his drink in his hands. “He’s actually mentioned dropping you?”

“He’s suggested it.”

“That doesn’t sound like him. Hart, actually, is not such a bad guy. I mean, he is serious about getting good writing out there. But lately he just has been, I don’t know, extreme. He gets like this from time to time, when the pressure really builds up.

“Do you know what may be causing it now?”

Laurence stood and stepped into the kitchen. He returned with a new bottle of bourbon, and some wine for Claire. He sliced into the seal around the neck of the wine bottle with the tip of the corkscrew, pried off the wrapper and tossed it into the fire. Setting
the bottle on the wood floors, and holding it steady between his slippered feet, he drove in
the corkscrew. When it was all the way in, he looked up at Claire, then to me, and back at the
bottle. Finally, he said, “I don’t know if you want to be bored by this business talk. Just keep
writing. Try to hit that page requirement, and you’ll be fine.” He pulled the cork out and
walked over to Claire and filled her glass, perhaps a bit too full. She struggled to bring it to
her lips without spilling a bit on her skirt.

“I understand about not wanting to talk shop here, but I just want to have an idea of
whats going on, you know, so I have a better idea of where Hart’s coming from.”

Sleightor topped off his and my glass of bourbon, and sat back down in front of the
fire. He threw on a couple more logs, larger this time. He sipped at his bourbon. He was
reluctant to talk; that much was clear. I was beginning to fear that perhaps he was involved,
that everything I’d told him during the past month was going right back to Hart and Fien
and would eventually be used against me.

Finally, he said, “Here’s the thing: several years back, Hart, well I should say Bunsen,
got into some serious shit, but Hart was sort of at the center of the debacle. There were
some fraud charges, and though they managed to escape the initial charges by settling out of
court, it’s somehow come back into the light again, and I think Hart is still trying to finagle
his way out of it.

“Hart’s actually mentioned these charges to me.”

Laurence looked surprised.

“Well,” I continued, not exactly to me. I should say, I’ve heard about them, but I
don’t know any of the details. What was it all about?”

Laurence agitated the fire with an iron poker. “I’m not really at liberty to talk
extensively about it, as part of my new contract states.” He shook his head. “But between
you and me,” he looked at Claire, “and Claire, here, there was some legal trouble that occurred several years back, during the end of the last decade, actually, that involved myself, Fien, and Hart. This was before Fien had gone completely off the deep end, though he’s been on the precipice for as long as I’ve known him. We were drinking one night, as we often did in those days. We both lived in Los Angeles at the time. We got into a huge debate about the truer art form, fiction or non-fiction. While I, of course, maintained that fiction was a truer form of art, Fien argued that neither were art. That all we ever did was copied what those before us had done, and until we learn to forget all that has been done, in writing, there will be no art. He maintained that the only way to forget everything that had been done was to invest all your energy and all your attention to it, until it enters into that sort of consciousness that also includes our acknowledgment of, like, the sky, the ground, gravity, and phone numbers we’d long since stored in our cell phones. We know these things intrinsically, yet they’ve become so common that we’ve ceased to be awed, or even impressed, by them. They are so known, that we’ve come to unknow them. As usual, I thought he was full of shit, and he was definitely drunk, so I decided to make a wager with him.”

Laurence took a drink and held the bourbon in his mouth for a several moments before swallowing. He ran the side of the glass across his forehead, and then carefully placed two more logs on the fire.

He continued, “We both spent a year writing a new, short book. My project was to take something completely true, and write it as though it were fiction. I was not allowed to change a single detail that I hadn’t personally witnessed, which proved to be a much more challenging task than I’d originally thought. That, and I had to write completely in third-person, with myself as the point of view character. Fien, on the other hand, had to write
something completely made-up, and market it as non-fiction. He, of course, had to write from first-person, and could not include any truth. Somehow, he even got Hart to agree to it.”

“"I don’t understand how that would prove which is the higher art.”

“Well, by the time we got to that point, the conversation had wandered a ways from its starting focus, and I think we were less concerned with that, as we were with the exercise. We decided that whoever’s book received that higher critical praise from the most prestigious critics, would ultimately lose the bet.”

“How so?” Claire asked.

“Well,” Laurence continued, “if critics praised one of these books, we reasoned that it was because of the content, not the form. If the content, then, became transparent, then the book was just a story, just words and memories, and thus not art.”

When I stood up to refill my glass, the lightness in my head had spread across my body, to my torso and legs. He held out the bottle and poured me another. “So, who won?”

“I did. And Fien never got over it. As a result of winning, he had to sign over his proceeds to me. My book completely flopped, which wasn’t a big deal, since when the fraud charges took place, my book was also recalled.”

“You lost me again. Where is the fraud?” I asked.

“Fien’s book ended up doing so well, that he did a tour of readings, including several major morning shows. A certain talk show host, however, dug a bit too deep into the details of his story, and discovered that it was completely false. She sued Bunsen for fraud, and the entire wager surfaced. Hart desperately wanted to settle out of court, but the host was so pissed, and petty if you ask me, that she would only settle if both books were taken off the market.”
“So if you settled, why is Hart still dealing with it.”

Laurence chuckled to himself. “Well, it turned out that Fien’s non-fiction account wasn’t entirely fictional. There were a few elements of truth in it, particularly, a librarian he had once pissed off had made her way into the book as a vindictive, prudish sixth grade teacher who repeatedly seduced her male students. Fien used her real name, as well as several other actual details about her. After finding the recalled book in the basement of her library, several years after the settlement, she read it and filed new fraud charges against Bunsen.”

“Shit,” Claire said. She looked toward me. Her eyes were barely opened, and I could tell she was trying to stay awake only to see our plan go through. “You knew about all of this, Karin?” she asked.

“No. I only knew that there were fraud charges.”

Laurence was sweating, sitting so close to the fire. He removed his plaid shirt, revealing a stained white t-shirt underneath. He threw another log on the fire, and then took a seat on the couch next to Claire. He said, “To be honest, I’m really surprised that Hart even told you that. The whole thing has been very secretive, to avoid bad press. Hart is in a tough spot, with this whole ordeal. You see, Fien is like, well, his golden boy. Somehow, the garbage he writes sells better than any other writer on the roster, probably only because so many college professors use them in their classes, requiring students across the map to purchase it. From there, I suppose, it becomes one of those status symbols. Impressionable students who’ve just discovered explicit sex scenes in academically prestigious book spread the word everyone they know, that Fien’s work is a staple for students ‘in the know.’ As a result, Hart is willing to do just about anything to keep Fien writing for Bunsen. Without Fien’s profits, many of the other writers’ books would not have near as good of circulation.”
Claire was dozing. I said her name and asked her to bring me the bottle of bourbon, just to make sure she was awake. As I topped off my glass, I said to Laurence, “Actually, Hart didn’t mention it to me. I found something, recently, and I’m afraid I run a certain risk telling you about it, with your relationship with Fien and Hart, but I’m willing to chance it.”

Laurence leaned forward in his seat. Creeping out of the bottom of his shirtsleeve, on his left arm, I noticed a name that I couldn’t make out, tattooed on an aging bicep.

“At the reading in LA, I was confused for Fien by his assistant’s assistant. Allegedly, she had never personally met him, so naturally she assumed I was Fien. She gave me a package of letters from Fien, as well as some things from his office. He must’ve read some of them, as several were already open. Most of it was just fan mail, but I found something that may get me, me and Claire, that is, off the hook for the Baelb Library arson. It was a letter from Hart to Fien.”

I explained the letter, even pulled it out of my bag and showed it to Sleighter. After several minutes of the fire crackling, Claire biting down nervously on a piece of ice she’d taken from my glass, Laurence began laughing.

“Holy shit!” he said. “I can’t believe this!”

“You didn’t know anything about this?” Claire asked, bluntly.

“You’re from Prentice, right?”

Claire and I nodded.

“Did you use the Baelb library much?”

We nodded again.

“Do you know if an Ezra Wile happened to work there?”

I looked at Claire. “You live right across the street. Does the name sound familiar?”
She looked into the fire, her brow furrowed. “It does sound familiar, but something is off.” Then, she sprung to her feet, which gave me and Laurence a startle. “Shit. Hold on a second. I think I might know where I’d heard the name.”

Claire ran upstairs. We heard the trap door open to the attic, and Claire’s footsteps stomped above us. When she came down the stairs, she was holding a newspaper page, reading it. She handed it to Laurence, and we gathered behind him to read it.

“Is this the newspaper article from chapter five?” I asked.

Claire and Laurence looked up at me, puzzled, and then continued reading. It was. Check it out for yourselves.

There was an interview from the head librarian, Esther Wile.

“Do you think she’s related?”

Laurence left the room and came back with his laptop. He typed for a few seconds, and we all stared at the screen. After a bit of searching, he found an employee’s page for the Prentice library. A photo came up with a picture of Ezra Wile in front of a library with a pair of scissors. A caption read, “Ezra Wile, from a large family of librarians, cuts the ribbon at the Prentice Library.”

“That’s not the Baelb Library,” Claire said. At the top of the page, the masthead read, “Prentice Public Library, Prentice, Illinois.”

“Search for Esther Wile,” I said. After a couple seconds, we found her, in a very similar photo, cutting the ribbon at the Baelb Library in Prentice Wisconsin.

“That fucker burned down the wrong fucking library!” Laurence shouted, and exploded into a burst of laughter.

“So you knew he was going to burn it down?”
Through fits of laughter, Laurence managed to explain, “I didn’t think he’d ever do it. I mean, after she got involved in the fraud case, he always said he should burn down her library. But, you know, just like saying it, not actually thinking about doing it. So, when did the library burn?”

Claire looked at the newspaper. “January 21, earlier this year.”

“That’s right before he came down here to stay with me. He was here about a month, and in the worst shape I’d ever seen him. I mean, a complete asshole. I had no idea he was hiding out.”

Laurence continued to laugh into a coughing fit. When his hand came down, it rested on Claire’s leg, just above the kneecap. I walked around the back of Laurence’s chair and took a seat across from them. The fire was dying and nobody got up to stoke it.

Laurence seemed legit. I mean, what motivation would he have to implicate himself into some sort of criminal activity, particularly for a guy he seemed to hate. No, he definitely hates him. I remember the first emails he’d sent me, before I’d told him anything about my project, and even then he was bitching about Fien. Additionally, he did seem sincerely surprised at our story, at the letter. As much as he’d drank tonight, as much as all of us had drank, it would be a tall order to pull off such a convincing acting performance. Laurence was legit, and his hand crept higher on Claire’s leg.

Claire didn’t seem to notice, or else she was pulling off a hell of a performance herself. Laurence suggested another cigarette, and we joined him. Upon our return, I’d planned on taking over his seat next to Claire, nonchalantly, of course. Yet, just as I had sat down, he asked me if I’d mind fetching everybody another drink. Fuck, I felt like I was in a Raymond Carver story. When I returned, he was in my seat, and his arm was draped over Claire’s shoulders. He twirled a strand of hair in his fingers. They talked softly; I was scarcely
able to hear them. In protest, I sat in silence, conscious of my sulking. I reasoned that Claire was her own person, that I had been too sincere about seeking out Anna, that I was reading into things and too drunk to make any certain conclusion. To pass the time, I moved over to the fire and stabbed the iron poker into the ashes. I tried not to notice her giggling, nor did I attend to his legs crossing, his body leaning into her. His overdone laugh at her stories, and his hand, continuing to find loose strands of hair to tuck behind her ear, they happened behind me, and I had other things to focus on.

To my relief, Claire finally yawned, stretched her arms—shaking off Laurence’s semi-embrace—and petitioned for bed. When she asked me to “see her to her room,” I couldn’t resist flashing a resentful grin Laurence’s way, to which he responded with a wink and a stabbing grin of his own.

I went so far as to hold Claire’s elbow as she ascended the stairs to the second floor. I stopped her in the hallway and embraced her. I leaned in for a kiss, an insecure gesture, for certain. She allowed it, but showed no signs of interest. I pulled down the hidden staircase and followed her up to our room. I helped her unfasten her skirt and she sat on the edge of the mattress. She spoke first, looking straight ahead, and I had not expected her to ask me what she did.

“How do you think it went?”

“I’m convinced.”
“Me, too,” she said. Her eyes were heavy, and she wasn’t far from sleep. Despite my silence earlier—I had been too ashamed to even comfort her, as it was my silence that had caused her to need comfort—she leaned into me and hugged me from the side. She said, “I really don’t believe he had anything to do with it. You should go back down there, though. He may be different without me there.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you have the original copy of the letter?” Claire asked.

I reached underneath the mattress and felt for it. When I removed it, we sat in silence and looked at it for several moments. I put it back.

Claire yawned.

I smoothed the top of her head, leaving my hand there. I had this image of us, just then, sitting inside of a Pablo Picasso painting: a blue attic with a swampy-colored moon shedding faint light into the room, Claire and I sitting desperately on the mattress.

I lowered her onto the mattress, and covered her with a thin, soft sheet, and I just looked at her for a few moments as she drifted into the early stages of slumber. Her edges were all soft, but they were markedly troubled, and I was responsible for that. I kissed her lightly on the forehead, and went back to Laurence. I left the trap door down so the creaky hinges would not wake her upon my return.

Laurence was exactly where I’d left him. He checked his watch when I returned, remarking that he hadn’t thought I’d be returning. “She must be tired.”

I didn’t like the implications of his comments, but I let it go. It wasn’t my place to be protective, and we needed Laurence’s hospitality, at least for the next couple days until I could meet Hart’s new page requirement. “She’s had a lot to drink.”
The letter, too, still lay on the table in front of him. I reached for it and slid it into my computer bag, making sure he noticed. I leaned the bag against the wall.

He motioned for me to sit across from him and he leaned toward me, pushing the bottle of bourbon across the wooden table between us. He had expected me to return. My glass had been cleaned, and there were fresh ice cubes in it. I filled it to the top of the ice with bourbon.

“So,” he said casually, “you and Claire are,” and he waited for me to finish the sentence.

“Just here for a couple days,” I answered.

“You know that’s not what I meant,” he said, chuckling. “You and Claire are together?”

I considered lying, but I wasn’t sure of what I’d already told him. Had I mentioned Anna? I must have. My head was foggy and my memory elusive. This made the act of lying nearly impossible. Finally, I said, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? How can you be unsure about something like that? Let me guess, it’s this other one, isn’t it. Abby?”

“Anna. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“Right, Anna. She’s the one that left you, right? Only returns your emails occasionally, cancelled her cell phone?”

“That’s the one.”

“It’s not easy. I mean, I guess this Anna must be one hell of a woman, if she’s making you think twice about Claire.”

“Like I said, I’d rather not talk about it. I think I’m pretty drunk.”

“You have a picture of her?”
I shook my head.

“Well, I’ll give you some advice, if you’re willing to take it.”

“I’m not up for being advised, either. It’s been a long day.”

“Here’s the thing, and I think you’ll find it applies to a lot more than relationships. You need to make a decision. Moving forward is great, but if you’re doing it just to avoid making a tough decision, you’re not going to end up anywhere.”

“Where’d you hear that, a fortune cookie?”

“E.M. Woodsman wrote it. Second chapter of Writing the Novel. It’s the one about plot.”

Laurence glanced at my computer bag, against the wall, and then back to me. He raised his eyebrows, and burst into a laugh, and I had no idea what the gesture had meant. He asked me if I’d like another cigarette. We refilled our glasses one last time, and I followed him to the back porch.

During my first long pull of the cigarette, I felt an entire night’s worth of bourbon bubbling back up into my throat. I swallowed hard, and finally let it all spill out. I said, “I can’t figure out how this entire fucking mess got started. I mean, I had just finished The SauerKraut Circus, and I really thought it was good, but it wasn’t true enough. There was too much story and not enough truth. And then Anna left, and though I met Claire, and fell in love with her, I still longed for Anna, for the permanence she represented in my life. Or maybe it was just the stasis she offered that I needed. And then somewhere in there, the fucking library burned down, and next thing I know B. Hart’s sending me emails. He thought my writing said something, represented something, and he was willing to pay me to conduct some research and give him a novel. I move out of Prentice, somehow Fien moves in, and I still don’t understand how I ever thought that was a reasonable idea, but I did, I
moved out, and I left Claire there. Nothing had ever changed while I was in Prentice, and I
assumed nothing would change in Prentice when I was gone. But now they got these fucking
posters of me hanging in the train station and in the libraries. I’m on all these fucking lists
and my phone is full of all these messages from the Prentice Police Department and Lord
knows who else, which I’m too fucking paranoid to even check. And the whole time, I mean
the way it all started, was I just wanted to tell a story, to write it in such a way that someday
somebody would be compelled to read it, and maybe identify with it or, at the risk of
sounding pretentious, maybe learn something from it. That’s it, just telling a story.”

I wasn’t sure when, during my vomiting, I’d started crying, but Laurence was offering
me a clean, white handkerchief, and he offered to relight my cigarette.

“Karin,” he said, “you can never simply tell a story. There’s nothing simple about it.
We’d like to think that we can arrange the events and walk people through the tracks we’ve
made, but they’re never going to see the same things that we’ve seen. A story, you see, I
mean in a story, there is never just one direction; rather a story is everything at once. You’re
trying too hard to decide what your story is about, and in the end, it will never be that way to
anybody who ever reads it. You’re not the one who’s in control. A phrase, or just a simple
word, cannot mean only one thing. For example, put a man and his wife in the kitchen. He is
doing dishes and she is cooking at the stove. While he’s putting away the cutting board, he
says, ‘whoever cleaned the cutting board last, didn’t clean the bottom side and now there are
crusty garlic remains and red pepper stains on it.’ Now the wife’s pissed because though,
according to the actual words, he is simply making an observation, she thinks he’s implying
that she’s a shitty dishwasher.”

I was struggling to make any sense out of what Laurence was saying. I was searching
for some sort of sage-like insight into my dilemma with Anna, Claire, the novel, or the
burned down library, but I felt as though I was casting my net too wide, and catching nothing.

“Even if,” he continued, “the man were to qualify his observation by saying something like, ‘whoever cleaned the cutting board last didn’t clean the bottom side and now there are crusty garlic remains and red pepper stains on it. I’m not insinuating that it was you, of course. It could very well have been me.’ Now, by qualifying his statement, though he’s avoided accusing his wife of being an incompetent dishwasher, he’s just insinuated that she is quick to become defensive and insulted, and is ultimately insecure. What I’m saying, Karin, I mean, what I’m trying to explain, er, point out to you in this difficult time,” Laurence struggled to find the words. He continued, “I mean, you just can’t say something, simply. Like the story you wanted to tell. It isn’t yours just because you wrote it. It belongs to whoever is reading it. As a writer, Karin, all you can do is love your characters. This is more important than writing a perfect story, because when the author dies, his characters are the only ones who ever knew him in a meaningful way. He can only ever exist, truthfully, that is to say, without sub-contexts and insinuations, through the memories of the characters.”

Laurence seemed suddenly agitated. I had closed my eyes while he spoke, not to sleep, but just to try to figure out what the hell he was saying, and he stormed back into the house. I followed him, trying to explain, and when we reached the den, he turned and embraced me. “It is getting late, Karin. I'll understand if you don’t want to stay up for a nightcap.”

I was tempted to, if only to prove that I hadn’t been sleeping, but Claire and I’s plan was contingent upon me retiring to bed before Laurence, leaving the bag and the letter in his
sole presence. That, and Claire was upstairs, sleeping alone on the mattress, and I wanted to be next to her.

I crept up the first staircase, feeling pretty hopeless about something I couldn’t quite name, and then I crept once more up the rickety staircase into the attic. I pulled the trapdoor shut slowly and carefully, so the springs would not cause Claire to stir, and then I crawled into bed next to her warm, breathing body, my hand rested on her forearm.
Chapter 47: Plagiarizing a Novel, March 14

When I woke up, I was in the bed with only a headache. I felt the covers that rested over where Claire had slept, and they were cool. After changing into some cleaner clothes, clothes I hadn’t been wearing for several days, that is, I rummaged through Claire’s toiletries bag until I found some aspirin. I chewed them dry as I went downstairs to find Claire. Following the smell of burned coffee, I went into the kitchen. The dishes from the previous night had been washed and put away, and on the stove were some leftover eggs, scrambled in a pan. There was a note tapes to the lid of the coffeemaker. The handwriting was in the hand of someone who was just learning to write. Even though it wasn’t in cursive, the letters all leaned dangerously to the right.

*had to go into town will be gone most of the day make yourself at home ill be home in time to prepare dinner*

*laurence*

I listened for Claire, and when I couldn’t hear her, I feared that she’d gone with Laurence. In the den, I found my backpack, apparently untouched throughout the night. This, at least, was a good sign. Thinking I was alone in the house, I began poking around in the different rooms. The entire house, it seemed, was decorated as bare as the den and kitchen. In a room I figured to be Laurence’s bedroom, a twin mattress lay on the floor with its blankets crumpled at its foot. Bookshelves lined the wall, mostly empty except for a stack of his second novel on the bottom row of one. His clothes were in a series of wicker bins in an open closet. In a room just off from his bedroom, I found his office: a card table with a
yellow legal pad, a Cedar Point coffee mug full of blue ink pens, and a laptop on top of it. The bookshelf in this room had more books in it than the rest. When I pulled out a copy of *Dante’s Inferno*, however, it was only a prop, a box made of cardstock. The rest of them, all of them, were the same: *Moby-Dick*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, all phony and probably ripped off from a chain bookstore’s display case.

