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The Prometheus Chord

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THE PROMETHEUS CHORD

A NOVEL

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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James Earnest Stone

2019

Dedication

For Jeanne Christine

THE PROMETHEUS CHORD

A NOVEL

by

JAMES EARNEST STONE

THESIS

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of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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Preface

The scope of the work began to take shape in the winter of 2014. The initial thought was to write a contemporary update to the Promethean myth from the point of view of Generation-X. Elements of the story also strongly draw from a fusion of influential works from J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* to The Who's 1973 rock opera *Quadrophenia* and Wes Anderson's 2009 film *The Darjeeling Limited*. The story is framed around three main characters which are tied to larger than life symbolic representations of mankind's creative endeavors. The protagonist's mother, Sylvia is closely rendered through a Blüthner grand piano. Elle and Miles are attributed to a vintage Bugatti Royale automobile and the ill-fated Hindenburg Zeppelin, respectively. In the simplest of terms, this is a story about a young boy grappling with his angry youth, the love of a girl out of his reach and wanting much more from his parents. He grows up after leaving home in estrangement and returns a decade later upon his father's death to face the ghosts of his past. He unexpectedly discovers his mother's forgiveness and the grace of the woman whom he always loved.

In this preface I want to speak about my process and some of the overall thematic elements that I employ throughout this piece. And also, how my belief system, my convictions, my world view and how I think about my place within that framework affect this piece's poetics, narrative voice and tone. I set out to experiment and explore different narrative types and voices for a telescopic feeling of closeness that the reader will ultimately feel. I utilized humor, some dark and irreverent in tone, to connect my characters to the narrative and did not try to censor or self-edit too much in the beginning. I did not feel that each piece of the story doesn't have to be resolved, as life itself is very much unresolved until death, but not for those left behind grieving. I prefer

events flow and show character interpretations and reactions to those real-time events rather than work to a story resolution.

I also want to speak to my character construction and story development techniques within this piece and the many influences that motivated the journey. I have never really been able to produce anything in a linear way. I have always moved and jumped around from beginning to end, to the center and back again. Eventually the pieces become developed enough to fit together. But never in a simple, side by side chronological order. I experimented in many ways to combine and string the pieces together for one linear story. I want to be honest and upfront when I say I do not write with the reader in mind all of the time. In fact, I write more for myself, first and foremost. I write to create a physicality that my mind can grapple with and attempt to order.

The overarching theme that runs throughout the piece is a question: can one be forgiven even if things cannot be put back together as they once were? To bring this question forward I force the reader to address subjects such as memory, family illness and death, religion, estrangement and generational differences. I want to see how family and friends cope with these defining aspects of life through the characters. I want to see if they can reconnect and rebuild the bridges that once burnt and ask for forgiveness.

There are several writers and novels that are foundational to my own craft. Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* showed me that a writer could present a non-linear story framed with real world events and recurring themes while asking the *big questions*. Vonnegut addresses the verisimilitude of infinity and Christianity and traffics in obscure facts that enrich his themes and characters while affecting the way in which the reader visualizes them.

J.D. Salinger covers much of the same themes as Vonnegut, but I feel that Salinger accomplishes this with a much more rich and close narrative voice in his novel *The Catcher in the*

Rye. He places the reader right there in the chair next to his protagonist Holden Caulfield and never lets go. A large amount of humor and sarcasm are also at play and are used to frame Holden's state of mind yet never seem to insult or push back upon the reader.

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* may not be asking the deep ontological questions of humankind that Vonnegut and Kundera so closely do, but Thompson's delivery and narrative momentum is what I first loved about his writing. *Fear and Loathing* is interesting in the sense that bookstores aren't quite sure where to display and categorize his books, especially this one. One never finds Thompson in the fiction/literature section because it isn't really fiction in the true sense but I would argue that it is literature. I find Thompson innovative and hysterical at the same time with his over the top use of adjectives and adverbs. His use of first-person narrative manages to always conjure vivid imagery and is heavily confessional at times. He speaks with a significant amount of hyperbole in terms of the situations and environments that his characters inhabit, and I wanted to emulate his construction of character mythology.

In terms of my own mindset when I work, I am not writing for what makes me happy. I am not writing for recreation. I am writing for catharsis. Plain and simple, I want to work ideas out of my brain and make it more tangible and physical so that I can deal with the world. Having said that, I do consider the reader and feel that making them look at and see what *has been* and *what will be*, forces them to construct and adhere to a set of values. Once that has been established, the reader has now signed on and become a participant in *what is to come*. I as the writer want to make the *unknown* more vivid and intense, not just the *known*. There is a veil between what I want the reader to see and not see and I am constantly walking a line like a matador waving a red muleta in front of them leading to the eventual duende.

In considering the narrative style, I sometimes feel like this piece is more of a summary than a story. I think that the essence of the story takes place within the character conversations and interactions. Although I believe it is more difficult to give the reader all the imagery and intimacy inside the confines of first-person, yet I think that the first-person mode resonates best with a reader. Be it first person narrative or not, a difficult part of the process for me is transforming my ideas from a summary context to a multi-layered novel context.

Next, I want to address the significance in what the truth-in-narration can or could be and what the truth-of-narrative from a possibly untruthful narrator can or could be. The protagonist/first person narrator possesses the luxury of allowing the reader to know or not to know the truth. But, again, that is where Miles' private poetry comes into play at the end of the novel. The main character, the narrator, discovers and reveals his true thoughts in these poems unwillingly or unknowingly. This is the authentic truth and is exclusively for the reader. The reader and writer may have initially agreed upon rules of engagement but in the end, the author (myself) gives the reader the advantage. The reader now knows what the closed-off protagonist refused even his own mother, his deepest feelings.

In *Slaughterhouse Five*, reliability of the narrator is put on ice in the first line of the novel, "All this happened, more or less" (Vonnegut 1). I feel that everything thereafter is a matter of opinion. Vonnegut is off the hook; he can say anything he wishes, and the reader has to weigh the possibility. For example, Vonnegut speaks directly to the reader in an almost self-confessionary voice when saying about Billy Pilgrim, "That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book" (Vonnegut 125).

J.D. Salinger's opening sentence in *The Catcher in the Rye* reads as "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy

childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and that David Copperfield kind of crap” (Salinger 1). This is a fantastic opening sentence speaking direct to the reader. It establishes a strange confidence with the reader. And in what sounds like an honest confession about lying, “I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life. It’s awful” (Salinger 16). The author relieves his protagonist from adhering to any and all absolute truth. For example, he says, “In my mind, I’m probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw” (Salinger *). But in fact, Holden is rejected by every girl he approaches or thinks about approaching. The closer Salinger can get his character to the reader the more he can get away with. “Just once in a while, I’m a moderate smoker” (Salinger *). when earlier in fact, Holden admits to the reader that he smokes about a carton a day.

In one of the climactic moments in *War and Peace*, Tolstoy used a significant amount of fictional license in using a widely agreed on fictional place and geographic location to enhance his story and explain his theory of why Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo. Tolstoy used “the sunken road to Ohain” to explain this historic defeat (Tolstoy loc 5479). Question: does a fictional author have a responsibility or an ethical and moral duty to not go too far in creating a mythology for readers? I would argue that there might be a large contingent of people that regard Tolstoy’s fantastic novel as historical truth. I would assert that everything that happens within a given novel is “under a dome” and all things are relative only under that dome. The writer may be burdened with elucidating the themes and large questions to permeating outside that dome and left open to the reader’s interpretations.

Another example of Salinger’s protagonist confessing or admitting thoughts or motives directly to the reader is when he states, “The trouble with me is, I like it when somebody digresses. It’s more interesting and all” (Salinger 183). This lets Salinger off the hook, as most of Holden’s

thoughts and inner dialog in large part is just that, digression. Fantastic digression similar in tone to David Foster Wallace's character Hal Incandenza.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter Thompson illustrates how two powerful characters and the events they encounter are almost always interpreted differently. This gives Thompson a great device in that he has the option to describe events from one or both characters point of view. Each character's reaction to a given situation exaggerates or alters that of the other's. This same "buddy" scenario is played out in *The Prometheus Chord* as well. Sylvia is portrayed as having always misunderstood and failed to show true affection toward Miles in the past but now here he is trying to understand and express remorse to her. This dichotomy between Miles and Sylvia's points of view give me the broader option of how I get to frame events surrounding one or both of these characters. The unpredictable buddy character such as Dr. Gonzo in *Fear and Loathing* could be portrayed as Sylvia, she is causing chaos in her own blissful manner unknowingly and the first-person narrator has to cope with the chaos.

The self-affirmation in Thompson's narrator feeling that "But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country—but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that" (Thompson 16). Thompson initiates the inner monologue to the reader with intimate questioning and confession, "How long can we maintain? I wondered. How long before one of us starts raving and jabbering at this boy ... he'll report us at once to some kind of outback Nazi law enforcement agency, and they'll run us down like dogs. Jesus! Did I say that? Or just think it? Was I talking? Did they hear me?" (Thompson *).

Thompson's drug addled hyperbole renders his narrator unreliable in a real way, but it is powerfully entertaining. His inner monologues reveal more of his true nature and even a more

frightening picture of his thoughts. But Thompson wants the reader to see these thoughts. Here his protagonist is lamenting having to let go of his beloved car. “But I can’t abandon the fucker. The only hope is to somehow get it across three hundred miles of open road between here and Sanctuary. But, sweet Jesus, I am tired! I’m scared. I’m crazy. This culture has beaten me down. What the fuck am I doing out here” (Thompson 84)?

Michael Cunningham writes, in his novel *The Hours*, a character’s voice that is losing his mind and cannot recall timelines or memories when he writes “Sorry. I seem to keep thinking things have already happened. When you asked if I remembered about the party and the ceremony thought you meant, did I remember having gone to them. And I did remember. I seem to have fallen out of time” Cunningham 62). Cunningham writing a character who was in the process of dying and losing memory found a brilliant narrative voice. This vein of writing was highly influential in my thinking about writing my character Sylvia.

The character/narrator Miles, speaks for his diseased mother Sylvia, but I envision a chapter written distinctly from her point of view similar to Faulkner’s opening chapter in *The Sound and the Fury* where he allows Benjy to lead the reader in a chaotic manner and allows the reader to come to terms with how to react and interpret this portrayal of a disturbed mind’s narrative voice. I am considering a chapter from the point of view of an elderly woman who is suffering from dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, but I have yet been able to allow myself to go there. But I will.

The ‘prodigal son’ archetype is another major theme that I try to bring forward. Two things I took away from one of my first courses with Dr. Daniel Chacon was the craft of designing a foundational story based on one of the character archetypes. My protagonist Miles is on an accidental quest of sorts. One he did not really want to travel into but one he knew was always

coming for him. The archetypal situation of the hero thrust upon a journey. “The journey sends the Hero in search of some truth that will help save his kingdom.” Miles’ “kingdom” is the lost maternal relationship he has always yearned for but didn’t feel he ever received. Now he might have a chance to reconnect in some way to his mother.

There other foundational piece of the archetypal story is the situation that the protagonist discovers themselves within. Here I portray my protagonist Miles’ into a situation similar to the “father-son conflict.” But in this story the conflict is with his mother. Never receiving the affection and love that he thought was so indicative in her religious nature, he was left on the outside. The struggle is built on the abandonment, estrangement and lost relationship until the two meet again on the day of the father’s funeral. The biblical story of The Prodigal Son could be considered to exemplify this concept. The Prodigal Son could also be considered a fable that teaches its audience a life lesson.

But I also left much of the story ambiguous because I want the reader to have the opportunity for open interpretation. I want to navigate a ship at sea that cuts the engines and pulls the sails to let the reader begin his/her own navigation. I believe I heard in a poetry course that “the whitespace is where God speaks,” and I want to leave some wide open road for God or any other spiritual force to speak to the reader and give the reader time to listen as well. I would argue that a writer can create a type of whitespace in giving the reader time to pull away from the scaffolding and read a poem from a character or narrator and I specifically wanted to experiment with placing an entire poem within a footnote.

I believe there is a significant difference between recounting a story and presenting a story. I want to present this story in a close and intimate fashion by allowing the reader to have access to the main character/narrator as if they were sitting across from each other on a train car or next to

each other at a quiet bar. I want to create a place where the narrator is able to divulge confidential details about his past without hesitation. And I believe that poems found and read by another character gives the reader a sense of discovery that even the narrator doesn't know that they have. The reader knows more than the narrator probably wishes to confide. This device is uber-powerful. Its nuclear. This could also be closely related to Lorca's concept of *duende*. He says, "those dark sounds are the mystery, the roots that cling to the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but from which comes the very substance of art... seeking the *duende*, there is neither map no discipline. We only know it burns the blood like powdered glass, that it exhausts, rejects all the sweet geometry we understand, that it shatters styles" (Lorca *).

Within the Berlin chapters, I experimented with effects such as "delay" and "yearning" and wanted to make these distances and spaces as close as possible. I wanted the reader to be in the same room and the same time as my narrator and my characters, especially within the present-day events. I wanted to always strive to present the story from the protagonist's point of view and not try to anticipate what the reader's point of view should be in the way that Orhan Pamuk discusses in *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist*. I want to leave the reader to navigate that for themselves. I also agree with Pamuk that the device of the novel allows the writer to narrate from within a minor character. And that allows the reader to see distinguishing marks and scars on the protagonist/narrator that he/she himself may not allow the reader to see. Pamuk goes on to say that "the novelist finds an abundance of material in the details of his own life and in his imagination. One writes in order to explore, develop, and engage deeply with this material.

Again, I have always written out of catharsis and regret. I am not sure where and when the pain will be quelled and healed, but if I am on the journey then I am bound to reach the destination. Pamuk says "just as the sentimental-reflective reader goes through the novel trying to

guess exactly where the center is, the experienced novelist goes along knowing that the center will gradually emerge as he writes, and that the most challenging and rewarding aspect of his work will be finding this center and bringing it into focus.” This concept is also always in the forefront of my mind as I prepare to sit and write.

I wanted to also try to apply Roland Barthe’s concept of *punctum* within a long form fiction piece. I need to express the pain that the character is feeling and how it is hurting them. Miles’ persona on the outside is aloof and emotionally distant, not necessarily cutoff, just distant. But on the inside, he is bleeding out with guilt and regret. I feel like placing Miles’ poems at the end of the story will show the reader how he feels and how he now chooses to express those emotions. He expresses those through art and not wonton vandalism and rejection of his family and peers as he once did. The poetry I think could become a larger part of the protagonist’s self-expression for the reader to discover and I would like to involve more of the poems within the text, specifically in footnotes. That way, I feel like they are just telegraphic thoughts and/or requests to the cosmos that the reader can access at the bottom a page.

Another strong theme throughout the story is the dichotomy of suburban America’s fascination with religion and worship of God and the run-amok fuck-you mentality of everyday capitalistic society. I especially cannot ignore the use of the atom bomb as a measure to ensure a well lived life for these Americans at the expense of vaporized and melted human beings on the other side of the planet. Gary Snyder in a keynote speech encapsulated in the book *Poetics and Polemics* by Jerome Rothenberg, stated aloud that “The world is charg’d with the grandeur of God” but rebuts this notion with “For after Auschwitz and Hiroshima the line comes back to me distorted: ‘The world is charged with the terror of God’” (Rothenberg *). I wanted to bring my perceived hypocrisy of the religious right in America where I could. The historical context is very

important to me. I take in to account the importance of the current American culture and political environment Vonnegut was writing in and also how old he was at the time of his writing. The historical content of *Slaughterhouse-five* is overwhelming.

When Vonnegut needed to speak in a more formal way concerning historical fact but at the same time did not want to leave his informal narrative voice, he would have another character speak the words. Here is an example of where Vonnegut goes into a documentarian voice saying, “On the night of March 9th, 1945, an air attack on Tokyo by American heavy bombers, using incendiary and high explosive bombs, caused the death of 83,793 people. The atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed 71,379 people” (Vonnegut 188). He leaves the reader to interpret his meaning which typically leans toward the sarcastic flavor. This is a voicing style that I wanted to emulate with the footnote storylines of the WWII Hoyal G. character in the Pacific * and the dental pharmaceuticals in The Hottest Summer footnote. *

Junot Diaz’s use of footnotes is also highly influential to my writing in this piece. One of the best examples of this, outside of the initial instances at the very start of the novel, is concerning his recurring theme regarding the mongoose. One of the best examples of this is illustrated on page 151 of the 2008 trade-paperback edition. And another footnote from page 132, of the same edition, is used as an editorial explanation to the reader. While these footnotes take me out of the narrative rhythm, they make me as the reader feel like I am reading a dense and accurate portrayal of the events affecting the book’s characters. I love the feeling of academia within the fictional novel.

At times, I struggle to keep the temporal space as close as possible between the writer and the reader. This is paramount to the way I read, the way I think about “story” and very much the way I think about writing. I want the relationship to be intimate and not distant. I am afraid that this struggle is not aided by the experimentation in footnotes. But I wanted to see if the space could

be bridged between reader and protagonist via internal dialog and information that the protagonist most likely would never divulge to the reader.

Kundera defines the term “novel” in his “Sixty-three Words” glossary at the end of *The Art of the Novel* as “the great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some themes of existence.” I truly love this concise definition. I only hope that the existence of “experimental selves” is not indicative to schizophrenia.

A good place that I have found to change or distort the point of view toward the reader is obviously the beginning of a new chapter. The chapter change has already created a “whitespace”, and this allows for the writer to introduce a change in point-of-view. I decided to experiment with some third person narrative within this piece and have still not convinced myself that that was a good idea in and of itself and also if it is a good idea outright. I do not prefer third person. It feels so distant that it is as if one is reading a textbook. I prefer intimacy. I prefer a close proximity with my reader. I don't want to hurt my reader, but I do want them to feel a bit of the pain.

Infinite Jest could be described as “super-realist fiction” as John Gardner might say. Gardner also has stated another concept very important to me, he states “by keeping out a careful ear for rhythm, the writer can control the emotion of his sentences with considerable subtlety. The good writer works out his rhythms by ear” (Gardner *). Somehow I have felt this has been my way all along. The phrase “by ear” could mean “by feel” and I have always leaned toward the anarchistic side of writing and music as well. The less you know sometimes, the better. Most everyone can feel and recognize a good song that is comprised of good melodies the same way most everyone can recognize a good story. A story with strong themes, strong characters and a yearning that is rewarded or lost in the end.

The beginning of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* allows the author to prostrate his protagonist/narrator Hal Incandenza into a position of confessions to the reader and allows the reader to swiftly climb aboard DFW's *ship-at-sea*. He grabs the reader on page one. His character tells the reader "I do not know ... I've been coached ... I have committed ... I believe I appear neutral ... I hope." The reader is brought very close from the get-go. DFW also incorporates the hyphenated word sequence that I have also felt compelled to sprinkle throughout my prose. In a great example of this, DFW writes "A kind of distanced affront, an I'm-eating-something-that-makes-me-really-appreciate-the-presence-of-whatever-I'm-drinking-along-with-it look" (Wallace 6).

One of the more difficult criticisms of writing for me would be the heavy use of adjectives. In my Forms and Techniques of Poetry course there was an article written by Ezra Pound in which he wrote, "use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something." Pound was speaking in terms of poetry, but I found that the study of poetry was beneficial to my approach toward prose. I find this difficult to balance within my writing. I am tossed and turned in the storm between Hunter S. Thompson's uber-adjective innovations to Ernest Hemingway's razor sharp and bare bones editing. I tend to lean toward Thompson.

An example of both follow: In *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway remains sparse with sentences such as "The leaves lay sodden in the rain and the wind drove the rain against the big green autobus at the terminal and the Café des Amateurs was crowded and the windows misted over from the heat and the smoke inside" (Hemingway 3). Hemingway's book is one of my favorites, but it did not come naturally to me. When I read Thompson's *Fear and Loathing*, I felt like I was listening to the Beatles' 1967 album Sgt. Pepper's Lonely-Hearts Club Band for the first

time. It just made more sense to me in the same way Junot Diaz's *Oscar Wao* changed the game for me as well.

Here is an array of examples of Thompson's style, first describing his attorney Dr. Gonzo, "there he goes, one of God's own prototypes, a high-powered mutant of somekind never considered for mass production. Too weird to live too rare to die" (Thompson *). Then using hyphenated words and words divided with a forward slash (/) to invent new combinations of descriptors such as a "filthy piss-ridden little hole, once-innocent teenager, a sensual/surface drug, pimp/drug underworld, stone-broke freaks, piss-poor lawyer, elephant-leg pants, glaze-black shirt, drug-addled grin, rotten kid/hitchhiker, Kingston Trio/young stockbroker type, strange County-Fair/Polish Carnival madness. (Thompson *). Thomson also used actual pronoun references to enhance an object such as a ten-peso Acapulco shirt, Sandy Bull's Saigon-mirror shades, a natural Bogart smile, Arnie Palmer golf shirts, a mean Baptist hysteric, a good Vida Blue fastball" (Thompson *).

Each of the authors I have mentioned rely on recurring themes throughout their novels. An example of recurring theme in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* is the Central Park ducks, whereas Junot Diaz uses a mongoose. Vonnegut uses a handful of recurring phrases such as "and so on to infinity; and so it goes; somewhere a big dog barked." In this manner I wanted to bring a few themes forward in my own work. The usage of symbolism like fire, 88 keys of a piano, 88 constellations, were my own way to emulate some of these writer's techniques.

DFW also brings forth his protagonist as sort of a "rebel without a cause." Hal is a student at a prestigious tennis academy, yet he is disaffected and affectionless at the same time. DFW's character is "the potentially gifted ten-year-old tennis and lexical prodigy whose mom's a continental mover and shaker in the prescriptive-grammar academic world and whose dad's a

towering figure in optical and avant-garde film circles and single-handedly founded the Enfield Tennis academy” (Wallace 30). Salinger seems to portray his protagonist, Holden Caulfield, much in the same way. A privileged student with access to wealth and access to higher education yet he has the luxury to spend time contemplating the human condition.

Wallace employs endnotes to the chagrin of many I might guess, but they also create that form of whitespace I spoke about earlier. The reader is forced to pull themselves out of the story at hand to go down a rabbit hole of an endnote. Yet they always felt rewarding to me. I prefer to use footnotes in a fashion similar to Junot Diaz. These still take the reader out of rhythm at times, but they are revealing and also pertinent in the end. The endnotes that DFW created are incredible in volume and specificity other and I would not expect to ever see another author come close to achieving that same effect.