After poking around some of the other rooms, most of them vacant with the exception of a military cot in one and some women’s dresses hanging in the closet of another, poured myself a cup of coffee and headed out to the porch to see if I could find a cigarette. After smoking, I would begin writing, I had a little over a hundred pages to come up with for Hart, and I was hoping to finish it by tomorrow.

When I opened the door to the porch, my headache seemed to instantly float away in the breezy morning air. Seriously, it did. Not metaphorically, or in a maybe-if-i-just-pretend-its-gone-I’ll-forget-about-it sort of way, but it actually left. The thick must of swamipy fauna had seemed to sink straight into my bloodstream. Like the night before, the bugs beyond the screen chattered and hummed, as though still agitated from at having this house plopped right into the middle of their sanctuary. I found Laurence’s tobacco sitting on the edge of the windowsill, near the ashtray. Some papers were inside the pouch, and I removed one and attempted to roll a cigarette. The first one didn’t turn out well; I had used too little tobacco and the paper was ruined from using too much saliva in an attempt to seal the edges. I used too much tobacco in the second cigarette, and the paper tore. With only a few papers left, I considered putting the tobacco along the inside of my lip, like I had done with Tabby. I wasn’t sure if it would work that way. Determined to have a smoke, I pulled out another paper. I was startled when Claire spoke.

“Here, let me roll that for you,” she said from behind me.
I turned to find that she’d been sitting on the couch, silently the whole time. I handed her the paper and she deftly rolled me a perfect cigarette.

“Where’d you learn to roll them so well?”

She rolled another for herself, and handed me a book of matches. I lit hers and then mine. She said, “I started smoking more often after this whole Fien business started. Really, it was just a reason to stand out on my porch and show the cops patrolling my house that I was there, innocent and living normally. A while before you approached me that night at the library, I had dated a guy who only smoked rolled cigarettes. He refused to roll them for me, too. Said it was a skill I should possess.”

I hadn’t approached Claire at the library, and it certainly wasn’t night when she’d approached me. “How long did you date this guy?”

Claire exhaled a thin stream of smoke from the side of her mouth. As it hit the screen it dissipated quickly in the breeze. She held her arms closely to her body, as though hugging herself, her cigarette shaking slightly between her second and third finger. Her legs were crossed. It was as though she could become a smaller physical presence without rolling into the fetal position. With some hesitation, she finally said, “Karin, I’ve dated guys. Before I met you, I mean.”

“I know.” I sat next to her on the couch. “I didn’t mean,” I started, but she cut me off.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for that too sound so harsh.”

“Last night, you asked me if I was still searching for Anna, and I didn’t answer.”

“I shouldn’t have pried.”

“No, it’s okay. You should pry. You have every right to pry. I mean, I guess I am still sort of searching for her, in a way. It’s like, I’m not choosing to go places to find her, like I’d
originally intended on doing during this trip. But it’s like she’s still making my choices for me, whether I want her to or not. She just seems to show up, or some part of her does, at the places I go to. I feel like even if I decide not to go, she’s gonna be, or have just left, wherever I end up. I know it isn’t fair, but it’s really tough to just move past that whole narrative with the end as open as it is. I feel like, since I’ve only experienced the beginning and middle parts, that it will never be over until it is just, I don’t know, over.” I knew I wasn’t making any sense, and I wanted so badly for Claire to understand, or for things to be clearer in my head, but they weren’t. There simply weren’t any words.

“It’s okay, Karin. I want to tell you I understand, but I’d be lying. It’s not my story, and there is too much missing for me to understand. But, it’s okay. Let’s just get through our current mess, and we’ll deal with it then.”

“You’re incredible,’ I said.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “And you have writing to do.” She was right.

After a quick breakfast of cold eggs—we found some bread and jam in the refrigerator—Claire found a guitar in one of the empty room’s closets. I could hear her plucking at the strings from the attic where I’d spread out the books she brought and opened up my computer. I scrolled through the last few pages I’d written. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t written anything since New York, right before my meeting with Hart. Everybody was now on the train, and I had to get them together now. I wrote for most of the day until I heard Claire talking to Laurence downstairs. It was slow-going at first, but as I copied various pages from the charred pages, I was able to manage close to thirty pages an hour. At this rate, I could send the pages to Hart by the morning. The secret, I found, was all in the dialogue. Since all the characters were in some sort of economic trouble, it would only make sense that they’d spend most of their train journey theorizing and bitching about it. I added a
love story, too, to qualify it as fiction. Ben, the New Yorker who had just left Carol in New York, spent most of the trip drinking contraband gin Olivia had snuck on the train. In their drunkest moments, he halfheartedly fought off her sloppy advances, and occasionally he did not fight them off at all. I summarized most of this; scenes would have to wait until I had some more time, should I ever decide to write seriously.

In Chicago, all the characters ended up in the same car, in relatively close proximity to each other. After several hours of keeping to themselves, Katrina and Jacob began conversing. Overhearing something Jacob said about the Detroit Tigers, Ben joined their conversation with some fan knowledge of the New York Mets—the teams, as it happened, were about to meet in a three game interleague series. Olivia, feeling left out, said she thought the Trailblazers had a good team this year. Ben reminded her that the Portland Trail Blazers were, in fact, a basketball season, the basketball season was over, and that the Trail Blazers haven’t had a decent team since the early nineties. She confessed that her asshole ex-husband had been obsessed with sports, and that she’d rather watch the Home Shopping Network than ever see another televised sports game, regardless of the sport. She just wanted to talk. Ben realized that, should he ever care to use it, he now had a subject that would halt Olivia’s sometimes-unwanted advances.

After their necks grew sore from craning to participate in conversation, they eventually moved to the lounge car where they sat together in a booth, and the conversation soon turned to economics.

During a break, primarily out of boredom, though out of curiosity as well, I decided to map a couple pages that I had written in order to see how much of it had actually been plagiarized. This is what it looked like:
Jacob ended his brief answer to Katrina’s question of why he was headed to San Diego, with a terse “this goddam economy.”

Ben shook his head. He said, “I was reading earlier, from this book about the economy. Basically, many people erroneously believe that the current economic situation arose from the presidency of James Cater, and that Ronald Reagan’s popular ‘trickle down’ theory, better known as Reaganomics, was the answer to the nation’s economic problems. After a slight upturn in our nation’s economic situation during Reagan’s eight year term, however, the economic situation began worsening, particularly during the presidencies of two terms of George Herbert Walker Bush. While some parties argue that the economic downfall was due to the war America was involved in in the Middle East, many others argued that the economic decline was, in fact, aftermath of the highly questionable and agenda-ridden practice of Reaganomics. The truth of the matter, however, is that neither a single man in office, or a war alone, can be singly responsible for the economic struggles in the United States.”

“I agree,” Katrina agreed. “It is, in fact, the collective responsibility of the American People to establish and maintain a healthy economy. The key participants can be broken down into three categories: the consumer, the employer, and the lawmaker. Without a healthy synergy from the involved parties, a negative shift in the economic state is inevitable. Simply put—and this text will certainly expand upon the intricacies of the following date imminently—the economy thrives when the three parties responsibly meet the following social expectations: the employer provides enough jobs for at least ninety-seven percent of the working population, paying them competitively in a manner that allows upward mobility, even if slight, and providing essential services such as health care and retirement funds, which the employee would not otherwise be able to afford and still maintain a chance at prosperity; the consumer must be attend to their job with an adequate level of work ethic so as to maintain the current position, must be careful not to save too frivolously, so as not to keep the money from flowing back to the employer, and must occasionally indulge in less-than-sensible purchases, in order to supply business to the extravagant and novelty markets (namely, cruises and gag gifts, such as whoopee cushions, dirty calendars, and instant weight-loss pills (the necessity of which is far more crucial to a balanced, healthy economy than previously given credit for (their presence, a sort of symbol of the

2 Footnotes included, though will be removed when sent to Hart

3 From Money!!!
and finally, the lawmakers must make it possible for the consumer and employer to thrive in this system without too much interference."

Olivia, who, under the table was simultaneously pouring a gin into a Styrofoam© cup and running her shoeless toes along the inseam of Ben’s trousers (she had assumed that Ben was perhaps turned on at the mere mention of a dirty calendar, as her husband always had been, and in truth, he had been, though had been as quickly turned off when the smell of her sweaty, stale train feet seeped up from his inseam to his nostrils) said, “well, while I’m not an expert on the economy, I do know a thing or two about trains. For example, this here train is called The California Zephyr. Before being taken over by Amtrak, the California Zephyr, otherwise known as the CaliZeph, was operated by the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad, and Western Pacific Railroad. On March 19, 1825, the CaliZeph was called ‘the most popular train to take to California, if you’re heading that way, that is’ by Andrew Jackson, who at the time was still bitter about losing one of the most controversial elections in presidential history. In 1970 the California Zephyr was discontinued until Amtrak put it back in use in 1983. In its early years, the female car hostesses were often hired based on their seemingly gravity-free hairdos, and were known as Zephyrettes, now a derogatory name for women who loiter in train yards. Additionally, during its inaugural run, every female passenger was given a complimentary bar of soap, flown in from Hilo, Hawaii.”

“Who gives a shit?” interrupted Jacob, who was also chewing on a straw. “You sound like a goddam railroad historian. What, are you hiding a book on the history of the railroad there in your lap, or is it still just a bottle of gin? Besides, all this horseshit you’ve spouted about the economy is not even close to being accurate. Anybody with any semblance of sense knows that The second World War was the real reason the American dollar depreciated in value so rapidly. Though there certainly have been occasional rises in value since the late forties, The Great War with Germany and Japan instituted a burgeoning global economy in regards to vast markets that had since only been tinkered with. Once the United States’ economy was first infiltrated by special interest groups from nations of a lower economical weight, products that had never been considered viable for national trade, were now considered to be not only viable, but en vogue for the elite, upper class citizens of post-war American society. The result of the en vogue market, that is to say, citizens who were willing to buy useless shit only because their friends were unable to buy it, was that the citizens who had once purchased useless American shit—we’re talking cruises and novelties here—ceased to because these services and products were no longer considered worthy by their useless, foreign-shit-buying friends.”

And so it went for nearly 150 pages. Most of the text was included as dialogue, though occasionally I’d open a new chapter with a historical account of the American Dollar or the Forty Mile Desert stretch of the CaliZeph, vis-à-vis Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*. Since

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5 From Ride, Engineer, Ride!: The True Story of the American Railroad.
I hadn’t quite made the 150 page mark, I upped my font size to 12.3 instead of 12.0. It was a virtually unnoticeable difference on the printed page, though enough of one to stretch 143 pages to just over 151. Besides, I could hear Laurence and Claire laughing heartily two floors below me, and I heard Claire also strumming confidently at Laurence’s guitar with him singing along in that slow way he had of speaking, and I did not think any good would come of me being up here while the two of them lived it up down there. Also, I was hungry and ready for a drink.

“The great novelist emerges,” Laurence said with a faux-grandiose flourish. Then, to my dismay, he began singing it. Claire continued to strum on the guitar, fingerling through a pretty impressive progression of twelve-bar blues. Several empty beer bottles stood upright on the floor by her feet. Her auburn hair hung in her face as her entire body swayed from side to side. She giggled occasionally, as Laurence sang impromptu about the details of the room. I was the subject now: the emerging, great novelist.

I walked past them and grabbed a beer from the fridge. Laurence had been shopping, and the fridge was stocked, front to back, with a brand of beer I didn’t recognize. “The Beer of New Orleans,’ the label read. Claire yelled from the den that I gotta try one of these beers, that they’re fucking revolutionary, and Laurence caught onto the phrase, fucking revolutionary, making it the new refrain to his sad, pathetic blues. Everything was fucking revolutionary: the beer, the emerging novelist, the sound his hands made when he slapped them against his thighs, Claire’s auburn hair, her slender fingers, her nimble fingers, her talented fingers, the promise of her fingers. Laurence sang about each of these things, and they were all fucking revolutionary. Careful not to seem as though I was pouting, I sat down across from them, and reluctantly bobbed my head, too, and I knocked two glass beer bottles together, dragging the beat, perhaps intentionally, and acted as though I was cool
with this scene. Something about the entire scene made me think of Tabby. It seemed like her scene, and I pictured her sitting in a circle around a fire with a group of pale, denim clad whisperers, whispering the ills of non-referential language. I wondered if she and Abe had ever made it back to Albuquerque. I hoped that they had just kept going, found a way to continue West, across the ocean, and I hoped that if they did, our paths would cross as their West became my East.

To my further dismay, Laurence had pulled a harmonica out of his front pocket—of course, it just happened to be there—and began punching in and out of notes, trying to find the right key. When he found it, it turned out that he was really fucking good. I had a suspicion that he played it to drown out my bottle clinking, which had lapsed considerably as I thought about Tabby. I was tempted to take it up another notch, whether to really belt out some words over the harmonica, something funnier and more appropriate, or to stomp my feet and clap my hands to drown out the harmonica, but in the end I just didn’t have it in me to enter this duel with Laurence. Instead, I grinned politely, showing how impressed I was at their keen musical talents, and I went out back to try my hand at rolling another cigarette. I did okay, and I sat on the couch and waited them out. Detached from the immediate scene, they actually didn’t sound all that bad, and the songs they played seemed fitting for the way I was feeling, despite that I was feeling this way because of the songs they played. And Claire was right: the beer was incredible, perhaps not fucking revolutionary, but pretty damn close.

I’d never been jealous with Anna, and it really bothered me that I was beginning to feel this way with Claire, especially since I had nothing to be jealous of. I was the reason we weren’t closer. When I heard the music finally come to an end, I decided to rejoin them in the kitchen. They were making dinner. Laurence had bought the stuff for jambalaya, and as
he was cutting up the onions, shrimp, garlic, and peppers, Claire was cleaning the shrimp, pulling their tiny bodies apart and removing the grime under the faucet. She wore the apron Laurence had worn the day before. She’d tied her hair up and chewed on her lip as she worked. As I was distracted by Claire, Laurence snuck up behind me and tossed an apron over my head. He handed me a fresh beer and ordered me, playfully, to begin cutting up the chicken and sausage. Like during the previous night when he had sung Frank Sinatra songs as he prepared the spaghetti, he now tuned a radio to a station that specialized in Zydeco. The songs were raucous and hard to wrap my mind around, they seemed to lack structure and before long, we had all developed our own interpretation of how to dance to this music while cutting meats and vegetables. For a while, I wasn’t jealous, and as I watched Laurence and Claire stomping around the kitchen, tossing stray peppers into the pot, drumming on the counters with wooden spoons, and slamming dishes rhythmically into the sink, I was aware that I would remember this moment long after I’d forgotten the other moments of my journey thus far.

The meal was incredible, its spiciness balanced perfectly with the ice cold New Orleans beer. We were all feeling great, laughing and full. Much to my surprise, as well as to my pleasure, Laurence suggested that we take off for the evening and experience the Cajun night life. If we passed the French Quarter, and headed down Frenchman Street, we would find some of the best music in the area.

Claire seemed to sober up, quickly. “What if someone notices us?”

“They should notice you. It’s really quite an experience.”

“No,” she said. “I mean, what if they recognize us from the flyers?”

Laurence laughed. “Claire, there won’t be a single person down there who isn’t wanted by some public department. Nobody’s looking to turn anybody in. Just avoid any
dark alleys and keep your plastic cups full. Really, as long as you stay away from the brightly colored drink glasses, the flashing visors, and an excess of beads, you’ll be fine. Just make sure that there is always somebody who looks like a bigger asshole in your vicinity, and you can rest assured that if anything bad is going to happen, it will happen to them.”

“What about you?” I asked. “You going to join us?”

“I don’t know. I got some stuff to finish up around here. You kids go enjoy yourself. I don’t think you want some old man following you around.”

“Ah, come on,” Claire pleaded. “Be our tour guide.”

As though we were engaged in some sort of game, Laurence looked at me and winked. “Maybe,” he said, “I’ll come down and find you later on. You still have my number saved in your phone, Claire?”

She did.

“Alright, then. It’s settled. Go get ready and I’ll drive you guys to the bus station.”

Before we left, Claire went upstairs to change, and I printed out my pages from earlier to ship to B. Hart. I was waiting with Laurence at the front door, each of us tipping back a beer, when Claire finally appeared on the stairway. Neither of us spoke at first. Claire, who I’d rarely seen wearing anything except a long denim skirt and a t-shirt, stepped, no sauntered down the steps in a sleeveless black dress that stopped just above her knees. Her auburn hair dangled in weightless curls, just above her shoulders and her olive eyes were so striking that they seemed as though they’d been edited by photo software. As Laurence swallowed hard and tripped over his words, I met her at the bottom of the stairs and took her arm. I smirked at him as we passed, and he followed us out to his truck. When he suggested she sit between us in the old truck, I argued that it wouldn’t be very comfortable for a woman in a dress to straddle the gear shift. I took the middle seat, and I made sure
Laurence saw me put my arm around. My hand, resting on her shoulder, reflected in the passenger window and onto the front corner of the windshield. He didn’t say much on the trip. I don’t know if it had been out of astonishment, or jealousy, or simple disregard to drinking and driving rules, but he held his beer bottle between his legs, drinking from it occasionally until he dropped us off at the bus station. He gave us directions to a 24 hour shipping store, and reminded us to call him. Then, he drove away.

I was a bit embarrassed and somewhat worried when, trying to pay for the shipping on the package to Hart, my traveler’s checks were refused. Thankfully, the woman who refused it did not seem intent on making any official calls; a game of solitaire lay spread out on table behind her, waiting for her imminent return. I should’ve known better from what had happened in LA, but I had left Sleightor’s in a rush and did not think to grab the remainder of my cash from Fien’s reading out of my suitcase. Claire covered the shipping cost, and I promised to repay her once my name was clear, and I was able to get refunded for the checks.

She asked if I had the letter with me, and I said I did. She wanted to see it again, just to remind her that she wouldn’t have to hide for much longer.

It was not a long way to Bourbon Street, so we decided to walk. It was dark already, and even at this distance, we could hear the music; rather, we could hear noise, a conglomeration of music and shouting and voices chattering, doors slamming and people falling, people retching and doors opening, woman saying no and men asking please, couples asking how much and mothers saying no, brooms sweeping and flyers touching the pavement and bright colorful plastic cups dropping. Doors were opening and then they were shutting. Claire touched my hand and I pretended not to notice. When the back of her hand brushed against mine a second time, I grabbed ahold of it.
The Quarter was as raucous, as sad and energetic as its music. From every physical angle, every emotional angle was revealed: a bride and groom, still in their wedding garments, shared a cigarette in front of a thin man in a wheelchair, his face covered in scabs and I couldn’t be certain if the man was even alive; he appeared to have been sitting there for months. A heavyset woman in skin digging purple lingerie held up a sign that advertised the sex acts taking place just inside the door she stood at, and a father walked past her with a child in a front carrier; he didn’t even have to strain not to look in through the open door.

As we made our way through the blocks toward Frenchman Street, we traversed the blocks, sticking on Bourbon for a while past all the high-end strip clubs and sex shops, and then made our way onto Royal, and then to Chartres, into a garden and past a statue of Andrew Jackson enclosed behind a gate. Several tarot readers draped with scarves lounged behind lonely card tables; it was too early. Back on Bourbon we stopped into a blues bar, and the way that trombonist blew and the drummer sizzled, I realized that Tabby had it all wrong.

The high notes from the brass pierced my inner ear, and Claire bought us each a bourbon on the rocks. She handed me the plastic cup, and after a song and a semi-serious attempt to dance—though I couldn’t figure out if Claire was, in fact, serious about the attempt or if she were only playing, and I held back from taking it serious in the event that she was only fooling around—we headed back on to Bourbon, crossing a dark St. Peter and a lonely St Ann, and eventually found ourselves along a less crowded street with music punching at our ribs from every direction. It was Frenchman Street. Several beggars still lined the brick facades in front of the bars, but there was a sort of dignity inherent in begging on this street, just outside the Quarter, where the traffic was less and the music slightly more authentic and the patrons less drunk, less impulsive, and less likely to have any change to spare. If my
traveler’s checks would have been worth anything, I’d have gladly donated a considerable
amount in B. Hart’s name.

After walking the short length of the street, we popped into one of the clubs, and
stood near the bar, listening to an old man strum an acoustic guitar without any
accompaniment. Despite the crowd and the noise of the bartender shaking martinis in metal
cups, despite the girl standing right in front of the guitar player, talking on her phone and
smacking her gum, his unamplified notes cut through the room, sharp and delicate. He went
back and forth from strumming to picking, and I hadn’t even noticed he was wearing a harp
around his neck until he blew into it. We had a couple more drinks there, and eventually
wandered outside. There was a park bench near the door, and we decided to sit for a while
where we could still hear the music.

The air was thick with humidity and carried a stale stench of alcohol and sweat. The
shorter wisps of hair in front of Claire’s ear were damp and stuck to her face; the back of her
neck glistened.

“When do you think we should head back?” she asked, taking a sip of her drink and
running the plastic cup across her forehead.

I looked down the street. Several drunk women held onto each other as they
stumbled away from us down the center of the road. Claire’s chest rose with a deep breath
and she tugged at the bottom of her skirt. “We can go now if you’d like,” I answered.

“But all of our stuff, it’s still at Laurence’s.” Apparently she had been asking when
we should head back to Prentice.

“It feels weird, after all this, to think about returning home.”

“But we have to, right?”
“Yes, of course. I don’t mean that I don’t want to. I just, I guess I mean that it is different, now, knowing that the end is right there. We’re so close to it, aren’t we?”

“The end? Will it end when you return?”

“I think it has to, the trip, that is.”

“I figured you would leave again after settling the business with Hart,” Claire said.

Inside the bar, the guitarist had been joined by some other musicians. He was playing through an amplifier, now, and matching the notes on his guitar with a saxophone player. A snare drum punctuated their melody. “I don’t know,” I said. “I haven’t given it much thought. The end. It feels weird to say it.”

“It doesn’t have to be the end. The novel won’t even be finished.”

“If we turn in Hart and Fien, I doubt Hart will continue to fund my research.”

“Does that mean no novel?”

“There isn’t a novel. I mean, not really. Not yet. Besides, I don’t think I have to travel to write it, not with good internet access, that is. Any question I may have, anything that keeps me from moving forward can always be answered with a quick search, right?” It was difficult, thinking about the end. I hadn’t even considered until the moment Claire had mentioned it, but in her words the notion began to seem concrete and clear.

Claire, who I think noticed my discomfort with the conversation, plucked an ice cube from her cup and dropped it down the back of my shirt. I stood up quickly and wasn’t able to dislodge it. Dancing around the pavement, Claire fought to keep the bottom of my shirt closed until the ice cube melted. I was finally able to pull her hand away and the ice cube, almost completely melted, dropped to the pavement. Then, Claire leaned in and kissed me fully on the lips. I put my hand on her back, and she touched the back of my neck. When she finally pulled back, the ice cube had melted into the concrete.
As I took her hand and then took a step forward, she held back. She said, “I’m not trying to convince you to leave Prentice or anything, but do you really think you can finish the novel using only the internet as your experience? I mean, how can you be sure any of that stuff’s even real?”

I turned and faced her. “It’s fiction, after all. Besides, I can’t guarantee something’s real just because I’ve seen it. Most of the things I’ve experienced the past couple weeks haven’t exactly turned out to be as they appeared. How can I know that anything I’ve experienced is real?”

Claire led me down the street, pausing in the doorway of a bar. “Some of it’s real,” she said, and then she disappeared inside.

The place was crowded, more so than the previous bar. All the chairs in the place had been stacked up and lined against the wall to make the dance floor larger. The band had set up on the floor level just inside of the front window. There had to have been at least a dozen members on stage; the small performance area was so crowded with musicians and equipment that it wasn’t always clear who was playing what, or from where the sound was coming from. A drumset of mismatched equipment was centered in the back, but even from the drummer’s equipment hung accessories that the other members banged on and tinkered with as they danced by. An upright piano missing most of its frame stood like a skeleton in the back corner; its mechanisms twitching and thumping, leaving nothing hidden. In the front, practically part of the dancers, a young man worked an accordion like an extension of his ribcage and scatted into the microphone. The entire barroom pulsed in a single movement, as though a single organism struggling for breath, and I had lost Claire in them.

When she emerged, she balanced four drinks and handed me two of them. Relieved of the other two, she grinned and there was a touch of something hot in her eyes. Slowly,
from her hips and sliding upwards to her torso, down to her knees, she began swaying. Before long, we were both taken in by the music. By the overwhelming impression of the crowd, and we became part of it. I was connected to Claire; somehow we managed to intertwine our limbs and function with the limbs of the others, all without dropping our drinks, which isn’t to say the drinks hadn’t spilled at all. The ground was sole-high with spilled drinks. It splashed onto our ankles and soaked our socks as we not so much danced, but pulsed in an automatic response to the crowd. Our socks soaked, the alcohol seemed to seep in and rise through our bloodstream to our hearts. When our drinks were empty, the cups, too, hit the floor and for a section of time I was not aware of, Claire was pressed tightly against my body, our muscles gone limp, and the crowd carried us back and forth through to the end of the set. I could feel the mechanics of her body against my own, the oscillating of her bones in their joints, the knocking and ticking of a knee not-quite-right, and the shifting of weight in her hips. The flow of blood in her veins, through her skin, throbbed through my own skin, effecting a new rhythm just beneath my own skin.

As the music abruptly stopped, the single sweaty organism stilled, looking itself over in the brief silence. A moment of shame and a fleeting feeling of foolishness and a large empty space in their memories. They split, and individually went outdoors to breathe in the slightly fresher air. Claire and I were with them, and we had more drinks in our hands.

We kept on the road, however, creating distance between us and the crowd, still shaky from the static energy firing underneath our skin. Claire hadn’t called Laurence, and I wasn’t about to ask her too. Before long, we ended up in the square we’d visited earlier, Jackson Square, the sign had read, where the tarot readers sat at their card tables, their faces lit eerily by candlelight. Claire held onto my arm and we tried our best to stay out of the shadows, which wasn’t an easy task. Lights beamed inland from the Mississippi River and
seaward from the Quarter. Andrew’s statue and the spires of the St. Louis Cathedral cast large web-like voids throughout the park and onto the cobblestone. It was late, though I had no idea how late. The party seemed to still go on several streets to the north, but with the exception of the Tarot readers, and a single trumpet player bleating across the square, we were alone.

The woman who shouted first was young and well-dressed, though she appeared as though she’d spent some time roughing up her hair and hands to fit the part. “Come on, I’ll do you both, cheap,” she said. “I have a feeling about you.” Her accent was phony, and I thought this was why she sat so far from the others. We kept walking.

The next tarot reader was a man, and he was equally as eager. He rubbed the inseam of his jeans when we walked by. “You pay,” he said with a voice full of gravel and cigarettes, “and I’ll do her for free.” He raised lifted his arms up and behind his neck in a stretch; sweat seeped from his underarms into the fabric of his grimy tank top. I pulled Claire a little closer and we kept walking.

After the first two, they quit soliciting. At the far end of the square their tables were pulled together close, and they looked up from their conversations as we passed. Finally, after we thought we’d passed them all, Claire stopped and nodded toward a woman sitting right on the edge of a shadow, the shadow dividing the table in half. She was remarkably small. She had the frame of an undeveloped ten year old girl, but the dark spots around her eyes and the weary way her skin hung from her wrists revealed that she was much older than that. Claire said, “Her. Let’s go to her.”

“I don’t know, Claire. I don’t think I really want to get a reading. Besides, didn’t Laurence say to keep around people. It’s getting awfully dark around here.”

“No, I think we should.”
I followed her, and we stood several moments in front of her table before the woman looked up from her book. “I don’t do couples, together, I mean. It don’t work like that, and if somebody told you it did, they’re full of shit.”

“No couples,” I repeated. “Just her.”

She looked at me quizzically. “Okay, you can stay, but you gotta keep your mouth shut.” She flipped over a bucket and kicked it toward me, motioning with a bob of her head to sit. She looked at Claire, closely and attempted a smile, showing a rotted upper tooth. As an afterthought, she tried to cover the tooth with her tongue. Finally, she asked what Claire was doing in New Orleans.”

To my surprise, Claire said, “Hiding. I’m in trouble up North, but I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know you didn’t, honey.” She touched the top of Claire’s hand from across the table. I wondered if she had, perhaps, intuited Claire’s innocence after only a few moments.

“Can you tell me if I’ll be okay?” Claire asked.

“Probably not. It usually doesn’t work that way. If you want to be told you’ll be okay, I suggest you head over to her,” she said, pointing to the first woman who’d propositioned us. “Either that or you could always wait until later tonight, when you and him are alone, and just start crying. He seems like the type to tell you everything will be okay.”

I looked down at the top of my shoes. It wasn’t news to me, but I wasn’t okay with her broadcasting my weaknesses to others. Perhaps it was news to Claire.

The reader continued: “My name is Amarre.”

“How’d you get into this?”
“It’s not something one gets into. My mother was Egyptian, from Marsa Alam. That’s where I was born, too, but I came here years ago. Shit,” she said, looking up toward the statue of Andrew Jackson, “it must’ve been in my twenties.”

“Why did you come here?” Claire asked.

“Cause Egypt my town was a shithole with desert on one side and the Red Sea on the other. Everything, everybody was always the same. Here, it isn’t much better, I’ve now realized, but it is not as easy to go back.”

Claire looked around the square. She was hesitating. Finally, she asked, “how much does it cost for a reading?”

“Thirty dollars. Usually forty, but there’s something different about you, and I’d be lying if I said I too wasn’t a little curious.”

Claire reached for her wallet, which she’d put in my bag next to Hart’s letter and my useless traveler’s checks. Amarre told her not to worry, that they’d settle up afterward. She didn’t like the money out with the cards.

Amarre pulled a pack of cards from somewhere underneath her draping garments and handed them to Claire. Claire turned them over in her hands, their edges were worn and bore the grease and dirt from the hands of the readers before her. Amarre instructed her to shuffle them, and Claire did. The cards, larger than ordinary playing cards were cumbersome in Claire’s hands. I watched silently as the pulled several from the front of the deck and slid them between the others. She did this several times, and then set them back on the table in front of Amarre. After several moments of silence—I assumed Amarre was conjuring some spiritual being to assist her—she turned to me and asked if I’d like to cut. I hesitated, and when I reached for the deck in the middle of the table, Amarre slapped my hand away. She looked at Claire and rolled her eyes, and Claire giggled.
Amarre then dealt five cards in a cross pattern. She explained, as she did, that it was the pattern her mother had used, that these were, in fact, the same cards her mother had used. Skeptically, I looked for a Bicycle© or Hoyle© brand name along the edges, but didn’t see one.

After studying the cards for several moments, Amarre urged Claire to relax. She closed her eyes and mumbled a few undecipherable phrases, and then she studied the cards. I, too, looked at them, trying to look for patterns, a series of male figures, or any sort of conventional symbols: a moon, a ladder, a sickle. After two full minutes, during which Amarre alternated between looking at the cards and mumbling into her garments, she urged Claire, once more to relax. She reached for Claire’s hands, turned them palms upward and rubbed her thumbs along them.

“You’re drenched in sweat, dear,” Amarre said.

Claire didn’t respond.

Amarre studied her palms, looking from the cards to her palms and back. Finally, she gathered the cards and handed them back to Claire. “Shuffle them good,” she said. “They’re holding something back. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have made the joke earlier.”

Claire reshuffled the cards, seven, eight, nine times she slid the cards into each other, and then she handed them back to Amarre, who closed her eyes and mumbled. After a few seconds, she commanded that I leave the table. They would call for me afterward.

I looked at Claire and she nodded. I stepped away from the table and walked across the square once more. I heard some music softly emanating from a brick building covered in ivy, and I peeked my head in. I could still see Claire and Amarre from the front door of the bar, so I slipped in, quickly, to grab a drink. A woman with long brown hair and a thick German accent played a beat-up electric guitar softly and sang a Charlie Patton song.
of a soft, accordion accompaniment. I stepped toward the bar and sat, waiting for the attention of the woman behind the bar. A man in an army jacket sat next to me; he was scribbling in a notebook and he looked familiar. Not that I’d once known him, but he looked familiar in the sense that he, too, seemed out of place and a little lost. He appeared drunk; his eyes were puffy and red. He wasn’t sloppy, per se, just too unaware of his environment. He scribbled furiously into a notebook, occasionally looking up at the bartender. When she finally came over, I ordered two bourbons, paid her from Claire’s wallet, and turned to leave. Out of my peripheral, I watched the man tear the page from his notebook and hand it to the bartender. He looked ashamed of himself, and I was curious of his story. As soon as she touched the page, he turned sharply to leave, forcing me to exit as well, so as not to look suspicious.

We exited next to each other, and I could see that Claire and Amarre still studied the cards. The guy from the bar leaned against the brick façade and lit a cigarette. I pulled a dollar from Claire’s wallet and offered to buy a couple smokes from him. He took my dollar silently and handed me three and then held out a lit match. I tried to ask him where he was from, if he was a writer, what he thought of New Orleans, but he refused to talk, firing back at my questions with one-word answers: north, yes, and a shake of the head. I considered prying deeper, coming up with a question that didn’t have a one-word answer, but I was disrupted by some loud cursing, and turned to see Amarre standing in front of Claire, lighting a cigarette in frustration. I started toward them, but was stopped by the man who’d sold me the cigarettes. He said, “Hey, did you hear about the free spaghetti they’re giving away just at the other corner of the square?”

“Excuse me?”

“There giving away free spaghetti down there, you know, just if you were hungry.”
“I’m a bit wary of accepting free spaghetti in the French Quarter.”

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “I just thought, I don’t know, maybe you were hungry.” He shrugged his shoulders and headed toward Bourbon Street. I wasn’t.

When I made it back to Claire and Amarre, Claire had her hand on Amarre’s back, rubbing it consolingly. Amarre was flustered, repeating that it had never happened before, and Claire just nodded and said it was okay. That she would be fine. When they spotted me, Amarre said, I’ll make it up to you. I’ll do his for the same price.”

“No, thank you. I’m fine,” I said.

“I insist. I have to,” she said. “The cards were silent with Claire, and I have to know they are still speaking to me.”

“Come on,” Claire urged.

Reluctantly, I sat down. Amarre handed me the cards. I shuffled them, and handed them back. After spreading them out in the same cross format she’d used for Claire, she said, “you’re running too.”

I looked at Claire. “Yes, sort of. But not for long, we think.”

“Let me do the thinking. You just relax.” She turned over our more cards in the four corners of the cross, making a three by three square. “Whatever you’re working on,” she said, “it lacks heart.”

I didn’t respond. I assumed she was talking about the novel, which certainly lacked heart, but as she flipped two more cards along the bottom edge of the square, I wondered if she meant my relationship with Anna.

Amarre interrupted my thoughts: “You’ll face a trial soon, and it will not go as smoothly as you anticipate. You are not innocent.”

I glanced again at Claire; her puzzled eyes met mine.
Amarre continued: “whatever it is you’re running from, you need to run toward it. You will are not guilty of that crime, but there is something else to come, a climax that is long overdue. You will be found guilty of something else.”

“What?” I shouted. “Found guilty of what?”

“Do not go to Portland,” Amarre said, and she gathered her cards. She held out her hand and demanded thirty dollars.

I was unable to move. Portland?

Claire reached for my bag and pulled out her wallet. She opened it, digging through it.

“Karin,” she said, “what happen to the rest of the money?”

My glare loosened from across the table. “What?”

“The money. I had thirty dollars left in here. There’s only,” she thumbed through the bills, “seventeen dollars left.”

“While I was waiting for you, I had a couple drinks. I’m sorry. I didn’t know that was all that was left.”

Claire looked up at Amarre, whose expression hadn’t changed since she demanded that I stay away from Portland.

Amarre repeated the price: thirty bucks.

“I’m so sorry,” Claire stammered.

“It’s my fault. I thought there was more. I just went and bought us some drinks. There’s only seventeen left.”

Amarre sat back down and opened her book.

“We’re so sorry,” I repeated. “Can we come back tomorrow and give you the money.”
She looked up only for a brief moment, and she said, “You should leave.”

“Will you be here tomorrow?” Claire asked again.

“You should leave, now,” Amarre said, adamantly, without looking up from her book, a paperback, I’d recognized from an earlier time, something called N’an Lure.

Claire slid the seventeen dollars across the table and we left. I apologized profusely to Claire.

“Karin, it’s okay. I mean, what a waste of money, anyway. I can’t believe I talked you into it. First, she couldn’t even read my cards, and then she just warns you not to go to Portland. You’re not going to Portland, are you?”

“I hadn’t planned to,” I said, and then I remembered Olivia. “I mean, in the very beginning, Portland was on the drawing board, but I’ve long since given up on the drawing board. Besides, how can I even know which Portland she meant? East or West?”

“Who knows? Hey, you got me a drink, right?”

“Of course.” I handed her the other bourbon. I also handed her a cigarette, and we set about looking for a match.

When we neared Bourbon street, we found the crowd, the single organism from which it seemed (though I expect it to be far more complex than this) the city thrived upon. Claire held back a bit, startled, perhaps, by the raucous effusion of something disguised as joy. Boys in tank tops with tattooed arms cast their arms around girls in tube tops too small to support even a logo. Small wrists supported slender and bizarrely tall novelty cups full of sugar and alcohol. We stopped a man who had been stumbling our way and asked him for a light. With his thumb on the lighter he flicked the wheel across the flint and held it our way, firing an unsteady flame. I grabbed hold of his wrist to steady it and lit my cigarette, and after I thanked him, lit Claire’s from mine. The ember grew as she inhaled and illuminated a
small place on the street. There was a sign there, and we took time to read it, not that we
were interested in history, but that the screeching crowd ahead of us just seemed like too
much, like standing between cars on a New York subway train, and watching the
advertisements flutter by without the filter of Plexiglas®. The sign was merely a way to stall,
to build up the energy to move forth, to become a reluctant part of the organism, our buzz
having been long since killed. In bronze letters it marked the spot where Andrew Jackson
had given a speech in the latter half of the nineteenth century, shortly after the Battle of
New Orleans. The sign indicated that the speech had been delivered several stories up,
though when we looked up there was nothing more than a balcony with some couples on it,
nervous to finish the rest of their drinks. “New Orleans has been an integral part of our
nation since its beginnings in 1718,” the sign quoted, “and I’ll be goddamn if that’s gonna
end under my watch.”

Claire said, “It doesn’t feel right for a place to have been around for so long, and for
me to already feel too old for it. I mean, look at these assholes.”

The kids—probably not kids, exactly—a group of beardless men and women who
hadn’t used a legit ID since their virginity had been an issue, continued to stream through
the narrow street tossing beads and thrusting neon beverages into each other’s faces. Claire
and I stepped back against the wall to give them room, but there were too many, the
organism too large. We brushed shoulders, and then torsos with them until we spun away
from the mass, holding onto each other, a little disoriented. Claire had fallen onto the
pavement, thick with spilled drinks and shame. I pulled her up and tugged down at the edges
of her skirt. My heart, I mean, how she’d looked and all, and I was helping her up from the
cobblestone. All I wanted was to consume her, to clench her so tight that it’d only cost us
one bus fare to get home, but as I helped her up, and before I had time to bring her closer, a
cold piece of metal touched softly against my cheek. It took me a couple seconds to
understand what was happening, and when I looked around, the crowd had suddenly
vanished. I couldn’t see the figure because he was standing behind me, but I could feel the
metal barrel of a gun pressed into my check and aimed toward Claire.

It was as though hours had passed, though I had read these moments go by so quick.
My only experience like this had ended with vomit along my pant legs and a pillaged knife,
which I had quit carrying. I was in no way prepared, but as every movie I’d seen had
scripted, I allowed the man to speak first.

“Farkin’ Partland bouy,” he said, in a Cajun accent more guttural than my German
speaking grandfather. “Y’ant ta shart change m’lady, I’ll farkin tell ya what far!”

I’m not sure I could explain the following sequences, had I been tortured and
sentenced. In short, I flipped my shit, as much as a scrawny novelist aspirant could, that is.
Several months’ worth of a novel that would never be finished, an uninterested girlfriend
who had strung me across the country with fishing line, and the heretofore unrecognized
compulsion to act, to force the barrel in a direction away from Claire. All this, and some
other things that I couldn’t quite grasp had taken over my muscles as I knocked the pistol
away with the brunt of my forearm, and I spun around and released a barrage of punches
into the man’s midsection. In between punches—I had launched a dozen at this point, and
was waiting for him to finally double over—I pushed Claire out of the way, unharmed and
out of immediate danger.

Perhaps it was out of boredom, though I’d like to think it was because he was
growing tired, the man finally grabbed hold of my weary wrists and backed me against a wall,
pressing my wrists suffocatingly tight against my sternum. “Ma gal, Amar, she’d not bin
payed. Ahle tayk ‘is,” he said, ripping my bag from my shoulder and spinning me around to face the brick façade.

Before I could react, he kicked out the back of my knees and once I fell, dug his foot into the back of my neck, pressing my teeth into the grimy concrete. “Farkin styaway,” he said, and with one last jerk of his leg I tasted blood and bits of teeth atop my tongue. I watched his shadow bend over and pick up the gun. He grunted at Claire, who was crouching against the wall, and he disappeared.

With my face buried into the concrete, ashamed and bitter, I ran my tongue along the front of my teeth to ensure that the teeth had only been grinded and not knocked out. After swaddling my head into my arms, the taste of spilt beer and piss in my mouth, I felt Claire’s small arms pulling at my shoulders, turning me onto my back. She leaned me against the wall and used the hem of her dress to dab at the blood underneath my eye. All of this I watched through a single eye that was filling with blood. For the first time since my youth, I felt the sting of shame arising after letting down someone I loved.

Laurence was on his way to pick us up. I wasn’t in the French Quarter anymore, though I couldn’t tell you how I’d gotten out of it. There was a brief conversation. Claire asked what was in my bag. Anything besides the letter and the traveler’s checks? I shook my head. I was sitting on carpet, late, underneath the bright lights of a hotel. She rocked me back and forth, my head in her lap. It’s a good thing we kept the original underneath the mattress, she said.

When Laurence helped to hoist me up, I discovered that I could move without any trouble, yet each small movement fired an electric shock through my skull. He helped me into the truck. Claire explained what had happened on the way back to his house. I had to
clench every muscle in my body to endure the bumps on the dirt road. Laurence, silent for a
time, eventually asked if the tarot reader had told us anything good, and Claire said no.

Laurence gathered some first aid supplies for Claire—some bandages, antibiotic
ointment, and a few Vicodin, and then disappeared almost immediately after. It took some
effort to reach the attic, more from disorientation than anything. Claire helped me onto the
mattress and cleaned the cuts on my face. I took two of the Vicodin, which I probably
shouldn’t have since painkillers, even in very light doses, have always put my head in a cloud.
I closed my eyes for a few moments in an attempt to tolerate the pain.