Whereas DFW waits until page 23 to drop his first endnote, Junot Diaz begins with his footnotes straight away. Diaz utilizes this device to have a second narrative traveling parallel to the proper narrative in the conventional prose. Diaz launches in on page 2 of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* with footnotes encapsulating the Dominican Republic’s political upheaval with the “then dictator-for-life Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina.” Diaz’s first footnote goes on for 2 pages and is quickly followed by many more. Diaz uses these footnotes as a backdrop to his narrative prose that describes the maternal relationships between several generations of mothers and daughters.

Diaz’s novel inspired many of my initial ideas for this piece. When I read Oscar Wao, it was very much like seeing Nirvana in a small sweaty club, a bell went off in my head. I read *Oscar Wao* and was inspired to try myself to create a long form piece of prose. Oscar’s sister, Lola was a self-described “punk chick. That’s what I became. A Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk

chick” (Diaz 54). “All my life I’d been swearing that one day I would just disappear. And one day I did” (Diaz 61). Diaz uses differing points of view from relative characters to establish a generational line of struggle. The bad habits and bad luck of one generation is visited onto the next.

Musical references are another characteristic that I often use to express what a character’s state of mind, fashion sense, likes and dislikes and political nature might be. One can sometimes extrapolate a lot from someone’s musical tastes and using references to musicians, albums or songs can target in on the deep and hidden idiosyncratic nature of a character.

Hunter Thompson used many musical references in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. One of the first examples of this can be found in the opening scene of the book. Thompson places his two characters in a convertible travelling through the desert with the car’s AM radio playing simultaneously with a portable tape recorder. The radio is playing “One toke over the line, Sweet Jesus.... One toke over the line...” “One toke? You poor fool? I could barely hear the radio Slumped over on the far side of the seat grappling with the tape recorder turned all the way up on Sympathy for the Devil” (Thompson *). These songs and visuals put the reader right there in the car along with them.

Diaz uses two musical references on a single page to describe his characters’ states of mind. In speaking about Oscar, Diaz writes “One night while he was listening to New Order ... his sister knocked on the door...She’d shaved her head down to the bone, Sinead-style” (Diaz 37). Another example is where Diaz writes, “So, anyway, guess who decided that she was the love of his life? Who fell head over heels for her because he heard her playing Joy Division up in her room and, surprise, he loved Joy Division too? Oscar, of course” (Diaz 182).

My hope is that I successfully emulated these techniques in the following long form fiction piece. The authors mentioned above continue to render inspiration and innovation in prose for me as a writer.

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The Prometheus Chord

A Novel

Prologue: Sign in Stranger

Given the chance, most everyone would switch places with a Greek god or goddess, right? To know the true feeling of immortality and live forever. To be able to shed this pitiful existence of humankind and its inherent suffering. Maybe not, hell, I don't know. Not all gods are equal if you really think about it. Some were even struck with tragic and horrific conditions typically brought on by their own doing. Take Prometheus, the son of Zeus. This could've been the life, being the son of the all mighty creator and the most powerful spirit in the cosmos. But, in the end, this guy found himself chained to a mountain peak so a giant bird could have breakfast, lunch and dinner every day for eternity. Why, you ask. Nothing big, he just scammed his father, the all mighty and most powerful God in the universe, into gifting humankind some knowledge. Some very valuable and specific knowledge on how to create fire. And then the rest is history. A couple of millennia pass, and you have humankind heaving the power of the Sun onto large populous cities in Japan incinerating everything in 2-mile radii. But, isn't it better to know the truth rather than not to know? Zeus didn't really think he could protect mankind from him/herself, did he? I have always felt that one should always know the truth, all the truth and nothing but. As much as one can handle, anyway. Colonel Jessup would not agree.

We aren't marionettes hanging from the heavens. Even if we were, I would urge each of you to reach above your head and cut the strings. You can do what you want to do within limits. I mean, we are all somewhat chained to *something* under the Sun, spinning and sliding through infinity, yet still, you can do what you want to do. My point is, just don't scam your family, steal their secrets and make the world a harder place. Or one day you might find yourself alienated from "the family" in a way that seems irreparable. Don't hold out on them. Every hug counts. Once the hugs and the smiles dry up and time moves on, it can be a long road back. And all you'll have left

is a collection of memories. But then again, you might not even have *that*. So, anyway, I cut the strings, I pulled the cords, I set fires and now I'm on the long road back. Someone once told me that it only stings at first, you'll get used to it. *So come on, you zombie, be born again my friend and sign in stranger.*¹

¹ Steely Dan lyric from their 1976 album the Royal Scam. The strings that connect all of us and everything together within this marionette opera can indeed make life feel like a royal scam. It's hard to cut the strings without upsetting the puppeteer. And once you start that fire, you can never *unburn* things.

The Hazards of Night Running

. . . Blood always tastes strange, but with animal flavor and familiarity. The warm sensation and viscosity of one's own blood filling one's own mouth stirs the soul. The deep Precambrian soul. Swallowing blood awakens our dark human and needful base fears. It's usually never a good thing. Having blood in your mouth, I mean. Maybe this is because our brains are not sure whether to fight or take flight, to laugh or cry, or simply curl up into Pompeii-style-fetal-form, wait for the volcanic ash to pull the soft sheets over our heads and tuck us in for an infinite night's sleep. I prefer to lean more toward a good laugh and a cheap high. But when I truly think about it, I glaze over and think back to a few hours ago when I first arrived back here to my childhood home. A home I have not seen in almost a decade. In fact, I have just stumbled forward breaking the fall with my jaw onto a curb while jogging at night two blocks from that very childhood home. A run I haven't made since I was a late teen. But on this strange day's night-run, I am fully buzzed from hours of drinking and angry for myriad of reasons and asking myself, 'well, how did I get here?'² Why am I searching inside my bloody mouth with my bloody tongue for cleaved granular sands

² Lyrics taken from the Talking Heads song Once In a Lifetime from their 1980 album Remain In Light. The song's music video aired in heavy rotation during the MTV's formative years in the early 1980 's. David Byrne, the Zen-electrified-and-Dancing-Wu-Li-Master-influenced-lead-singer, performs as an anti-hero rockstar in a religious evangelical style. Byrne seemed to be somewhat mocking religious rituals from all over the globe as they were looped in the background of the music video. Of all the punk-rock joints in all the world MTV reached down from the heavens and chose the Talking Heads over The Ramones.

This was already a few years on from Blondie being commercialized on network broadcast television's Friday Night Videos and Saturday morning's Dick Clark's Top Ten. This was a birthing moment shipped via coax cable into the suburban cradles of aural renderings and cemented into video posterity for a new version of collective consciousness, this time for gen-x, a time within rock and pop music not to be missed. All the 10-year old kids in America could now watch the FCC's sugar coating of the sticky-wet-grains of sex and street-grit straight from the New York Punk scene and beyond, in unadulterated tube-driven television, provided they had access to early era cable tv. Naturally I was one of these 10-year old kids.

of sharp enamel and root pulp? What if I told you the real reason I'm lying face down in a cold puddle of water on a fog-enshrouded street corner is that I'm looking for the entrance of the rabbit hole I fell into today. What if I told you I was running with my eyes closed? I do that from time to time. While in full stride I will dare myself to just simply shut my eyes for a few seconds to feel my heartbeat and the wind in my ears in full faith that I will remain upright and sure footed. This thought, this ridiculous idea of running blind, when it appears inside my head, will not go away until I succumb and close my eyes. Then and only then can I get on with my run. What if I told you that in just the past few days I have received life-altering news regarding my parents? The parents from whom I have been estranged in a self-imposed exile. But the truth is, on this night, this night of reckoning, this night of illumination, I have the fire in my hands, and I am hell-bent on laying everything aflame. In a moment of stillness, a staggering electric shock of anger grips me and I find myself throwing punches at the sky.

This is the account that I choose to share with you as a cautionary tale or maybe as a holy confessional, you can decide. It's my version of a memory. In any case, it is for *you*. That is, if you want to follow me down the rabbit hole. The one I just stumbled upon. The one I just broke my teeth on. The one I am clinging to the sides of for dear life praying not to slip any farther down. I am not asking you to rescue me. I am not asking you to trust me. You can turn back anytime you want. But then you will never know. [One other forewarning: there are no Manson-style murder scenes here and there isn't any Ian Fleming-style espionage. This isn't a space opera, nor is it a comedic experiment in any straightforward sense. This is just a story emanating from one of the last mid-western American outposts of suburbia that attempts to outline the connections between the human inhabitants therein.]³ This is the story of a child who didn't get around to growing up

³ All words in brackets represent later additions and repressed thoughts by the author.

until one morning when the phone rang at 3am. When time finally ran out. When childhood ended. This is a story about how life waits its sweet time to bestow upon you the never-never-land revelations that will change your entire mind's landscape forever. *Forever*. The very word sometimes holds me in suspended fright on quiet nights while lying in darkness, breathing slow and wanting to fall asleep. The kind of sober thinking that keeps you wide eyed and still. The kind of thoughts that keep your stomach bile on a low simmer with a tinge of hot foam touching the bottom of your throat. Your brain is bouncing like a hammer off the invisible bulletproof window at the edge of the milky way. And you begin to doubt if a wave of warm sleep will ever come to dim your cerebral warehouse ceiling lamps into slumber mode. *Forever. Who wants to live forever anyway?*⁴

⁴ A song composed by Queen for the 1986 film Highlander and yet is often mistaken for Freddie Mercury's swansong. He in fact had not yet shared his fatal diagnosis with the world. Much more on Queen later. The following few years would see Generation-X come of age, another variant of Punk Rock would germinate to thin out the herd of arena rock bands such as Queen and the world in general would accelerate at incredible speed and force. New emotional disorders would be discovered, diagnosed, neutralized, cauterized and arguably perpetuated by big-pharma. A host of drugs for the inexperienced and a new menu of legal drugs for the uber experienced Boomers was synthesized and sold wholesale to the hoards.

The Prodigal Son Wearily Returns

Turning toward the car window I lean my head onto the taxi-cab's backseat headrest. Propping it sideways into the direct sunlight. This way I can keep the strobe effect of the sun onto my closed eyelids. I've done this meditation trick many times since I was a child. I loved the self-hypnosis of riding in the warm cocoon of a car along a tree-lined farm road with my eyes closed. The sunlight projects the rapid-fire-shadows through the branches and leaves down upon my face, and through the thin curtains of my capillary rich eyelids. All the while, I am descending the steps below the thousand and one Arabian trap doors hidden within my skull. The frightening thing about the possession of a photographic memory is that there truly is no escape. When the hammer and chisel of grief carves its brutal mark deep onto your cortex, that's when your race is begun. The race to get away, to escape and find the fuzzy buzz of numbness and release. More on that later. There are pressing issues at hand, and I need to lock down the hatch that leads to that dark little box in the corner of my brain where all my reptilian winged friends reside.

The airport taxi pulls up in front of my childhood home. The house looks the same but like an aged face that has moved on without you. The shrubs are a bit taller and the house paint a bit faded. It feels as though I am looking at a Polaroid within a Polaroid. There are two frames, one around the house and one around my mind's memory of the house. The trees remaining full of late Autumn leaves construct an almost complete canopy above the tar-striped street. This stretch of homes was built in the late 1960's when the housing boom was beginning to throttle up and the suburban wave of sprawl was rising against the city's outer ring of farmland. This is the America that the Boomers wanted, right? Albeit, it is far beyond their control now. A diseased outcropping of their symptomatic loss of control. This I like, the Boomer's loss of control. They had their turn. Now we are left to scavenge through the ruins for our own forgiveness from the gods.

Opening the car door, I begin a rapid review and recall of all the files that I need to open and access on my brain's memory card to check for feeling, emotion and compassion. Error, they were never saved to disc and the files are long lost. Besides, my entire hard drive will soon be Hiroshima'd⁵ to kingdom come. I find myself stutter stepping at the curb taking a deep breath while the taxi driver pulls away. He waited a long minute for me to walk toward the house. I guess he thought I was going to change my mind, get back into the car and get the hell back to New York. He read it on my face.

Is there time for a quick cigarette? Better not. There are cars parked all down the street and from what I can tell, the house looks full. A close childhood friend, to remain yet unnamed, was kind enough to message me and let me know that my father's body would indeed be lying in state at the wake. He also told me to take it slow and that things may be a little different than expected.

The shady walkup through the front yard is something of a wormhole. The memories are coming back full strength now. I'm rebooting.

Motionless I stand on my parent's front porch. Through the door from inside the house I listen to a flawless rendition of a repetitive fragment of Rachmaninoff. A piece being mercilessly pounded down with claws of exponential kinetic energy onto the ivory keys. My feeling of intimidation with this surreal situation is growing by the minute, and the ferocity of this music is pushing my limits of courage to peak levels. I arrived here with full intent to confront whatever comes my way. But now that there is only one door left between me and everything I have avoided for years; I am now not so confident. I realize that I am holding my breath and looking down in deep study of my well-worn loafers. These loafers have been everywhere with me the last couple

⁵ The first foreign target for "Oppenheimer's deadly toy." The power of a star was brought down onto civilization vaporizing everything in a mile radius. Now the spot that had the crosshairs on it looks to be a highway offramp in downtown Hiroshima. Somehow things always grow back.

of years, but they have never stood here. Right here on the edge of a threshold I left long ago. You always knew this day would come Miles. You always knew you would return. You knew you would always come home. So, buckle up and open the door. See if you can let yourself back in.

Wait.

Oberlin

“Ohio!?”

“Yes. Ohio. Open the door!”

Sylvia unlocked and opened the bathroom door to find both her parents standing in their church clothes and says “I am going to be sick again. I can’t go.”

Sylvia was an only child. A pure-bred Baby-Boomer. Her father fought in the Pacific theater of World War II island hopping the atolls all the way up to Japan.⁶ He didn’t return home

⁶ When I was a child, I called my paternal grandfather Paw-Paw so naturally I called my maternal grandfather Hoyal G. Everyone called him Hoyal G., and he never really demurred to anything else. Not even to his eldest grandson. For me, his name just added to the deep mystique with which I held him in, even though I didn’t know what the word mystique meant. He was a fit and tall man; thin, almost gaunt you might say, but as rugged as a Mexican pack-mule. His hands and arms looked like rusted wrought iron and undoubtedly were as durable. I spent days at a time with my grandparents around the Christmas holidays each year and would eventually return home with my parents after our big family Christmas Day lunch. But the quiet afternoons leading up to Christmas Day in his woodshop watching him build cabinets and tables were my fondest memories. He was austere and stoic, he said very few words to anyone, but he tolerated my never-ending questions and expeditions through his large garage and woodshop. There were trunks, bankers-boxes and shelves full of the universal mysteries of the American Dream.

I would be left alone for hours at a time digging far into the single light bulb lit storage closets. And those closets seemed infinite. There was always this one trunk buried by large books, blankets and dusty boxes but the trunk itself looked official in some engineered way. I finally was able to open it one day and discovered Hoyal G’s World War II archive. Guns, rounds, medals, helmets, belts, holsters, knives and bayonets. But what captured my 10-year-old imagination were the twin shoe boxes of black and white photos and slides. Quickly walking past Hoyal G with the boxes, I made my way inside the house. I presumed he didn’t see what treasure I had procured from his infinite closet, but he quietly followed right behind me. I took the boxes to the kitchen table and urgently began to bring bright sunlight to the long-stowed photographs. He seated himself facing across from me at his kitchen table and that afternoon, he took me to a place he had not spoken of in over 40 years. Hoyal G. took the first carefully rubber banded bundle of 3x5’s out of the box. It was labeled Guam ‘44.

In his stoic voice he began to tell me, “I waited my turn to look out thru the gimlet opening. Seeing the first wave of AMTRAK LCs on fire and sinking was not comforting. It was a serene, stone-cold, chilling terror. We were not yet in full range of their guns but soon would be.” I look back to that decades ago conversation and think about how strange a feeling to be caught in an unnatural act that holds great potential for your death, but there is no turning back. Your soul is booked for the trip. You are moving floating forward into a cauldron of hell. A nest of angered wasps and you will soon be stung. It’s a strange feeling. He said, “not everyone wanted to peer through the gimlet. It

as the same man but by all accounts he was a product of the Greatest Generation and tried his best to be the husband and father he was before the war. Sylvia's mother was a farm girl turned city girl who worked in the ordnance factories assembling shells in Fort Worth, Texas during the war.

“If you want to do this, we need to leave now.”

“I want to, but I can't”

was like letting yourself give in to what was coming.” For most of the men that squatted low within the maw of the AMTRAK, the future was grim at best. But, allowing oneself to stand and lean against the cold water dripping down inside the iron hull and to peer through the rectangle gimlet took a confidence and nerve of a rare man.

These beaches would have been an Earthly paradise on any other day in a galaxy far, far away with lush banana trees and coconut palms, white sands and cool breezes from an azul ocean tide. But today it is an unholy Hell upon Earth. The American's Destroyer's 16-inch guns made sure of that in a two-week long 24-7 barrage of shelling three separate beaches and the Japanese Army's entrenchments just beyond the tree lines. Hoyal G was to land on Agat Beach on July 21, 1944. Once the beachheads were established, the Americans were to move upward and onward taking heavy losses along the way. The Japanese slowly retreated up into the steep hills and deep within complex cave systems. They had been waiting for this moment for three years. They knew the Americans would eventually be coming.

The Japanese were tunneled underground and avoided U.S. detection when the initial assault began. They were underground in rocky caves and fortified bunkers awaiting the Americans arrival with 8-inch cannons and 25mm anti-aircraft guns. Not only were the American forces handed heavy losses in the immediate aftermath of the landing but also with the following days in which the Americans liberated the local Chamorros from the occupying Japanese prisoner internment camps. The Japanese held the local populations of Guam in these forced labor camps for years after their invasion just weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Japanese utilized the free labor to move many heavy cannons up into the lush forest growth. These cannons were methodically perched within the forested hills virtually invisible to the Americans arriving in the bay and landing on the beach that day. The shallow ocean floor at Agat Beach Bay is littered with armored landing vehicles that the Japanese forces destroyed and sunk. Many of these were from the initial waves of attack. Before the 77th Infantry division of the US Army could move North and connect up with the 3rd Battalion U.S. Marines they had to secure the beachhead at Agat and take the Japanese defenses who were heavily dug in and tunneled beneath Ga'an Point, a densely forested hill just above Agat Beach.

The rear attack on Ga'an point was the decisive strike on Agat Beach but the Americans had to move their amphibious-tanks up onto the flat terrain just beyond the beach landing and then trek inland and back around to attack Ga'an Point driving the Japanese out and into the sea.

Hoyal G. and I worked our way through two shoeboxes stuffed full of photos, letters, and maps. I don't have Hoyal G. anymore but I still have his boxes of photos. I think of him often and I am reminded of his mechanically austere manner in describing the horrors of war.

“Sylvia, this man came a long way to hear you play. It would be awful for him to have to go all the way back to Ohio without seeing you.”

“You don’t want to disappoint this man from Oberlin. You’ve worked so hard.”

“I will be out in another minute” Sylvia says in negotiating tones.^[1] She leans over the toilet dry heaving and sweating profusely. She knows this will be the last of the gut pumping and anxiety killing heaves, then she has to go. She knows she’ll feel an adrenaline high for about the next six or so minutes. Just enough time to get to the school. Then she can assume the position and resume the battle of retching in the nearest restroom.

Months ago, when Sylvia received the news that she garnered the attention of the classical piano department at Oberlin Music Conservatory, she was euphoric. Such is the rollercoaster of the anxiety-ridden person. At the outset of any scheduled performance or important date of appointment the subject is over the moon and high on life. But when the date closes in and the hours approach, our subject begins to shrivel and shut down. Soon they begin dying on the vine and fantasizing about how to avoid the performance altogether. If and when the subject can conjure an acceptable excuse and commit to it, then the resulting high is as great or more satisfying than the first day in which they accepted the date from the start. It is truly a sad and incapacitating cycle.

Sylvia struggled to walk upright into the school where two Oberlin representatives eagerly awaited her audition. She dry-heaved in the parking lot and had tears rolling down her heavily made up face. The feeling of disappointing her parents and the people from the music school were forefront in her mind. The music hadn’t even occurred to her yet that morning. The music was the furthest thing from her tsunami pounded mind. The only thing inside her head was the question of how bad this feeling might get, and would it place her into an inescapable position in which she would become spectacle. Sitting at the piano with all eyes on you in dead reckoning silence is the very definition of spectacle. Sylvia made her way into the restroom and went to work alleviating the icepick pain inside her abdomen. In an awkward and shuffled manner, she passed by her high school’s assistant principal, the school district’s fine arts director and her private tutor in a

contorted shape of a slight and slim young girl. She was skin and bones, nerves and bile. In all, there were about a dozen people eager to listen to Sylvia audition the most important performance of her life to date. All the while she was frozen stiff in a sort of standing fetal position with vomit on her shoes and in her hair. She could feel the cool sweat dripping onto her ears and the back of her neck. The acidic bile collected in her mouth was rusting the enamel off the backsides of her teeth. She could feel the grit with her tongue. Sylvia was dizzy, sweaty and now, since the last animalistic convulsion, feeling like she could run a marathon.

The momentary high one feels when they realize the current episode of vomiting has expired is unexplainable. When she emerged from the restroom, it was as if one was watching a mucus covered butterfly free itself of its chrysalis. She was now walking in a confident posture and after opening the door of the small theater room she greeted her tutor and the assistant principal. She was introduced to a very proud fine arts director who couldn't seem to stop himself from repeating the phrase "we are so proud." Then the Oberlin Music College and Conservatory administrators and faculty members that traveled all the way from Ohio spoke with Sylvia for several minutes while her mother and father sat anxiously a few rows back somewhat out of sight from the stage. They had seen this episode play out before. They had seen the grotesque facial expressions and animal howls. They had seen the fits of anger and the extreme vomiting. They had heard the excuses and the guilty crying. But, they had also, on rare occasion, witnessed what they were watching at that very moment. A confident and strident daughter taking her talent by the reins and letting it soar. A fully realized artist sparkling for just a moment. But this was unfortunately a rare occurrence. And once it was over the artist went back into seclusion not to be seen again for a very long time.

The Oberlin officials requested three pieces be performed. Two choices being from the university faculty of which they forwarded to the fine arts director three weeks ago. And one piece of Sylvia's choosing. Oberlin requested Liszt's "Un Sospiro" and the Largo movement of Chopin's Sonata No. 3. As for Sylvia, the moment she received news of her audition there was not a question

in her mind that she would play Beethoven's Fur Elise. This piece is a favorite of hers and her mother's and was also one of the first difficult songs she learned at an early age.