Claire warned me not to fall asleep, that I should stay awake as long as I could. She
told me to sit up, and helped position me in an upright position, with my back against the
wall. “I’ll go get the guitar,” she said. “I’ll play you some songs to keep you awake.” She
hurried downstairs.

It seemed like she’d been gone for twenty minutes. I could feel the Vicodin kicking
in and I was fighting to stay awake. As a distraction, I grabbed my computer from my
suitcase and checked my email. I’d avoided it since LA. To my surprise, there were only
three emails.

Hart was glad to hear that the additional 150 pages would be ready, and he hoped
that after my stop in Prentice, we would be able to get back on track with the project. He
also mentioned that Fien was no longer staying in my apartment.

Dennison Whitmore wrote to ask why a Federal Agent recently telephoned him
about my involvement with the arson of the Baelb Library. He was certain, he said, that I
had no part in the public burning, and offered to help me out in any way possible. He also
asked how the writing had been going, and if I had any new ideas in store. He’d love to
continue to represent me, if things didn’t work out with Bunsen, that is.
I froze when I read the subject of the final email. It was too bizarre to summarize. I considered clicking delete without reading it, but couldn’t bring myself to do it.

Subject: See you in Portland!
From: “Ann Bertrab” Abba89@vmail.net
Marh 15, 2009 12:13 AM
To: “Karin” (kpank@vmail.net)
Priority: High

Karin,

This isn’t another one of your games is it? I was really excited when I saw you in L.A, and couldn’t believe you left without saying anything. Lucky for you, the security guard I met afterward said he knew you well, and explained that you had no choice in the matter. That you wanted to see me, but had to rush off immediately, though, he didn’t explain why. Oh well, I’m sure we can cover that over drinks in Portland, if you actually show up, that is.

Your email asking me to join you in the City of Roses couldn’t have come at a better time! I’m in San Francisco now, so I can be there by the eighteenth. I have friends there, too. So, you know, we could probably stay with them. I’ve already asked them about places to get a drink in Portland. They mocked me ruthlessly before sending me a few suggestions. (I guess Portland is something like the microbrewery capital of the country.) Anyway, I chose one because I liked the name. You’ll never believe it. It’s called “The Chanting Hunters!” Can you believe there’s two places named that? I wonder if its anything like the one in Prentice. (I hope the name doesn’t bring up too many bad memories. After all, we’re past all that, right?)

It is located on 2242 Southeast Hawthorne Blvd, and is just about a mile East of the Willamette River. If you’re arriving by train, take the Hawthorne Blvd bridge across the river. I’ll be waiting for you at 3:30pm.

Can’t wait to see you!

Love,
Anna.

I knew there was something wrong. I mean, there had to be. Of course, I’d never emailed Anna to meet me in Portland. But perhaps this was part of a game. Her retaliation to the game she thought I’d been playing in L.A. Regardless, I couldn’t go. It wouldn’t make any
sense. I was about to reply to the email when I heard the trap door open violently, and Claire stormed up the stairs guitarless.

I closed the computer.

“He is such a creep.”

“What happened?”

“He just wouldn’t let up, you know? First he insisted on having just a quick nightcap, that he wouldn’t be able to sleep properly knowing he’d been a poor host. Then, after I gave in, he started in with the hands: around my shoulders, and then a quick shoulder massage, then down my arms.” Claire was flustered. She paced across the room as she ranted, holding her elbows. She continued: “And then, I feel that asshole’s breath on my neck. Can you believe he had leaned in to try to kiss the back of my neck?”

“What did you do?” I stood up, slowly. There was a dull pounding, like a cue ball rattling inside my skull.

“I ducked out of the way. I mean, the fucking nerve! I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

I set the computer on the floor. “You are,” I said. I reached for her, but she darted out of reach. “Is he still down there?”

“I don’t fucking no. He was at the bottom of the stairs calling after me, saying he’s sorry, that he’s just really drunk, and on and on.”

I reached for her once more, but she spun out of my reach and knelt beside the mattress. “You know what we ought to do?” she said, lifting up the mattress. “We need to get this letter and get the fuck out of here. I mean tonight. There’s no sense sticking,” and then she quit talking.

The letter was gone.
We stared at the bare floor underneath the mattress. I don’t know how long we looked at it, but eventually Claire lowered that mattress, and we panicked.

“He’s got the only proof of our innocence,” she said, sitting on the attic floor with her knees tucked under us.

“We gotta get it back.”

“There isn’t any getting it back, Karin.” She stood up and walked over to her suitcase. She opened it onto the mattress and began throwing her clothes into it. “He took it, which means he’s in on all of this. If he’s in on it, he would have destroyed it as soon as he could. Besides, for all we know, he’s already called the cops. Why wouldn’t he? We have nothing that proves our innocence.”

I walked to the stairs, listening for Laurence. I wanted to go down there, but Claire was right. We couldn’t know how much time we actually had. I, too, packed my suitcase. “Once we get to the train station, we can hide there until our train leaves.”

“What about the flyers? They’ll recognize us.”

“I looked into a small mirror that hung on the wall next to the window. “I think we’ll be fine. Your picture wasn’t on the flyer, and my face is swollen to shit. Nobody will recognize us.” I set our packed suitcases next to the opened trap door and listened for Laurence. The floors below us were still. “Do you know where he keeps his truck keys?”

“I’m pretty sure he keeps them in the ignition.”

“You remember how to get back into town?”

“Yup,” she said.

“Wait here,” I told her. My head still ached, but the Vicodin seemed to be almost at full effect. My mind was foggy, but I was able to function, thinking only about the next step,
and the next step, and the next step. One scene, one action at a time. No more distractions, no more detours.

I eased the suitcases down through the trap door and set them near the landing at the top of the stairs. Downstairs, I snuck around until I found Laurence’s bedroom. When I was certain he was asleep, I brought the suitcases down and loaded them into the truck. I went back for Claire. To be on the safe side, I slipped the truck into neutral and pushed it out into the road a ways before starting it. Claire sat silently beside me as the truck rattled down the stretch of road and eventually into town. I probably shouldn’t have been driving.

The inside of the truck felt like a movie theater. Periodically I glanced over at Claire, her hair tangled from an exhausting evening, her black dress wrinkled. Beside her, the New Orleans landscape flashed by like fast forwarded images from a film. My heart, I had thought earlier, in the Quarter when I helped her to her feet, my heart had stuttered when I saw her crumpled on the ground. And now, it shattered. I wasn’t going to go to Prentice with her. Not yet. I’d come too far not to reach the ending, to at least see it. I had to go to Portland and finalize things with Anna. I didn’t know the rules of this game she was playing. I didn’t even understand the nature of the game, but since it was a game I knew there had to be an ending.

When we reached the station, we parked along the road. I before heading in, I stabbed my knife into all four tires of Laurence’s truck. Claire and I stood at a distance, and watched it sink into the pavement. Claire insisted on trying to appear as though we were not together. I hated doing this, but accepted it, and it bought me a little time. We stood at a distance from each other and scanned the departure times. The Northbound train left at 4 AM, and the Westbound train at 4:25AM. I used the last of my money to buy Claire a train ticket to Chicago and give her bus fare back to Prentice. We sat across from each other on
opposite benches. Occasionally, Claire looked up at me and smiled. Her expression was filled
with excitement and nervousness. When she got up to go to the bathroom she dropped a
note in my lap. It read:

What are we going to do when we get to Prentice, without the letter?

I tore a page from my journal and wrote the following:

Claire,

I can't go with you. Not yet. I'm so sorry, but I have one more stop to make before I can return home,
otherwise I will keep chasing and chasing and never arrive. I will be in Prentice in less than a week, I
promise. Lay low until I return. I will contact you as soon as possible.

I still owe you an answer. I wasn't sure when you asked this, but now I know. Yes, I am still chasing Anna.
I'm following her to one last city, and it'll be over. I need to end this game for good. I hope you understand.

I love you,
Karin.

I folded the letter and put it in my pocket. When she returned, an announcement was made
for our train. Claire led the way down the platform, following the directions of the
conductor. I followed her, keeping several passengers between us, as she had suggested to
avoid suspicion. I boarded the train behind her, stowed my luggage on the lower deck, and
followed her up to her seat. I took the seat behind her. She put her hand over the back of
the seat against the window, and I grabbed hold of it. We sat like this in silence for fifteen
minutes as the other passengers filled in the seats around us. When the conductor made the
announcement for last call, I told her I was going downstairs to grab my notebook. Before
leaving, I leaned over the passenger who now sat next to her, and I kissed her hard on the
lips. Then I went downstairs.

As I stepped off the train, I handed the letter to the conductor and she ensured me
she’d pass it on to Claire immediately. I had just enough time to exchange my ticket and
board the train to Portland, and when I walked across the platform to the opposite rails, I saw Claire in the window. She was reading my note.

I boarded the train to Portland, took another Vicodin, and instantly fell asleep.
I slept most of the trip. Though I remembered writing a little, I couldn’t remember what I had written, and didn’t see much point in opening my computer to check. After all, it wasn’t really about that anymore. I struggled to decide if it had ever been about that. By the time I crossed the Mississippi, I figured Claire had arrived in Prentice. I felt terrible for making her arrive alone, particularly since I was no longer interested in chasing down Anna. But it seemed necessary, the natural order of things, for me to find Anna one last time, on the road, if only to tell her that I’d accepted her narrative, that our story was complete.

Shortly before we arrived in Portland, I sat in the lounge car sipping on a cup of water. My funds had run out. Two young men, probably in their mid-twenties, sat in the booth behind me. From what I’d gathered, they had both just finished graduate school and were discussing their theses. I listened in on their conversation:

Young Man 1: What was yours on again?
Young Man 2: It was basically an argument against this recent theory that men are taller now and more apt to play video games because of the selection process for high-school basketball teams in the seventies.
Young Man 1: It’s amazing what you can get away with writing. No offense. How long did it end up?
Young Man 2: The fucker ended up over 400 pages.
Young Man 1: Do you think they’re still reading it?
Young Man 2: I guess I’ll find out after this trip.

I went downstairs and gathered my bag, unsure if I was ready for this final stop.
Chapter 49: Almost the End (Seriously, Flip Ahead, It's Right Teere), In Which, Out of Perhaps Nervousness, or Possibly As A Distraction, For a Time I Address You, the Reader, March 19

When I found Anna in Portland, she’d been expecting me. It was the first time in a really long time I remembered her even waiting for me, let alone anticipating my arrival. The writing, well, I’d actually written some on the train, I mean really wrote; I didn’t copy anything. The truth is, it was a distraction from how shitty I’d felt about leaving Claire. But now that you’ve caught up, you know. Truthfully, the writing was terrible, and there seemed not to be a foreseeable improvement. You’ve made it here, so I suppose you know. After finishing things with Anna, who’d long since finished things with me, I’d head back to Prentice, on my own accord, and I would face the end, whatever it brought. Until then, you should take some satisfaction in knowing that you’ve made it to the near ending, the moment before the climax, the calm before the storm. I assure you, a storm is coming.

Anna sat at a brewery, alone at an outdoor table, and she was wearing dark sunglasses and a sleeveless tank-top I don’t remember ever having been in our once-shared closet. There was no color in her cheeks, and I dreaded to hear her speak. I’d much rather put my headphones back on and listen to a tape, the mix Claire had given me what seemed like years ago, though I know it had only been weeks, when I’d first left Prentice. Her tank top was yellow, sort of, though not the kind of yellow that you’d associate with the word; it was nothing like the sun, and it was not like a bottle of mustard; it was the yellow of faded pages and of drywall hung below a leaky patch in the roof, and it was stretched tight across her abdomen as she leaned back, craning her neck over her shoulder, and said, “Hey, Karin.”

“Can I sit down?”
“Of course,” she laughed, and set down the paperback she’d been reading. I glanced at the cover and recognized the title, Na’n Lure. “Welcome to Portland,” she said as she crossed her legs and shifted her weight forward, onto her right elbow. It wasn’t until I sat down and placed my bag at the feet of the iron deck table that I realized her hair had been dyed a darker shade of brown.

“You look great,” I said. “This place, Portland, it’s not bad, right?”

“Yeah, it’s not bad. I’ve only been here a day and a half.” She lifted her glass and took a long drink from her amber beer and with her thumb and index finger wiped the foam from her upper lip.

“Your hair is darker than it was. I mean, it’s a great color for you. When did you dye it?”

She pinched a curl and pulled it taut in front of her sunglasses. Her eyebrows rose and her nose squished upwards as she looked over her sunglasses to see the dark strand. “Dyed it?” She looked surprised. “This is the real color, silly. I quit dying it after,” she paused, and then continued, “when I started traveling. You’ve seen it this color before, right?”

“Of course I have,” I lied.

“I’ve quit wearing those awful contacts too.” She raised her sunglasses and nested them high upon her head, revealing her hazel eyes which I’d always known as blue. “I’m sorry. I know your thing with sunglasses. Don’t worry. I’m looking at you when I talk,” she said as she looked past me toward the Willamette River. I reached in my pocket for something to hold on to, looking at the table, studying the way her tan wrists flexed as she lifted her glass once more to her lips. I gripped the handle of the knife I’d acquired shortly after the last time I’d spoken with Anna. Me, gripping the knife, by the way, foreshadows
nothing. Since New Orleans, I’d just started carrying it again, and it was in my pocket, so I
gripped it.

“So, what are you reading?” I finally asked.

She picked up the book and opened it to somewhere in the middle, holding her
finger in a spot, perhaps chosen at random, and then closed it and looked at the cover. “It’s
called Ranger Em, The Best Side, by N’an Lure.” I noticed my error; the actual title was hidden
in the glossy purple cover beneath a pair of eyes that intimated fear and haunting, shriveled
below N’an Lure, the author’s name.

“What’s it about?”

“What’s it about?” she repeated. “It’s about people, about cities and trains and long
stretches of highway alongside soybean fields. It’s about deception and fucking and dying.
What do you think it’s about? It’s about love.”

“Sounds accurate,” I said, immediately regretting my biting tone.

“So,” she said, setting the book back onto the table. “How’s this game work? I ditch
you in Prentice, you ditch me in LA. I suppose it’s my turn, right? Is that why you so
urgently insisted I meet you in Portland?” She wasn’t angry; rather, she smirked, fully
engaged and ready to give this game her all.

“Anna, this isn’t a game. I met you here because,” I started to say, when the waiter
walked by. I caught his attention and ordered a Rob Roy.

“Oh come on, Karin. A Rob Roy? This is the microbrew capital of the country and
you’re going to drink that snobby sludge?” She flagged the waiter before he went inside.

“Scratch the Scotch,” she said. “Bring him the dopplebock.” She looked back at me. “You
were saying?”
“Anna, I never sent you an email asking you to meet me in Portland. I received your email three days ago. I was meant to leave for Prentice the following morning, but I took a chance and came here to meet you. In truth, I came here in order to,” I tried to say it, but Anna cut me off.

“I’m confused,” she said. “Is this part of the game?”

“There isn’t a game, Anna.”

“I only sent my email as a response to the email you sent me.”

Anna and I’s meeting, here in Portland, was not chance. She had received an email, allegedly from me, and had only responded. There was no doubt Fien had set this up.

“Anna, I think this meeting was designed, a trick. What sort of communication have you had recently with Fien?”

Before she could answer the waiter came back with my drink. He looked down at Anna’s book. “Ranger Em,” he said. “Incredible, isn’t it?”

“I can’t put it down.” The waiter didn’t move. He looked expectantly at Anna.

“We’re kinda in the middle of something,” I said, slowly looking up at him, annoyed. He glared back, challenging me until he was called by another server from somewhere within the brewery.


“I wasn’t protecting you.”

“Either way, I liked it. You’ve changed a bit in your travels.”

“It’s just, I’m exhausted. A lot has happened.”

“It’s a true story, you know.”

“What is?”
“The book,” she said, holding it up once more. There was such cheesiness to the way she displayed it, as though plugging a product in a film.

“I’ll check it out,” I lied again.

Foam swelled above the top of the glass and a thin line of dark liquid streaked to the bottom where it pooled at the table. Without warning, Anna swept her finger across the top of the beer, scooping up a dab of head like it was frosting from a cake and put her finger into her mouth.

“Is that a Portland thing?”

“Try it,” she said, and like most things she suggests, I did. It didn’t taste like much, but I lifted my eyebrows, regardless. “It’s not the taste you’re paying attention to, dork. Look at how the foam on top the beer stays suspended like that, even after you remove your finger. The higher the foam stands after you pull your finger away, the realer the beer is.”

“The realer?”

“The more authentic it is. The more natural and fresh.” I tried it again, but the head shriveled back when my finger came in contact with it.

“Anna, there is something else going on here. “Did you happen to mention the reading to Fien?”

She looked away, took a long sip from her beer.

“Anna?”

She flagged down the waiter to order another. He brazenly brought her one, smirking at me as he did.

Finally, after sipping at the foam of her fresh beer, she said, “It just came up, when he was in L.A.”

“He was in LA?”
“Yeah, just a couple days after you left. He asked to meet with me, about the editing opportunity.”

I couldn’t believe it. He had known about the reading, and I was certain who had told him, though I couldn't figure out Laurence’s angle on this entire thing. He seemed to legitimately hate Fien, and I didn’t think he was on that good of terms with Hart, either, since he was so late on his third novel. “What did you guys discuss?”

“Not much,” she said. It was a very short meeting. That guy I told you about, the security guard, Cory I think was his name, he showed up and started going at it with Fien.”

“What about?”

“It was something to do with some mail Cory was supposed to have sent to Fien. Fien was furious. He knocked over a table at the restaurant. He kept threatening to burn Cory down. They were kicked out immediately, and then I lost track of them. Later that night I got your email, asking me to meet you in Portland.”

“The email wasn’t from me. It was from Fien. He has access to my email account. I put a request in to cancel it, but it hasn’t taken effect yet. Either that, or he put in an additional request, probably claiming that the initial request was phony.”

“I don’t understand. What’s going on between you two?”

I wanted another beer, but didn’t want to order from our waiter. I reached across the table and grabbed Anna’s glass and took a drink. I tried to explain the story to Anna, as briefly as I could. I left a lot out, and perhaps added a little as well. In short, I told her that Fien had been staying in our, my apartment. That I was wanted for burning down the library, and that Fien had actually done it. After doing the reading, I came across a letter that proved my innocence, as well as Fien’s guilt, but the letter had been stolen. I explained that I was going to go back to Prentice as soon as I could, and I would probably be arrested.
“So, if you knew I hadn’t invited you here, why did you come?”

“Because I knew you’d be here, regardless of who had invited who.”

“Karin, I don’t understand.”

From across the table I saw the woman I’d met in a hotel lobby several years ago. Despite her hair and eye color, despite that we were now in Portland instead of Prentice, I saw the girl whom I had loved until she wouldn’t allow me to love her anymore. “It isn’t a game,” I repeated.

She reached into her purse and removed some lip gloss. Deliberately slow, she twisted off the cap and dabbed at her lips with it. I knew this meant she was shutting down. That I didn’t have much time left. Whether intentionally or not, I’d brought too much drama to the situation, and she wasn’t willing to accept it, let alone become a part of it. She would keep moving on without me.

“Oh. Damnit! I hadn’t intended on going into all this. It isn’t why I came. It’s just that, I knew you’d be here, and I have to say something to you, but it’s all wrong now. I mean, fuck. Anna.”

“What?” she asked, casually tossing her lip gloss back into her purse.

“You know how I get. I never know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything” she said dramatically.

“Come on. You know that isn’t true. I can’t just sit here.” I took another drink of her beer, and it swirled in my empty stomach. It was terrible, and somehow fitting for my situation. “Can’t we just start over?”

“What, you mean like, metaphorically? Start it all over? Us?”

I paused. “Would you? Start it all over?”

“No,” she said.
“What I mean is,” I started, but wasn’t sure how to finish. I said, “I could leave and come back. So could you. We would come back, and I would say something else. You could edit what I said when I first sat down. I’ll remove the sarcasm when I comment on the book you’re reading, or maybe you could be reading a different book, and I could sit down again and tell you that I’ve missed you so much, and that though I’ve come all this way to find you, and that everything has been miserable since you left, things have changed. We could talk without pretext. I wouldn’t have to talk about how my writing has been going or about Fien or about the past. We could talk about right now.”

“You mean lie?”

“I—”

“It can’t be the truth if we leave out the past,” she said, “but I’m okay with that. We can pretend.” She flipped her sunglasses down from her naturally darker brown hair, covering her hazel eyes. It seemed she was looking at me. She was looking in my direction.

“Lie?”

She stood up. “Okay,” she said, and then she walked into the brewery and I watched her emerge again from the front door that led to the sidewalk. Even as she walked past me I thought this was part of a game. She’d leave—I was used to that—and I’d also leave, and we would meet up here again in a matter of minutes. So, I too stood up and headed to the door, thinking of how I would restart the conversation when we sat again, just moments from now. But when I reached the door the waiter stopped me. He put a hand forcefully to my chest.

“What’s your tab,” he said, pressing the thin piece of paper against me. “You have to pay it before you leave.”
“I’m not leaving. It’s just a, just a game. She’s coming back, and I am too. We’ll have another drink and probably some lunch.” At least I hoped to end things civilly with Anna. The bread in my bag had gone hard, and the lunch meat that I had taken from Laurence’s house had not been refrigerated for almost seventy hours. “I’ll be back in a second. It is just some theatrics, a game. We’re starting over, you see, not metaphorically, but actually.” He continued to hold the bill against my chest, blocking the exit. I reached my hand to his, taking hold of the bill, and returned to my seat. I stretched to look back at Anna, in the direction she had been walking, just in time to see her step onto a Portland municipal bus, and then the doors closed and the air brakes released and the bus merged into traffic.

My wallet was empty. I’d used the last of my cash for Claire’s train ticket. I thumbed through my hiding places, the collection of Eliot poems, my journal. It was all gone, and even if I would have found a stray traveler’s check, I knew it would not be usable. I wondered where Anna would be headed to next. Glancing down at the bill, I realized that she had been waiting for me, not for minutes or an hour, but for most of the day, with guests and meals and drinks. As my mind drifted away from Anna, as she drifted away from me—I hadn’t had the chance, I realized, to tell her that I did not want to chase her any longer, that though I loved her, I was moving on—I began to think about Fien’s motivation for bringing us both to Portland. No sooner had the thought entered my mind, did the answer appear, as the scripted, timed out to the exact second, as only a fine-tuned novelist could do. I looked up from the bill and saw a black SUV skid up to the curb and stop. Two men jumped out; they wore black suits and dark sunglasses. I knew exactly who they were, and more importantly, I knew who they were looking for. They passed right by my table on the sidewalk, and then entered the restaurant. Through the window I saw them scanning the
place. One of the officers poked his head out into the patio area and questioned the waiter. I heard my name mentioned, and the waiter pointed right at me.

And just at that time, by chance, or by some additional grandly scripted narrative—a competing plotline—a beer glass was dropped near the door. The officers’ path had been blocked by several drunk patrons who scrambled to simultaneously avoid and clean up the shattered glass. The waiter, my waiter, looked me in the eyes, and he tried to push the patrons out of the way. Desperately, I grabbed my suitcase and planted my left palm on the top rail of the waist-high iron fence that kept me contained, and I leapt over it. I was surprised at the fluidity of my sudden movement. It’d been days since I’d had anything more than some hard bread and salami, and I felt too weak to stand up, let alone be chased through a town I’d never before been in. Despite all this, I ran down the sidewalk, disappearing into the crowds of bikers and speed-walking hipsters. I ran until my lungs felt as though they could not process another breath of oxygen, and then I ducked into a shady brewery with dim lights and red leather booths. A sign at the bar read, “Tacos, 2 for a dollar.” On the carpet, behind a row of nearby barstools, a pair of yellow dogs lifted their heads lazily at my entrance and put them back down.

“What do you drink?” a painted, dark-haired bartender asked me.

I wasn’t worried about the money. I was certain that I’d be found before it ever came to that. “Give me your finest bourbon” I said. “A double,” and she turned to search for the right bottle.

I sat in a shadowy booth in the rear corner of the bar and watched two small boys roll cue balls back and forth to each other on the pool table. Each time the ball smacked against the rails, they quickly pulled their hands away. If they kept it up, I thought, fingers would be smashed.
A waitress brought me another bourbon as soon as she’d noticed my first glass was empty. It wouldn’t be long now. On the television, the Seattle Mariners were playing a spring training game. The field was bright green; most of the players wore sunglasses and played without sleeves. They were in Arizona, I remembered, for Spring Training. They’d get a dose of the desert air before returning to the rainy north to start their actual season. I was turned almost completely around, so I didn’t notice when the man approached my booth. As soon as he spoke, I thought this must be the end.

“Karin? Karin Pankreez? My goodness, what the hell are you doing way out here? You do recognize me don’t you?”

In the dim bar, it took a few seconds, but yes, I did recognize him. It was not the police.

“Uncle Morris? Holy shit! What are you doing in Portland?”

He laughed. “I get around, as I told you in Boston. And it’s not Uncle Morris, It’s Morris Uncle Sam Echols.” He held out his hand and I took it.

“It doesn’t make sense, though, running into you this far into my trip, all the way across the country. And right as my trip is about to end, as well. It’s,” I searched for the word, “it’s too contrived.”

“It doesn’t have to make sense,” he said. “Some things just happen. I suppose stranger things have.”

“Well, I wish you would’ve showed up earlier. I’m afraid my time in Portland is about up.”

“So that must mean you’ve found your girl. Abby, was it?”

“Anna. Abby was her sister. I did find her, but there’s more to the story.”

“There always is.”
“Can I ask your advice on something?”

“Of course.” He brushed his beard over his shoulder.

“I mean, you’ve been around for a while, and you seem to understand things in a clearer way than most people. You see, I’m about to get arrested for burning down a library in Wisconsin. I didn’t burn it down, though the only proof I had has been stolen. That’s not what I’m concerned with anymore, though. I’m convinced now that what happens will happen regardless of what I do. What bothers me is that I can’t figure out how everything has happened, how it all blew up so completely. I only wanted two things: to write a novel and to find Anna.”

Morris took a drink of his beer, and looked hard at me from across the table. Finally, he said, “What got you in trouble is that you tried too hard to include it all, to tie up every loose end. I recognized this in you from our first conversation.”

“Why didn’t you say anything? It would’ve saved me a lot of time writing.”

“I don’t mean the novel. I mean your deal with Anna. As soon as you caught wind of her in Boston, you began creating all her surroundings and all of her motivations, trying to pursue every aspect: the items to give to her sister, the suspicions of where she’d head next, the confidence that you knew her plans and motivations. If you could just find out where she was, you’d win her back. But you never had an ending, and though you thought you had a beginning, most of that turned out to be inaccurate.”

“But I had a beginning. It was in a hotel lobby one night.”

He interrupted me. “That was only your interpretation of the beginning. There was far more to it. Remember the roommate she’d had in Boston, the time she spent in New York, all those things that’d happened before you that you never knew of?”
“I don’t know what you mean,” I said. Suddenly, the barroom lit up. The front door had flown open and the men in suits from The Chanting Hunters, led by the waiter, stormed inside and addressed the bartender. Even in the dark bar, they still wore their sunglasses. Morris didn’t even seem to notice them.

He continued: “What you have to understand, Karin, is that stories cannot be all-inclusive. They cannot be from life to death. You need to impose a new beginning and end. As a designer, you have to recognize these things. You don’t have to create anything. Merely, you have to recognize the appropriate starting and ending points, and record what you know. If you fail to miss either one, the entire thing begins to unravel. You find yourself in an infinite labyrinth, trying to resolve each and every new plot line, and thus never get to the real ending.”

Suddenly, it was clear. Morris was right. Even now, I realized that I still hadn’t had the opportunity to end things with Anna, nor had I allowed myself to start things with Claire. Abby, Hart, Tabby, Abe, the reading, they had all been distractions that kept me from moving East and West, never North and South. Behind me, a child screeched in pain. I looked back to see him dropped to his knees, holding his hand. When I turned again to face Morris, the suited men were standing in front of the booth.

“Karin Pankreez?”

I nodded.

His grip around my arm as he pulled me from the booth was surprisingly gentle, as though he wasn’t all that concerned with my arrest. As he twisted my wrists behind my back and snapped on handcuffs in one fluid motion, he said, “I’m Detective Henry, and this here is Agent James. You’re under arrest for impersonation, theft, evasion of justice, and under suspicion for arson. You have the right to remain silent,” he started, and went on and on. I’d
never had handcuffs on before, and was amazed at how tightly they pulled at all the muscles in my arms. As a kid, I remember sitting at a Elementary School Assembly, where I friend of mine was chosen to be an assistant in a Magic Show. The magician put my friend in handcuffs to test them, before later escaping out of them. I was jealous of my friend, then, but no longer was. Finally, Detective Henry said, “You need to come with us.”

I looked at Morris, who scratched at his beard and tossed it once again over his shoulder. The waitress piped up to say that I hadn’t yet paid for my bourbons, either.

Morris smiled and raised his glass to me. “I got this round,” he said.

I thanked him with a nod and was tugged away by my wrists as they led me out of the bar.

“Hang in there,” Morris shouted from our booth in the rear.

The officers wasted no time bringing me back to the Portland Police Department. They didn’t say anything during the drive. Nor did anybody at the station. They took my picture from several angles, stamped my fingerprints, and placed me into a small holding cell. I was of no concern to them, just a little extra work, and they treated me this way, cordial but uninterested. In the evening, I was fed. The meal was nothing like the meals we’d had at Laurence’s but here there was no pretext. It was just a simple meal—a dry hamburger with damp French Fries and a soda. I was ravenous, and a small part of me was glad to finally be caught. I wasn’t sure what would happen next, but I knew that I no longer had to figure it out.

After eating, I was brought in basic Police Cruiser to the Portland International Airport. There was no black SUV, no armored vehicle, no motorcade; they hadn’t even bothered to put the cuffs back on me. In under an hour, I was put on a plane and headed
back home. The officer who traveled with me forced me to sit near the window. Compared to the trains I’d slept on, the seats were terribly confining, though the officer offered me five dollars to purchase a pair of headphones so I could watch the in-flight movie. I’d already seen it. After the movie finished, re-runs of NYC-Vivor® played until we landed in Milwaukee. It was different, watching it, having met Karyn, and seen them shooting it in L.A. It reminded of the scene from the Wizard of Oz, when Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal the wizard. The magic was gone, though in this case, neither red slippers, nor a bravery medallion were going to help me out. In Milwaukee, where we landed, a police car was ready to bring us the rest of the way. Before noon, I was sitting in an empty cell in Prentice.
Chapter 50: The Preliminary Questioning and Consultation, March 20

Through a reinforced glass window in my cell, located just above eye-level, I watched the rain fall over the parking lot, rinsing the salt from the cars and eating away at the large piles of snow that had accumulated over months of plowing. Prentice had an unusually early thaw this year; the small city had transitioned from a blanketed, white grid to a sloppy soup-bowl of mud. If I stood on the single cot against the windowed wall—there were three cots in the cell, though I was the only tenant, a small sink, and a toilet—I could watch the citizens dash to and from their cars, scurrying to make it into the public building to dispute their fines, get copies of their birth certificates, and register their pets. The jail was connected to the courthouse, and being such a small town, most official city business occurred here. It was in this building, in fact, where I had applied to work for the Prentice Parks Department. I wonder if any of my coworkers knew I was here, if they’d pay me a visit. For that matter, I wonder if anybody besides those who had sought me knew I was here.

For the time being, I was told, I would just have to wait. I’d been fed lunch upon arriving, and it felt as though days had passed before they brought me dinner. At dinner, I was told that it wouldn’t be much longer. The authorities had been trying to figure out who would be handling my case. Lucky for me, the officer said as he slid a tray with a hastily made sandwich my way, it appeared as though the local authorities would handle most of the charges. My belongings—my computer and notebook—would be kept safe until they granted me access to them.

There’s a rule in storytelling, one of those “if a gun is shown in the first scene is must go off in the last scene” sort of overly general and universal codes, that advises the writer
never to leave a character in a room by himself for too long. Regardless, I didn’t think my captors were storytellers.

Shortly after dinner, I was finally led out of my cell. It was awkward, at first. I knew several of the officers. They’d questioned me after being caught speeding, witnessing an accident downtown, or locking my keys in my vehicle. Prentice was not very large, less than 10,000 citizens. These people shopped where I shopped, brought their kids to their parks where Anna and I walked; they borrowed books from the public library I had so often visited. This was probably why they were friendly with me. They didn’t believe that I had burned down the library—I could tell that in their relaxed manner of transporting me from room to room, and in their lethargic way of questioning me.

The walls of the new room were bare except for a large window on the side opposite the door. Otherwise it appeared to be more or less a conference room. There was a long table with some notebooks, a pitcher of water and plastic cups, a couple pencils, and a microphone on top. The chairs were large and cushioned. It was a relief to sit in such a nice chair after the hours spent sitting on the plane, in the car, and on my cot.

Twenty minutes passed before anybody joined me in the room, though I was fairly sure I was being watched through the two-way mirror. (Here I am, in a room by myself again, well, sort of). I wasn’t cuffed. What were they looking for, if they were indeed watching me? Was there a particular posture known to be used by arsonists? At first, I made sure to avoid any movements that would appear nervous, but then I feared coming off too calm. I rapped my fingers on the table, but it felt phony. My gut was stirring with nerves, but knowing I was being watched, I couldn’t find a twitch or fidget to accurately represent those nerves. Finally, I picked up one of the nearby pencils with the intention of writing a letter to Claire, but as soon as I did, the door opened. Had they been waiting for me to do this?
Three people entered; I think they had probably looked very official in the morning, but it had been a long day and they were ready to go home. I was keeping them from going home, and I think they were more upset about this than anything else. The young police officer in a lazy blue uniform remained standing near the door while the other two sat across for me: to my right, a chubby man in a grey button up with a briefcase clasped tightly in front of him, and to my left a slender woman with orange-tinted skin and thick-rimmed glasses. They said hello, and informed me that they would be recording our conversation.

After fidgeting with the microphone, the woman spoke first: When we entered you were about to write something. Was it a confession?"

I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

She looked at the top of the page. “Claire,” she read. “That must be your friend who lives across the street from the library, right?”

How could I have been so foolish, so soon, to have written her name when I knew I was being watched? I’d have to be smarter. “She’s a close friend of mine.”

“Yes, we know. We’ve been keeping an eye on her, a peculiar woman, though I wouldn’t pin her as the type to burn down a library. But, you never know, right?”

I didn’t respond.

The man in the button-up took over, opening his folder and removing a page. As he scanned it, he introduced himself as Detective Crease. He’d be leading my investigation. He asked if I’d found an attorney.

I shook my head. Where had he expected me to find an attorney since being arrested? I hadn’t even been allowed a phone call.

“Ms. Banks, then will represent you and provide counsel. Is that okay?”
Ms. Banks smiled, more out of habit, I was sure, than any pressing desire to represent me. “That’s okay. Listen,” I said, “I just want to tell the truth.” I looked at Ms. Banks, who continued to smirk. “I don’t mean to offend you, Ms. Banks, but I don’t want a lawyer to take everything I say and shape it into sort-of-truths. I can do that myself. But I know what I’ve done. I know what I’m guilty of and what I’m innocent of.”

“We stated, Mr. Pankreez. Unfortunately, I think you’ll find it to be slightly more complicated than that. Whether or not you tell the truth will have little bearing on this case.”

I wasn’t sure what she’d meant. After some biographical questioning, they started in with the questions:

1) Did you willingly leave Prentice after an officer advised you to remain in the city?
   a. Yes.

2) Why?
   a. I was under contract with Bunsen Publishing to conduct research on the novel. I assumed the officer’s advice was just that: advice. I didn’t think it was legally binding.

3) On March 5, did you receive a telephone message from the Prentice Police Department requesting you to show up at the courthouse no later than March 7?
   a. Yes.

4) Did you receive subsequent requests after you failed to show, including emails from both the Prentice University Library and the Prentice Police Department?
   a. Yes.

5) Why did you fail to show up?
   a. I was in Albuquerque at the time. I wouldn’t have been able to make it.

6) And why did you neglect to contact the department?
They thought I burned down the library. I figured that if I stayed away longer, I may be able to find proof that showed otherwise.

7) Did you assault a hotel employee in front of a small crowd in New York City, and then proceed to pull a knife on the crowd?
   a. Yes.

8) What caused this altercation?
   a. Hunger, mostly. And he was withholding some information I was seeking about a, about someone I knew.

9) On March 8, did you smoke an illegal substance with a hostel employee in Albuquerque?
   a. Yes.

10) Do you smoke marijuana frequently?
    a. Never.

11) Did you impersonate novelist Finn Fien at a reading in Los Angeles?
    a. Yes.

12) Did you profit from this impersonation?
    a. Yes, sort of. I received the cash that was collected at the door. I used it to make up for the money that Fien had taken from my account after making several online purchases in my name. Directly after the reading, however, my traveler’s checks had been voided, so that cash was all the money I had.

13) On March 14, did you receive the services of a Tarot Reader, and fail to pay her?
    a. She charged thirty dollars. I was only able to pay seventeen.
14) On March 19, did you flee from The Chanting Hunters in Portland without paying for your bill?
   a. Yes, but the bill wasn’t mine. I mean, I had ordered a single beer. There were several hundred dollars’ worth of—

Ms. Banks held up her hand to silence me and leaned over to Detective Crease. She whispered something into his ear. After a few quiet moments, he scribbled something onto his notepad. He said, “Never mind the restaurant bill. Ms. Banks has just informed me that a woman had returned to the restaurant several minutes after you left and paid the bill. Apparently, she was supposed to meet you there. Some game you guys were playing, she’d said.

Anna had returned.

“Alright, now for the more serious offenses.”

14. Did you set fire to the Baelb Public Library?
   a. No.

15. Do you have an alibi for your whereabouts that evening?
   a. I was walking home from The Chanting Hunters, here in Prentice. Anna, the girl who paid the tab at The Chanting Hunters in Portland, she knew where I was. I’d been writing.

16. Was she with you on this walk? I mean, can she verify that you were where you say you were?
   a. No.

17. Do you have any proof that you didn’t set fire to the Baelb library.
a. I did, but it was stolen.

18. Your proof was stolen? By whom?
   a. It was a letter, from B. Hart to Finn Fien. It was signed. Everything was in it, how they had planned to set me up to ensure Fien’s innocence. When I was in New Orleans, I stayed with Laurence Sleightor, another writer represented by Bunsen. I thought I could trust him. He convinced me to go to the French Quarter, and when I returned, the letter was gone.

19. I have to ask: if you had such a valuable letter, why didn’t you make copies?
   a. I did. I carried the copy with my, and kept the original at Laurence’s house. But we, I was mugged that night, in the Quarter. The mugger said he worked for the tarot reader, and he was trying to get the thirteen bucks I owed him. He beat the shit out of me, and then took my bag. When we returned, we discovered the other letter was missing as well.

Detective Crease continued to write long after I’d finished answering the questions. Periodically, he asked me to verify the spelling of some names, and to clarify on dates. When he finished, he turned and looked into the mirror. In the reflection, I saw him signal to somebody just beyond the glass. Moments later, a small red light flashed twice through the mirror.

   “Alright,” he finally said, scanning his notes. It appears that we have confessions then to multiple accounts of evasion of justice.”

   “Wait,” I interrupted. “Is that possible? Can I evade justice multiple times? I mean, I only evaded it the first time, when I decided that I wouldn’t return. Then, I just, I don’t know, stuck with my decision.”
“You’ll be charged for each time you were notified and failed to respond.”

I tried to figure out how many times this was. Too many to remember.

“Additionally,” he continued, “you’ve confessed to assault, threat with use of a deadly weapon, use of an illegal substance, criminal impersonation for personal profit, and two counts receiving services without paying fully for them. After I verify that the bill at The Chanting Hunters had been paid, the latter charge will be dropped to a single charge. Furthermore,” he added, “you plead no contest to the arson at the Baelb Public Library. Is this accurate?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, Karin. Thank you for your cooperation. We’re through with the questions for the time being. Ms. Banks will be in contact with you soon.” They stood, and the police officer, who I had forgotten was even in the room, finally led me back to my cell. Before long, the lights were cut, and I was left alone in the dark. There was no sound except my breathing and the tapping of the rain against the window. Occasionally, from some hidden hallway, a door swung open and then it shut, but whoever had been there, hadn’t been looking for me.

That night, sleeping on the spring-less mattress of the cot, I tossed and turned violently. A cars driving by outside sprayed the inside of my cell walls with their headlights. I tried to sleep on my back with my hands behind my head, as I had seen the prisoners do in movies, but the bed was so narrow my inside elbow scraped against the wall. Even when sleeping on my side, I couldn’t pull my knees up without them hanging over the edge of the cot. I spent most of the night sitting upright on the cot, my back against the wall, with the thin wool blanket spread across my shoulders and knees.
I couldn’t quit thinking about what Ms. Banks had said about Anna coming back to the restaurant. What had I missed out on? Clearly, she hadn’t known about the arrest, and I wonder if she’d found out about it later. Someone from the restaurant must have said something to her when she offered to pay the bill. Had I been wrong in choosing to go to Portland to end things with Anna? Was it simply the moments stuck in my head that I’d shared with Claire? Picking her up from the ground, getting my wounds cleaned by her, her desperation mixed with her ability to play twelve bar blues? I knew it was more than that, but what did it matter? I hadn’t finalized anything. And now Claire, too, was somewhere here in Prentice, hiding out, unaware that I was less than a mile from her doorstep.

I found myself waiting for the cars to drive by, eager to provide light into my dark cell. The window streaked with rain, and puddles had formed around the lower edge of the window. I was as lonesome as I’d ever been, and I could not see a way out.