When she had finished playing, Sylvia also answered a few questions from the stage as traces of ejecta matter shimmered in her hair. The faculty either didn't notice or chose to ignore as something they are quite familiar with in their line of high-pressure performance. And as events would play out, Sylvia was invited to attend a special summer week of performance study at the Oberlin campus. She unhesitatingly accepted without the slightest consideration of the grand effort it took for her just to complete this performance. Her mother and father were happy yet reticent about what was surely to come. This next trial by fire would require a plane ride, a few nights in a hotel and voluminous amounts of vomit. As the weeks passed and the summer study program approached, so did the creeping fear of the unknown. The levels of anxiety increased with each passing day.

The morning of the flight was just such one of these tornadic events. Sylvia eventually made it out of the house and to the car with a stained dress, make-up smeared face and deep scratches on her arms. Her hair was never even attended to that morning. It looked as if she had just awakened on the forest floor. The airport was almost an hour drive from their west Fort Worth home and her father knew it would prove to be a defining event. Sylvia twisted and contorted in a restless and ever escalating manner all the way to the airport. Her father stopped no less than a dozen times to allow her to dry heave with the car door open. It was just too soon, she had to find a handle on the situation before she ruined her chances of attending a prestigious conservatory. She was able to live with the fantasy intact for several weeks. A fantasy that she had earned something for herself. This was hers. She didn't want to lose it yet. It was just too soon. She had to postpone. She knew deep down that she would never get on the plane. But the charade continued as they entered the airport and approached the check-in desk.

"I can't do this" Sylvia says in a volume not even she is sure is audible. She is scared. "Mom, I can't do this."

“I know you think that you cannot. But we are going to try. We’re here. We came all this way. We have our tickets. Our luggage has been checked. Let’s try.”

Sylvia felt faint. The panic was seeping in from all sides. She felt that her parents were now lost to her. They were not going to listen to her. They had come this far. She sat squirming and wrestling with herself as they waited at the gate. The flight had begun to board when Sylvia stood up and made her contorted and half bent forward walk to the nearest restroom. Her mother closely followed. They both emerged as the last of the line was boarding. Sylvia walked alongside her father searching in desperation to find that rare confident self, but it just wasn’t there on that day. They walked the long length of the skyway to the door of the plane. Sylvia stepped aboard and began to shake. Her father helped her into her seat and could feel that her clothes were soaked through with sweat. Even he was amazed at how wet she was. And then she began to scream. An uncontrollable and unforgiving blade to the cochleae of every passenger on the plane.

They were ushered back off the plane, down the skywalk and into a small room just off the main gate waiting area. The flight and gate personnel worked at fever pitch to calm her down. They and her parents stood in a semi-circle around the hunched-over and folded up little sixteen-year-old girl. That was the end of Oberlin. That was the end of competitive performance. And that was the end of piano for almost two years.

1967 at University

Sylvia makes up her mind and dares herself to come down to the student activity center with some friends. The first few weeks here at this local university in Texas where she is still close to her family have been difficult, but she has managed to assimilate. She has been able to establish a routine that will allow her to function. They enter to find a crowded central room with dozens of students in varying degrees of conversation playing ping pong and cards and dominoes. Some are just standing in circles and others are lazily sitting or lying on sectional couches. It is a late summer Saturday night and most everyone knows this room is equipped with the best air conditioning on campus. Sylvia stays close and doesn't leave the orbit of her new friends from the women's dormitory.

She begins to feel comfortable and starts to look up and survey the room with more intent. And then she sees it. An old upright piano pushed into one of the corners of the room. She shivers as if looking at a decaying corpse, yet she can't stop looking back at the dormant box of neglected and aging strings. She could sense that it had not been played or shown any real attention in quite some time. The fallboard is closed and there are some tufted burgundy curtains swathed across the top and hanging down the sides. The bench has long since disappeared. She tries hard to ignore the call, but the magnetism is too great, and it eventually ensnares Sylvia's curiosity and she makes the walk across the room. She stands looking at the wooden corpse and wonders what condition the keys might be in.

"Do you play?"

Sylvia turned to see a cautiously disarming young man.

"If you do, I'd be glad to find a chair for you to sit in. I've never heard anyone play this old thing. It's been here for years." Sylvia just looked at him without saying a word. "You do play, I can tell. I'll be right back. Oh, and by the way, my name is Hank."

She watched him navigate the room like it was his own living room. She watched as he made a similar looking young man, dressed much as himself, stand and give up his chair. Hank

raised the metal folding chair over his head like a trophy and winked at Sylvia in a moment of mock triumph.

“Hey, you have to tell me your name now. I’ve never seen you in here before.”

Sylvia still silent, sat down and placed both her wide-open hands onto the fallboard. She had not touched a piano in almost two years. She often wondered what it would feel like to play again but she never let herself get this close in a long while. She could see the strings in her mind. She could imagine the worn ivory keys hinged under the wooden cover.

Then she said aloud not intending to, “I wonder if it is tuned.”

“Only one way to find out. I sure wish I could play. What’s your name?”

She raised the fallboard and found a brilliant array of keys. All complete and none were broken or chipped. She thought of something her tutor used to say when describing the power of the piano. He would say, “Eighty-eight keys to eighty-eight constellations. This instrument can take you anywhere, Sylvia.” That thought made her feel a bit sad, but she rarely ever let herself think of what she gave up. She was happy to be close to home and off on her own at the same time. She was still shy and awkward. The piano was once her life, but it was suggested to both her and her parents that she take a break from playing and try focusing on school. She ended up graduating high in her high school class when all was said and done. The piano was now like a giant iron vault that was sealed shut. And now here was her newfound friend Hank, trying to help her pick the lock.

Sylvia closed her eyes and in the most delicate of manner placed her fingers down on the keys. It was in tune. The dust of many years had just been shaken off the strings. And a constellation within her mind lit up along with the muffled sounding chord. The din of the random conversations inside the student activity hall was still in full Saturday night swing when she let the beginning riffs of a classical piece roll off her slight fingers.

“Wow. Is that Liberace or Beethoven?” Hank said with a mile-wide grin.

“Chopin.”

“C’mon, what’s your name?”

“Sylvia,” she whispered in a slight robotic voice. And she began to play louder and was now feeling the sweet elixir of performance. Something she had forgotten. Something she didn’t quite know she had even lost. There is a significant difference in hearing someone play chords and perform a song on piano and then there is the unmistakable experience of hearing a piano being handled and whipped into submission by a gifted and disciplined player. It is something so rare that it will command you to stop and listen. It unconditionally demands your full attention. And if played by just this sort of seasoned individual, it has the power of hypnotism and a transcendent astral body projection-like feeling. It can launch you upward through the troposphere and pull you around the Earth with the force of several super-Gs.

When she had finished, she found that all the people in the room were crowded around her in an ad hoc semi-circle shaped audience and were unsure as to applaud or if she was indeed finished or not. Sylvia then stood and began to walk toward her friends while the room was full of applause and whistling.

“Let’s hear another one,” Hank howled.

But that was as far as she was willing to go that night. She walked near Hank, touched him on his arm and thanked him for the chair. And that’s all it took. Sometimes that’s all it takes really. Sometimes it’s just a quick flash of light and boom, you’re in love. Hank knew right then and there that Sylvia was *‘the one’*. He was a senior and would be finishing his degree in the coming spring. He already had a solid job offer and plans on buying a house from a family friend. And now he had found Sylvia. She was the final piece that he didn’t even know was missing. And that’s how things happen here on Earth folks. One Saturday night, one mysterious girl, an old piano and suddenly Hank’s life was made whole.

Later that night, Sylvia realized how she had by some miracle played without any feeling of fear. She felt free. She remembered Hank made her smile while she played. She couldn’t recall the last time she had ever smiled while at the piano. Hank had enabled the impossible. He made her feel secure. He allowed space for her to be calm and relaxed.

She was becoming confused if she was most happy about finding the piano or finding Hank.

Viet-Mom

The past year had moved quickly. Hank and Sylvia were inseparable. Sylvia took him home to her parents several times for her father's approval and re-approval. The transformation within herself during her freshman year of college was staggering. Her dark years of post-Oberlin were seemingly forgotten, and the demons of anxiety lay dormant. She had stumbled upon the American dream along with Hank. A short engagement followed, and wedding plans were made. Sylvia would decide about continuing school or starting a family after the honeymoon.

In the small sphere of their university life, everything was almost perfect. Yet they did realize that the Summer of Love was over, and a dark cloud was approaching. On occasional weekend evenings, after dinner, Sylvia, Hank and her parents would watch the nightly horrors of Vietnam massacres on television along with the MLK and Bobby Kennedy assassinations, various international airliner hijackings and bouts of civil unrest throughout the nation.⁷

In their visits, Hank and Hoyal G would always get around to discussing the war in Vietnam. Their late-night conversations at the kitchen table never made much sense to Sylvia, until one day Hank met her for lunch with a little white envelope. She saw that it had a government seal on the front and she immediately became undone. Sylvia fell to her knees right in the middle of the city-square diner. The diner patrons and wait staff stood in a semicircle around the helpless and kneeling Hank who had his arms around a folded up little girl.

⁷ RFK shot in Los Angeles about 60 days later. He was on his way to winning the California Democratic primary and had a significant chance to ultimately winning the nomination and therefore could have defeated Richard Nixon later that year in November of 1968. It could have redefined the US's military commitment in Vietnam. But folks, this is not how the cosmos works. Whereas MLK was almost certain of his impending doom, RFK was also rumored to have had inescapable premonitions of replicating his older brother's mortal exit. This is the shit rolling around in my head as I stand here listening to Rachmaninov and doing everything I can to prolong my entrance into the house.

Every generation questions the validity and/or sanity as to whether a newborn child should be brought into such a violent and depraved world. But I would argue that such a thought has never stopped a single soul from doing so. The summer of 1970 was no different.⁸ Because, whatever newspaper you read, it didn't really seem like the best of times to bring a new life into the world yet almost all hospital nurseries were sold out.

And are our paths so welded to our early and initial influences making all that follows absolute and subject? Hearing our first voice, seeing our first face, reading our first book, watching our first film, listening to our first album? The random forces and infinite sources imprinting our recombinant DNA collide and make us all so different in how we see and interpret ourselves and the world.

Well?

By late summer of 1969⁹ my father was on the other side of the planet fighting in what would become a somewhat controversial war. When Hank was granted a week's leave that

⁸ The America of the late 1960's and early 1970's was as vast an oeuvre or palette that could be drawn up and compared to say for example the Roman empire a decade before its own zenith. There was this certain underlying feeling that you better "get yours" before it's all gone. We'd seen it all right there on the color television set. "Adjust the rabbit ears, shit I can't see who just got shot!" was the rallying cry around suburban dinner tables everywhere. If you're ever left wondering if we deserve this violent and vain nation's history then take a trip down to Dealey Plaza sometime and watch the tourists take family portraits with the big white "X" painted in the middle of Elm Street where they once had to scrape up the president's brain matter.

In April of 1970, after years of creative battles, Yoko Ono and Rolling Stones manager Allen Klein broke up The Beatles. In May, members of the Ohio National Guard fired into a large crowd of student war protesters at Kent State University killing four. Two of the four were merely walking between buildings going to class. Boston Bruin Bobby Orr takes flight after scoring the dramatic Game 7 overtime Championship goal and is immortalized into hockey legend and lore by an iconic black and white photo that went around the world. In late May, Apollo 13 splashes down ending three weeks of nonstop epic television dramas. Later that night Sylvia goes into labor.

⁹ Ho Chi Minh dies Sept. 2, 1969 in Hanoi but this had little effect on Nixon's ideas of further escalation. He was going to "win this war for the American people Goddamnit." And at this point the United States had well north of half

September, he asked a monumental request of his young bride to meet him in Hawaii. This as you know would require Sylvia doing the whole airport / airplane thing, considering the historical record here, this was no small invitation. But I think it does reveal that in some instances, high levels of anxiety-dysfunction can be suppressed if need be. Fact is, a long-suffering brain can spread plaque, much like a baker spreads icing on a cake, all over itself for insulation and protection from further suffering.

a million soldiers in-country and was pushing into the 5-digit range of casualties and innumerable permanent injured. The Wise Men, five wealthy white and well-connected fuckers who played chess with the nation's sons and daughters, drew up fear tactics to bring support for the burgeoning containment policy that America was being swept into. Is it fate or karma or divine predestination or just a handful of wealthy and well positioned men can steer the world to the direction they desire and make us all dance to their symphony of destruction? Damn, I can't waste time thinking about this rubbish. Harriman inherited wealth and used his power for what? It doesn't matter much anyway, his plan didn't take out my father, so what the hell do I care?

Walking Through a Wake

I can't stand here much longer debating the worthiness of another cigarette and thinking about the damage of the past. Not much longer before I become discovered either, that I'm sure of. Damn, Miles, just reach for the door and see what's on the other side. But before I can get my hand out of my pants pocket someone is opening the door from the inside. This old college-town pier and beam home has a wide and generous front stoop. Enough so to have a couple of wicker chairs and small table on the porch. The chairs are full of autumn leaves, so they haven't been used today I'm guessing. They always had chairs on the front porch. There is also a couple of old birdhouses and a faded green garden hose coiled up with some planting tools inside the coiled rings. They were also always gardening. Infinite gardening.

"Oh, excuse me. Are you coming inside? Are you a friend of the family?"

I don't immediately answer as I am distracted by the pounding of the piano keys from inside the house.

"Yes, actually yes. A friend of the family." I say to a towering and thin man in a dark suit with cropped salt-and-pepper grey hair.

"Hello, I'm Hank and Sylvia's pastor, Dr. Scott Westin. My father was also their pastor for many years until he passed. Are those your bags?"

He hasn't recognized me yet, but he will. And when he does, I don't want to be standing here. I need to move on past before he fits more of the jigsaw puzzle pieces together in his mind. Yeah, they were always going to church. If only I had been a tomato plant in their garden or the Son of God, they might have spoken to me a bit more.

"Yes sir. It's good to meet you Dr. Westin, I better go on in." Geez that piano, who is doing that?

I didn't fully close the conversation nor complete the handshake before sliding by the pastor. Now I am passing over the threshold and into the small entryway. Aside from the piano there are loud conversations from every corner of the house. The old hardwood floors are a natural acoustic amplifier. It's crowded and but I haven't recognized a face yet. The piano finally finds some soothing notes and the random banging ceases which brings an entirely different mood to the home. I am trapped in the entryway which splits the two front rooms of the house, I am not sweating yet but soon will be in this wool suit. I can see that my father's casket is in the front living area which looks to be the least crowded space in my field of vision. But I'm not ready yet.

Turning around I walk directly into a bear hug from my longtime friend Christian Malone or Moz as I have called him for decades. We'll get to that later.

"Miles, how are you doing with all of this?"

"I'm fine, I don't think anyone knows who I am yet."

"Well, they definitely will in about an hour if you intend on sitting with your mother at the graveside ceremony."

"That's Sylvia playing the piano isn't it? Wow!"

"Yeah, that's your mom pal. Most people in here have never heard her play. She's been alternating between pounding out random chords to playing some of the most eloquent and beautiful pieces I've ever heard."

"How did you manage to beat me here? I thought I left La Guardia on the earliest flight out this morning."

"I flew in last night. And ... I had dinner with Elle. She said that she told Sylvia that you were coming. She is in there with your mother right now."

Now the film goes slow motion for a few seconds. I look down at my shoes again and check my pockets for cigarettes. Here comes the first wave. It's a big one too. Maybe we should catch up a bit since you're riding shotgun with me. I left home over a dozen years or so ago and haven't been back since. My parents and I mutually disowned each other, I guess. I spoke with my father on occasion and we thawed the ice even more in the last couple of years. But Sylvia, my mom, was furious with me and chose not to speak to me for a while. I am at fault for extending that "while" a little more than expected. Elle and I hold a secret that explains the disownment and the subsequent exile. I have had almost no contact with Elle for all these years as well.

Moz and I were childhood best friends up until Moz's family moved to upstate New York in the summer before our freshman year of high school. But then Moz and I reunited in New York City where he is an editor at a well-regarded indie music magazine and where he eventually secured me with a job as well. We essentially are both struggling writers when you boil it right down. But struggling in New York City can be addictive. Elle is a couple of years older than us but we three were all grade-school friends. That's where the piano comes in, it tied us together in the beginning. We were all three regular students of Sylvia's piano lessons, but I didn't last long and was the first to quit. Sylvia never forgave me for that.

All these memories are approaching the shore as I begin walking towards my father. The casket is open, and the lower half is draped with an American flag. I try remembering that last conversation that we had. I remember he was in some pain, but he wouldn't divulge details. I know his feet hurt a great deal. I trace the lines of his face with my eyes. Still a tough looking guy right up until the end. He had the build of an offensive lineman, but his heart got weak and couldn't push the blood to his feet any longer. I can see another wave on the horizon.

The piano starts up again. This time with a string of chords that sound formal but carry a volume of dissonance not normally heard in something played under these circumstances. I follow the music and enter into the room where the Yamaha upright dominated. I have vivid memories of this wooden mastodon-like beast.

I still haven't found the right words to say. What does one say? 'I'm sorry your husband has passed? I'm sorry I vanished twelve years ago? I'm sorry I never learned to play piano?'

I slip up behind her as she is seated and still playing exotic fugues that I have never heard. At the same time, I can feel the faces and eyes of everyone in the house peering to see what her reaction is going to be. I've no idea how to do this. Without thinking, I place my hand on her shoulder and she turns to look at me. In what I can only describe as a near out of body experience, I stand there petrified as she is struggling to place me. Her eyes are different. Her facial expression is on remote control, but the batteries are low.

My father hid my mother's illness with the deftness of a seasoned sculptor. I was both crushed and astonished in the same instant. A burning ball of fire began rising in my throat. Why did I wait so long? It seems so easy now that I'm standing here in the room with her. I can feel myself beginning to crumble and cleave away from the moorings on my emotional dock. At all costs I do not want her to see me fall to pieces like a child. Tears had not even occurred to me until this moment. I do not want to cry in front of these people either. They don't even know who the fuck I am, but I can feel their eyes burning holes into my body. Once again, I find myself the helpless child managing to just barely hold these slippery pieces together.

Can I ask you a question? How is it that we can be molded of such nuanced complexities, in the end only to collapse onto ourselves like giant stars into melancholy and infinite

sadness?¹⁰ I'm hit with a meteor of a thousand fears. I so want to go back to the start. I come to the hard realization that one just has to surrender. One must embrace the anger and fear and ride it like a wild horse, then hope to hell it throws you off into a tall patch of soft green grass. And then one day when the smoke clears and the storm recedes, you will come upon a sublime calm within the crosshairs of the elephant-gun-of-regret that's pointed at your head. There is time enough yet, for me to grow into this straight jacket, but as for now, I realize I have to reach out and hope she clasps my hands with her delicate frail fingers. And she does... in the Disney version. But that's not the truth. That isn't quite how this little piece of penance unfolds.

¹⁰ "The world is a vampire." Lyric taken from the first single off The Smashing Pumpkins 1995 double LP Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness. Miles' first published music review, as a freelance columnist at the direction of Moz, was for this album.

Children of the Grave

It was decided it would be best for Sylvia to travel and be surrounded with familiar people on the way over to the cemetery. So, I ride with Moz and we pull up behind a long line of cars on a gravel path. I can see several United States Armed service members in full dress standing at attention behind the hearse.

“Here we are kid. Are you good?”

“I missed my father’s phone call last week. We spoke every so often and he would update me on his garden or a book he read. But he never spoke of Sylvia. The very last time I spoke with him he mentioned the neuropathy in his feet. Did you know his feet are gone? The hospice nurse at the wake told me that. I remember him saying something about the well water on the farm he grew up on possibly being toxic. Can you believe that?”

“I’m sorry Miles. He went quick from everything I’ve heard today.”

“I should have gotten here earlier. The truth is, the longer my mother and I didn’t speak the more I resisted coming home.”

“Where are you going to stay tonight or are you staying?”

“I’m going to stay here a day or two. I’ve already decided that. Where yet, I don’t know.”

“Miles, I learned a lot last night at dinner with Elle. I now know what you did for her.”

“I always thought you knew.”

I open the car door and start making my way to the tent erected beside the fresh mound of red caliche. The soldiers are carrying the flag draped casket on their shoulders. The sun is just passing its perihelion in the mid-day sky with giant and billowing cumulus clouds. The feeling I have is strange. It’s not total sadness, it feels more like a friend has gone away for a while and

don't expect to see them again for a while. I guess I am okay with that. But Sylvia is another story altogether.

Standing in the sun beside the porta-chapel tent with a nervous posture, I watch my father's extended family and friends gather. I hear soft conversations coupled with soft footing in the damp soil.

Then Elle appears. Unmistakably Elle, older now, tall and slender as ever. Almost exactly how I've imagined her, she is wearing a sheer black dress with a black pill box hat, her long dark hair is held back in a thick tail. She is walking with Sylvia, arm in arm, to keep her steady. Sylvia changed clothes into a dark pants-suit and is wearing large Jackie-O shades.

Everyone watches as they make their way to the front row of chairs. The soldiers begin the ceremonial calls to attention and the crowd gathers in close. Moz stands beside me in his way of a steadying friend of support and then I notice the one open chair. It sits next to Sylvia and Elle and my nervous posture becomes nervous posturing. I feel that I am now about to become involved. Again.

Listening to Pastor Westin's opening prayer, the film reel in my head speeds up. And it's a multi-spliced show of memories. Just boom boom boom. One after the other. So, let me place them in chronological order as best I can do, to catch you up.

I am amazed still that Dr. Westin hasn't recognized me or at least he has not outwardly shown it yet. He and myself engaged in a schoolyard fight when I was in 5th grade. It resulted in suspensions and loads of family embarrassment since my parents were longtime church members where his father was the pastor.

Elle looks in my direction for the first time in over a decade and pats her hand on the seat next to her. Here I go, Geronimo, jumping in behind enemy lines.

A Brief History of Pianos and other Secrets to the Universe

There is something so simple, yet majestic, about southwestern facing windows in the afternoon. To have the warmth of the sunlight on my face was an early form of ecstasy for me. I used to find this sanctuary, as a child of maybe ten or eleven, in our small front living room. The “piano room.” I would stretch out on my back lying on the floor and drift away. So warm and comfortable as if I was still umbilically tethered to my mother. In that way, the “piano room” was much like being in the womb once again.

This special location on the floor was also directly across from Sylvia’s beloved baby grand piano. A Blüthner baby-grand. I am still, to this day, connecting the dots on the histrionics that brought such a preeminent world class instrument into our family. I would be awakened by her on many occasions when her feet began dancing on the pedals at the bottom of the lyre. She would more often than not warm up with Beethoven’s Fur Elise. And those first few bars are still so very familiar to me today. Those notes reside in a microbial jewel box just on the inner side of my ear drum and are always at the top of my brain’s DJ playlist. The notes of an eternal loop of glitch-style breakbeats pinging off the rubber walls inside my skull.