Somehow, I must’ve managed to sleep a little bit, because I had a strange dream. It started off more as a memory. Claire and I were in the taxi on our way north to Lake Superior as we had done more than a month ago. The first difference I’d noticed was the music playing. Instead of the listening to the tape Claire had given the cab driver, he had insisted listening to his own tape of Zydeco. Besides that, everything in the dream was exactly as it had been that night, until I was standing on the rocks, my feet soaking wet, and I leaned in to kiss Claire. I was startled in the dream, however, because in her kiss there was a strong taste of Colgate® toothpaste and coffee. I knew that smell. When I pulled away, it was Anna. I struggled to remember that moment, if I had ever kissed Anna on the rocks of Lake Superior, but there was no such memory. Then, as we walked back to the car, it was Claire again. On our way home, I realized that I hadn’t yet seen the driver’s face. I asked him a question to try to get him to turn around, and was shocked to discover Laurence Sleightor
driving the car. He had rolled three cigarettes, keeping the wheel still with his knee, and passed them back to Claire and I. For the rest of the night, any moment in which Claire and I had become intimate, it was always Anna’s face I kissed, Anna’s body I touched. When we talked, though, flipped through the pages of her book, it was Claire. A loud crack of thunder pulled me out of the dream; it was followed shortly after by a flash of lightning, illuminating the jail cell. The passing cars became fewer and fewer, and soon the darkness started to fade into light. Somewhere down the hallway, a floor-polisher fired up, and I could hear somebody cough. I tried to look out the small window on the door to see if I could find a clock, but there was none. What time did it get light in Prentice during late March? It was my loneliest night, and I had no idea how long until it ended. Soon, I fell asleep again, but was dreamless.
When I woke, Ms. Banks was sitting on the cot across from me. She was thumbing through a stack of papers. I sat up slowly. I knew I hadn’t slept long, as the daylight was yet immature.

“I brought you some things,” Ms. Banks said, and handed me a grocery sack. I stretched my arms into the air and yawned. I was still wearing the clothes I’d been arrested in: a pair of blue jeans and James Franco’s “Felice Brothers” t-shirt. Inside the bag there was a toothbrush in a package, some travel-size toothpaste, a pack of gum, a couple granola bars, an apple, a yellow legal pad and a golf pencil. “You’re a writer, right?” she said. “You’re going to be here for a while, so I figured maybe you could get some work done.”

“Thanks.” I walked over to the sink, opening up the package with the toothbrush. I had to piss like my life depended on it. I looked back at Ms. Banks. She looked as though she had only recently left her thirties. Her hair was pulled up in a bun, and she wore a different shade of thick-framed glassed. They were red this time, to match her red sweater, I supposed.

“Go ahead,” she said, pointing at the toilet.

“I’m not sure I can, I mean, with you here.”

“Of course you can, if you have to go bad enough. Besides, I can’t leave. I have twenty minutes with you, and you’ve sleep through the first ten. Trust me, this isn’t the first time a man has urinated in my presence. Nothing about you suggests that this experience would be any different than the others. Now, if you don’t mind, time is an issue. I’ll turn away if it makes you more comfortable.”
It took me awhile to get it rolling, but once it didn’t, I didn’t think I’d ever stop. The sound of my piss hitting the bowl was like a bathtub filling up with water. I heard a chuckle from the corner of the cell, which made me all the more self-conscious. I swear it was the longest piss I’d ever taken. I considered stopping mid-stream and finishing up after she’d left.

“Any day, now, Mr. Pankreez.”

I held up a finger, signaling ‘just a moment.’ Finally, after what’d felt like a full two minutes, my bladder had emptied. A shiver ran up my spine, and I was exhausted. I washed my hands, brushed my teeth, and sat down across from Ms. Banks.

“Very impressive.”

“Thanks. Can we get on with this? Time’s an issue, right?”

“Correct.” She crossed her legs and looked down at the notes she’d written. Looking up at me, over the rim of her glasses, she said “Karin, I’m going to be straight with you. Things do not look great. We’re dealing, of course, with the primary charge of arson. We may be able to work something out with the lesser charges, after the arson charge is dealt with. Here is where we currently stand: the city has substantial evidence that suggests you were involved with the arson.”

“But it’s not mine, I mean, it wasn’t mean. I told you yesterday it was plant—”

She held up a hand. “You must let me finish, if we are going to get this done.” The city has substantial evidence that suggests you were involved in the arson of the Baelb Public Library, which took place on the evening of December 16. You, however, have no proof to show otherwise, nor do you have an alibi for your whereabouts on December 16. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”
“Good. Moving on. You claim that certain measures had been made by a,” she squinted at her notes, “was it a Mr. Fine Flynn?”

“Finn Fien.”

“Yes, by a Mr. Finn Fien in an effort to make you appear guilty. What is your relationship with Mr. Fien?”

I ripped open the packaging on one of the granola bars and chewed it as I tried to place ‘my relationship’ with Fien in a context that didn’t seem completely absurd. The problem was, that the actual origins and nature of our relationship seemed too far fetch to ever believe. I said, “It’s a very bizarre scenario, my relationship with Fien, and contains a plethora of ins and outs.” I took a deep breath and rubbed my temples. “It’s not a very believable story, but I swear it’s all true.”

“Do you best, and keep it brief.”

I started several times, and each time I started, I would remember a relevant detail that’d happened earlier, so I had to stop and start over again. It was as though I was telling the story backwards. I couldn’t help but think of Sleightor’s first novel. Eventually, I think I divulged all the pertinent details: the access to my email account, to my credit card information, the internet purchases and phony emails, the material he’d stolen from the Prentice University Library, moving into my apartment, working with B. Hart, the Author-Sit program, my first interaction with B. Hart, the failure of my first manuscript.

“The Author-Sit program?” she repeated. “That can’t be legally sound. I’ll have to look that up.” Her pencil scratched away on the pad. “Okay, second on the agenda: You claim that you had acquired proof of Fien’s guilt, and the involvement of Mr. Hart. Please explain to me what the proof consisted of, where you had attained it, and what happened to it.”
After explaining all the details of Hart’s letter, Ms. Banks stopped me.

“So, you’re saying that while impersonating Fien, you gained access to his mail, read it, stole it, and planned on using it against him?”

I stood up on the bed and looked out the window. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still a oppressive grey. I couldn’t quite get the angle right, but I knew Claire’s house was only a few blocks down the road from my cell, and the library remains just across the street.

“That’s correct,” I told her, sitting down. “Hearing it put that way makes it seem a lot less hopeless.”

“Yes,” she said. “It does.” She scribbled some more on her pad, flipping the page and starting again at the top. “Now, I have one more request of you. Since the mysterious, vanishing letter is not only missing, but had been illegally obtained, our next effort will be to gather a list of contacts, people who you’ve met during the last six to eight weeks, that is, while you’ve been evading justice, who can testify one way or another to your actions and character. It is a longshot, and unless you have somebody with some serious prestige and strong political standing it seldom makes a difference, but at this time I’d like you to compile a list of all those who you’ve been in contact with during your travels. You can use the legal pad I brought you. Please, to the best of your ability, provide as much as you can about them: names, location, nature of the relationship, and anything else that may help to show a jury that you were not involved with the arson. I’ll be by again this evening to collect it.” Ms. Banks stood up and took another look at her notes. “There really isn’t a lot here, Karin.”

I didn’t respond.

“I’ll look into that letter to see if it gives us any possibilities. Be sure to make it clear on your list which individuals may also know Mr. Fien, as well as those who’ve seen the
letter.” She slid her papers into a leather briefcase, snapped it shut, and knocked twice on the cell door.

“Thank you, Ms. Banks, for helping me out.”

She nodded.

“I am telling the truth, you know.”

“I know.”

The door opened and the officer who’d monitored our hearing yesterday held it for Ms. Banks. She turned once more to me. “You’re going to be allowed to make a phone call later today, Karin. You should think about whom you might want to call, who you think can help you. If there is anyone else you feel I should contact, please write it down.”

The door shut, and I was alone again in the cell.

Later in the day, after returning from lunch, Ms. Banks returned. I gave her the list.

Contacts (or, the cast of characters):

Anna Bertreb—former girlfriend. She is currently traveling, and has been in contact with Fien. He began contacting her about a month ago using my email account; she had believed it was me.

Claire—a friend. We met shortly after the library fire. She was with me when the copy of the letter was stolen in the French Quarter, and was also the one who discovered the original letter missing at Laurence Sleightor’s house.

Dennison Whitmore—my literary agent. He had advised me not to sign on with B. Hart, claiming they sounded like “real elitists, people with god-knows-what sort of agenda.”

B. Hart—my editor at Bunsen Publishing. He arranged everything, from my travels to my timeline. Finn Fien is his best-selling author.

Abby Bertreb—Anna’s sister. I visited with her while in Boston, hoping she would help me find Anna.

Morris Uncle Sam Echols—A sage-like old man I had first met in Boston, and later in Portland. He advised me on how to find Anna, as well as how to find a story.

Janelle—an employee at the Shell-Sea Hostel in lower Manhattan, though she lives in the Park Slope area of Brooklyn. She likes her wine and her reality television.
Tabby Noebale—an organic farmer in Albuquerque New Mexico. Former member of the Arpoh Winfrey group, and acquaintance of Laurence Sleightor.

Abe Filmnopryz—Public Speaker and current voice of Storage-Tec® Hard-Drives. Supposedly has, or had, a perfect memory. Acquaintance of Tabby Noebale.

James Franco—Hollywood actor, Writer, and PhD student. An admirer of Finn Fien’s novels. He helped me to exit the reading in LA, without getting caught. He’s also an acquaintance of Cory O’Graffer.

Karen—Hostel employee in Albuquerque, NM. She seems to be on the run from somebody out East.

Karyn “Karate” Collickson—Reality television star and amateur poet. A much more tolerable person that his television persona makes him out to be. He’s also represented Storage-Tec® External Hard-Drives with Abe Filmnopryz.

Jason Shrontz—Bounty hunter and amateur fighter. I met him first in Albuquerque. He appeared to be an acquaintance of Karen’s, and tried to convince her to return home. I ran into him later at an underground fighting match in the Fashion District of Los Angeles. A friend of mine—Abe—was scheduled to fight, but when he didn’t show up, they forced me to enter the ring. At the last minute, Jason Shrontz registered to fight in my place. A friendly guy, despite his know-it-all attitude and unkempt facial hair.

Cory O’Graffer—The head of the Los Angeles Public Library’s Media Center. He may be a part time security guard, as well. I couldn’t tell. He’s an old acquaintance of Laurence Sleightor’s. He helped coordinate the Fien Reading.

Laurence Sleightor—Novelist who also publishes with Bunsen Publishing. He’s well-acquainted with Fien and Hart, as well as Claire, O’Graffer, and Tabby Noebale. He took the letter from underneath my mattress in the attic, where I slept when I stayed at his house.

Finn Fien—Well, you probably know. If not, you can search for him on the internet. He’s been staying at my apartment for the past month, through an arrangement vis-à-vis Hart’s AuthorSit program. He burned down the Baelb Public Library out of revenge for something Ezra Wile wrote about one of his novels. Ezra Wile, however, works at the public library in Prentice IL; her sister, Esther, works at the Baelb Public Library. He set fire to the wrong one.

I looked over the list once more to be sure that I hadn’t left anybody out, and then I handed it to Ms. Banks.

“Any new advancements on the case?” I asked her.

“What, since this morning?”

“Yeah. I mean, I thought that’s what you’d been working on.”

“Karin, let’s get something clear. I’ve got at least a dozen other clients in this building, with just as bizarre, if not more bizarre, stories as you have. They’ve all got a story,
and then they’ve got the truth that is somewhere underneath the layers of the story, things they’ve added and things they’ve left out. I spend all day trying to find the actual story, and then figuring out how to rearrange their story to convince a jury. I’ll be lucky if I can even take a look at your file before then.”

“Are there stories are really as bizarre as mine?”

“Well, no. Close, maybe. I can tell you this, however. If we are able to locate that letter, it would be dismissed in court as soon as we brought it forward. You can’t steal mail and then attempt to use it as evidence. The only way that letter would stand is if either Hart of Fien somehow, accidentally or not, mailed it to you or to someone who was willing to hand it over.” She checked her watch, and then knocked on the door.

“How long does this last?” My throat was so dry, it felt as though it could split open at any moment. “I mean, how long until the end, until I am convicted and put behind real bars?”

“Could be days, could be months. It depends on the strength of the evidence against you. Hey, the evidence against you hasn’t even been cleared for use, yet. That reminds me, can you prove that Fien had been staying at your place?”

I thought about it. “I think so. As long as he hasn’t deleted my emails, I definitely could.”

“Alright,” she said. “That’s a start.” She withdrew from the conversation, I could tell. She was considering something, looking at an invisible chart somewhere, like working long division in her head.

As the guard let her out, she turned and asked, “Have you given any thought to that phone call?”

“Not yet. I’m sorry.”
“Give it some thought. I'll be back in the morning. Hey,” she said, “you haven't lost this case, yet. You never know what could come up.” Her teethy smile had the power to instill confidence, and I'm sure some of the others in this building, those who were sharing similarly lonely nights inside similarly lonesome rooms, would sleep better having spoken with Ms. Banks. I, however, felt no such feeling.

That night, after dinner, I was allowed a couple hours of recreational time, which was nothing like the recreational time shown in prison films. Nobody lifted weights; nor was there anybody in jumpsuits. No shivs, no poker games, no basketball courts, and no bodybuilding prison guards with automatic rifles. That was to come. We were watched over by a stout woman who sat next to a red button on the wall, though none of us knew what the button would do if pressed. This sort of rec time—as the regulars called it—consisted of a couple chairs in what looked like an office break room, with access to a small courtyard and a one-room library. The break room had a coffeepot and a vending machine, and though there were three of us in there, all of our money had been confiscated upon arrival. Due to the nature of my alleged crimes, I was only allowed into the library for fifteen minutes, and was followed down each aisle by a chaperone. I found a dusty copy of Kafka's *The Trial* which I hoped would get me through a sleepless night. In the courtyard, there was a park bench underneath some elm trees; their fresh green buds glistened from the day's rain. The rain had since stopped. Beyond a cyclone fence, I could just make out the area around Claire's house and the library, though the fog had obscured my view. I leaned against the fence, waiting for a chance to see Claire, walk out of the fog. But soon I was called back in, and she never did arrive.

When I returned to my room, there was a note from Ms. Banks.
Karin,

Your list of characters has actually been helpful. I will attempt to contact some of them in the morning. I’d like you to do something more for me. I want you to give me an account of all the events you can remember, since the burning of the library. I’ve requested that your journal and computer be given back to you for this purpose, though of course, your laptop use will be limited to your writing files. Please be as detailed as you can. Regardless of how incriminating you think this report may be, I need you to be honest. Tell me everything. I believe it will give me a little help with your case.

I’ll be back in the morning to see how you’re doing. See if you can’t get your morning “duties” taken care of before I arrive.

Hang in there,
Barbara Banks

Shortly after reading the note, a guard arrived with my computer and journal. I tried to remember the night when I’d first seen the flames. It was difficult to think of it as a mere account. I felt that I’d had to create the scenes, give Ms. Banks the whole account. I had to start earlier; I had to start, just slightly, before the beginning. I wrote:

Watching Anna watch the snow accumulate outside, I typed the words:

It wasn’t reasonable to expect me to get all the quotes write, all the letters, emails and phone calls. I could cut and paste some of my writing, I supposed, in order to give the narrative some credibility. Besides, if she liked it, that is, if she thought it would be useful, I could always request those letters later.

I typed halfway through the night. I was on the bus, headed toward Boston when a vehicle’s headlights lit spilled into my cell. At first, they were no different than the other headlights that leaked in, but they hung there just a little longer. Somebody letting their car warm up, I figured, though I was outside earlier and it wasn’t that cold. I went back to my writing:
The brightly-lit subway car was full of twenty and thirty-year olds acting much older.

The headlights still hadn’t moved. What caught my attention, however, were the shadows that passed across my walls: long, stilted legs like a giant walking in between myself and the headlights. A short while later, they passed again. And again, closer. I looked back at my screen, and before I could start, I heard a knock on my window. I stood on the bed to get a better view. Legs, much smaller, thinner, rose like saplings in front of my window. They were bare up to just below the knees, where a skirt whipped in the wind. At first I thought it was a mistake, some kids who ran out of doors to bang on and run. Then, the legs disappeared out of view. They were replaced by Claire’s face. The headlights that had lit up my cell, disappeared. It hadn’t rained in a while, though her long, auburn hair stuck to her face. She had been walking for a while.

Her lips formed words, but there was no sound. The window was too thick. She grabbed a strand of hair that had stuck to her cheek and pulled it from her ear. I tried signaling to her. I touched my chest, meaning “I,” but I couldn’t find the gesture for “am so fucking sorry.” She touched her chest too. She pointed at me. Then, for no less than two minutes, we looked at each other in the dark, allowing our eyes to adjust. I touched the window, but it wasn’t as a gesture, to signify anything, that is. It was selfish. The gesture was an uncalculated response, my body’s attempt to dry her cheek with my sleeve, an attempt to press through the glass. Claire stood up, then, and I thought I lost her. Her legs left my view for a moment, and then a saw a small light. She knelt down again, and held her phone to the window.
The screen read: “I received an email from somebody named Cory. Do you know him? Laurence is pissed about his tires.”

Cory? How is it possible that Cory O'Graffer had contacted Claire? I jumped from the bed and grabbed the notebook Ms. Banks had given me. I wrote, “Fuck Laurence’s tires. Claire, I’m so so so so sorry I left you on the train. I should’ve known nothing would come of it. I’m a fool.” She knocked on the window and pointed to her watch. I nodded and showed her the notebook.

She typed and held the phone to the window. It read: “You don’t understand. He has the letter. Said it was a misunderstanding. I’ll explain later. You going to Portland was a good thing.” I drew a question mark on the page. Her pronoun confused me. Who had the letter?

She wrote: “You met someone there, right? Uncle Morris.”

Just then, a light flashed into my cell. Claire looked behind her, and then she leapt up and took off running. I stretched as far as I could, trying to see who had approached her, but the window was too high. I placed my foot on the edge of the sink and gripped the edge of the window, hopping up to get a better view. How could Morris have the letter? Or did Cory have it? Straining, my fingertips slipped and I misplaced my foot on the way down, missing the bed by inches. The wall beside my cot seemed to explode inward, and then I saw a white flash. When I finally came to, sun crept into my cell, and Ms. Banks stood over me.
“You had a visitor last night, I’ve been told.”

I nodded. I touched my forehead, finding an acorn-sized lump just above my left eye.

“Could this visitor be of any help to your case?”

“I’m not sure. Somebody came by before she could tell me anything.”

“Any decision on the phone call?”

I hadn’t given it much thought. If I called Claire, she could explain how she’d heard from Cory. I could, perhaps, call Hart, tell him I had the letter and hope to maybe blackmail him. Though, that was risky. Maybe I could talk to Laurence and see if he’d be willing to sell the letter back to me, though I didn’t have any money left; besides, he’s probably already destroyed it. I suppose that, if there was nobody else, I could always call Anna to tell her the game was over, but she didn’t have a phone.

Ms. Banks reached into her briefcase and pulled out a bottle of aspirin. She handed me three and I popped them into my mouth and chewed them.

“Yeah,” I finally said. “I think I know who I can call.”

Ms. Banks arranged it, and within an hour I was back in the conference room, sitting in front of the phone. It was a long shot, I thought as I dialed the numbers. When he answered, the voice was gruff, as though I’d just woke him up.

“Dennison? It’s Karin.”

“Karin! My goodness, I hadn’t expected to hear from you. How are you?”

“Not good. I’m in jail, and I don’t think I’m going to get out any time soon.”
Since I only had ten minutes, I briefly explained the entire situation. It wasn’t that difficult. I’d revised the story so many times in the last few days that I could make it as short or long as I needed. When I finished, there was a long pause on the line.

“I had a bad feeling about that company.”

“I wish I would’ve listened to you.”

There was a knock on the conference room door. An officer signaled two minutes.

“It’s just,” I continued, “I was so upset about how The SauerKraut Circus had turned out. I thought maybe this would be my break.”

“Are you back in Prentice?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a lawyer?”

“State appointed.”

“I’m sorry, Karin. Business has been tremendously slow for our agency recently, and we’ve had to limit the duties of our legal representation. Otherwise—”

“It’s okay. She seems alright. She’s a storyteller, and seemingly honest, somehow.”

“What’s her name?”

“Barbara Banks.” There was a long pause on the other line. I assumed Dennison had been writing down the name.

“Give me a little bit of time. I’ll see what I can do.”

I thanked him and said goodbye. The officer led me back to my cell, where, with nothing else to do, I continued working on my account of my time since the library burning.

After a few hours, there was a knock on the door. I had a visitor. The officer led me back to the conference room. Dennison, I figured, must’ve needed some more information. I noticed a door this time, on my way through the hallway. It was adjacent from the
conference room door, except that this door had been painted to match the walls. The trim had been removed, and the plane of the door was flush with the plane of the wall. With the exception of a thin, grey line that separated the door from the wall, one would never notice the hidden door. Well, until you got inside the conference room, that is, and spotted the tiny flashing red light in the corner.

It wasn’t Dennison, though. With her back against the mirror, Claire sat in a chair facing the opposite wall, her posture pole-straight. You could tell she was nervous. She faced me as I entered, stood halfway up, and hesitated. The officer asked her to remain seated. You have ten minutes, he said.

I sat across the table from her. Our conversation from the night before was so obfuscated with sleeplessness and ambiguity. I didn’t know where I stood with her. Her face, now that I could see it in the daylight, was pale and also appeared unrested.

“Claire.” I didn’t know what to say except for to repeat my apologies from the night before. Somehow, the reverberations in my gut, though, told me they weren’t enough. I was surprised when she reached across the table with both hands and placed them on top of my fingers. “I really fucked up. I’m so sorry. I thought I had to do it, but I was wrong.”

“No cuffs?” she responded.

“No touching,” the guard interrupted.

She withdrew her hands, only a little. “I have some news,” she said.

“About the letter?”

She nodded.

My thoughts were moving in a dozen different directions. “I didn’t go to Portland to find Anna. I mean,” I said, “I did, but not to get her back. I went there to tell her I’m out.”

“I know. Forget about that for a moment.”
“Last night,” I started, and then looked up at the officer. He was typing on his cell phone. How do you know about the letter? How’d you know I was here?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Can you tell it in less than,” I paused, looked up at the clock, “under eight minutes?”

“Have you met somebody named Cory O’Graffer?”

“Sure, in LA.”

“Right.” Claire chewed on the edge of her lip for a moment, strategizing the order of her story. “He’s friends with Laurence, apparently.”

I nodded.

“So, here goes.” She looked up at the clock. “Laurence had been contacted by Hart about you being arrested in Portland. Apparently, he felt sort of conflicted. He’s pretty pissed about his tires.”

“How did Hart know I was arrested?”

“Karin, I’ll never finish if you keep interrupting. So Hart found out you were arrested because Finn Fien had sent him an email, like a mission accomplished sort of notification.” She held her hand up as I started to speak again, and then she continued. “Fien had been informed by Anna. I guess they met in LA the day after your arrest. Fien was there to try to clear up some misconceptions about his reading,” she said, drawing invisible quotations in the air as she said ‘Reading.’ Anna.

“That’s right. Anna knew about my arrest, because she had returned to the restaurant.”

Claire glared at me from across the table. She looked up at the clock on the wall, and then back at me.
“I’m sorry,” I said. “Continue.”

“Anna did not know about your arrest. She only knew that you hadn’t returned to the restaurant. But, she had been contacted earlier that day by her sister, Abby. Abby is the one who told her you had been arrested.”

I resisted the urge to speak.

“Abby, apparently, had received a strange call the night before from an uncle of yours, I guess. Uncle Morris?”

“No, he’s not my uncle. Just some guy I met in Boston, and ran into again in Portland. Morris Uncle Sam Ech—” catching myself, I shut up.

“Whatsoever. Anyway, he was there when you were arrested. According to Abby, and all the others whom this story has filtered through, he felt the need to contact somebody. The only name he knew, however, was Abby Bertreb. He found a listing for her in Boston and made the call.”

“Shit. That’s amazing. I mean, I don’t think it helps us at all, but that is too unbelievable to make up, right?”

“That’s not all,” she said.

“Two minutes,” said the officer, and he focused back to his cell phone.

Claire continued: “Laurence admitted to taking the letter, but he didn’t destroy it. That night when we were in the French Quarter, well, the reason he didn’t come along was because he had a meeting scheduled with Hart, through Skype. He saw right through our plan, you know, leaving the letter out in the open that first night for him to steal, and he was mildly insulted that we’d trusted him so little. He said he knew we’d never tend to the original so carelessly, so once we left, he searched our room and found the original under the mattress. His plan was to show it to Hart, to use it as some sort of leverage or blackmail, in
an attempt to get Hart off his back about the third novel. When we called him that night to pick us up, he hadn’t had the time to replace it. He hoped we were too drunk to notice it missing. He planned to tell us about it the following morning over breakfast, but we were gone. He got a phone call later in the day to say his truck had been towed from the Amtrak station, and that he had to pay a fine to get it back. That’s where he discovered the slashed tires."

Claire was out of breath, though she had completed the story impressively in less than eight minutes. I felt as though I trampled on her accomplishment, though, when I explained that the letter wouldn’t do me any good, that it was stolen property and wouldn’t hold up in court.

“He already knew that,” Claire said. “He had a plan, before we bolted and slashed his tires, that is.”

“So he’s not going to help us?”

“Cory couldn’t say. He just kept repeating how pissed he was about his tires. I guess things have been pretty tight for him in the last couple years, with the poor sales of his first two novels, and the delayed third novel. Cory said he’s considering going back to teaching. He’s already sold most of his belongings, including the furniture in his house, to maintain his lifestyle.”

“What do we do, then,” I asked.

“Time’s up,” the officer said, putting slipping his phone into his pocket.

Claire shrugged her shoulders. “Wait?”

The officer grabbed my wrist and began leading me out of the room.
Straining my neck to look at Claire, I tried to say something fitting for the moment—her sitting in the chair as I was ushered out by an officer—but nothing came out. I just looked at her, and she back at me. It wasn’t right, but I had this sense that it was.
Chapter 53: The Days Go By, March 23-27

The days had continued to go by with no word from either Ms. Banks or Dennison. I’d been informed that bail was a possibility, but I shrugged it off. I didn’t have any money

I continued to work on my account of my experience of the events. It was no longer as much of an obligation as it was a way to pass the time. I found myself more and more engaged with the story, my story, and I was sinking deeper and deeper into the details with every sentence. I remembered conversations I’d had with Anna in a lost subway tunnel, her head in my lap, and I remembered the lesser character, the barista at a café in lower Manhattan who’d cut off my free coffee refills until I purchased breakfast. I even remembered sharply those early moments, walking back from The Chanting Hunters and seeing the inevitable collision in the Prentice streets between the football fans and the city’s firemen; the sky had been white for moments, and then slowly faded shade by shade to red, orange, and finally purple. I even remembered remembering things, like having first met Anna in a hotel lobby, and how I had once walked the Los Angeles streets recklessly, even as a not-so-confident college student. As I got further and further into the narrative, I was able to sink further and further into each scene and really question myself, my motivation for every action. Had I really acted so desperately with Abby? I remembered her fondly, and the guilty feeling for leaving her would only be amplified that early morning when I’d stepped off the North-bound train in New Orleans. I wondered what had become of Tabby and Abe, the oddest pairing; though I could’ve never lasted in the actual world with them, in my memories I found myself wishing I had stretched that bender just a few days longer, put off the reading and go west with them, where we would burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue
centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!” But that wasn’t the case. It had never been. I was only meant to experience this story, the one I spent each day and night composing.

Each evening an officer came to my cell with a Storage-Tec® flash drive and I uploaded my progress on it, so he could give it to Ms. Banks. Lately, however, it had slowed down. It wasn’t due to lack of motivation, though, nor was it due to a shortage of time; I had plenty of that, and I believed I would have plenty to come. The problem was that I had caught up. In six long days of writing, I had finally arrived what had taken me months to arrive at in the real world: this cell, that is. I spent some time going back through it and reading, adding details that I hadn’t remembered, removing details that I perhaps had colored too much. The account was all true, and honest to God work of non-fiction.

I tried not to sit around and feel shitty for myself, though. I don’t know if it was Claire’s optimism or a hitherto unknown faith in the justice system or karma, or if I just felt okay knowing I was innocent, but I had this sense, this strong feeling that things would work out. I never believed that I would be spending years in prison for burning down the library. Well, I shouldn’t say never; I rarely believed it. Part of this feeling, I knew, came from the visits that Claire had paid me each night at my cell window, almost always at 2:30 AM. The light from her cell phone would flash a couple times into my window, and I’d save the progress of my account, close my laptop, and stand on the bed to be near her. The visits were never long, lest she get caught and they would be eliminated altogether. They frequently lasted about an hour. Since we couldn’t talk, we’d just position ourselves close to each other, her sitting on a blanket on one side of the window, me standing on a cot. I found that if I stacked all the mattresses on top of each other, I could stand and be at eye-level with her. Mostly we’d just read. She’d bring something from the library—at the time she was
trying to read through Fien’s novels—and I read Kafka’s *The Trial.* The selection at the jail library was very limited, so when I finished *The Trial,* I moved on to *Crime and Punishment.*

Also, each night Claire would bring a letter for me, about a page long each. She’d hold it up to the window and place her cellphone against the back of it so I could read it. Every twenty seconds the cellphone light would dim, and she’d press another button to get it going again. Mostly, the letters just contained biographical details about her from before we’d met: she’d grown up in Northern Michigan a block away from Lake Superior and she’d studied female artists in college, with an emphasis on cubism, and all through junior high and high school she had been a catcher on their school’s softball team. She loved Fall more than any other season, learned how to play guitar from her father who worked fulltime at a furniture factory and played blues in local bars on the weekend, and she had a brother who was nineteen years younger than her. Her family lived in Southern Michigan. She wrote other things, too. Personal things that I won’t repeat here, except to say that if nothing else went right in this entire narrative, things between Claire and I would be fine.

After she left, usually around 3:30 AM, I’d watch her walk away into the night and I pretended that I was walking with her, if only to drop her off at her doorstop.

I would sleep a little then, about three hours, and then I’d wake up and continue writing.
Chapter 54: A New Manuscript and an Unraveling, March 28

It had been a day and a half since I finished my account. I tried to go back to it from time to time, but there seemed nothing more to add. I spent some time tinkering around with *This Monster Land*, but I also knew that project had been dead for some time now. I had killed it. I wanted to think that I’d killed it when I plagiarized all those sections, but I knew this wasn’t the truth. I’d killed it as soon as I arrived in Boston, had dialed Abby’s phone number, and ceased to nurture it any longer.

I was a couple paragraphs into a letter to Claire when I heard a key click into my cell door. An officer opened it wide, and Ms. Banks was standing behind him struggling to hold a large, leather brief case against her chest. She didn’t even look up at me when she spoke, and I knew that this was the moment that I had been waiting for, that I had both dreaded and anticipated: things were about to start moving forward again. Though I wasn’t sure what exactly this had meant—several of the others who I sat with during recreation time spent their two hours researching books about the law, a hobby I simply didn’t have the stomach for—I anticipated weeks upon weeks of being shuffled from room to room in a cheap suit and dress shoes, nervous and tired from an existence in limbo.

She said, “Mr. Pankreez, can you please come with me?”

I closed my computer and was about to set it on the cot near my other few possessions, most of which she’d purchased for me, when she told me I should bring my things, too. I wouldn’t be staying here any longer.

I followed her down the familiar pathway to the conference room. I ran my fingers along the grooves of the hidden door as we waited for the officer to let us in. There wasn’t a
doorknob or latch. I pressed on it to see if that would trigger the mechanism to open it, but it was solid. Maybe there really wasn’t anything behind it.

Somebody else was already seated in the room, a man, with his back against the mirror. He tapped his fingers nervously on the tabletop. I didn’t recognize him until I finally sat down, and once I did, I shot right back out of my seat and embraced him awkwardly from across the table. Dennison had come! It had been so long since I’ve actually physically met with him that it took some time for his features to find their place in my memory. He’d grown thicker since I last saw him. Not fat, just thick, like a wrestler. He appeared how I’d often envisioned some of my favorite writers looking: Ken Kesey, John Irving, Raymond Carver (in truth, I had no idea what these writers looked like).

“Karin,” he said somberly. His embrace had been heartfelt, and he couldn’t hold back his smile, but the tone of his voice put me on the edge a bit. Having just hugged, he reached across the table and grabbed my hand with both of his. I waited for the officer to reprimand us, but he did not.

Sitting across from them, it was the first time I’d gotten a close look at Ms. Banks since she’d taken me to make a phone call. She was still standing, though the briefcase appeared heavier than she did. I feared she would drop at any moment. Her eyes seemed to have sunk deeper into her face and were outlined with thick black shadows; her hair had been hurriedly pulled back, and hadn’t been washed in at least a couple days. She looked at the loose watch that dangled from her frail wrist, and said, “I suppose we should get started now.”

She dropped her briefcase onto the table, sending a dead thud across the room. The seams bulged, and the zipper was only half-zipped. She made small circles in the air with her wrists, attempting to release the strain that had been placed on them from carrying that
briefcase for so long. When she opened it, she struggled to pull out a large box of copy paper. Then, she pulled out another and placed it on the table beside the first. I looked from Ms. Banks to Dennison. Dennison looked at me, and Ms. Banks looked at the boxes. The officer leaned in, distracted from his usual cellphone game.

“Are these, files, I mean, file about my case?”

“Yes. You could say that,” she responded.

“All of them?”

She nodded. “Go ahead,” she said. “you can look at them.”

I pulled the first box in front of me and slid the cover off, setting it gently off to the side. The first page had my name on top, last name first, as well as a series of numbers, and a brief description of the case. “Arson: City Library, Baelb Public Library. On the bottom of the page there were three red stamps, each slightly more faded than the one above it, and each containing a handwritten date in blue ink, and a pair of initials. In order, they read:

“Documents Accepted for Review”

“Documents Approved”

“Documents Released”

I was baffled by the third stamp. I looked up at Ms. Banks, but she only nodded, urging me to look closer. I flipped the top page off the stack and set it in the cover. Centered on the next page was a title. “The Collected Letters and Unpublished Writing of Karin Pankreez, Novelist Aspirant: A Legal Account.” Before that, there was another stamp that read, “For Legal Purposes Only.” Scribbled overtop of the stamp, in black ink, were the words “Revoked,” and today’s date.

I turned to the next page and found a couple quotes I’d discovered and decided to place at the beginning. On the following page, it all started with the words.
Watching Anna watch the snow accumulate outside, I typed the words:

I flipped several through several of the pages. All of it was there: Prentice, Boston, and New York in the first box, and Albuquerque, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Portland, and Prentice again in the second. I wasn’t sure what it meant. Why had they given this back to me?

“It’s a hell of a story, Karin,” Ms. Banks said, her lips starting to curl upwards. “I mean, the prose is a bit to flowery at times, too concerned with the non-relevant details than the material I typically read, but it’s a hell of an account.”

“What does this mean? I mean, what are we supposed to do with it?”

Ms. Banks looked at Dennison and nodded, slightly.

“I can publish this, Karin. That is to say, I can get someone to publish this.”

I was both baffled and furious. “Is that what you thought this was for? To publish it? I’m fucking sleeping on a shitty mattress with nothing to look at for days on end, eating my shitty meals on cafeteria trays that I’d thought I’d never see again after leaving high school, sitting in there so fucking alone, wondering if you all even remembered I was in there, and all you got to say is that you can fucking publish it? I mean, fuck! What the hell am I, er, what is the state even paying you for? Are you a lawyer or an agent? Will you just do your fucking job? Whether its prison or otherwise, can just fucking get on with it all?”

I stood up and jammed the boxes back toward Ms. Banks and Dennison, who sat at their end of the table, a shared look of shock etched onto their faces. “I’m ready to go back to my cell, officer. I’m done with this bullshit.” I even turned and, in dramatic fashion, clasped my wrists behind my back for the officer to cuff. After several moments passed without feeling the snap of metal against my wrists, not even a firm hand on my shoulder, I faced him. He, too, had the same puzzled look on his face. “What’s the matter? You forgot how to do your fucking job, too? Fuck! Who’s in charge here?”
The officer looked toward Ms. Banks for what to do.

“Who’s running this fucking show, anyway?”

Ms. Banks finally stood up. “Are you through?” she asked.

Everything in the room seemed to still: the clock, the flashing screen of the officer’s cellphone, even the blinking red light from within the mirror.

“I’m,” I started. “I’m tired.”

“I know, Karin. We all are. Why don’t you come back and have a seat. I have something else to show you.”

As I sat back down, Ms. Banks pulled another folder from her briefcase. I wondered how much that thing could carry before the seams split wide open. This folder, however, was very thin, containing only one page, and when she opened it and pushed it across the table toward me, I recognized it too.

I read through it again, nonetheless. “What good is this?” I asked, tapping what appeared to be the original copy of B. Hart’s incriminating letter to Finn Fien. “You said yourself that we couldn’t use it because I’d attained it unlawfully.”

“It’s legal,” Dennison said. “It’s legit.”

I had trouble processing this. I could feel the blood still rising from my previous outburst. None of this seemed to be actually happening, and for a moment I wondered if it was, in fact, not real. If I had only been fantasizing, dreaming. I heard myself speaking, rather than actually forming words. “How can it be legit? Only two people have the ability to hand this over.”

“Your buddy, Mr. B. Hart, hand delivered it to us late last night.”

“I don’t believe you.”
Ms. Banks laughed. “You don’t have to believe me,” she said. “But you must move out. Your cell is being prepared for a new guest.”

We passed Finn Fien in the hallway as the officer led me to fill out some paperwork. It occurred to me that I’d never actually seen him before, not even a picture. I’d written things under his name, I’d fabricated conversations I claimed to have had with him, and for a few hours I was him. But this was the first time I had ever seen him, and there was very little to remark on. He seemed older than I’d imagined, well into his sixties. He was thin, dressed in jeans and a bright polo shirt. His hair was thinning and grey, and he kept it closely cropped to his skull. From several feet down the hallway he peered at me through a thin pair of spectacle. He recognized me. I watched the recognition register, and as soon as he did, he exploded into a frenzy. All the way down the hall he kept yelling, “I’m gonna fucking burn you down, Karin Pankreez! I’m gonna fucking burn you down!”

He tried to lunge at me but was too well-restrained to get very far. As the officers tackled him to the ground, I hollered back, “just make sure you get the right one, this time.”

Ms. Banks led Dennison and I out to the parking lot. “Can you believe they wanted me to represent that asshole, too? Thankfully I was able to convince the judge that it was a conflict of interest.”

“What about the other charges?” I asked her, as we reached the parking lot. The assault, the evasion of justice, and the impersonation, what happens to all those?”

“You’re off on the assault charges. You have Anna to thank for that. The guy you punched, I guess he knew Anna pretty well. She was able to talk him into dropping the charges.”
“And the other ones?”

The impersonation charge has been dropped to a lesser charge, since you were trying to regain funds that had been stolen from you. The evasion charge still stands.”

“And?”

“You’re looking at some community service. The judge will take into account your motivation. In fact, he’s reading your account as we speak. I heard from his secretary this morning that he started it last night. Called in sick today to keep reading it.”

“What sort of community service?”

“Cleaning up the highways, a bit. Ironically, you’ll probably spend most your time cleaning up the Baelb Library grounds.”

“That’s what I was doing before I left.”

“You won’t be getting paid for it now, though.”

We arrived at Ms. Banks car and I thanked her for her help. She profusely denied the credit. “You have a lot of people to thank,” she said, “but I’m not one of them.” I hugged her anyway. After all, she had read through my account in less than four days. She got in her car and left.

I followed Dennison to his car. “Are you going to explain how all this came about?” I asked him.

“Of course,” he said. “Get in.” I walked around the car and when I reached the passenger door, it started sprinkling lightly.

“I can’t,” I said. “Not right now.”

“Aw, Karin, come on. I’m eager to talk to you about the new novel. It’s really going to be a big deal, especially once you see what I have in store for you. Get in.”
I looked back at the courthouse, the row of windows that were along ground level. I couldn’t tell which was mine.

“Besides, we got plenty of catching up to do, right?”

“We do,” I said. “And the book, we have to talk about the book.”

“Precisely.” He started the car, and leaned over to push open the passenger door.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I can’t now. Can I meet you in an hour?”

Dennison looked hurt. He’d done so much, but he nodded. He’d read the account, so I figured he’d piece it together eventually and understand. “I’ll see you in an hour,” he said. “Don’t keep me waiting.” He smiled unconvincingly and drove away.

Though Claire’s house was several blocks away, and despite having to carry my suitcase, I ran the entire way. Across the street, most of the debris at the library site had been swept up and dumped somewhere, millions of miscellaneous, unordered pages that would never get read again.

It took forever for Claire to answer the door. My shirt clung to my chest in sweat, both from the run and the anticipation. She’d mentioned in one of her letters that the patrol cars had quit patrolling her place several days ago. She was no longer an accessory. I remember the look of guilt that flashed across her face as the light from her cellphone reached those lines in her letter. Finally, I saw the curtains being pulled to the side, and Claire peeked through the front window.

She opened the door.

“Karin!”

I stepped inside and picked her up off the floor.

“What’s happened?”

“I’m free,” I said. “It’s over.”
“But how?”

“The letter. All I know is that for some reason, B. Hart offered it to the court as evidence. I have no idea why. In an hour I’m meeting with Dennison Whitmore, my agent from *The SauerKraut Circus*. He has plans for a new story. I guess it has something to do with how I happened to get out of all this mess.”

Claire rushed to the kitchen and grabbed a couple glasses to celebrate. She grabbed her pitcher of homemade bourbon from the fridge, and some real bourbon from the freezer. She poured one of each and handed me the real bourbon. We carried our drinks down the familiar hallway and into the bedroom, where we sat on the bed. I leaned over and wrapped my palm around the back of her neck. I kissed her, lightly at first, and then more fervently. We didn’t push things any further than that, though. Not yet. There were only a few more loose ends to tie up. Instead, we lay down on the bed facing each other. I touched her face and stroked her arm. She rested her hand on my ribs.

“It’s over,” I said. My heart was pounding. “Almost.”

She nodded. With her chin tucked down, she looked up at me.

“That old narrative is nearly through. It’s been written, and is going to be published. Now, we can start a new one, us.”

“No fires? No crazed authors?”

“No fires or crazed authors. We’ll discover a whole new cast of characters, new scenes, and new dialogue.”

Claire leaned in closer to me. I could feel her breath on my chin. She kissed me lightly on the bridge of my nose, and again on the lips. Neither of us had slept much recently, and for the next forty-five minutes we traipsed in and out of sleep, waking occasionally as though we need proof that the scene was real. After the forty-five minutes
were up, we headed to the bar to meet Dennison. I held her hand as we walked; it felt small and good.

Claire and I ordered two beers at the bar. We had let the ice melt into our glasses back at her place, the bourbon untouched. Dennison sat in a corner, hunched over a series of pages spread across the table. He stood when we approached. I introduced him to Claire, and he said he recognized her from my account. He seemed to understand why I hadn’t wanted to go straight to the bar.

After a bit of small talk, some jokes about the sort of real-life experience I must’ve gathered in jail, Dennison insisted we get down to brass tacks.

“Do you think this account has a chance at getting published?” I asked him.