The piano room in our house was right off the entryway hall and was full of light. And also full of the obligatory piles of aged pages and folders of sheet music from anything and everything to concertos, cantatas, sinfonias, and sonatas. I can recall, in ultra-rich detail, the musty smell of the stack of vinyl albums leaning against the wall. That unique aroma comprised of long dormant cardboard sleeves and the vinyl discs housed within would fill the air. We almost never spoke aloud to one another while sharing time in the presence of the Blüthner. It was a dominant force in our home. The behemoth dark-wooden cabinet of hammers and strings seemed to reside upon

its own Acropolis-style plateau. This is where I would become chained and held for my sins in the decades to come.

I would sit Indian-style on the wood floor in front of the leaning stacks of records and flip through them while Sylvia performed her afternoon warm-up. Most weekdays would see a steady stream of students of all ages and playing levels come and sit on the bench beside Sylvia at her upright piano. I would sometimes stay on the floor basking in the warm rays of light mesmerized by each and every album cover. Rubenstein, Van Cliburn, Rachmaninoff, Liszt, Chopin, Prokofiev, the Doors and Fleetwood Mac. Hendrix & Floyd. Beatles & Stones. But my absolute favorites were the Martha Argerich album covers. She was exotic. She was exquisite. I would sit enraptured in my musical womb examining the albums closely one by one. I would lose myself while peering into these twelve-by-twelve-inch cardboard portals trying to imagine what Ms. Argerich was thinking about, and if at that very moment somewhere in the world she might be perched at the front of a studio grade grand-piano, recording another record. If I had to trace back to the exact moment in time where I became aware of the magical shape of the female form, that was it.

A bell rang in my head and it was around this time that I noticed Elle. She would step around me if I was sitting on the floor. I discovered later that her name was pronounced the same as the Parisian fashion magazine or like Richard Rodriguez's most famous character, *El Mariachi*. We would sometimes play in the front yard while she waited for her turn at the piano. Waiting for her lessons in the interpretations of the cosmos via Sylvia, Beethoven, Bach, on an old Blüthner baby-grand. The same lessons and prescribed interpretations that I would soon deny. Why? That is what I'm looking for now, I guess. Why, is the question on almost every level, is the essence of this story. I had no foreshadowing that Elle would be the one to lead me down the rabbit hole.

But herein lies the first incisions of separation between Sylvia and myself. The second severing of the umbilical and the piano chords I would never learn to play. I suffered her rigid piano instruction for just a handful of years until I became uninterested and defiant. It truly broke her heart. But I couldn't see it. In reality, I didn't care; I was a child. And a seed of willful monstrosity was growing strong inside me during those years. How does one become possessed if that is even a thing? I have always doubted that I was demonically possessed but sometimes I wonder if Sylvia believed otherwise.

However, she also turned me onto my other drug of choice, music. As I've already told you, my mother was once a lauded and gifted musical talent. Enough even so to be given the opportunity to study at music school. But I would learn years later, through Elle, about her paralyzing panic attacks and deep struggles with anxiety. These battles atomized Sylvia's confidence and stole from her the profound will in pursuing her dream of becoming a concert pianist. Or did the universe gently redirect her path in the realization of her musical gifts?

After the airport and jet plane episode my grandparents tried again with driving her to Oberlin in Ohio. And then again with the Manhattan School of Music in New York City where she was able to survive for a while until Sylvia altogether had to abandon piano performance and instruction for a handful of years. Doctor's orders.

In the end, both were monumental fails. But something magical happened inside those painful sojourns and she discovered another talent, the talent for teaching. This is where she found that she could see the first spark in the eyes of her students as she imparted the musical secrets of the universe.

At some early points in her life I'm sure she must have loved the thrill and adoration of public performance and the demanding routine of rehearsals that go with it weeks and months before ever setting foot on stage, but I really feel that her teaching became her true love. It became her connection to other humans. A special connection to her students in which I was left peering in from the outside. As I already told ya, I quit Sylvia's piano instruction.

Texas 1980

It was the first day of school and the end of an incendiary summer.¹¹ The fifth-grade classes are eating lunch in the cafeteria. But Miles sits in the office awaiting his mother's arrival.

¹¹¹¹¹¹ One of the hottest days ever recorded in the great State of Texas. In fact, there was a stretch of time with a record number of 100+ degree days in July and August of 1980 that has not occurred since. I recall my mother sequestering me indoors with the over-strained A/C window units, a network of box-fans and the cool wooden floors. I didn't realize then that most of my friends were inside as well while the sun cauterized the grass lawns and melted the tar on the neighborhood streets. That same morning I had endured a dentist appointment where I experienced my first dose of a magnificent chemical high being just shy of eleven years of age.

$C_2HBrClF_3$

People would be correct in saying that the advancements in dentistry techniques have been exponential since those boiling days of 1980 but I would argue that, at least in my case, we had an exceptional and capable family dentist, Michael Layton D.D.S. My mandibles are still chock full with fillings to this day that my children's dentist drilled, soldered and topped of with a plastique cocktail of silver, magnesium, and composite resin cement. One truly magnificent doctor. Aside from the local anesthetic, administered in the form of a fantastic and frightening stainless steel syringe I *loved* the glorious dental experience. These were my first official high times. The *Halothane* gas numbed my cortex and skin from head to toe and made me feel as if afloat on a buzzing throne. My dentist always had a mix of late-seventies new wave and album rock playing at low volume throughout the hallways and exam rooms. I never actually noticed it until the gas was administered and then the music made perfect sense.

$C_{18}H_{21}NO_3$

Later that day, I experienced my mother both coming down and coming undone from the harsh effects of the opioid painkiller Hydrocodone that she was using for postoperative back surgery. On top of the back pain she was also dealing with the loss of her father, Hoyal G. Being an elementary school teacher she was afforded the summer months off and in those long doldrum days she would frequent the public library and used bookstores for her burgeoning classroom library. She would always have a near overflowing plastic tub of books in rotation. I remember we had drawn our lines in the sand as it were throughout the house as if it were post-Potsdam Berlin. Boundaries were fortified, her space and mine. As the day drew on we secluded ourselves deeper and deeper into the shady recesses of the house. I recall hearing loud and startling bangs on my shut bedroom door. I cracked it opened to find her slumped down against the hallway wall surrounded by scattered library books. She was hurtling these books against my closed door. Bent over the tub of books she looked as though she had crawled to an empty water well and was peering into the abyss when she looked up to see me. I didn't know it then, but she was between doses and was slipping into lethargic hallucinations and restless outbursts. I remember how warm my tears were, how they rolled down my face as my instinct was to move toward her but she stopped me cold. Warning me back into my room. Her hands fumbled to open the lawyer cabinet that held two different full volumes of encyclopedia. I sat in my room for the rest of that afternoon with the vicious pounding of World Book volumes bouncing off my door accompanied with her screaming and sobbing. I listened to two records that afternoon over and over. The Beatles' White Album and Bob Dylan's Blood on the Tracks, both ironically procured from my teetotalling parents record collection. I turned the volume up and sat in front of my bedroom window looking up between the dusty blinds into the late afternoon western sky. Later that evening all was normal with my father at home bringing a sense of normalcy to our little battlefield. I remember being shocked to see all the divots and ricochet markings from the airborne Britannicas and World Books of Knowledge upon the outside of my bedroom door. I still have those actual pieces of record vinyl in their respective cardboard covers. And when I listen to them, I am transported back into the hottest of summers and that besieged bedroom.

$C_{20}H_{25}N_3O$

He had just listened to the principal recount the unbecoming behavior of one Miles Birchwood to his mother.

“The teachers responding to the fight attested to Miles being pulled off the top of another boy who was protecting his face and head with his arms. Once Miles was separated from the other child and restrained, he sat down in the hallway and calmed himself. He has since apologized to the other boy and his teacher. Mrs. Birchwood, it really was just a typical schoolyard fight. They don’t happen every day, but they do happen. We are recommending that he go home for the remainder of the day. Are you able to arrange for his pickup?”

A startled Sylvia asks, “Can you just send Miles home? He walked home every day last year and he planned to walk home this afternoon.”

Just fifteen years earlier another dentist, although a bit more dubious in his methods, administered dosings of Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) to Beatles John, George and their wives at a London flat in 1965. This one drop into the serene pond of their songwriting minds created monstrous ripples and waves that would forever change the direction of their music and the world’s music as well. John Riley, D.D.S. and his drug laced coffee made possible the special albums I spoke of earlier and in some random way allowed me to escape my mother’s dopesick-book-assault.

Dr. Albert Hofman accidentally discovered this same substance that would ultimately lead both to a growing fear between the American generations and to a revolutionary youth movement of the likes never before seen in the realms of creativity and social awakening. His discovery came about a quarter century before Sgt. Pepper’s took the Summer of Love by storm. And after Altamont dashed that summer’s hopes, another Hoffman was contributing even more to the late-Sixties counterculture and to the ever-widening generational gap. One Abbie Hoffman, not to be confused with the good doctor from Switzerland, was neck-deep in protests, public actions, happenings and conspiracy trials. When Abbie wasn’t busy with the Black Panthers or working with his lawyers, he was storming concert stages and demanding release of political prisoners. Once even being attacked onstage by an angry Pete Townshend who wanted Hoffman “the fuck off his stage!” Hoffman chalked it up to a bad LSD trip.

C₁₁H₁₇NO₃

Abbie met briefly with actor Peter Coyote’s Anti-War movement group The Diggers and managed to anger him as well by publishing a book containing full accounts of the group’s actions. Coyote later became infamous with my generation’s apathy and distrustful cynicism toward clandestine government agencies when he passively interrogates Elliott as to the whereabouts of E.T. the Extra-terrestrial. While at university Peter changed his last name to Coyote after ingesting peyote and having a vision of paw prints. Peyote the great native American machine of cosmic communication. The Great communicator. Mescaline is the psychoactive ingredient in peyote which allows the patient to step through the Doors of Perception and beyond. I just wanted to step through my bedroom door and hug my mother.

Keys: Elliott, I’ve been to the forest... Elliott, that machine. What does it do?

Elliott: The communicator? Is it still working?

Keys: It’s doing something. What?

“We need you to come get him. And Mrs. Birchwood, there is one other thing I wanted to let you know. It surprised me to hear this since I know your family well and see you almost every Sunday morning.”

“What is it?” Sylvia asks in a cautious tone.

“The boy Miles was fighting with is Dr. Westin’s sixth grade son.”

“What on Earth could they be fighting about?”

“Miles had an outburst on the playground and the coach said he and Scott Westin were fighting because Miles kept saying that there was no God. Let’s talk more when you come in. Is that okay?”

“His grandfather passed away yesterday” Sylvia said.

In a chair outside the principal’s door, eleven-year-old Miles sits and waits. Later that day he would witness his mother’s nervous breakdown.

The Sessions Begin

Miles had something close to perfect pitch. He produced perfect scores in pitch perception tests more than once and consistently outscored the first chair violinist in the Senior orchestra. In a unique turn of events this led to Miles becoming the designated instrument tuner for the entire first tier senior high school orchestra. In a sense he was also the roadie for all contest performances and contest trips. He oversaw the care and transport of the violins, violas and cellos. This was far and away the favorite elective class of his Sophomore year aside from running cross-country. He was assigned a small soundproof practice room off the main hall of practice closets. This would serve as his office for the daylong statewide contests. Miles had a long row of violins and violas on the floor. Some in open cases and others delicately propped against the wall face first. Some of the violin backs were of wide-flame maple-tiger-stripped wood grain and were fantastic looking arrayed around the room. He was seated at the grand piano when Elle knocked and walked through the door.

“Is this what they have you doing now?” she laughed.

“I’m actually liking this job. And I still get a fine arts credit.”

“You’re not performing in any of the contests?” she asked walking slow and making her way around the room. It seemed to Miles that she was wandering through the horses on a carousel taking in all the wooden instruments in the circular room. Elle was always discerning in every instance even when she was looking for the right violin to pick up and hold. She had never really held one.

“No, I’m not playing. That’s a whole other story. Your friends didn’t mention that I’m guessing. Anyway, I’ve been tuning most everyone’s instruments for a while now. This arrangement felt like a natural thing to do,” Miles said as he placed a string-less violin in its case atop the piano. “Sal doesn’t come along to school orchestra performances with you does he? There aren’t any footballs or weight benches here.”

“Are you afraid to talk to me Miles?”

“No, but I already have my share of trouble as it is, don't you think?”

She picked the violin up from its case and held it under her chin. “Do you want to come over tonight and watch a movie? My parents are going out to a party tonight.”

The Cedar Closet

Even though she was a few grades ahead of me in school I still considered her a friend although I probably kept that illusion going for myself. As we progressed through grade school, then jr. high, we faded apart really. That's just the natural order of things no doubt but I was also the extreme measure of an immature adolescent boy, a child of the early Eighties and I wanted my MTV. And as she blossomed into an intelligent and stunning young woman inside the confines of our banal suburban high school, our very own suburbanite Roman Colosseum, the student hierarchy meted out its cruel and decisive hegemony.

Yet Elle kept tabs on me, in a very distant way. A strange way, her way. We ran with two very divergent circles of friends, but she never completely severed ties between us. And that was fine by me. I was as lost as any other kid my age, clawing desperately in the milieu, searching for one of the identities that we would assimilate to and have to live with for the rest of our lives. Or so I thought. I always tended to over-dramatize and hyper-analyze every facet of daily life. That's what happens in those pre-drug and alcohol days at the very time when one could really use them. Being shot through with hormones and nothing to take the edge off, what a wonderful bottleneck of experience that we all have to pass through. Our little American suburbia rites of passage. Things went along like this for years until a day of true illumination arrived.

Elle had not asked me over in years. In fact, now that we were both in high school together, we had a relationship similar to a queen and a village commoner. Although being the burgeoning upstart punk-rocker that I was at the time, I wasn't going to let that ideology stand in the way of me capitulating to whatever Elle asked of me. She knew she had me well under her spell and I didn't mind it in the least. There was no mistaking the look she passed me coupled with her sublime body language. I knew what this was going to be about. Or at least I thought I did. I just wasn't mature enough to understand the "why."

Elle took me by the hand and then in that moment I knew for sure that this day was going to alter everything that followed. She led me upstairs and to a door just off her parent's master

bedroom. When she opened the door, the thick aromas of a dark and foreboding forest escaped into the hallway and added exponential depth to the mystery that was Elle. In reality though, I hadn't even scratched the surface of this hidden iceberg. She disappeared into the dark and I followed. I stepped forward cautiously into a large walk-in closet that purposely had an entirely different feel from any other room in the house. This was a cedar closet and it had the air of an ancient cabin in the woods just below the tree-line of a mountain ridge.

It felt as if we had spent the day traversing miles of snow-covered fields and stumbled upon this chateau almost buried in the snowdrifts. It was her clever device to transport us both far away from our default realities and mannerisms. We were different people inside that closet. She was creating an alternate universe based on our long history of trust and symbiotic relationship. She pulled the chain to the single- bulb light fixture and illuminated our new secret cabin in the woods. It was stocked full of winter coats, ski jackets, chests, boxes, sleeping bags, hats, old hunting rifles leaning in one corner and antique golf clubs in another. The overall soundproof effect from all the clothes, blankets, furs and faux-furs gave off a serene sense of security as if this place was an impenetrable bubble from all the outside forces of the world.

Elle pressed her fore-finger lightly onto my lips and we dived deep into the ocean in classic Cousteau style. This closet was her Calypso and I was her Silent World. She was speaking encyclopedic volumes to me with her deep green irises but never said a word. We weren't losing our innocence. We were just carefully resting our innocence onto the laboratory table to survey and catalog. Order and array. Dissect and study. And even though I realized she was far more clinical in her resolve throughout our cabin in the woods sessions than myself, I was falling hard. We had somewhat spoken and agreed that this would not happen, but you have to remember I wasn't close to being mature enough to handle that.

And so as the school year progressed, so did our science experiment of a relationship and our advanced games of doctor. But there was a clear line of demarcation in the sand. She was very principled and highly regarded by her parents, teachers and friends. So in fact we never did anything that would compromise her virtues or future in any way. Or her reputation for that matter

as long as I kept my end of the bargain and preserved my silence. Coincidentally and propitious for Elle, silence is one of my few and truest gifts in life.

And so it went. Elle had a classic Truffaut's Julie Christie mystique about her, which wrested control of my thoughts away from me each night right before I dozed away. She ruled my nighttime theater in the round. She was Carole Lombard and Bo Derek rolled into one with a dash of Joan Jett to account for her frequent flights of edginess. As I said before, I would swan dive into an erupting volcano at her mere suggestion; she had me hook, line and sinker. I was ensnared pure and simple and I didn't give a damn and there wasn't a thing I could do about it anyway.

Those few years that separated us inside the high school environs more or less equaled epochs in time on a geologic scale. Outside of our cedar closet universe she was far and distant from me in almost all other aspects. I knew I was on the outside and against the odds, but hell, that's where I felt most comfortable.

Up on the Roof

Miles finally catches Elle alone. Dusk is falling and the room is quiet and dark. Elle sits facing out the living room's large bay windows with her back to the door. Miles' presence is given away by the creaking floorboards and she turns to face him with dried tears in her eyes. "Elle, I am so sorry."

"Funny, I think I should be saying that to you."

"I had no idea you were so close to my parents, Elle. I thought you were living out west in the Bay Area."

"I did for a while. It didn't end well. It's a long story."

"Look at us, two old strangers who have a collection of 'long stories.' Elle, I ask this in the most sensitive of ways, please don't be offended. But, how did you end up back here?"

She didn't answer for a while. Miles chooses an old armchair close, but not too close to Elle, and sits down. She was looking outside through the window gathering her answer. They had been together in this room many times before. Decades before. They had shared a blanket on many Friday nights watching rented VHS movies and eating popcorn in this very room. But now they were as far apart as Messier objects in the Milky Way.

"I'm sorry Miles but you cannot come here and ask me that. You gave away that right a long time ago."

"May be. But Elle, I *am* here now."

"Are you?"

They sat together and alone in the room for half an hour or more looking through the darkening bay window watching the large neighborhood trees swallow up the last of the dusk light. Sylvia was finally down for a long nap and only a few people were left over still cleaning the kitchen. No one would dare bother the two of them in this room now. A continuing conversation interrupted for almost twenty years. Miles was realizing in a big way that his penance was going

be a long road to travel. He got up and broke the silence and said, "I've got to go upstairs and figure out a place to sleep tonight. I've been putting off going up there all day."

"Okay, I'm going to stay a while longer to make sure Sylvia sleeps and help put the house back together," Elle said in a schoolteacher tone. Miles was glad to hear this, but he did not show it. He staggered upstairs in a seventeen-year-old version of himself.

Miles cupped his hands, sparked another flame and inhaled briskly to make sure his cigarette was lit before leaning back on the second story eaves of the roof. It's always breezy up here he was thinking. He figured it was because the house was atop a high elevation. A location that the city had built radio towers reaching far into the sky constructed in a field next to his subdivision. Seventeen-year-old Miles used to lie flat on the steep roof and look at the blinking red bulbs for hours each night smoking and thinking. But seventeen-year-old Miles has come and gone a couple of times since then. A decade has come and gone since then. Climbing back into his old room through the second-story window seemed a bit easier back then too. Standing up he looks to find that he's no longer alone.

"I knew I would find you out there," she said.

"Old habits."

"Yeah, I thought so."

"That was tough in there today Elle." Miles said as he placed the ashtray on the windowsill. "I don't know where my mother went but that's not her," Miles whispered.

"Yes it is. It's just not the one you wanted," she said. "So here you are, you show up for your father's funeral and wake and find it a bit rough then run right up to the roof for one of your secret smokes," Elle continued.

"Seriously, old habits . . ."

She tilted her head, spun, and stepped toward the bedroom door. Then said with her back turned to him, "Miles, did you ever stop to think about how we all dealt with your juvenile-runaway-episodes?"

"I am truly sorry for leaving the way I did. I am. But you left first. You were practically engaged and graduating college. Besides, you know my parents were better off when I was finally gone, the secret I promised to keep made it impossible to stay" Miles said in a less than convincing tone.

"Keep telling yourself that, Miles." Then she finally asked, "Will you come back downstairs?"

"Yes, but first come out and have a cigarette with me on the roof."

She gave a slight slumped shoulder reaction but with a simultaneous spark in her pupils that said *yes*. They both crawled through the bedroom window and around and up the highest easement. It was getting dusk and the blinking red lights were all the brighter. They both carefully sat back and then she leaned forward hugging her knees.

"I forgot how far off in the distance we can see from up here," Elle mused.

He struggled to get the first cigarette to light but then skillfully lit the second and passed it over to Elle. Then he said, "I love how those pastures are still there, undeveloped undoubtedly because the owner, some sentimental curmudgeon gracefully says 'no.'. Remember the frenetic day that I managed to burn about twenty-something acres of those fields? You'd think my first fire would have been better planned. It's really impossible to manage a grass-fire's progress. So unpredictable, so unruly, so unmanageable. Damn bottle rockets. Did I ever tell you how euphoric it felt? But just for about ten minutes or so. Then I felt sick with guilt, not just for my parent's disappointment but for that sentimental curmudgeon's pastureland. The fire department put us on a list. I guess it meant if our house ever caught fire they didn't have to come. Anyway . . ."

The sun was softened by the low hanging haze in the magical way that it does on those late autumn evening skies. Miles and Elle had a wide-scope panoramic view of the horizon as they sat together. He hadn't been this close to Elle in decades. "Elle, why did my mother start playing that frightening piece of music in the middle of the wake?"

She took a long drag and said, “Would you believe that when she first heard you were coming home she spent days looking through her boxes of music for that score? She has been playing random bars and pages from it for days.”

“Of all the beautiful pieces she used to perform, she chooses the scariest sounding thing to play while the house is full of guests. You know what that concerto is called?”

“She’s suffering, Miles. I know you know that. But if you choose to stay home for a while, and I hope you do, then you are going to discover the true depths of your mother’s illness. And I think you may need help coping with her.”

“She would’ve been lucky to have you as her daughter, Elle. You should have been her daughter and I should’ve been somebody else’s son.”

“Well, I wasn’t and you’re not,” she whispered.

“You know what’s funny? They never had a clue I smoked outside up here nearly every night when I lived here as a teenager. I guess they never knew I would sneak out at night to meet you either. Then the legendary arguments between my mother and I about religious dogma resurfaced and seemed to escalate as time went on. Or maybe they just never went away. From the time I told my fourth-grade homeroom class that there was no God until my last day here at home eight years later, it all just seeped in and poisoned us again and again. I thought I was so enlightened about how the world worked. And I was damn confident that I was going to make it work for me. Unfortunately, confidence doesn’t pass for intelligence, does it?”

“No, but what’s truly funny is the look on everyone’s faces this afternoon as they struggled to figure out who you are. No one can believe you came back. More so, I’m sure they can’t believe what a huge asshole you are,” she said unsmiling.

“I deserve everything that’s coming to me. Tell me Elle; is it selfish for me to want to find a way to reach out to my mother after all this? Or should I just let go? We don’t know each other, we never did. Should I just make sure everything is taken care of for her here and then let her go?”

“Don’t let her go Miles.”

A Himalayan mountain range of silence passes. The forbidden question they have been waltzing around is approaching the surface like a breaching whale. Miles is up in the stern with harpoon in hand but decides to stand down for now. “I hope you’ll stay and take it slow. She’s old Miles,” Elle said while stubbing out her cigarette on a roof tile. “Let’s go back inside. I need to check on Sylvia, will you come with me?”

They walked downstairs. Most everyone had trickled out one by one and Miles’ mother was now alone at the kitchen table. As he walked through the front living room, he stopped at the piano and picked through the sheets of music. He held up a cover page and showed it to Elle. It was entitled *Prometheus: Poem of Fire* composed by Alexander Scriabin.¹² They walked into the kitchen and Miles laid the sheet music on the counter. Sitting at the old oakwood kitchen table, his mother just continued to gaze forward and just before Elle was going to break the silence, his mother said without looking up, “You’ve probably been looking for these” and lifted a Ziploc baggie stuffed full of old cigarette lighters and pushed them across the table toward her son.

“Old habits,” Miles said, “I have many.”

¹² Scriabin utilized a special chord, later referred to as both the “mystic chord” and also as the “Prometheus chord” to derive a myriad tonal note combinations in his later works. Sylvia had stumbled upon this piece in her short stint at the Manhattan Conservatory for Music. Scriabin was and still is very difficult to access. I find it to be like chewing sand. I fuckin hate it.

The Night Runner

One of the problematic downsides with suburban-street night-running is not being able to clearly recognize and judge sudden changes in elevation pitch in the dark. Not to mention the hundreds of unlevelled tar-seams between random sidewalk segments.

See, for some people running is a high. I don't have to tell you that their day is not complete without it. They will almost certainly tell you all about it themselves. The high comes from the subtle spike of natural serotonin released to the brain's cortex. This is much safer for the fitness minded individual than procuring a half ounce of weed from their local high-school dealer. And then, of course, there are those who run for fitness, for race training and the obligatory weight loss goals. Once you've cut through these cheese-head and sour-dough participants, you start to scratch the surface of the slightly bent persona of the depraved runner. These are the truly sick runners who don't give a flying fuck what their half-marathon pace is or what the caloric burn was on their last run. They run to chase the demons back into the dark. They run so they can sleep. They run so they can live and work with the rest of us in the social settings of working office hours. They run in the rain. They run in extreme heat. They run in toe-numbing, piss-freezing temperatures. They run when on vacation, overnight family visits and out of town business trips. Some run with devices, some without. Lately, I have been running on a full tank of regret, fear and the ultimate big-seller of self-loathing. Not that you would ever be able to discern such details from my appearance or from my night-running attire. How could you? I run at night.

The listless and apathetic teen that I once was wasn't unlike any other listless and apathetic suburban teen. I knew it all yet truly knew nothing. There is a sublime bliss of knowing you're too young to really answer for any minor crimes or offenses. And not having a trace of responsibility other than being a passably ordinary adolescent should never be underestimated. I was never all that athletic in my youth, although I was indeed a member of such obligatory forms of character-growth-by-peer competition such as football, baseball, soccer and cross country teams from pee-wee through high school until I by chance found that high-school weed dealer. My discovery of

distance running occurred within this volatile time frame. I didn't know it then, but I had stumbled onto my true drug of choice. Most any runner will tell you that the initial body shock that one experiences when launching out on a long road run is of natural disdain and suppressed dread. But as the first miles begin to tick by, a funny thing happens, the brain begins to administer miniature drop dosing of euphoric endorphins. All of a sudden, the fog of a new day's numbing high makes its soft glide across your mind's hemispheres. Whether it's a perverse nostalgia or just base simian pleasure, I have truly come to know and love this friend, aka 'the runner's high.' Unfortunately, this friend doesn't always want to come out and play. This is a story of an ordinary kid "who knew everything," an entitled Gen-Xer who had it all figured out and nothing and nobody could talk him down off the ledge.

So, here I am, folded-up and hunched-over writhing on the curb holding my jaw. I am certain that a tooth is missing. A rear molar, I guess. I either swallowed it or its here on the ground somewhere. Thankfully nothing in the front of my mandible is missing. My face is scaped and the index and middle fingers of my right hand were dislocated backwards standing at a ninety-degree angle to the back of my hand. I just eased them back in place. They don't seem to hurt that much right now but I bet they will in the morning.

Looking up I see that I am directly across from Elle's old house and there is a for sale sign in the front yard. I want to look closer but I am too tired and scraped up to do anything else other than slunk back home. Damn, I'm already referring to it as home. Its not home by any stretch.

When I left for my run I made sure Sylvia was sleeping and that the house was locked and all but a single hallway light outside her bedroom door was lit. But now, coming up on the house, I walk out from under the canopy of the trees and see that almost every light in the house seems to be on.

I find a housekey under the seashell in the same large ceramic planter on the front porch where its always been. Letting myself in, I feel more like a houseguest or a new tenant than the young boy who grew up here. Looking in the bathroom mirror my face hurts worse than it looks.

One of the molars is gone leaving a bloody hole of dark purple gel and a dull pain reaching down my neck. The silver filled tooth is probably in the street somewhere not far from where I fell.

Sylvia is standing in the center of the kitchen awash in the audio of multiple radios and televisions. She has managed to turn almost everything, with an on/off switch, on in the house. I have got to lie down for just a minute and then I will check on her.

The crack at the bottom of the bedroom door is letting in just enough light for my eyes to scan the walls. There isn't much of anything left to indicate my stay here years ago. Just one show-bill sized poster of Robert Smith from the Cure's Prayer Tour and a bookcase with my old collection of weathered paperbacks. Holding a wet towel full of ice on my face and telling myself to shut the fuck up, I pass out.

Letter From In-Country

I stir awake with my mother knocking on my childhood room door. The same door that she tried to breakdown with an entire set of airborne encyclopedias when I was eleven years old. The same door I barricaded as I rampaged around inside my room pulverizing my little league trophies to dust and stripping the walls bare of all the posters. And then attempted to set ablaze.

She just keeps tapping. My head is pounding, and I can taste the slow leaking drops of fresh blood. It has dried around my mouth and crusted down my chin. The tapping on the door continues. I pull myself up off the mattress and step toward the door slow and unsteady. I crack the door.

She places her mouth close to door and says, “There isn’t any hot water.”

“Okay,” I say while pulling on my shirt. I also notice that the window is still dark. I find my watch on the bedside table and see that it’s 1 a.m. and I feel a bolt of nausea surge through my stomach.

Downstairs I find her standing in the utility room. Right about when I reach to open the utility room door that leads out to the garage, she confesses that she accidentally blew out the water heater pilot light. I opened the door and the artificial odor of the natural gas instantly spikes my nasal passages with a full dose. Without turning on the light I snake my way past the car and raise the garage door by hand, I’m amazed how all these movements reside somewhere deep inside my muscle memory. The car is parked on the same side and the garage door manual lock is in the exact spot that my hand finds in the dark. Muggy night air hits my face and helps wake me up a little. My tongue keeps its overworking vigil down into the vacant hole where a healthy rooted molar once thrived.

Moving back thorough the garage I see Sylvia standing beside the water heater and picking at one of those bright yellow economy rating stickers on the rounded side of the grey aluminum silo. A few silent minutes linger past while we both huff natural gas fumes waiting for the garage to air out.

“Hank can fix this. Hank can fix anything.”

I have no response, not even sure if there is good response. I am certainly not skilled in the area of good rhetorical responses.

“We should go back into the house. Let’s wait in the kitchen. I need to find a match too.”

“I have matches.” Sylvia says while pulling out a cabinet drawer.

Looking inside the kitchen junk drawer I can see that nothing has changed inside this microcosm of the house, as this drawer surely symbolizes. Pinlights, pocketknives, paper clips, fingernail clippers, thumbtacks, rubberbands resting in a beach of dustcrumbs that have not moved from this drawer in a decade or more.

“I am going to go try and relight the pilot. You sit down and I will be right back in. Pilot lights always seem tricky with the warning stickers and plastic dials with inset arrows. Fire has always come easy to me. That’s a ridiculous sounding claim I realize but it is just an inherent part of being a firebug. The pilot light sparks strong and true on my first try. And soon the gas rails have the water tumbling and swirling inside. Why is Sylvia taking a shower at 1 am?

The odor of gas is still noticeable, but I go ahead and risk switching on the garage light. Sitting on an old wooden stool I let my half-closed eyes survey the walls and the heaps of stacked boxes. Spotting an open box at the top of one of the stacks, curiosity has won out over my exhausted state and standing up I slide it off the top. Setting it down in front of my stool, I can see that it is chockfull of clippings, Polaroids, coins, a necktie and then I realize that these are some of my father’s personal effects. In a curious and insectile way I hold up a wrinkled hand written letter. No envelope, just a carelessly folded piece of thin yellow paper. As I begin to read, I feel my mind crossfading over onto another studio-track.

The first legible and non-redacted line reads as “found out your mother was pregnant today so I want to write you a letter.” I stop and hold the letter to my side trying to decide whether or not to continue reading. And I do. “It smells really strange out here. I can’t get used to it. I think my sense of smell has been raised to a superhuman level. I think fear does that. We spent the last few nights squatting, sitting and leaning on the side of a rain soaked hillside just below a dark tree lined

ridge. I worried most about having to slightly adjust my lying position on the ground, or sneezing or coughing. I think we are heading back out tomorrow night. It smells like a bomb out here.”

I never knew my father had written anything in Vietnam. Why am I just finding this now? Is this some kind of curvilinear logic or second order cybernetics? This almost feels staged. Why is this box even out here? And who the hell writes something like that to be mailed back home? Married couples back then had different ways of communication I guess. Anyway, the sickening mix of natural gas, stacks of damp newspapers and the overall moldy residue hanging in the air made my father’s words ring and echo in my half-baked brain. Standing back up, I turn to carry the box inside.

Sylvia meets me at the door and asks, “Did you find the car keys?”

I really need to start building a new mental rolodex of responses for Sylvia’s questions, but how would I save and recall the files? This is going to take time. I need to lie back down and sleep this headache off. The nurse might not be a bad idea at this point. I can at least already recognize this.

“There should be warm water in a few minutes. Are you still going to take a bath?”

“I don’t want to take bath.”

“I thought that you wanted to take a bath but there was no hot water.”

“I don’t want to take a bath.”

“Okay. But, if you need to go into the garage again, please come get me. I will go out there for you if you need something.” I say while still holding the box of my father’s letters and photos. I leave the box on the kitchen counter. “Sylvia, are you going to go to bed now?”

“I will soon. I want to clean up the kitchen.”

And I watch Sylvia begin to pace around the sink picking up forks, spoons, and saucers and then putting them into the cabinet. The utensils and dishes are still crusty with food.

“These plates need to go into the dishwasher. Can I do the dishes for you in the morning?”

“No! I want to put them up now.”

“Sylvia, look, these forks are not clean. Let me rinse them and load the dishwasher in the morning.”

“No! I want to clean the house.”

“Okay. But you should go to bed soon. Really Sylvia, let me clean up tomorrow. It has been a long day, you need to rest. Aren’t you tired?”

“Who are you? Leave me alone!”

I think she shocked herself with that outburst. She had been so quiet and so docile all day. I wanted to hug her and give her some security. I wanted to tell her who I was and that I was sorry for disappearing a decade ago only to show up on one of the worst days of her life. But I just backed up and massaged my jaw. She’s tired. She’s scared. She just buried her husband. Who the fuck am I to tell her how to do anything?

I need to lie down in the dark and work on this throbbing headache. Making my way back upstairs I realize my jaw feels like it is starting to swell. I intended on reading another letter but decide to wait until morning. Its about 2:00 am and I am now listening to clanging dishes in an agitating and random timing. I keep thinking she has got to go to sleep soon. She can’t stay up all night, can she? I find the damp washcloth and put it back onto my eyes.

The next morning again, begins with the clanging sounds of dishes and silverware. I wait until the noise stops to try and doze away again, but my mind ends up thinking in circles. Hurricane force rain-bands of thoughts and memories circling at sea and nowhere near landfall. Skyscraper cirrus clouds rich with memories of my father, thoughts about my mother and of course, thoughts about Elle. And it doesn’t take long to arrive at the endless scroll of regrets that hangs deep down into my mind's water-well along the eye-wall of the storm. The precious things that cannot be put back together the way they once were. The things money cannot buy. The restless and precocious boy who once lived in this room has returned. It’s not an uncommon story. It’s just uncommon that I took it to the far extreme. My adolescent years were wrought with reckless arguments between my religiously over-zealous mother and me about God, drugs, sex and the high bar of family expectation in school. We discussed many times my random experiments in pyromania and

hiding drugs in my room. Throw into the sauce that my mother and I both had varying degrees of anxiety disorders at the time, one can begin to see the all too common picture of a house divided.

Do I smell smoke? It would be hard to overstate how surreal it is waking up in my old bedroom not having slept here in almost two decades. Same feel, same smells and same person but just a different mental occupant. I keep thinking of how my father would have allowed me to come home a long time ago even after all the damage I did to our family unit. My father was a well-meaning parent and a great guy according to his buddies at the VFW. You would never know that this huggy-bear of a dad chased Vietcong around in the jungles of Southeast Asia. The damage of robbing my parents of their only child was a punishment I wasn't clever enough to conceive at that age but it's exactly what I did in a way. I wanted to come home on several occasions but pride, embarrassment, fear and guilt had constructed an impenetrable wall that I just could not get around. But time played its part and here I am and don't know the first thing to say to her but it's time. It's so very time to go downstairs and face the music.

Yes, I can smell smoke. Yes, I can now see it hanging in the air. Almost running as I turn into the kitchen, I see Sylvia standing at the kitchen sink looking through the window blinds. The countertops are full of casserole dishes and dessert pans that were not there when I went back to bed last night. Did she get all these dishes back out?

“What is burning? What's the smoke coming from?”

“I don't want these pictures anymore.”

“Oh God. Not that box. Not the one I brought in from the garage. Why are you burning these? What the hell are you doing?”

The old brown shoebox of letters and photos is wet and smoldering in the sink. She at least put the fire out before it engulfed the house. Goddamn the universe is clever.

At that moment, I slipped into an awesome coat of absolute guilt in allowing myself to become upset with her. I had just spoken to her as if I were the parent. She doesn't realize what she's done. This is her home and those were her photos. Who am I to say anything about it at all? I couldn't bring myself to explain to her the gravity of the few she did burn were gone forever.

Forever. What a goddamn word. And also to explain that she would be the very last person on the planet to ever look at them. I on the other hand will never know what photos were destroyed because I didn't even know that this box of family history captured on Polaroid and Kodak existed in the first place. But judging from the others that I looked through I knew they were very, very special and they encapsulated many nano-moments of memories from my childhood and my parents' early marriage. Forever. It's such a scary fucking word if you really stop for a second and try to make your mind unwind the idea of what forever might mean.

Sometimes as a small child, I would lay in bed after being tucked in and try not to think about forever. That word was used in great frequency around our home, in my school and at our church. Forever this and forever that. Did anyone actually stop and think about just how big a statement they were making when adding that descriptive and elusive word to something? I became aware that when in bed at night, I would try anything and everything to avoid that word from appearing on my brain's silver screen.

Her disease was gaining immense swaths of ground inside her cranium. And there wasn't a force on Earth that could stand in its way. Slowly my mother seemed to sadly be turning bitter and angry toward the people that very seldom dropped into her world. So much so, it reminds me of Ted Hughes' abandoned Rain Horse.¹³ A creature that may well have been neglected and left out to pasture with very rare interaction with another living creature. No companions except Mother Nature and her bold silence. Sylvia's mind has become harder in a way and less benevolent. The opposite of what she once was. I'm sure the Rain Horse was once a magnificent example of equestrian display but has now withered in loneliness and only has anger and fury to keep itself alive. Maybe we as human beings are not meant to keep growing in intellectual capacity and these incipient neuro-disorders are manifested to stunt and cauterize ourselves, slow down our human race before we ultimately run our Santa Maria aground and scorch the planet into malignancy.

¹³ Ted Hughes named the UK's poet laureate in 1984 who allegedly beat the living shit out of his first wife, Sylvia Plath. But she battled worse demons and eventually drowned herself. That's difficult to do I bet. We will never really know what went on in the Hughes household before Sylvia's fateful day of reckoning because I think Ted burned her detailed journal.

Sylvia standing in the corner facing me says, "I just thought I didn't want those pictures anymore. Is Elle here?"

"No, she is probably sleeping in. It's Saturday. Does she usually come by on Saturday mornings?"

"Oh," she says.

"Mom, are you okay?" I wanted to pull that question back as soon as it left my mouth. It is so stupid and so condescending. What the hell is wrong with me?

"When is Elle going to be here?" She asks again.

"Come on, let's sit down and let me see if there's something I can make you for breakfast. You haven't eaten anything, yet have you?"

I begin opening drawers and cabinet doors and the déjà vu quotient is rising at an exponential pace. Things are placed very much like they were when I lived here. Plates and bowls, forks and knives, glasses and mugs all right where I left them so long ago.

"I would love some toast and coffee," I hear her say.

"I can do that. Tell me how you're feeling this morning." Again, I realize how absurd that must sound. This might be *the* very first time I have ever asked her that simple and compassionate question.

She is either choosing not to answer me or she just isn't listening. The realization that all the dishes she was putting up early this morning are unwashed stuns me for a second or two. Still dirty and wet. Wondering if this is to be interpreted as stress from her husband's death or if this is something else entirely. My mother once had the world in her hand. She was accepted to the Oberlin Conservatory and the Manhattan School of Music among several other music conservatories for her exception prowess on piano. As a child all I knew is that it was something never to be spoken of and left alone. Something had gone gravely wrong. I used to wonder if I had caused this somehow. Then when I grew older, I constructed my own little pyre of sacrifice. I had my own *something that was never to be spoken of and left alone.*

I begin to sort through and replace the dishes I judge as unwashed back into the dishwasher then look deeper in the cabinet for something clean and dry. I place two slices of bread in the toaster and find the coffee right where it's always been. Right where it always was. How long was it "always" there before I became aware of it I wonder? How many times has she put away dirty dishes? There are hundreds of questions on my tongue, but I can't make myself ask her. How dare I ask? What right do I have? And when the hell did I grow this conscience?

"Is Elle here?"

I answer, "No. But she did tell me yesterday about how she has been looking in on you since Dad became ill."

Nothing. Not even a blink. She just sits in her chair with textbook posture looking at her clasped hands on the table. The toast popped up and the coffee maker began roaring. I find some red plum jam; some grape jelly and some butter and place it just beyond her outstretched hands. Then I pour us both a cup and sit down next to her. Not too close but not far away either. I want to see her eyes. I have no idea where to start. What to say. What to ask. She's sitting there almost pouting like a grounded teenager giving me the silent treatment and I'm practically begging her to talk to me. The universe has switched our places. Only in this universe she has every right to never speak to me again. But here we go, and I step out of the plane anyway. Geronimo!

"Mom, when did you learn Dad was so sick?"

. . . Silence . . .

"He'll be awake in few minutes. And then you can ask him," she shot back.

Oh shit, my chute isn't opening. I'm going to hit the ground.

"Mom, he's not here."

"Yes, I know."

"Ok. How did you sleep last night?"

"I slept fine, got up a few times to check on the piano and let the cat in. Did you let the cat out?" She asked me in an accusatory tone. A tone from the deep dark past. "She isn't supposed to be outside, she's an indoor cat."

I do not recall seeing any cats¹⁴ inside or outside of the house yesterday or this morning. But I do need to know why the concern for the piano. So, I strap up to do another jump. But this time the ante has been raised. “Sylvia, why did you feel like you needed to check on the piano?”

. . . Silence, again . . . but I don’t break it, I wait . . . and wait . . .

“It’s my medicine.”

The tears well up fast and I must tilt my head back and look at the ceiling.

Exhaling I notice she is finally for the first time looking directly at me.

“Is Elle here?”

“God, I wish she was”

Sliding my chair back and getting up I say, “I’m going to go for a walk. Would you like to come along?”

Thinking for a second or two she says, “I’m feeling tired. I might lie down for a nap.”

“Will you be okay? Sheila your nurse is on the way and should be here in a few minutes. I will wait until she gets here.”

“Who is Sheila?”

“She was Dad’s nurse. She took care of him. I asked her to come for the next few days until we can figure things out. She really likes you.”

Sylvia nods in a quiet kind of heartbroken way that makes me think she wanted to be the one who was thought of as taking care of Dad.

¹⁴ I find it both odd and heartbreaking that Sylvia would mention cats or having a cat or even suggest that she had a feline housepet. When I was 7 or 8 we had a pregnant cat and when it came time for it to deliver its litter, my mother took the cat out to the garage but wouldn’t let me follow her out there. She kept me inside. But I was excited to see the kittens being born and to take care of them. My mother would come back into the house every few minutes or so and tell me that all the kittens were being stillborn. Each time she would come in and tell me another one died and then another. It was years before it dawned on me that Sylvia had actually snuffed out the kittens one by one.

The Bugatti

Out the door with no stretching I am running away, again, in a sense. My truest gifts, running and avoiding. And running away is my forte. An early morning Sunday run in a sleepy and foggy neighborhood with the temperature somewhere in the forties, excellent weather for running. Who am I kidding? I'm not fit to run anywhere. My head is as foggy as these streets. My finger and hand are swollen to twice their normal size. What's that I see up ahead? Oh yes, the approaching black cloud of winged demons that will possess each one of my thoughts until I'm done. They're always there, waiting. Roosted in the backwoods beyond the tree line in my head. Waiting for me to pull the chain and crank up the anxiety-ridden-thinking machine. Running provides a strange, agonizing, and meditational state of mind ripe for the taking.

Today is a bit different though. I'm not much in the mood for a run at all. I am more in need of a quiet neighborhood walk. First and foremost, I woke up with a sore jaw and crusted blood on my lips. My tongue instantly moves over and around the missing molar. Fortunately, it was cleanly uprooted or at least it feels like it was. Let's see what the day brings before we jump the gun and find a dentist. I wonder if my old children's dentist still practices. That would be triple the surreal with all things considered.