“That is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about. There are a couple things, actually. First, I want you to look at something,” he said. He pushed the pages he’d been looking at in front of Claire and me. We leaned over them, trying to pull them together. At first, it looked like a poorly-drawn comic. Each page held several frames. A couple characters bled over the lines and into the other frames. Over the drawings, some words were written in blue ink, underlined two, three, and four times. I studied it for several minutes, and Claire did too.

I was about to give up on it when Claire leaned into the page, running her index finger over a long-haired character in a black dress, gesturing with a glass of wine in her hand. “Is that me?” she asked.

I looked at the drawing. The woman in the frame was scarcely more than a stick figure, but the hair was right, and the height seemed right, and once I thought of it as Claire, the context was dead on. It was only the second frame. Two figures—male and female—
stood in front of a man sitting majestically on a couch. Sweat dripped from the foreheads of the characters. Their arms flailed—shown by thin lines fading off from either sides of their arms—and the man—me, I suppose—waved a letter. Claire and I, in the frame, were testing Laurence in New Orleans, baiting him with the letter. I flipped the page over and on the back, near the end, was a sketch of me sitting in a jail cell. Several thought bubbles filled the space in the empty cell, each with a different figure in them: Anna, B. Hart, Claire, Laurence, and Fien.

“What is this?”

“This is the explanation as to why you’re here, and not still in jail.”

“The form seems a bit elaborate. Couldn’t you have just explained it to me?”

Dennison ordered another round of drinks, though it was clear it was a stalling tactic, a way to buy the time that would allow him to formulate the words appropriate for the audience. Finally, after the drinks came, and after he made quite an ordeal of sipping his gin and tonic, commenting on the lack of lime, he said, “It’s something else. It’s the part of your story you’ve left out.”

“Left out? So, we’re talking edits already?”

Dennison guffawed, nervously, shaking his head. “No, we’re past that. This part here, it’s no longer your story.”

Claire continued to study the frames, flipping the pages over where there were more illustrations on the back. I asked whose story it was.

“You know, Karin,” Dennison said, continuing to stall—it was as though he couldn’t figure out where to start—“your mentor, Laurence, is a better friend to you than you may think.”
“It’s Laurence’s story? That’s bullshit! I mean, that’s plagiarism, isn’t it? How can he write a story with me as the main character?”

Claire set the pages on the table and drew her knees to her chest, squeezing them in in front of the table. She chewed on her lip as she traced a finger over certain frames. Her hand lifted and dropped her mug repeatedly, creating a pattern of wet rings on the table.

Dennison leaned over the table, his chin mere inches above the surface, and his confidence regained. He prodded his index finger over the center of the pages. “This,” he said, “is the explanation. This explains how the letter got from under your mattress and into the hands of the judge. It’s a remarkable tale.”

“Laurence is going to publish this?”

“I plan to help him publish it, with your approval, of course.”

I leaned over to Claire and studied the pages. What had happened? I guess I’d been too surprised at getting released and excited about seeing Claire that I hadn’t given it much thought. Now, however, the thoughts ripped into my mind like a thunderstorm. How had Laurence even met Dennison? What’d happened to Bunsen, to Hart?

As though reading my thoughts, Dennison repeated, “It’s all there.”

The entire barroom seemed to shut down as I looked over the pages, and Dennison looked at my expression, waiting for it all to click. Claire broke the silence when she pointed at the stick-figure of a woman pleading with a man. The scene was set in front of the Chinese Theater in Los Angeles. “Is that Anna?” she asked.

I looked closer. “Yes, I think so.”

Pointing to the man, she said, “and this is Cory, the guy who contacted me about your arrest.”
“Yeah, I mean, I think so. How did you figure that out? You’ve never even met them.”

“Context, Karin. Read carefully.”

Claire walked me through the story, identifying characters whom she had never met. Real people, but characters, too. She said, “Remember when I told you that Abby had informed Anna about your arrest? This scene details Anna pleading with Cory to find a way to help you.”

Dennison nodded.

“I looked at the scene. There weren’t a lot of details, but her interpretation seemed to fit.”

She continued, “And in this next scene, Cory is pleading with this guy over the phone, and you can tell he’s in New Orleans on a film set, because there are cameras placed all around the Andrew Jackson Statue we walked by.”

It was James Franco. In the next frame, he was alone in a trailer. A thought bubble popped from his head that read, “I can’t believe I told him I was James Fucking Franco.” From there, the rest of the scenes became clearer. This was my story, though nothing I could’ve known, nothing I’d written. My story from an omniscient point of view, perhaps. Laurence had drawn a different circle around the same set of relations that I had used for my account, creating a new beginning, a new end.

It was a strange feeling, seeing the images that unraveled my narrative’s crisis, like looking at a photo album dated a day earlier than my oldest memory: my parents looked as I do now, and I unrecognizable as me. (I had memories of that train set, but this isn’t one of them!) I recognized several other characters: Hart’s shiny head beamed from a computer screen behind the silhouette of Laurence; Anna and Cory O’Graffer split a frame, talking to
each other on the phone; Tabby, Abe, Dennison, James Franco, and even Jason Shrontz were in the subsequent frames.

Further on in the story, James Franco, Tabby, and Abe stood in the back porch at Laurence’s house. Laurence sat with his head in his hands while the others pleaded with him. By piecing together the caption, I could tell that their simultaneous arrival had been mere chance. At the reading, when Tabby and Abe had surprisingly showed up, they had apparently run into Cory in the hallway, who had just finished rifling through Fien’s mail. When Cory found out who they were, he disclosed the contents of the letter to them. Abe, of course, remembered reading about the Baeb Library Fire, and recalled Fien’s guilt-laden laughter that had been acknowledged at the end of the article. After I’d been arrested, Cory enlisted the help of Tabby and Abe to speak with Laurence, knowing that Tabby, too, was a mutual friend. Tabby was resistant to travel East, but while they tried to hitchhike out of town, a friendly, and remarkably persuasive driver named Jason Shrontz, convinced her that she could never move Westward without eventually ending in the East. His sage-like wisdom so reminded Tabby of the Arpoh Frey-Win Prophet, that she was compelled to travel to New Orleans, to have a chat with Laurence.

“Do you see?” Dennison asked, enthusiasm like spittle from the corners of his mouth.

I looked back at the page, but Claire was already one step ahead of me. She pointed to a larger frame that took up a quarter of the next page. Laurence, Dennison, and Ms. Banks teleconferenced; each character identifiable by a single distinguishable feature: Dennison, his broad shoulders; Laurence, his short and thin frame; Ms. Banks, her thick rimmed glasses. In the next frame, Hart had tapped into the teleconference, his shiny, bald head mirroring the multiple thought bubbles also included in the frame: “You mean I’d
never have to have contact with Fien again?” “Do you really believe I could get my
sentenced reduced to a fine and community service?” “If, perchance, I had owed the guilty
party, say, forty bucks from a previous wager, would I still have to pay it?” A fourth bubble
popped into the fourth frame. It contained Hart behind a curtain in his New York Office.
He was on the phone; Fien was shown lower in the bubble, also on the phone. Both
watched a computer screen that contained a young man stumbling up a flight of stairs. I
recognized the scene. I could feel the blood flooding my face as I realized that they had been
betting on me, on which “adventure” I would choose that day in Hart’s office. The fourth
frame displayed Hart promising Fien forty dollars.

The entire narrative fell into place. Morris had informed Abby about my arrest, who
had informed Anna, who pleaded with Cory to help, who convinced James Franco, Tabby
Noebale, and Abe Filmnopryz to speak with Laurence, who eventually contacted Dennison
and Ms. Banks about my case, who convinced B. Hart to sign over the letter. I felt
somewhat ashamed, as a writer, that is. Laurence’s narrative was so tight, so compressed. It
had only taken a few pages to map out.

“So,” I finally asked, “is this, like, going to be his next novel?”

“Not really. Well, sort of.”

“Non-fiction, though, right?”

“Sort of, that is, not really.” Dennison explained that Laurence’s story would contain
both the truth and lies. That it wouldn’t necessarily even be a novel, in the way we view
novels, that is; rather, it would be released as a computer program. A game. The reader’s
objective would be to find the right path needed to free the protagonist, Karin, from jail. In
order to do this, they’d have to find the truth at the end of each chapter. By clicking on it,
which would be listed via hyperlink among several falsified options—how quickly the reader
is to accept lies—they would move on and soon be faced with another such challenge. By clicking on the falsified links, however, the reader would be led into a labyrinthine web of untruths, made-up characters, and false motivations. The only way to get out of the web was to start over.

“How does the reader know if they’ve chosen one of the lies?”

Dennison laughed. “Laurence is still working on this, but he’s thinking that every lie should be linked together in a way that after time, they start to repeat themselves in a perpetual state of never moving forward. It is up to the reader, then, to discern what is true and what is not, based on their memory of what has happened.”

Claire smirked. She seemed satisfied with Laurence’s idea.

I pushed the pages back to Dennison. “I suppose Hart isn’t publishing anymore?”

“No. He’s done. After we met, he told me in confidence that he never should’ve started in the first place. Such a strange guy,” Dennison said, chuckling. He took another drink, and ordered another round. “He told me that he had parted ways with his muse when he took up publishing, that he’d sought money instead of his true love.”

“Which is?”

“Drumming,” I guess. “Giving up the publishing business will allow him to rediscover his muse, to start drumming again.”

“And so this is why you’re hoping to publish Laurence’s, um, story?”

“I should say,” Dennison said, “that Laurence insisted that I only move forward on it with your permission, though he also wanted me to mention that you owe him $1,450 for towing expenses and four new tires.”

“Publish it.” Even though it had happened along my narrative, Laurence had drawn a new circle around it. He deserved to write it. When the waiter brought the next round, we
toasted the new novels. He insisted that, should Laurence’s novel really take off, mine could only be positively affected, and vice versa.

After the drinks were finished, Dennison looked at his watch; he needed to get going. He was eager to tell Laurence the news. As he stood up, Claire ribbed me with her elbow. She looked up at Dennison. “There’s something else, right?”

Dennison looked confused.

“When we first sat down, you said there were a couple things to talk about,” she said. “Laurence’s story was the first, right? What was the other?”

Dennison sat back down. Though his glass was empty, he tipped it back and waited for something to drop. Finally, he said, “It’s about your account, Karin. Your novel. I mean, I’m not sure how to say this. It doesn’t seem fair. Here’s the thing; since it’s on record as a legal document, I had to make a concession in order for the judge to approve it for commercial publication.”

“A concession?”

“You have to change your name.”

I stared back at Dennison. I wasn’t sure what to say. Change my name?

He continued, “I mean, not really change your name, Karin, just in the story. It can’t be about Karin Pankreez. You have to change your protagonist’s name. You know, make it seem like it fiction.”

When we left the bar, Claire and I made plans to have dinner over at her place. Later that night, she wanted to go for a drive, back to the lake. I assumed this meant that I’d be staying with her that night, so I told her I was going to head back to my place for a bit, to shower, ditch my clothes, and you know, process everything.
From the road, the apartment was dark. I don’t know why I had expected it to be otherwise. Paranoia, I suppose, had snuck upon me and I half expected Fien to be waiting inside, though I’d seen him at the jail. Or maybe I hadn’t expected the place to be there at all, to find instead a pile of ashes, all my belongings torched.

The walk back hadn’t been as cold as I thought it would be. Along the edges of the sidewalk, large rolls of sod had been peeled away from the plows. Dirt was piled in waist-high mounds at the center of each block. Tomorrow, the damaged sod would be repaired; the dead grass would be cut away with precision, dirt raked over the void, and fresh seed scattered. Within a month new blades of grass would erase the memory of winter from Prentice’s pedestrians. When I climbed the porch, I thought about that night Claire had come home with me, slept next to me as I set up the plot of *This Monster Land*. How strange it was, to be having this thought after so many other things had happened on this porch: the letters from Dennison, the visit from the police, and most remarkably, the door that had been left ajar that night Anna had left me.

When I fit my key into the lock, I thought I heard a knock, like something bumped blindly in the dark. I waited, but the noise did not recur. I turned the key and tentatively pushed open the door. A strong odor of smoke wafted into the night air. I flipped on the light, and the living room appeared exactly as I had left it. It felt good to drop my suitcase onto the floor, where Anna’s suitcase had once sat. After surveying the apartment for any serious damages, I opened several windows to air it out. One of Anna’s scented candles had been left on a counter—had I left it here? Fien? I lit it. Also in the cupboard, I noticed a nearly full bottle of bourbon. I was certain that I hadn’t left it. I sniffed it, tasted a tiny bit. After convincing myself that it hadn’t been poisoned, I poured a drink and went into the bathroom to shower.
The water was hot and the pressure good. I leaned back against the shower wall and let the steam brush my tired flesh. Claire, too, was showering, I imagined. I felt a removal of myself from myself, like floating, hovering over a map, blue and black and red lines stretching like veins just underneath a translucent film of skin, and I sunk in, until my body was in view, the rambunctious Friday nights in the French Quarter, the rigid grid of Manhattan, the laid-back pulsing of Albuquerque's city streets; I sunk deeper until Prentice was in view, the courthouse, the remains of the Baelb Library, Claire's house, her kitchen, her bathroom, her thin fingers rinsing suds from her hair, her eyes clamped tightly shut; strange spices simmered on an off-screen stove; Claire bent over and turned the water off, cinched the towel tight across her chest and went into the stove to check on dinner in the kitchen; where I surprised her by turning off the burner and leading her into the back bedroom; I wrapped my bare legs around hers. It had been so long. I took a deep breath, and Claire slowly, tantalizingly slid down onto my hips. I wrapped her hair across my face and along my chest, crawling on top of me—I joked that it had been so long that I'd never last—but Claire's hands moved down my shirtless back and I dragged her hair across my face and along my chest, crawling on top of me—I joked that it had been so long that I'd never last—but Claire's hands moved down my shirtless back and I wrapped my bare legs around hers. It had been so long. I kissed the inside of her neck and worked my way to her jawline, following it to her ear; she pressed hard on my shoulder and dragged her hair across my face and along my chest, crawling on top of me—I joked that it had been so long that I'd never last—but her body went on forever and I knew I had some time left. I took a deep breath, and Claire slowly, tantalizingly slid down onto my hips. I wrapped her hair across my face and along my chest, crawling on top of me—I joked that it had been so long that I'd never last—but her body went on forever and I knew I had some time left. I took a deep breath, and Claire slowly, tantalizingly slid down onto my hips.
thick smoky smell; it didn’t seem as though anything had been burned, and I wondered if it was just Fien’s natural smell, a relic he’d left behind, like an autograph or his printed words. I was just about to get up, to go to the bedroom to find some clothes when I noticed something peculiar from my bookshelves. The spaces were missing. The gaps that, so long ago, Anna had filled with I.O.U. notes, had been replaced with the original books. I examined them. They were all there.

Then, an alarm went off.

I followed the persistent beeps into the bedroom and discovered a body in my bed, covered with blankets, dark hair spilling out onto the pillow.

Anna stirred as I flipped on the light. I didn’t know whether to retreat, approach her, or go about looking for a clean shirt to wear to Claire’s.

She rose and rubbed her knuckles into her eye sockets as a child might do if awoken before the sleep had run its course.

“You’re home,” she said. “Finally.”

I didn’t respond.

“I heard you were released today,” she said, though she didn’t say where she’d heard it from. She pulled the blanket back. A slender thigh stemmed out from one of my t-shirts. “Come here.” She patted the ruffled sheets next to her, that warm spot her body had readied for me.

I didn’t move.

“It’s all over, now. We can go back to normal, like it was in the beginning. We can start there all over and see what happens. Come on, Karin.” She bent her leg, pushing the covers back further.
I stepped tentatively toward the bed. She held her hand out and I took it. I sat next to her on the mattress. She ran her hand down up the length of my arm and down my back. She started up my ribcage again, and I grabbed her hand and held it in both of mine. “I already know what happens, Anna.”

Her hand went limp. She hoisted herself up on her elbow.

“We end up here.”

She ignored me. “Just lay down, honey,” she said. “I know you’re tired. You probably have a million thoughts running through your mind right now.”

I stood up and looked down at her. “I’m not tired. I’m just ready to move forward. You left me, and I’ve been going backward ever since. That’s how we work. We’re only ever going to move forward to a certain point, and then be forced to stop and go back. I can’t do that any longer.”

“Karin.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. I walked to the edge of the room and pulled open a drawer to find some clean clothes. Anna remained still. Even her eyes were stuck in the same position, staring up into the void where I had stood only moments earlier. The smell of smoke grew stronger, and as I removed a t-shirt, I discovered where the smell emanated from. I brought a shirt to my nose and it reeked of smoke. Another one, the same thing. Fien had been wearing my clothes.

I’d have to find something from my suitcase. Something a little less dirty than the others. When I left the room, Anna still hadn’t moved. It was as though she were a cassette tape unraveled, waiting for someone to insert a pencil inside her, wind her back up, and press play.
I got dressed in the living room and put the bourbon back in the cupboard. I’d left the house exactly as I’d found it when I started my walk back to Claire’s house. As I reached the next block, I turned just in time to see the bedroom light also turn off.
Chapter ∞: After the Ending, December 23

Watching Claire watch the snow accumulate outside, I typed the words: “Claire stood at the window watching the snow accumulate outside, burying the lawn, the garden we had planted too late into the spring, the cars, the mailbox, and Sandy, our mail lady, who climbed our steps to exchange our letters and bills for a single envelope. Everything outside was turning white so quickly, erasing all the detail we had known in our yards and replacing them with a different, strange world, like the opening pages of a novel,” and then I read them back to her.

Claire smiled and joined me on the carpet in her, our living room. She had been rearranging the pages of her manuscript, the pages that, by chance, had fallen into her yard a little less than a year ago.

The floor was scattered with boxes like suitcases that were in a perpetual state of unpacking, ripped and tangled clumps of packing tape that clung to our socks and pant legs, packing peanuts that had been flicked and shot across the room so many times we didn’t think we’d ever find them all.

We had been sitting indoors all day, waiting for the mail to come. It was Saturday, which meant that if I didn’t hear back from Dennison today, I would have to wait two more days before receiving my first official check for my forthcoming novel. It would be going into print by Christmas. The timing was perfect. Claire and I had made plans to take another trip at the beginning of the year. We had already made plans to visit some of the people who we’d met earlier. Tabby and Abe, who were now living together, were expecting us in Albuquerque, as was Cory in LA, Laurence in New Orleans, and Morris in Boston.
Both of us were stuffed from a large breakfast. At the start of breakfast, we had been determined to clear up the boxes by noon, though it was now 2 PM, and the boxes remained. I knew, however, that we would get to it. Before the end of the day, I would officially be moved in.

I had recently sold the bulk of my belongings—my old laptop, several of my cds and records, an old mountain bike, and half of my book collection, among other things—and had moved the rest of my things into Claire’s. She’d insisted upon it, and I agreed.

Claire pulled her pages together, placed them all back into their plastic sleeves, and carried them back to our bedroom. Playfully, she stepped on my back on her way through the living room, before opening the front door and reaching out for the mail. “It’s really coming down, now,” she said.

“We should take a walk soon.” She agreed, and we decided that a walk would be our reward for putting away half of the boxes. I was looking at my computer screen when she walked into the kitchen, and I looked up when I heard her drop a couple ice cubes into a cup. I watched her grab the pitcher from the refrigerator and fill two glasses. She set them on the living room table.

“You’re hiding something. I can tell.”

Claire asked if it was too early for a drink. She sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her.

“What is it?” I asked. I join her on the couch, brushing aside several packing peanuts and a wad of tape. Claire leaned in to kiss me, but I thwarted her advance by digging my fingers into her ribs until she squirmed out of my reach, breathless from laughing. When I thought she’d given up, she leapt to her feet and tackled me, pinning me down on the couch. She kissed me on the mouth, and I didn’t fight it. As she pulled back, she reached into the
back pocket of her jeans and pulled out a legal-size envelope. She leaned backward into my lap and handed it to me.

I turned the letter over in my hands. There was a stamp on the front, instructing the post office to forward it to Claire’s address. There was no return address, besides a handwritten “New York, NY.” Dennison’s offices had recently opened a branch in New York. I weighed the letter in my hands. “This is it,” I said. This is the start. We’ll be in Albuquerque in a couple months.”

“Open it,” she said, and I did.

21 December, 2010

561 St Johns Place
Brooklyn, NY 11238

Karin,

Thanks for the autograph. Is it real?

By the way, I should warn you that after the hostel burned down, authorities tried to pin me with starting it, based on a fight I’d gotten into with my boss the night before. I told them it was impossible, that I had been sleeping when it started. I even confessed to having had a couple glasses of wine. Well, they found the wine bottle under some rubble, and your fingerprints were all over it. Just a heads up: you might be getting a call soon from the NYPD.

Thanks again for the autograph.

Janelle

Claire held out her glass to toast, not knowing, of course, the contents of the letter.

“Should we celebrate?”

I folded up the letter. “I don’t know,” I said. “It may still be a little premature.”

“Come on! You know this one is going to sell.” She walked into the kitchen for the pitcher of bourbon.
I stuffed the letter in my pants pocket.

"What did it say?" she asked. "It was from Denison, right?"

Hesitating for a moment, I said it was. "He said it may just take a little more time. But things look promising.

Claire sauntered into the living room and fell backward into my lip, spilling the contents of her glass down the front of her shirt. I faked a smile, convincingly. It’s ubiquitous, I told her. "Let’s look at a map, later, after our walk. Perhaps we could plan our trip a little sooner."