Most of the homes in this subdivision are long-style ranch sitting on half-acre lots. A few are two-story and look to have more than a half-acre footprint. Almost all have separate garages, and most have pools. We didn't have a pool when growing up but there was always one to be had.

As you might guess, alongside Sylvia, Elle has now appeared foremost in my mind. And it goes without saying, she is on my Sylvia's mind as well. When we were kids Elle lived near but not quite the same neighborhood division. Elle's was a couple of ties upscale. So, she doesn't necessarily qualify as the classic "girl next door" but she most certainly qualifies as a classic girl. Two years older than me, yet that never bothered her.

She was one of Sylvia's earliest piano students. Probably her favorite student, so she was well known in our household as I was in hers. But on this morning, decades removed from those

two children, I pass her old house. The trees were large back then and now they are mammoth. There's a large for-sale sign in the front yard and then I notice Elle is the realtor. She's the realtor for her own childhood home, how strange. I keep my pace and decide that on my second pass around, I am going to stop and take a closer look.

My thoughts toggle between Sylvia and Elle. And the steep mountain ravines and deep crevasses between us all. Crashed cars, hidden stashes, total disdain for all things religious, benign pasture and barn fires, refusal of familial intimacy, dysfunctional sexual relationship with family friend's daughter drove me to take the first ride out of town. I dug these sharp crevasses and steep peaks all by my lonesome. No instruction manual needed. I was ordained with the infinite capacity of burning things to a blanket of ash. But there is one other warhead I haven't deployed yet. We'll get to it soon. I want you to stay in my corner for a while longer.

Disappearing for the better part of a dozen years is unforgivable, I realize. Whatever the force is that brought me back, I want to hope is the same force that will show me the next path to take. We're not just starting off a bit behind, we're starting directly behind the eight ball and that's nobody's fault but mine.¹⁵

The neighborhood is still and quiet. I slow down as I reach the front of Elle's childhood home. The fog insulates the sound and keeps the sound of crackling leaves and my breath close to my ears. I jog up the J-hook driveway back around to the gate that leads to the separate three car garage. The gate is locked but the half cord of firewood is in the same place it always was, and I use it to hop the fence. The driveway and yard is covered with giant wet leaves and I can smell a nearby fireplace. It is beautiful back here. The big-ugly-beautiful and inciting suburbs. Say what you want, in rare moments they can be sublime.

¹⁵ Nobody's Fault But Mine is a song from Led Zeppelin's 1976 album entitled Presence. I wrote a retrospective album review for the German publication Der Spiegel a few years back. Moz helped me get my first freelance writing jobs there and I pitched an idea of monthly classic album reviews. At this moment I remember all the vinyl albums that used to be in the piano room. I need to see if they still exist in the house somewhere. The cover to this album Presence has a family awkwardly seated around a table. This could be a family portrait of my own family, stone cold and affectionless. But all made up to look as if everything is okay. I remember this album being in the leaning stacks of records on the floor when I was a child. I remember being fascinated by the Swan Song logo on the circular vinyl center labels. It depicts a fallen angel possibly on fire as he falls to the ground like Icarus or Lucifer.

I walk up to the darkened square windows at the top of the third bay garage door and cup my hands around my eyes. Squinting, I fall back on my heels for a brief second, then put my cupped hands back onto the glass. Am I really seeing this? Is it still in there? Elle's father's Bugatti?¹⁶ A brilliant replica of a 1933 Bugatti Royale Coupe. Alice, the Hatter and the White Rabbit surely must be in there, too.

My missing tooth is throbbing, and my head is being hit with cluster bombs of memory. So I decide to surrender, lean my back against the garage door and let myself remember. I drift into thoughts about the first time I was with Elle inside the Bugatti. I was always drawn to Elle's father's cars. They had a spacious three-car garage that actually had room for two cars in each bay, one in front of the other. He had a classic silver Mercedes Benz 300SL Gull-wing that I was afraid to sit in because he told me the doors were tricky and sometimes wouldn't always shut correctly. But I didn't mind. The car I obsessed over was the Bugatti replica. Even as it was a replica, it was still relatively old. I once heard him say it was from the mid-sixties. The body and interior were in almost mint condition. The only strange thing was that it had never been fitted with an engine block. So it just rested there in the far third bay with its book-fold-hood shut and buckled.

Each bay had its own lights so you could just switch the one bay light on and the Bugatti would be displayed like a massive Renoir with its own private room within a museum. Elle had

¹⁶ In the early 1940's, Ettore Bugatti had to begin burying his prized auto engines in underground bunkers in order to protect and save them from the Nazi Luftwaffe bombing in the early days of the German invasion into France. He didn't manage to sell many of the original Bugatti Type-41 Royales because typically only international royalty could afford the extravagant monsters. I know all this obscure shit because I did my time reading through Elle's father's extensive library of classic automobiles. Actually, when these rich motherfuckers purchased a Bugatti they had to send their chauffeurs and mechanics to the French factory to attend a week's worth of technical training to be able to deal with these beasts. The 200 lb. crankshaft could muster enough horsepower for 100mph. That's gaddamn fast in 1939 for an elephantine sized commercial sedan. They front grille nose of these vehicles came adorned with a Rembrandt Bugatti designed elephant hood ornament. It was thought to rival the Winged Angel hood ornament of early Mercedes Benz. The *Berline de Voyage* being double in auction-hammer price of a Rolls Royce Phantom at the time were for the blue bloods only. Thus the replicas have prospered far better in modern day. Elle's father thought of himself as a blue blood and his daughter Elle as well. I most certainly was not.

Elle's father acquired a half built replica in a real estate transaction and some of the body parts were cast in a type of alloy that was highly flammable because of a high magnesium content. These parts couldn't be welded but had to be hand appended to the frame. That is how Ettore was able to design the highly erotic body contours. There was a photo of a Bugatti Aerolithe that reminded me of Elle lying naked on her side. The long front hood and sleek fenders were like her legs. They went on forever, and the rounded coupe cockpit resembled her hips. Hips that made you want to spend a day moving your tongue along their lines.

told me he was having trouble getting the front bench seat to move back on the slide-rails. He needed more room to do some restoration work on the wooden dashboard. So one day after school, I slipped into the garage and went to work. I did finally get the seats to move back too. And then sure enough as you might guess, Elle appeared.

She was a senior at the time and though we had been friends off and on for our entire childhood, the high school years were both the most surreal and awkward. She was *now* that “classic girl” I spoke of earlier. She had a very Natalie Wood thing going on and alluring in every way. Yes, I may have been obsessed with her and not mature enough to recognize it, but hell, I was just a kid. Just another damn fool roaring with hormonal impulses and hanging loosely onto the reins of restraint. It seems like back then everyone I knew spent a great deal of time either under suppression or in full exploitation of their impulses. And some of us failed miserably. But then again maybe that was just nature taking its course.

Elle was known as one of the more respected and graceful young women in the school but at the same time she allowed me to be just coy enough to not be uncouth. As the Bugatti Royale sits high off the ground, one has to step up to get inside. I remember Elle climbing in first and then pulling me by the hand. The steering wheel is damn near center of the dashboard on these epic cars too. But the bench seats were pushed well back into the coupe housing thanks to my earlier efforts in unjamming the slide rails.

I can still smell the leather interior, the wooden dash, the oil and gas, the fire and sweat. It had a grandiose aroma that can only be replicated in certain rare environs. She whispered that she was going to lead me through our little rendezvous session and only to do what she asked and nothing more. I complied with a slow comatose nod. Damn fool.

Elle sat down directly in front of me on the seat bench and pulled my hands up under her shirt and then she reached forward and took hold of the steering wheel with her back to my face. She then moved back onto my lap and unbuttoned her pants and took my right hand and pushed it down into her jeans. She arched her back and let go of a sigh. Her long straight hair hanging back into my face smelled like the exotic fauna of a beachside rainforest.

With the lights on in that garage bay we were figures in *that* Renoir painting. Looking back I think it was some kind of an experiment. Maybe it was an experiment with good results because that wasn't our last meeting in the Bugatti. In fact, it wasn't even our first experimental session at all. But it was only a few years before I would become an ad-hoc revenant of Holden Caulfield.

So, you want to know how to disappear? This is how I did it. In my second year at university I endured what is now diagnosed as a panic attack. This initial and unexpected meltdown accreted from my brain in an engineering calculus lab. I had no idea what was happening to me. I remember being paralyzed with fear that I may have indeed pissed my seat. I waited until everyone had left the small, soft-lit stadium seating room to walk back to my dorm. That was it. That was my mind's calling card. The cue to abandon. My deal with the slippery guy downstairs. It was Thanksgiving Holiday and the next morning some newfound friends let me know they were headed on a road trip north to Chicago and then on to Manhattan. My decision was made for me. All I had to do was comply. And so, on that opportune Autumnal morning. . . I got into the car and disappeared.

In fact, I disappeared from Texas altogether for several years to come. I was asked to join a fledgling indie-rock band and my downward spiral just gained speed and accelerated from there. A record deal along with a constant tour cycle followed. Years were taken off my life. Eventually I began to find time to write. Like writing actual words in sequential order. Something I had always had an urge to do but never took the time nor chance. I submitted album and concert reviews to university papers all around the country and a couple were even published. I'm sure my parents were overjoyed that their once promising son went from studious university student to college dropout. A dropout that no less had a handful of published essays and on most nights literally played music for his supper. A memory of the first time I drove across the George Washington Bridge¹⁷ fills my brain.

¹⁷ Leaving Chicago late in the afternoon just the day before, we had been driving east through the night and on the road for well over a week. I was slowly awakened in the back seat by the increasing chatter of excitement in the car. It was a brilliant crystal clear blue morning and we were closely following the headliner's tour van as our driver was doing his best to stay in sight. This was the early nineties which translates into no smart phones nor smart maps and

However, this experience would payoff in a strange way. By chance, Moz had read one of my live music reviews and tracked me down. This was before email and the age of smartphones. He came to see my band play an instore performance at a small record store on 12th and Broadway and afterwards we went to one of his favorite dive bars around Tompkins Square Park in the Lower East Side.

Everything feels random when you look closely at single events. But if you could step back and view the entire range of multiverses as if it were one large painting hanging on a wall, then I believe the random patterns of chaos would make total sense. I think that we would be able to see how things become entwined in a way that connects them together for eternity. It had been almost 8 years since I watched a moving truck drive away from my neighborhood along with Moz and his family. I figured we would never see each other again.

Moz and I go way back. I spent vast amounts of time over at his house after school and on weekends. His mother graciously co-opted me as one of her own. I was such a sheltered kid back then but I had Moz. And he was more than willing to enlighten me on any subject. He was never condescending though, he just reveled in his ability to impart to me the secrets of the universe. The secrets that he had so fortuitously discovered from his older siblings.

one very skittish road manager and driver. But as I pulled the blanket from over my head and pried open my eyes, I, for the very first time, was beholden to the magnificent island that stretched out in front of us. It was mid-morning and the hazy sun was just above the skyline and the city's crown was silhouetted in the bright light. My heart skipped beats with anticipation, peppered with bolts of excitement and anxiety, as if I was standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon. Soon I would see this city's own grand canyons. We were truly on the precipice of weighing the substance of our collective dreams as an upstart and unsigned indie rock band against the tried and true measure of New York City. I felt like the tin man, the scarecrow and the lion all rolled into one. We inched closer and closer to Oz. Our destination was an independent subsidiary label of Virgin EMI in midtown on which our tour-mates had just released their second full length record.

How I got here is a familiar story of success versus failure and failure versus success. Practicality versus idealism. One's responsibilities versus one's dreams. Expectations versus disappointments. I woke up one day and decided to pull my own version of a Holden Caulfield when I triumphantly walked out of my wing of the university dorms and got into a car with some newfound friends bound for New York City. I was sliding into dangerous territory as far as grades were going anyway and was recently placed on academic probation when I abruptly decided I had to make this break. Also the day before, I endured my first full blown panic attack in an engineering calculus lab. And it scared the shit out of me. I had to escape. I needed a new opportunity right then. I had to run. And I had to run right then, literally before the car door shut. A rash decision, I know. Not to mention foolish and weak, but when you are a slave to the unmerciful winged demon of anxiety, there is no contest. I disappeared for almost twelve years.

His name was Christian Malone but I for the life of me couldn't remember his given name, I knew him as Moz Ramone. Yes, Moz Ramone, you read that right. We were very tight from fourth grade on until his father was offered a job 'up in New England' and his family moved away before our sophomore year in high school.

In their home I was turned on to so much of the good music that I would carry forward with myself forever. Moz would always have a few new albums in his possession that he no doubt lifted from one of his older sisters. As we were only eleven and twelve years old, we certainly had no legitimate means to secure the latest rock albums of the day so we relied heavily on his older siblings. We were discovering all this new and magical music together, The Police, The Clash, The Talking Heads, Blondie and slightly older albums by T. Rex, Led Zeppelin and Elton John. In conjunction with the endless stash of music from his sisters, the advent of cassette tapes was becoming the new industry standard in music media. And the great thing about cassettes was that they were small enough to sometimes lift from the shelves and into your pockets on those rare moments of unlawful enterprising. Those moments didn't present themselves that often, but hey, we were kids.

Moz was not removed from bestowing the random world lesson to me through shocking and convincing events. He was aware that I had a crush on his oldest sister Traci who was in high school. Nothing more than a severe case of Rod Stewart-esque Infatuation, I would tend to gravitate to her when she was around. She was so cool. One late afternoon when I was over at his house, Moz dared me to sneak into the hallway and peer into his sister's room, she had left the door just ever so slightly cracked open. As I delicately stepped out into the hall and peered into her room through the most minimal sliver of lighted space through the cracked door and Moz violently thrust me into her room. As I pulled myself up from a rolling fall I realized she was stark naked. Moz of course knew this well before I did. This was the first fully nude female of the species I had ever seen in real life and it occurred in blinding sunlight no less. That image is somewhat faded now but on that day it was emblazoned upon my cortex. She just laughed and pretended to be shocked at my raucous entrance as if this was her natural state of existence. I was in fact,

mortified beyond words. My face was surely chili pepper red. I clumsily ran through Moz's house with his mother yelling at me to stay for dinner and Moz in near heart-attack hysterics, but I just kept running straight out of their front door, around the house and hopped a fence into the alley. As I neared my own home I too was uncontrollably laughing. A little more educated and a little less innocent. Moz taught me many tough-love life lessons throughout our early adolescent friendship, lessons I will never forget. But the motherlode of music we mined together was my lifeline. It was similar to the strange feeling you get when you're reading a book that you know is ultimately going to become one of your fundamental tomes and you realize that it has been sitting on a lonely shelf in an old bookstore or library silently waiting for you to finally come along and discover its ancient bindings. It may have been written decades before your birth but nevertheless the book patiently waited for you to be born, grow up and become resolute in your long searches for literary zen. You wonder randomly among the myriad aisles of endless volumes until fate guides your eyes and hands to the piece that will become one of your fireside blankets of comfort for the rest of your life. A lot of those albums we found together had that same gravity.

The Damning Parallels Back in Manhattan

I remember walking past and seeing the golden Prometheus in flight above the ice rink in Rockefeller Center. That geographical point in Manhattan is almost always seething with the power and energy of people. And there are certain rare times of the day in which the Sun hits the golden statue and seems to spark everything with disco ball reflections. It was a place I slipped past a few times when I first began living in the city and would happen to be in midtown looking for writing jobs. I was just getting my feel for city dwelling and would be up there for meetings about possible jobs. Or more common than not, lunches involving possible meetings.

I had a small circle of acquaintances when I first struck out to stay in the city indefinitely and I had to lean on them for a while until gaining a foothold. Most of my friends still perceived me as the struggling musician I once was years ago and they reached out to help me along with almost no prompting whatsoever, they had all been in my shoes once before. They had received their university degrees, cultivated their ambitions, dreamed dreams, and then matriculated to New York City to make their plan a reality. My path was not as wisely planned as some of theirs but the important thing is that I got here.

The thing about it is everyone inherently knows you have got to scrape bottom and skin your knees before you can experience even one sweet drop of true success. You have to suffer and sweat on the ladder's lower rungs. You need to breathe the dust, eat the mud and taste the blood as you construct your temple in the desert. That's just the way it is, but once you're there in the city you begin to accept these rules of engagement and you do your damndest to measure up. And I had been here before.

I always kept hope of somehow getting my foot into the door somewhere. I realized early on that my restless soul ticked to a different clock, but I just haven't a clue how to rein it in and make it work for me on some significant level. That's what this City will do for you. It will demand that you ante up, deal you a hand and then make you call. My historical cycle of folding up and

running away had to be broken and this was the time. I was going to find out real quick if I could hang.

All the while during those first few months in the city I kept a watchful eye out for an old childhood friend. I had heard he was working in the city and I held out hope that we would eventually run into each other.

I bumped into him a few years after moving to Manhattan. We saw each other outside a bar in the Lower East Side, exchanged hugs and decided to go back in and close the place down. Yes, and all we kept talking about were the glory days. But it was a somber moment in time that night. It happened to be the day that his sister Traci succumbed to cancer. That was almost 10 years ago. Moz has grown up since then and become a much deeper and sensitive person since her passing. Getting old sucks just like Mr. Daltrey once sang.

Now I'm here, seated with my arms around my knees and leaning my back against the Bugatti's garage door. I can feel the tentacles of panic reaching toward me once again. The molar's volcanic hole in my jaw feels like the lava is topping its crater, steep waves of nausea are breaking on my stomach walls. I need to stand up. I need to walk home and find a way to reappear.

Mercedes

Do I hear shouting?

“Miles!”

Elle pulls her car up beside me as I walk under the thick tree canopy that overhangs the street. The trees are full of leaves that are grown to maximum size and will soon be falling in masse. I stop running and take the hoodie off my sweaty-wet hair. Breathing hard I lean over the passenger side window. She stares me down a dozen or so seconds and then says, “running away again?”

“No, just walking a bit. Getting some air. There was something I wanted to see.”

“Get in the car Miles.”

Her tone needs no interpretation and I get in without argument. “Is this your father’s old car? God, I remember this car. He wouldn’t let me near it.”

“You can’t leave her alone in the house, Miles. You can’t leave her by herself.” Elle says while looking straight ahead gripping the steering wheel with both her hands.

“The beloved 1981 Mercedes 380SL. His daily driver when we were kids. Your dad wouldn’t even let me sit in it. Did he leave this to you?”

“Listen to me please. You can-not leave her alone. Your mother is sick. And . . . we’re not kids anymore.”

“I get that Elle. I do. I’ve been with her all morning. I cooked her breakfast. I took her to her husband’s funeral, my father’s funeral where I read his eulogy to a full house. A chapel at standing room capacity full of looks of distrust, disdain and misunderstanding. All aimed my way, shredding me and tearing me apart. Deservedly so, I get that too. I stayed with her at the gravesite. I sat in the car with her in the cemetery for over an hour because she begged me not to drive away. I drove her over to her Sunday-church-group’s dinner, stayed there and then brought her home. I saw her go to bed Elle. She was asleep with the lights out when I left the house for a run not 30 minutes ago . . . I need to blow off some steam. I need to clear my head for a few minutes.”

“There’s the Miles I used to know . . .that’s the most I’ve heard you say in three days. Well, I just came from the house. She was wide awake. I was bringing over a few of the leftover floral arrangements from the funeral home. I found almost every light in the house on and she had the upstairs bathtub almost overflowing.”

I quickly shut up. I didn’t dare turn and look at Elle. I couldn’t say another word.

“You cannot leave her alone!”

How to Reappear

Back home I enter through the back patio sliding door. My long-lost-preferred way to enter the house other than my bedroom window. Old habits die hard.

“The prodigal son returns yet again. Twice in one week.” Elle exhorts with a half-smile and seated at the kitchen table.

“Wow. Good morning Elle. Where is Sylvia?”

“She’s in the bathroom. She’s fine. I made her breakfast.”

“What were you able to find in here?” I say while looking through the pantry.

“Eggs, she wanted some eggs. The nurse was here earlier this morning and made her toast and . . .”

“. . . Coffee? I know. Sylvia asked me to make toast and coffee several times last night. I think each time she woke up through the night she thought it was breakfast time.” I sit down at the table across from Elle and ask, “Have you ever felt like a true stranger in a strange land? I mean, safe and warm but at the same time everything you know is wrong?”

“What happened to your face?” Elle says in a slow whisper.

“I went for a short run sometime after midnight and misjudged a step. I lost a whole tooth and some pieces of other ones I think.”

“Miles, you need to wake up and begin to get your arms around what’s going on here,” Elle whispered.

“What *is* going on here, please tell me Elle?”

“Your father is gone, and your mother is slipping away. Showing up yesterday, no one is sure what to think about it. You picked a helluva time to come back and try to mend bridges.”

“Mending bridges didn’t occur to me. All my bridges were burned long ago and I know you are quite aware of that. Something told me to come find Sylvia . . . that’s really all there is to it Elle. I wanted to see my father one last time. I came to find my mother. Do you think that I may be too late?”

Sylvia walks through the room in the direction of the kitchen and without looking up she says, "Elle's here."

"Yes, she is, Sylvia. She certainly is."

The three of us sit together at the kitchen table. Elle holds one of my mother's hands and looks at me with a questioning face. I think to myself. Is it two against one? Is it me against them? Deja vu, same questions, same house, same people, just a different year. Are they waiting for me to proffer hammer and chisel to begin chipping at the wall that stands between us? There are no instructions for this. I begin to imagine the flickering stars burning out at the edge of the universe like each neuron dying out in my mother's brain. The 88 constellations. I think some kind of blasphemous karma has come for its day of reckoning. I fear that Sylvia's God may have already shut the window and closed the door on me.

How much of this is purposeful forgetting and how much is just natural selection switching off segments of her mind? I bet she tried hard in the early days to straight up forget me. Put that together with her demons of dementia and there probably isn't much left to pick through.

"Sylvia, the songs that you played at the wake yesterday were beautiful. Everyone was shocked and just stood like they were all paralyzed. No one spoke or even moved while you played."

Elle agreed, "Sylvia, they were wonderful and I would love to know the names of those pieces that you played. I have never heard you perform them before."

"Let me see if I have the music," she said getting up and walking with purpose to her piano in the front room.

"Elle. We need to talk. I need to talk. There is so much I need to explain to you," I quickly whispered. "Where do I start?"

"Where did you end?" she answered.

Another snowcapped mountain range of silence passes.

"I saw the Bugatti."

Another snowcapped mountain range of silence passes and Sylvia comes back in with a stack of sheet music in her arms and begins arranging them on the table and sits back down. Elle calmly reached for her hands to stop her rifling through the antique pages. Then Elle lowered the boom. She shapeshifted into a Hammer of the Gods and revealed to me what I was already fearing.

“Sylvia?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know he stayed upstairs last night?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Did he make you toast and coffee this morning?”

“Yes.”

“What’s his name?”

“Elle, why are you asking me this?”

“Who is sitting at the table with us Sylvia?”

“Elle, I don’t know his name.”

“Mom. . . it’s me Miles.”

And for the second time this morning my eyes are burning with tears. I slide my chair out and head upstairs to take a shower. When I get out, Sylvia is looking through a stack of sheet music. She has papers spread out all over the piano room floor and coffee table. Standing there watching her, the little boy in me wants to go give her a big hug. Why can I not just do that? That’s the space, that’s the ghost, that’s the invisible wall that keeps people apart. It’s probably unexplainable. It’s what this story is about. I’ve been in the house for a little over twenty-four hours now and have yet to hug my own mother. Fuck you karma!

I choose not to interrupt Sylvia’s search for the sheet music and instead go on through the house and join Elle on the back patio.

“Hey, I was thinking, we’re kind of picking right up where we left off. Remember one of the last times you tracked me down while I was out for a run?”

“Yes, I do. It kind of ended us.”

“That was one side effect. Not entirely unintentional either. It had to end. I was officially letting you go. In my mind and in reality, too. Sal didn’t deserve you, but he got you.”

“Miles, I do remember. I’ve thought about the consequences of that day almost every day since. Important things were lost that day. The most important things.”

Taking the Hit

What I remember is this: Elle pulled her car up behind me when I was out for a Saturday morning run. Not just any ordinary Saturday, but the very Saturday of her high school graduation. I leaned onto the car and peered into the passenger side window to see that she was crying. I got in and it went something like this.

“Miles I am so stupid.”

I remember looking at her and immediately feeling a bit frightened. I remember not saying anything. You must keep in mind that I was only sixteen years old.

“Miles, I don’t know what to do.”

“Are you hurt Elle?”

“No.”

“What happened?”

“I am so stupid. I’ve ruined everything. I have ruined everything for everyone.”

“What? What are you talking about? My parents and I are coming tonight, my mom wants to know what she can bring over for the big post-graduation party.”

“I’m not going to be there.”

“What do you mean you aren’t going to be there?”

“You won’t be there either Miles.”

“What?”

“I need you to go with me somewhere. I need you to go with me to the doctor.”

“Why Elle? What is wrong with you?”

“I’m pregnant. It’s Sal’s.”

“Are you going to an appointment right now? What are you going to do?”

“Yes. I am going right now.”

“Your mother needs to go with you. Does she know?”

“I told her last night but she doesn’t know I am going to do this today.”

“Why not? Elle, she needs to go with you.”

“Because I need to ask you something.”

“Elle don’t do this today. Wait. Your mother needs to be here.”

“I can’t. She would never allow me to do this and Sal wants me to end it today but he doesn’t want to be involved.”

“I need to ask you something that only you can do. Something that will mean everything.”

“What?”

“I need everyone to think this is yours. My mother demanded to know who did this, I told her it was you.”¹⁸

I remember feeling betrayed. I remember feeling second hand used. I remember thinking ‘Yes, okay.’”

And there you have it folks. The moment that changed fates. The obligatory fucking fork in the road. Probably the most unselfish thing I have ever done and at the same time the most selfish. I didn’t think long on it. She couldn’t stop crying. I’m not entirely sure if I was in love with her yet but it didn’t matter, I took the hit.

Bursting into the kitchen, Sylvia says, "I found the music!"

Elle and I get up and walk into the piano room. I stand behind her as she sits at the piano and grinds out a most complex array of chord structures. Scriabin again. Everything stands still. The Earth has slowed its spin. The tuner sure did his job. When did *he* come? She is hooked into the cosmos and I am about to take the red pill.

“It would sound better on the other one” she says to someone. Not me. She finishes, stands up and walks off like she was just dusting the room. I watch her walk to go and sit down into her favorite living room chair and pick up her New York Times crossword book circa 1976.

“Sylvia, Moz wants to come by and visit once more before he heads back to New York.”

¹⁸ Because it couldn’t possibly be her boyfriend/high school husband Sal who was committed to BYU and absolutely could not have done this. BYU having had a recent run of bad-luck with off-the-field domestic issues involving scholarship’d athletes was amid cleaning up its program as per its board of regents. Not to mention this situation would have Sal’s parents none-too-happy either.

It then occurs to me that he is to be the poor bastard that will help me move the Blüthner into the house. We spent many summers in and out of this garage, but never once did we think that we would ever move the 800 lb. box of German red beech timber. We had other things to do back then.

Once the Blüthner was resting horizontal on its legs I began to clean the dust and grime from each and every square inch of wood, brass, string and key. I am amazed at how I know every contour and joint of this wooden machine. I spent many afternoons lying under the belly of this beast listening to Sylvia and her students talk to each other and play together with such formal respect. The way Sylvia interacted with her students was different from the way she interacted with my father and me. I felt like I might have been in her the way. I was baggage.

I began running through phone numbers of local piano tuners to find one that could come today. Turns out there was a local shop that had tuned Sylvia's upright a few years ago and said they could send a tech over to the house later in the afternoon. Great. That gives me some time to inspect the hammers and strings. They all looked intact when Moz and I were fitting the soundboard onto its legs. All the keys look good, I just need to go one by one and listen. There is going to be some buzzing and some missing hammer felt but the tuner can correct those. If the string is there and the key has good down weight and strikes well, then I can do a lot of the fine tuning myself.

Doorbell. First time I've heard that since I've been back. Everyone who has been coming and going seems to have their own key. This should be nurse Sheila. I shouldn't say shocked, "but I am surprised in seeing Pastor Westin standing on the porch in casual clothes.

"Miles, good morning" he holds his hand out for me to shake.

"Good morning. Would you like to come inside?"

"Yes, please. I came by to check on Mrs. Sylvia. Is she feeling well today?"

"She seems good. She has been out back working in her garden most of the morning. I don't know where she gets all the energy. I haven't really seen her sleep."

“How are you doing Miles?”

“I have a solid toothache, but I’m fine. Sorry for the mess in here. I am putting Sylvia’s piano together. It’s something to do, I guess. Found it buried in the back of the garage.”

“What does Sylvia think about it?”

“She hasn’t seen it yet. She has been staying away from me today. I don’t think she is sure who I am.”

“Everyone knows Mrs. Sylvia is a beautiful piano player. Do you play too, Miles?”

“Never did.”

Doorbell. Again.

“Good morning. I’m Tully. Piano tuner and restoration.”

“Hi, morning. Your fast. I didn’t expect you guys until this afternoon.”

“I hope its not a problem but when I recognized the name and address, I moved your service call up to the top of my list.”

“You know Sylvia?”

“Actually yes, I went to high school with her. Her husband Hank has had me tune her piano in the past. How is he doing by the way?”

“He passed a few days ago. His funeral was yesterday. I’m Miles, his son.”

“I am very sorry to hear that son. If I had known, I would have liked to have been there yesterday.”

“Thanks. Come on in. The piano I want you to look at is right in through here. It’s a baby grand, very old but surprisingly clean on the inside.”

“Where did you find this beauty?”

“It was covered up and behind stacks of boxes in their garage. I brought it in early this morning and have been checking the keys.”

“Son, this is a Weimar-era Blüthner. It’s like finding a Rolls Royce in an abandoned countryside barn. Let me get some things from my truck. I will be right back.”

In speaking with Tully, it made me recall a dream that Sylvia used to tell me when I was a kid. She said that she had this wonderful dream that her and her friends were in a large pasture and stumbled upon a cast iron piano soundboard sticking out of the ground. She said that they figured out that it was from the Hindenburg¹⁹ and that the brass soundboard survived the fire and had been hidden here in this place ever since the disaster.

I forgot all about Pastor Westin. But then I see out the window that he found Sylvia and they are in deep discussions about something. Against my instincts I decide to go out and join them in the back-yard garden.

It's funny, here we are again. And again, there is someone in between. There is always someone or something in between. It could never just be mother and son. I was never one to be sentimental, but ever since I've arrived at this mortuary of memories I have been sinking in the quicksand of the past. Don't move to quick Miles, you will only slip deeper and deeper into the bog.

I left the piano tuner with the half-built Blüthner in the house and decided to invade Pastor Westin's conversation.

"Hello, Miles, please come sit with us." He said.

I shut the back-porch door and walked around onto the garden path. The garden had overgrown its boundaries and that was quite understandable. My father had probably stopped

¹⁹ The Blüthner company manufactured a special baby grand for the grand salon aboard the Hindenburg. It was made of an aluminum alloy. A flammable alloy no less. The Hindenburg's salon was directly connected to the smoking lounge. Can you believe that they had a smoking lounge inside a large gas filled balloon? German engineering, eh. The piano is featured in the 1975 film *The Hindenburg*, one of the first films I remember watching on television in the seventies. In the film, the suspected terrorist bomber and professional circus acrobat, Joseph Spah jumped to safety after performing on the piano. His character was portrayed by an actor who was a real-life Holocaust survivor of the Buchenwald death camp. I did some research once and by most accounts, that Blüthner grand had been taken off the fateful Lakehurst, New Jersey flight for repairs back at the Pianoforte Fabrik in Leipzig, Germany. So, it escaped a fiery end on that day. But, a few years later, allied bombers took care of that and vaporized it along with an entire Blüthner factory with an incendiary ordnance comprised of magnesium. In parts of the city, the fire melted sand to glass. Some things are just meant to burn.

tending to it months ago. Sylvia did her best though. But I expect she gardened in the same manner she ate her meals. Which was to just survey and move piles from one space to another. Never progressing with any plan or design.

“Sylvia was just saying to me how much she loved to garden.” He went on.

“Yes sir, she does.”

“You needn’t sir me Miles. We’re practically the same age. You do remember we went to school together?”

“I do, yes. And before we get too much further Pastor, you do remember we weren’t what you would call friends.”

“That’s not what Mrs. Birchwood says now. She says we were great friends.”

“She is probably right. But I do remember you and I having a bit of a disagreement once.”

“Did we? I don’t remember any disagreement.

“Actually, it was more or less a schoolyard fight. In truth, the last time you and I spoke was when Sylvia made me apologize to you and your family. She took me to your father’s church office and had me shake your hand.”

“That was you?” he said

“Yeah. That was me. We had not spoken since that day until yesterday. I’m honestly a little glad you don’t remember. I guess that’s the true power of forgiveness. I bet you forgot about it that day. I never did.”

“Miles, I’m sorry to hear that. Mrs. Birchwood, do you remember taking Miles to see my father?”

“You boys were the greatest of friends.” She says.

“It’s okay Scott. I shouldn’t have brought that up anyway. I should be thanking you for how you’ve looked in on Sylvia. That’s what really matters.”

“Miles. Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”

“Why do you refer to your mother as Sylvia?”

“It’s something I found myself doing after I had left home. I began speaking with my father quite often after I settled in New York City and on one phone call here or there I started to refer to her as Sylvia. And yesterday at the wake, It just felt natural to address her as such. In fact, I would say that it feels appropriate. I’m not sure what would happen if I was to call her something else.”

“Would you boys want to move some of those large rocks that are along the fence? Sylvia asked.

“I was wondering when she would jump into our little reunion.” I said. “Sure, where do you want them?”

Scott and I both stood up and wandered over to the rocks. It was out of earshot from Sylvia.

“You know Miles, forgiveness is a beautiful thing.”

“So, I’ve heard. I guess the thing is really, is that I’ve never felt it. I don’t think I ever have.”

“it’s easier than moving these rocks, I promise you.”

“Pastor Scott, I don’t want to get into another disagreement with you.”

He smiled.

Nurse Sheila was cooking Sylvia dinner when Elle let herself in the front door to find me sitting at the Blüthner with a tuning fork in my mouth. After Tully had left, I went key by key just slightly flattening a few notes to match Sylvia’s old upright piano tuning. I think she preferred it slightly detuned or maybe she had just gotten used to it.

“Where did this come from?” Elle says while running her hand along the polished and contoured veneer of the tilted top-board.

“Buried in the garage. Can you believe it. Moz helped me lift it into the house before he flew back to New York this morning.”

“Miles, I asked Sheila to stay late tonight. Would you like to go get some dinner with me?
I want to talk to you.”

“I’d like that very much. My tooth is feeling better so hopefully I can eat something. I
haven’t eaten all day.”

A Fascist Piano

Sitting with a tense posture and looking deep into his drink, Miles says, “I had a dream a few weeks ago, before I even knew I would be travelling home. It stuck with me for a while and today I was reminded of that dream.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Yeah. Remember how we always said we were going to go out to Joshua Tree and find that place where Gram Parsons died? Well that’s where I was, Cap Rock.”

Elle sits up and looks him square in the eyes, “Okay Miles . . . tell me about your dream.”

He moves forward with his arms on the table and surrounds his beer with both hands and then begins. “I’m walking through the hallways of an assisted living memory care facility. I keep walking and begin to hear a piano. Not only do I hear a piano, but I begin to realize it is astoundingly good. I keep walking the hallways finally finding a large high-ceilinged room with a massive chandelier and walls with most of the paint peeled off. No lights just afternoon sunlight angling through the windows. I find Sylvia sitting on the piano bench when I enter the doors of this large and dusty room. Except she isn’t playing. The music I hear is coming from a turntable over in the corner of the room. But when she sees me the music is turned off. She is encircled by a dozen elderly people sitting in fold out chairs and each of them have large hardback books on their laps. A few of these elderly people seem to be deeply focused on reading while others seem to be in various levels of meditative states. There are hundreds of books stacked against the walls, but I can’t read the language on their spines.”

After a long pull from the dark Belgian and a deep breath, Miles continues, “Stepping closer to Sylvia in my dream, she turns to me and tells me that she comes here each day to play piano but the keys do not work and she can’t figure out what is wrong. I have now noticed that these people surrounding the piano are evidently all Holocaust survivors. Recent survivors, gaunt and shoeless as if they were just emancipated. As you know, my mother is not Jewish. In fact, my mother’s Grandfather was an immigrant from Germany in the late 19th Century.”

“You’ve never mentioned that to me,” Elle says.

“I haven’t thought about in years until last night. The thing that I cannot shake is the sound of my mother’s voice as she tells me that these people are here in this room almost every day for hours. But they never speak, and they most certainly do not appreciate the record player. I think they are collectively meditating. They are trying to find an answer to something. She told me to look at the deep lines in their faces and the violent cataracts in their eyes. Then she asks me.”

“Asks you what?”

“She asks if I can fix the piano. ‘Yes, I can try.’ I sit down to play a few chords but the keys are silent. I move around to the back of the piano and open the top. It’s dark and dusty inside. I take a candle and lower it down in front of the soundboard and can see that there are dozens of old books dumped into the bottom of the sound cabinet. They are pressing up against the strings and hammers and are effectively muting the entire piano. I reach to pull one of the books out and I see that it looks to be a Gutenberg Bible. I reach back down and remove another but slightly different Bible. Someone has filled this piano up with Bibles. Why?”

Miles leans back and draws another deep breath.

“I become aware that Sylvia is now sobbing. She is looking intensely at something inscribed just inside the top of the soundboard’s cast iron frame close to where I sat down the candle.”

“What *is* inscribed? Miles?” Elle whispers.

He grips the Belgian’s pint glass again and says without looking up, “C. Bechstein Manufaktur in Seifhennersdorf Für Sonderausgabe Drittes Reich 1939.”

“It said what?” Elle jolted.

” It was a Nazi piano Elle, complete with the demonic golden Parteiadler label securely attached to the underside of the door. The residents of Sylvia’s memory care unit had long ago silenced the piano’s hammers with Bibles taken from rooms in the living center.”

“Why are you having such a difficult time letting go of this dream Miles?”

“I can’t get the strange sound of Sylvia’s sobbing out of my head. She was so ashamed.”

“How do you think that Nazi stuff got into your head?”

“I don’t know. Moz and I have done some freelance writing work for a German magazine over the years. He’s taken me to Berlin and Munich a handful of times.”

“Miles, is that piano you found in the garage a Nazi piano?”

“No, but it was the first thing I checked. It was made pre-Nazi. But who knows really, where it has been.”

“Listen. Miles, what I wanted to talk to you about. Your mother told me some things. Some things that might explain part of the great divide between the two of you.

“Okay.”

“She told me that she had given a child up for adoption.”

“Jesus Elle. Now I have another story for you.”

Oh Berlin

Here again, I definitely should have gone back to the hotel. How they always manage to convince me otherwise is a mystery. Although they insist, I acquiesce a bit easier than usual this time. I desperately need a quick nightcap at the hotel bar and then eight or nine cozy hours inside the cocoon of a warm and clean bed. But instead I find myself encircled by a close-knit circus of mad caps I refer to as friends.

The year is 1993 and this is my first time in Berlin and I now find myself walking briskly down a crowded sidewalk a block south of Alexanderplatz across the river Spree. Moz has been here several times in the last handful of years and told me there have been some things in this city he could not unsee. I think he is just trying to scare me. That's always been his calling card.

The four of us are semi-reluctantly following someone we just met who assures us that our entrance to an un-addressed single-door blind-tiger can safely be obtained by our entire party. The streets and sidewalks in this part of Berlin are a bit confusing at best. And I'm referring to the cement surface as well as the myriad of post-species human traffic that walks on them. Sexuality knows no bounds here and sexual expression is beyond boundless. Frequently one cannot discern who is who or what is what.

As we get closer to our hypothesized destination of debauchery, I think to myself how certain libertine aspects of the Weimar era 1920's here have anything but faded away into mythos. They are alive and well. But then again, maybe it is just because it is almost 3am and I'm an American who should be asleep in his hotel. I bet this very street looks entirely different in the light of the noonday sun and maybe it even seems downright Disney-friendly. But it isn't noon right now and these unnumbered and unlit metal doors that line this dank street are frightening in a neo-noir way. Each come complete with its own cavalcade of rules and regs, dress and demeanor, passwords and price. Of these aforementioned prerequisites; the price alarms me the most. And it has nothing to do with euros. The pulsating and muffled bass-beat of Kraut EDM* emanates from somewhere deep within one of these entombed warehouses.

These early nineteenth century buildings possess a look as though Allied bombers took pity on them some fifty years ago and saved their payloads for some other unlucky target. It occurs to me that at this moment I could very well be an unlucky target myself. Finally, we're here. We're somewhere. We are actually in a short queue of wishful thinking clubbers. Moz squeezes back through the line to tell me he thinks that the bouncer is saying we can each only enter with a female companion, no single guys. I offer my best Montgomery Clift annoyed-style-smile. The closed lips with three-quarters of my eyes shut kind of smile. I ask myself again why am I not in my hotel bar? He indicates that there are four girls who are agreeing to go in with us and that one of their friends is en route and can pick up the last straggler. I tell him to go ahead and I'll be in when I can. I need a cigarette and was born to be the last straggler anyway.

I eventually gain entry. A statuesque German girl whisks me past the bouncers and through a cramped entryway. A holding pen. Checkpoint Charlie Jr. When I look up after double checking my wallet and briefly touching my passport in my inner coat pocket she is gone. Okay, this is much improved from standing outside. It's much warmer and I can still smoke. I calmly survey all around the massive temple-esque structure. The bass beat is so pronounced it is squeezing the life breath right out of my lungs. There seem to be hundreds of white spotlights shining down from above cutting the smoke into an array of sharp angles. Shining down from some alternate Heaven I imagine. Moz pounces on me from behind with a mock bear hug. And then proceeds to scream into my ear.

"Christ, Miles, you are such the American. You look as stiff as Washington crossing the Hudson."

Miles smiles, "and I thought I was beginning to blend with the locals."

In brotherly style Moz puts me in a half headlock and we slowly push ourselves toward the cathedral-lit bar. The pounding bass takes a brief break and we take advantage to speak quickly.

"Where are the rest of the merry pranksters?"

"Waiting on you, kid."

"Who was the girl?"

“I thought you’d like her. Her name is Franka. Don’t worry, her friend said she doesn’t like Americans. But she does like euros because that stunt cost me €30.”

“Well I appreciate you getting me in here but I’m only staying for a few drinks.”

I am almost enjoying myself for the first time in days but I know this won't satisfy my friend for long and Moz will soon enough raise the bar of expectation. I also wonder about how the sheets are so neatly tucked under my hotel room mattress. And how soft and cool the snowy white comforter would be right now for my aching legs.

“This place isn’t that shocking now that we’re inside.”

Moz’s face slowly rolls to his default Mephisto-esque-ian grin and says, “Oh, dear boy. We’re not inside yet.”

He taps me on the shoulder and beckons me around a corner. I follow up and over, around and through an undulating and packed crowd to another bar on the far side of the main floor. The relentless dance-core beat renders all clubbers within virtually speechless. Our communication is comically limited to only facial expressions and hand motions. Where is my friend taking me? Why am I so willing to follow? A door opens and we are ushered through along with another dozen or so patrons ranging in dress from sub-grunge to black-tie formal. Once the door closes I hear different accents but none speaking English. Not yet anyway. The faint odor of archived beer odors from months of uncleansed floors is overwhelming. Smells like some kind of seasonal pumpkin dunkel doused with bull piss. We begin a labyrinthine trek through broken bathrooms, ad hoc offices and storage closets and end up walking single file along a brightly-lit hallway. Full-length mirrors lining one side of the wall and a decaying brick-wall on the other littered with ancient poster board flyers and retro-style sale ads from various fetish shops. Moz mentioned to me earlier that they would be vetting us. Now I’m a bit concerned but, even more so, I’m curious.

After some brief German and French is shouted, someone in broken English upfront instructs everyone to proceed down the spiral stairs and step through the corridor and a hostess will be waiting.

"One warning, do not for any reason shine anything or look up at the ceiling once in the breezeway. Not to worry, it's a short

passage. Just step through quickly and you will be at the destination."

That killed my buzz just a little but Moz's face couldn't be more electrified. He is still bouncing and bobbing to the now muffled and fading house-beat. I've been following Moz around since the first day of fifth-grade and now here we are in the newly unified Berlin. The brother I never had.

He turns and walks backwards to gleefully inform me. "Miles, you're going to love this. Someone told me what's down here on the roof."

"What's up there?"

"A colony of bats as big as cats hanging from the ceiling."

I stop at the bottom of the stairs cursing Moz under my breath and pull my hood up over my head.

How I simultaneously do something I do not wish to do with such boldness and lack of consequence is inexplicable. Moz is a born con. Once we are through the "bat-cave" and into the soft indirect lighting of a kind of lush living room I am struck by the thickly insulated silence. The purity of it has the reverse effect from that of the previous forty-five minute death-by-techno assault. What do they soundproof this place with? I now dare to analyze a thought or two since my eardrums and teeth have ceased rattling.

"Willkommen in Kreuzberg. Willkommen in Xerxes," someone says in a bizarre and formal voice.

More stairs dammit. But nice stairs. Red-wine carpeted and clean. We arrive on something of a terrace similar to that of an opera house but this house is circular. I hear classical piano and immediately recognize a Chopin nocturne. What the hell? Feels like we are in a Renoir style painting standing along the rounded back wall with hundreds of people who appear waiting for a table below. The precise and strategic lighting reveal several recessed rings of symmetrically arrayed tables. Each table has a couple of burning candles and an unlit lamp. This place is leveled

at maximum capacity, so Moz and I are stuck standing where we are for a while. Although my line of sight is constantly interrupted by passing patrons and wait staff squeezing by I manage to briefly behold the figure of a striking woman at the keys of an enormous concert grand piano with its top closed. It resembles a Bosendorfer Grand Imperial. I know the shape well. The Bugatti of pianos. The longest soundboard of any piano ever made. This also makes for a virtual dancefloor on its top door when closed.

The sound of piano shakes something loose from my alcohol drenched cortex. I see in my mind the photo clipping of my young mother captured in performance at a piano competition she unexpectedly won. When she was so young and before her demons came to roost. My tether ends and jerks me back to Earth with Moz shouting, Miles!

“Miles! . . . Miles!! Do you see her? Can you see her?”

I nod.

Deja vu just doesn't do this justice. I think I can see the apparition of angel wings attached to her shoulder like The Winged Victory of Samothrace. Brilliant. Radiant. Moz hasn't stopped staring and I haven't been able to look away from her. He leans in and says into my ear as clear as day, "She looks like you."

All the lights go dark except for the high spotlight shining down on the Winged Victory now violently wielding the notes of Beethoven. There is a brief sparkle of light from the top of the dome and everyone appears to be looking upward. Cheers began to go up and now I can see the solo figure of a female figure in full ultra-sheer black latex being slowly lowered in a trapeze-ring to the top of the piano.

Some minutes later, I slip out of a back exit door for some air. Some fresh air to smoke. There's no moon tonight but this part of town doesn't really sleep. I am caught off guard by the number of people out here in the alley, doing the same thing. I shouldn't be surprised since this is one of the smoking capitals of Europe. Catching my third wind I turn to see who else but Winged Victory herself, step out of another exit door bundled up in a long wool coat tipped with

real or faux brownish-white fur. I've never been able tell the difference. What strikes me the most is the worn pair of running shoes she's sporting. There is no mistaking the thick dark eyebrows in direct assault under the long straight jet black hair. It's her, the piano player. I'm sure of it. She stops just beyond my comfort-zone of space and says, "Moz said you were out here."

I pause for a split second, grin and say, "Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

"He's been here lots of times. You two must be very close."

"What's your name?"

"Franka."

"Yeah. We already sort of met out in front. You're a brilliant piano player by the way. American too?"

"Yes, I wanted to take a closer look at you before we went any further."

"Further?"

"Miles, I only have a minute until I need to be back inside. Wow, this is wild. Moz is convinced and I am already getting there."

"Convinced of what?"

"Take hold of yourself Miles."

"Oh. . .kay"

"He believes I am your sister."

"Funny, that is absolutely the last thing on Earth I thought you were about to say. I don't have a sister . . . Moz is such an asshole."

"Those were my exact words when he first told me too," she says.

"Franka, I'm going to sit down for a minute. Right here, okay?"

Christ, I just want to put my head on a nice soft pillow. Could be my head has already been on that pillow for hours now. This is most likely a dream. I knew something was off. He knew if he got me this far tonight that I'd be the last one in and the first one out the back for a cigarette.

"And then, that was your cue?" I say not directly to her or anyone really. I just half whisper it out loud. My mind is beginning to take on water and I'm feeling the ship beginning to list.

“He said he could have never made you agree to come here and see me if he told you the truth,” she says.

"Moz is a sweet guy but he sometimes over-analyzes things. He thinks a lot about everything other than the obvious points of fact. He exists in the ether, that's what I love about him. The thing is Franka, I don't have a sister. Seriously. And even if I did, how in the hell would he know before me? Ask yourself that."

She just stares directly at me. Right in the eye. Not a word is spoken for a few blurred seconds.

“Look, Miles. I need to run but I want to meet with you tomorrow. Moz said you were staying in Berlin for another day. He also said you would never turn down an opportunity to see inside Hansa Studios.”

“What, are you serious?” I say.

“I am doing some session work there with a producer named Colin Thurston. Moz said you would know.”

“It isn't ringing a bell but it doesn't matter. I'm sold.”

“He worked on David Bowie's Heroes album,” Franka says with a Santa-smile on her face.

“We will talk about all of this tomorrow. It was so great to finally meet you Miles.”

The Next Day

I awoke this afternoon thinking about my mother and her piano. Imagine that. I expect I dreamed about them too. I keep thinking of how she always warmed up with *Für Elise** when she first sat down to play. Always, without fail, this orphaned piece of Beethoven was cascaded out on the hammers. But she would speed it up and slow it down to craft slight variations that only she and myself knew. Although I have not been home in about five years* nor spoken to my mother in as many, I do have a picture in my mind of her. And that image spawns from this era of when I first became conscious of her piano playing.

What is this woman going to tell me about my mother? What is she about to stir and discover inside my head? I have the cab stop a few blocks from the studio on Schöneberger Straße. I want time to walk and think for a few minutes before I tip my skis forward on this double black-diamond slope. In all honesty, I need a serious sidewalk smoke.

Franka meets me outside on the street and we exchange a delicate hug. She is wearing the same fur coat but sans the running shoes. This is the second time she has been my golden ticket. I take in all the fanfare like a seasoned museum patron. Hansa was everything I hoped it would be. The brilliant smell of the Meisterhaal's ancient herringbone wood floor to the spectacular chandeliers hanging from the dark wooden coffered ceiling. To the ornate crown moulding and the gargantuan windows of the front façade that once faced the Berlin Wall. They have a display parade of mint condition Studer analog two inch tape machines and various Neumann consoles arrayed on the side of a long and indirectly lit hallway. And hanging on the wall above these recorders is the obligatory wall of fame with its endless framed golden records of days past. Recordings by artists Brian Eno, Depeche Mode, Iggy Pop, Siouxsie and the Banshees, and of course David Bowie's album *Heroes* which is Hansa's pièce de résistance.

Franka motions me along and says she's working in a newly constructed studio upstairs. I decided before I arrived that I would let Franka dictate the conversation regarding the "sibling theory." Through my travels I have become accustomed to meeting and hanging out with strangers

and people whom I've just met, especially other musicians. So even without the looming and bizarre "sibling theory," I still would have taken her up on this Hansa invite. I mean c'mon, they recorded *Achtung Baby* in here just a few years ago. I had to see it.

Franka introduces me to everyone in the studio as her long lost friend from Texas. Which in turn invites the overplayed questions such as "do you have a horse?" or "where are your boots?" and my favorite, "do you know J.R. Ewing?" She steps over to a serene Steinway & Sons baby grand that is polished to a syrupy black consistency. And there she perches onto the deep tufted leather bench. She has a music stand propped flat beside her that holds her opened old-school style briefcase full of sheet music. It's a relaxed atmosphere because she is only overdubbing short piano tracks today. I have so many questions and I know she does too.

The breaks in-between the stops and starts of the recording punch-ins give us intermittent spaces to talk to one another. But before we broach much past a brief "hello" she sits upright and jumps into a soft and tempered rendering of *Für Elise*.

In the late afternoon, Franka and Miles meet Moz at a café across from Tiergarten Park. Berlin's proud version of Manhattan's Central Park. They sit outdoors and order a round of drinks. It's late March and the trees are on the verge of sprouting, but the overall canopy of the park is still in the brown tones of winter hibernation. Franka spots a beautiful Irish Setter on the opposite side of the street along the Park's wide walking path with no owner in sight. Miles sensing that he and Franka have been in each other's company for several hours takes this opportunity to walk across the street and investigate further into this apparent lost dog or lost owner.

"So? Are you guys figuring it out?" asks Moz.

Franka turns and says, "What's funny is that we have yet to really talk much about the possibility. Miles seems like a great guy. He was in heaven inside the studio. I think we, or he is just proceeding cautiously. And that is ok. Probably for the best."

“Look at that. He’s walking that stray dog into the park. I think he may be taking a break from us.”

“Maybe he is just exhausted from tip-toeing around today and avoiding the elephant sleeping in the room,” Franka says looking off into the Park.

“Let me tell you a little something about our mutual friend Miles. The thing that you need to know is that he’s running. And once you understand that, everything makes better sense.”

“Running?” Franka says.

“And secondly, our boy won’t be gone long because he left his cigarettes on the table.”

Moz thinks for a minute about how he should begin to paint this picture of his closest friend. Franka needs to walk the path slowly if she doesn’t want to scare Miles off. But she’s beginning to consider the possibility that she may have a brother and that she may want to reach out and find her birth mother as well. People arrive at these strange crossroads by the most unpredictable means and once they are standing there alone they feel compelled to either walk away or commit. Franka wants to commit, but our mutual friend is the least committal human being ever to be hatched.

“Did you know Miles named me?”

“What? Is he *your* mother?”

“Funny, no, but he gave me this nickname ‘Moz.’ My given name is Christian Malone but somewhere around the third grade my oldest sister started calling me Moses Malone after the Philadelphia 76ers won the NBA championship. I was tall for my age and Moses Malone was the 76ers MVP center. Then Miles comes along and changes my last name to Ramone because I was crazy about the Ramones at the time. Actually still am. So now I’m Moses Ramone to everyone in the fifth grade because Miles makes damn sure it catches on quickly. Eventually he shortened it to Moz and it has been that way ever since. He even managed to get my sisters to address me as Moz. My parents were not as enthusiastic. Anyway, you can’t really control a dubbed nickname. Speaking of, here he comes. And look at that, no dog, he must have found the owner.”

Miles steps up on the curb and says “What an amazing dog. The fuck are looking at me so strange for, Moz?”

“Oh nothing. We were just saying how you used that dog to avoid an elephant.”

The Reigns of Regret

The rain pelts the rooftop and takes the edge off the early morning crush. That crushing feeling that you have when you are facing an entire day of unknowns and you haven't even gotten out of bed yet. These last few days have been flooded with the surreal, the ridiculous and the déjà vu. Mom is far more damaged than I was ever led to believe. I cannot answer why I was absent for so long but I'm here now. My father is passed, and my mother is fading into oblivion. I've been home three days and she has yet to initiate a hug. I keep telling myself that she will finally recognize and acknowledge me. Surprisingly, from what I've observed so far, she is able to cook and take care of herself. The nurse that comes by once a day, usually in the afternoons, told me that my mother doesn't drive even though she has been relentlessly asking me to produce the car keys. There have been the random strange words, the awkward actions and some long silences that are just beyond reason. But for the time being, I just want to focus on keeping her happy.

Was this the woman who recited my favorite stories by heart to woo my restless soul into the soft cloud of slumber each night? Was this the woman who used to take me by the hand and lead me and my bare feet down grocery store isles with unending patience? Was this the woman who spent sleepy summer days taking me to the nearby school park for picnics in the sun? Was this truly the once young and strident woman who fell in love with my father decades ago?

I'm going to have to get my arms around this like Elle said. I think I'm going to stay awhile. Something brought me back. Something that failed time after time until my selfish theft was complete. I truly never meant for my exile to last this long. maybe we're not supposed to keep growing in intellect and these incipient neuro-disorders slow down our race, slow down our human race before we ultimately run our clipper ship aground and scorch the planet into malignancy. Maybe that's the central idea that Zeus realized all too well. He was just looking for a simple concise reason to withhold the power of fire from mankind's realm of thought for our own good. But in the end Prometheus had other ideas altogether, and thus here we are.

The Books of Knowledge

Once I calmed myself, I then realized that I was in the right place, together here with Sylvia. She didn't know who I was, but she somehow trusted me to be with her.

“I'm getting hungry, would you mind making us something to eat?” she asked me.

Wow, she used the word “us.” The house was quiet, the sink had a window that looked out over the backyard. I stood there thinking about how I never stopped even once to ever look out this window when I lived here as a young boy. It was early morning and the sun was just beginning to shine through the trees to illuminate her garden. The lush backyard was bathed in that magic light of early summer morning. Mom was always gardening. The infinite gardener.

This garden wasn't one that would ever be pictured in a magazine, but it was unique beyond question. She was old and her garden exhibited this quality in an exquisite way. Elle made it clear to me earlier that she would not be able to live here alone but I had to figure that out for myself. And this is how I came to understand this startling truth.

Nature isn't here for us and our pleasure. We are just a part of nature. A leaf, a whale, a Sequoia, a human, all part of the same. To pursue the reasons why is an exercise of high order futility. Focus on the simple pieces that are in your scope of existence, such as an aging woman. A woman who is your blood. A woman of lost memories and lost loves. A woman in the deep throes of dementia. Just focus. This is what I keep telling myself.

The kitchen is bathed in the morning sun through the many windows surrounding her round wooden kitchen table. A table that had held many family meals and served as the center of many family arguments. Though never physically violent in nature they were most damaging in mental ferocity. One can almost always logically explain away a slap of the hand or a fist to the face, but words can butcher a relationship with irreparable incisions that one can ponder for a lifetime.

She remained quiet while I scrambled and cooked two eggs. I placed the eggs, a single slice of toast and her second cup of coffee in front of her and hoped for the best. She had played this

very same sequence in a reverse role many times sans the coffee. But in those days, we were never left to sit and face each other. In those days, we were too busy. But then her first words of the morning came tumbling out.

“My son used to sit and read those encyclopedias. I used to play piano and he would sit and read. Have you ever seen those encyclopedias?”

“Sure, I have seen those before” I answered.

“But, have you ever seen *those*?” she asked with a stronger tone.

Is she testing me? Or is she innocently asking me? I arrived here back home two days ago, we buried my father yesterday and I am not sure of anything much at this moment. She should know damn well I cherished those books. There were two separate series of encyclopedias housed in an antique lawyer’s cabinet. One being a 1971 set of Encyclopedia Britannica and the other being a 1973 set of the Book of Knowledge encyclopedias. And yes, I used to sit and read those books. I inhaled those books. I never once questioned those books when I was a child reading them. But now, I often have wondered just who or what consortium gathered and filtered just what “knowledge” they were going to print within The Book of Knowledge.

As if my mother and I needed a spark to light the fuse, these particular Books of Knowledge all have a spectacular gold leaf tree impressed onto each book cover. Why was Adam forbidden to take from the Tree of Knowledge but here in the suburban American Southwest Bible-Belt country I was given as a child a gold leaf stamped set of everything withheld from Adam. Oh how I loved to ignite the nuclear fission reaction between myself and my religiously devout mother over all things ‘Christian.’

I ask, “Can I take one of those volumes out and look?” I didn’t wait for her to answer. I walked over and pulled the C volume out and quickly leafed to Chopin. I always remembered the vivid pencil illustration of the regal haired composer. I also wanted to see if she would react to a word, a name, a phantom that she conjured on a daily basis when I was a child. These volumes are like a time capsule. They only hold chosen knowledge of a certain time and that of the preceding

years. Time stops at the publication date. The volumes are unbiased of future events and technology. They are a clearer picture of those times.

“My son used to sit and read those all the time” she says again.

After Mom finally nested in the chair in her bedroom and fell asleep, I went for a run. Toothache, headache and all. A good old-fashioned angry run. The late evening air felt good inside my lungs. The streets were wet from a short rain shower. I wore my water-resistant hoodie in hopes that it indeed *would* rain during my run. If I can keep the simple routine of the daily run then I can control at least one thing throughout the day even though I felt a bit nervous leaving her alone in the house. I did some research about “sundowners.” Those are the lucky few that are stricken with dementia and Alzheimer’s that get a magnificent rush of restlessness as the sun sets. They plunge headfirst into an unrelenting mania that impairs any moment of relaxation or rest. They just keep moving, thinking and speaking. But when they crash, they fucking crash. It’s well after midnight and I have to get this night run in. It’s the only thing that is going to keep the peace within my own head. It’s my little respite from myself in a way. It is difficult to explain. But I will try at a later point in this story.

She Shows Me the Chord

I come back to the house and find Sylvia seated at the Blüthner. Our long history of philosophical and spiritual disagreements, I'm almost certain began the day of my last piano lesson from her thirty something years ago. The last lesson until now. Until today. I would take her a new photo from the box each day. As if I was trying a different key to fit into the lock of her mind. The right key to spark the ignition of memory. Please GOD let me find a key to unlock just a few moments of grandeur that we can both share. PLEASE? Then she slowly sits down at her piano. The cover is down, and the wood grain is perfectly polished to mirror quality. She sits quietly and places her hands on the cover. Then with a stir of confident reason, she lifts the cover and softly plays the first notes of Fur Elise. I haven't moved in minutes. I haven't breathed in what seems like days. It was like I had just run up and jumped on a cable-car not knowing for how long I would ride. Mom looks back at me from her bench with an inquiring look that I recognize. In this moment, I believe she knows exactly her purpose; she knows why I'm here. She knows what she's asking. And without hesitation, I squeeze beside her onto the piano bench and she swiftly grabs my hands and holds them . . . I can feel her slightly tremble. . . I can feel her asking . . . this is our last chance. . . and I say. . . "show me."

Elle is upstairs in Miles' old room picking through some of the boxes that he brought out of the garage. Boxes filled with photos and baseball cards. Cassette tapes and music magazines. She finds a small spiral notebook beside Miles' makeshift mattress on the floor. Elle hesitates at first but sees that it is open to a page and realizes that it is a poem. As she listens to the muffled piano notes drifting up the staircase, she sits down on the mattress and begins to read the first one entitled *Detuning*.

The cats are happy to see me, have they been fed?

Recently,

Your rate of fading has quickened, show me

the hands of a clock that cannot keep time

but these are human hands that can only keep time on a piano.

I adjust the mute and key a string, she doesn't like this,

she prefers the piano in its detuned state.

We used to sit at the edge of the gulf with our toes in the sand

looking for sand dollars and shark teeth.

Now you just sit on the edge of a gulf

looking for neurons and synapses.

She has learned to play in a lower key

Because, the soundboard is irreparably cracked

much like her cerebrum.

I can retune the strings, but it's not that simple

she was never that simple.

Funny yet cruel how we sit at the piano twenty years on,

sometimes speaking, sometimes not

I can almost feel the sand in between my toes

when I move to the next string and key.

She grimaces as the pitch is brought to tune,

I crank it slightly back, slightly flat

She leans in and hugs me

for the first time, in a long time.

Then without thinking she turns the page to another short piece and reads this one in a whisper to herself.²⁰

²⁰*Her Piano:*

I awoke with the notes playing
in my head, she was still my mother
but was I still her son?
The piano strings in her mind had become razor-
wire, and I had become a stranger.
She was alone now in a house of memories,
everything as it was except her own
memory which was now lost and faded,
tossed on the open seas of her corrupted cortex.
So foolish of me to think of myself
as a lifeline, I wasn't there for her, I was there
for me.
Her fingers on the ivories,
her eyes on the score.
Why didn't I take the time
to sit along with her here,
Here at her altar of sacrifice?
I could have learned so much about her
and I could have learned about myself.
I awoke with the notes playing,
but I will not be sitting beside her at the keys today,
and neither will she.

A Recital

“Tully mentioned your high school reunion is next week. He asked if you were coming. He said there is a great sounding piano at the banquet hall where the reunion is going to be.”

“My high school reunion?”

“Yes. Do you want to go? I mean you don’t have to go but if you wanted to, I will take you. Elle will take you and stay with you.”

“I don’t know.”

“How would you feel about playing a piece for the people there?”

“I don’t know.”

Redemption Song

We sat at an outside table in the scattered mosaic of sunshine under the trees. The streets and sidewalks were their usual busy selves. I knew this was going to be heavy. Way too heavy for my frayed feelings. Is it a cosmic coincidence that I find her here? How does the universe keep these invisible thread-like umbilicals attached? These cords. How are they pulled back with elastic memory to bring the tethered souls back into unexpected collisions? For all of my life I have been doing one of two things. Running away or running toward two women. Sylvia and Elle. We aren't those scared kids in the back of Elle's father's Bugatti anymore. We're older and I'm far more weathered. Elle however has somehow shed her young adult radiance and constructed the serene façade of a Venus with arms. A twenty-first century elegant and sophisticated older woman with myriad paths to explore and peaks to ascend. I desperately need to pick up a book about Sir Edmund Hillary at the next bookstore I find.

She still has yet to speak a word. We met at the entrance of the brasserie and walked through and back out following the waitress to the sidewalk tables without really even looking into each other's faces. But now, there she sat. There would be no easy escape this time. The world was alive and loud around us. We just sat and I could feel her light-saber gaze trying desperately to crack the ice around me. I finally surrendered and looked up to focus in on her slightly watering eyes. Without saying a word she reaches into her purse and pulls out a single, warped, bent and yellowing photo. She holds it as if it's the first time her eyes have beheld the faded image. I can only see the back of the photo as both of her outstretched arms and hands hold it firmly upright on the table. I wish I could get back to the place where we started. The place where our innocence of discovery was first alive. I wish I could just stand up and lift her into my arms and fly up and above this heavy cloud that has surrounded us. Ascend like a jet emerging from the dark storm-clouds to a plateau of blinding white light. Can I bring us back? Could I? Just for a few minutes, a few hours. I would be so eternally grateful for just a day. Just a Lou Reed perfect day. But for once, I do know how this will end. She gently lays the picture flat on the table so we both can see the captured

moment. So we both can touch the face of the past. The photo depicts two very young children in the front yard of my mother's house. Both standing with their arms around each other as if both supernaturally inseparable and invincible. Fearless and confident within each other's arms. The whole world be damned, this is heaven. I'm safe. I'm saved.

It's a perfect picture in time of Elle and myself in a late summer afternoon. Elle slowly shifts her chair back and gracefully bends to gather her purse and whips back her hair in a simultaneous spin then walks slowly away. I'm hypnotized by the revelation of the lost photo and quickly come back up for air. She hasn't looked back. She's not going to look back. This is *the* moment. This is *the* moment I reach out. Sylvia's last lesson to me. This is how you reach out.

Vita

James Stone was born in Fort Campbell, Kentucky and earned a Bachelor of Science in University Studies at the University of Texas at Arlington. Presently, he is in his 20th year working in the finance industry as a licensed equity and bond trader. Before that, James was a contracted studio musician, performing and recording artist for BMG/Arista.